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Tarisa Warinai

Illust. Saki Ukai

DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level



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Chapter 1: A Fresh Attempt

We found ourselves in the Dungeon.

Maybe when I say “the Dungeon,” the image that springs to mind depends on the person. I’m sure there are some who picture an amusement park house of mirrors, while others think of a scribble you’d find scrawled on paper. Meanwhile, the kids of today, myself included, probably think of the sort of dungeon you’d crawl through in a video game. The kind that’s written out as the English word “dungeon” but uses the characters meaning “labyrinth.” I’d like to think that almost every adolescent boy is like me that way, anyway.

So let me be clear—this was a video game dungeon.

The dark stone of the corridors was moist and damp, and that musty odor was mixed with the smells of slinking beasts and spilled blood. It was the spitting image of a video game dungeon, albeit a tad on the gloomy side.

Such was the dimly lit path I now proceeded down...a red-haired little girl in tow.

“Hmm.” The girl, who was leading the way, sensed a disturbance and turned around to face me. “I’ve spotted a monster ahead of us, Sieg.”

Her face was childlike and adorable—cherubic, even, and her burning red eyes were her most striking feature. Perhaps due to her diminutive stature (no taller than an elementary schooler), her sleeves were far too long on her. They had been rolled up to fit the length of her arms, but that couldn’t mask her childish mien. Anybody not in the know would probably see her as some cute little kid out playing and go, “D’aww.”

Not me, though. I was far from melting from her cuteness. In fact, I was ever ready to defend myself at a moment’s notice on the assumption that death’s scythe hung over me at all times. My combat-focused dimensional magic, a spell called *Dimension: Calculash*, was up and active. To put it in RPG terms, I was using support magic made to wield against bosses. And that was only

natural, considering the girl in red *was* one of the Dungeon's boss monsters.

【DECIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Fire's Essence

The text my menu-sight displayed in my retinas proved she was, in truth, a monster. The girl in red's name was Alty, and she was an absolute beast that the divers of the Dungeon Alliance had failed to defeat over decades and decades.

"Got it, Alty. All right, battle time. I'll provide support from the rear."

And with that, the umpteenth battle that day was at hand.

Through my *Dimension* spell, I could perceive my surroundings in depth, which allowed me to grasp any sign of enemies in this pocket of the Dungeon. Swift, ratlike monsters were skittering ahead of us. By employing my Analyze option and focusing on the monsters, I learned their name ("Grain Rat"). They were low-ranking but zippy little things. Your average Dungeon diver would probably have trouble following them with their eyes. But Alty wasn't your average diver.



[DECIMAL GUARDIAN]

Thief of Fire's Essence

The rats set their tiny limbs in full motion as they ran through the dark Dungeon corridor. Alty, moving with a speed that reminded me of the boss monster I had fought not so many days prior (the Thief of Darkness's Essence, Tida), extended a sword of flame from behind the rats and slashed at them. I was a little worried the fire would ignite her clothes, but then again, this was the Thief of Fire's Essence we were talking about. She exercised flawless control over the intensity of her flames.

Cloven by the fire blade, the Grain Rats burst into light and faded away. Dead monsters left no corpses in the Dungeon. All they left behind were crystals called magic gems. Alty picked up the gems that had dropped to the floor in their wake and tossed them to me with a boastful look on her face. It wasn't hard to tell she wanted compliments. She was just like a cat that had brought home some prey.

"Yeah huh, you're so amazing and strong. Give it a rest and get a move on."

Alty pouted a bit. "Hmph. Aren't you being a bit cold to a well-meaning ally? Would it kill you to throw me some genuine praise?"

"I just did. And it goes without saying you'd be amazing, given you're a Guardian and all."

"You can never just be straight with somebody, huh, Sieg?" She stooped with an expression that screamed *good grief* and started down the corridor as she was told.

I didn't let my guard down, staring at her as she walked ahead. Alty was being cooperative. She was a bit of a chatterbox, sure, but she was contributing her services to my Dungeon exploration, demonstrating goodwill through her actions. But that didn't mean I could discard my suspicions so readily. Everything about her was too shady for that.

This morning, when I had bumped into Alty, I'd heard her wish, and it was a vague one: to "make an unrequited love not so unrequited." Afterwards, I listened to her speak on that more—it wasn't that she had some special crush. That being said, if Alty could fall in love and see that love requited, it would apparently be ideal, according to her. Yet she put herself down by stating, "I'm not the kind of entity that *can* fall in love." It seemed she'd given up on

something in life. That was why she'd settled on a compromise; she wanted me to introduce her to someone who *was* in love. From the sound of it, if she witnessed that infatuation, felt it vicariously, and saw it requited with her own eyes, her attachment to this world would finally be severed.

It was humdrum stuff. And it was dubious at best. I had my doubts that the whole story was true. Not that I could turn her down anyway.

When Alty spoke of love and romance, she seemed as young as her appearance would have one believe. Her eyes sparkled like a young lady in love with love itself. And if I declined to humor her, she'd likely take it pretty bad, and I had no idea how she'd react. Offending a monster of a power level comparable to Tida's was a minefield and a half. As such, after giving it quite a lot of thought, I'd decided to pretend to take on her request. After all, so long as she claimed to come in peace, postponing a battle with her was the best call. And then there was the fact that thrusting a sword at a monster bearing the face of a little girl was not that easy on the conscience. Finally, the calculating side of me figured that the more time passed, the safer I was thanks to my level rising.

All of this meant that, reluctant though I was, I had my reasons for walking through the Dungeon alongside Alty.

Aiming to earn my trust, Alty led the way, bopping along in fine spirits. Ever since entering the Dungeon, she had talked about herself during much of our time together in an attempt to close the emotional distance between us.

"So in other words, Sieg, I'm always thinking, I'd hate to have never known romantic love, you know, being a girl and all."

"C'mon, are you even young enough to be a 'girl'?"

"Hm, well, I know I'm at least a thousand years old... I think?"

"So you're an old biddy, then. It's high time you rest in peace, granny. For everybody's sake."

"You're just plain *rude*, you know that? You're seriously gonna call a girl this charming and cute 'granny'? That's not how you treat a lady, Sieg!"

"No duh. I'm not treating you as a girl. I'm treating you as a monster."

After a light round of self-introductions, we started calling each other by name. We put on the outward appearance of a regular party, or rather, we fulfilled the bare minimum requirements it called for. But I had no intention of continuing my Dungeon diving this way, seeing as I didn't need a stomach ulcer in my life. I planned to expose Alty's ulterior motives, and fast. And I'd already puzzled out a plan—soon, I'd deliberately put myself into harm's way against a monster and make Alty save me. If Alty took that opportunity to try attacking me, then my plan would succeed with flying colors. She would fall for my trap, and I had but to land a grand counterattack against her. If, on the other hand, Alty swooped in to save me, then the plan would still succeed. I'd sing her praises for rescuing me and use that to feign total trust in her. After that, I'd suggest we split up temporarily to increase our efficiency and cast a wider net, and use that time away from her to level up.

As we walked, I considered the correct timing to spring my scheme. On our way through the Dungeon, two or three floors deep, I spotted a handy candidate.

"Huh. Never seen that creature before, Alty. It seems to move fairly fast, so let's flank it."

"Good idea. Let me go behind it."

The monster was an agile-looking quadrupedal beast. Since it looked so nimble at a glance, Alty approved of my proposal without suspicion. We each inched closer and closer, creating a pincer formation in the process. Once Alty assumed her position behind the monster, we'd attack it at the same time. Or at least, I'd pretend to.

I knew full well that if we fought it for real, it'd die almost instantly. I was going to make the battle play out unfavorably by getting in Alty's way and "inadvertently" helping the monster. Then, after making sure Alty distanced herself a little, I'd let it swat away my sword. Thus "defenseless," my body would be prone to attack. Needless to say, I made it so that at any time, I could pull out a spare sword from my inventory by putting my right hand behind my back. That was how I would playact my embarrassing defeat.

"Agh! Oh no!"

I shot Alty a pleading look, taking care to examine what emotion she was exhibiting at that moment. But Alty's reaction was as straightforward as they come.

"Sieg!" Fear written on her face, she dashed forward at full speed, but not at me. Thrusting her sword with all her might at the monster, she slammed into it with her whole body. Her assault allowed me to escape. While it tore at her with its claws, her fire spouted, burning the beast to death.

After rendering the monster into fading light, her gaze darted to me straight away. "Sieg, are you okay?!"

I sensed no malice, no hostility. These were the words of someone who was truly worried about my well-being. The only one who'd been duplicitous was me.

"I... I'm okay. Thank you, Alty. Needing to be saved...what a shameful display from me."

"Phew... Heh heh," she laughed, smiling even as blood ran from the tears in her bandages. "Don't fret it. Allies help each other out. That's just common sense, isn't it?"

I felt nothing but mounting guilt. I wasn't confident that I was returning her smile convincingly. Alty was a boss monster, and as long as that was true, I couldn't afford to trust her. I knew that. But my determination to stay the course was fading the more I got to know her.

It was my menu-sight that categorized her as a monster, and she herself had professed she was a monster as well. Had that not been the case, I would have concluded she was some kind of demi-human peculiar to this world. Here, semifers—who, in my eyes, didn't differ very much from monsters appearance-wise—were an integrated part of society. If I didn't have my menu-sight, and if Alty didn't call herself a monster, and if she had approached me with her current attitude of friendliness, there was no doubt I'd partner up with her without an ounce of suspicion or misgivings. That was just how *human*, or close to it, she was. She harbored human-level intellect, spoke and emoted like a human, and even looked near enough to one. Was rejecting her really the correct thing to do? Wasn't I being a horrible person? Was I in the right for

treating her as a monster? What if all I was doing was spurning a fellow human being, a person I could talk to?

No, stop thinking about it.

If I brooded too much over it, my “???” skill would trigger. Only a fool would activate it knowing the trigger conditions.

The monsters were all on their guard. Devoting my energy to that was the safest and most logical course of action. So, just as planned, I started pretending that I’d begun to trust Alty.

“Ha ha, it’s just common sense, you say... All right, fine, I believe you. I know now that you just want me to help fulfill your wish, and you’ve got zero hostility towards me.”

“Wait, what? You’re good now? And here I was expecting to do this for the long haul.”

“If I didn’t relent after being rescued, it’d be pitifully childish of me. I’ll trust you, albeit not a hundred percent.”

“Hmmm, not a hundred percent, huh? Well, that’s good enough for me. I’m a monster and you’re a person, after all.” Alty nodded merrily, and I stared, feeling ashamed.

“All right, let’s keep moving. Thanks to you, combat’s no sweat. We can dive even deeper.”

“Heh heh, boy, did you change your tune, Sieg! You can leave everything to me.”

Alty seemed to be enjoying this. She led the way again, laughing just like a human girl. I walked behind her, depression whirling in my heart. To the best of my ability, I avoided looking at her face as we resumed our mission.



Together, Alty and I cleared Floors 4 and 5 without a hitch. That day’s dive had two objectives. The first was to advance through the Dungeon by myself. Dia had assured me that I could do it alone, and it was important that I prove that. Although it was a unique way of doing so, I had achieved that goal. While

outwardly, we may have seemed like a party of two, I was, strictly speaking, on my own. In fact, it was an even more frightening situation than if I had actually gone alone, so that was proof enough in my book.

My second objective was to retrieve Dia's severed arm. We reached the fifth floor and entered the chamber where we had fought Tida not long ago. However, though I went around and around searching for it, I couldn't find it. Maybe somebody had taken it away. Or maybe the Dungeon auto-purified. I could imagine there were monsters prowling around who lived off the muck and garbage.

I put my hand to my chin and wondered, worried.

"That Dia kid's arm probably isn't coming back," said Alty. "I think it must've been swallowed up."

"It got swallowed up? By what?"

"By the Dungeon," she said with a meaningful air.

As a boss monster, Alty worked with the Dungeon, so to speak. I had every confidence she was right—Dia's arm had been swallowed up, never to be seen again. It made no sense to keep searching for it, so we decided to descend to the sixth floor.

Then, when I expanded my *Dimension* field to search for nearby enemies, a shrill shriek rang out.

"Yahhhh!!!"

After nearly jumping out of my skin, I brandished my sword and scanned my surroundings only to find no one there. The scream had come from someplace hidden from view.

"Oh, a scream," said Alty. "What's your move?" She was walking by me, but unlike me, she was calm.

In all honesty, screams weren't uncommon in the Dungeon. Everybody was responsible for themselves when taking it on, so it was smartest to harden one's heart and ignore it. This scream, on the other hand, wasn't the type that one could ignore. It was too shrill for that—too much like a kid's. If it had been

an adult's, I'm sure I would have been able to stay as calm as Alty, but if a kid was in danger, my conscience ached. Yes, I was aware of my selective morality. Yes, I was aware that my sense of ethics was at odds with this cruel fantasy world. But if I left that kid to the wolves, then the already restive nights in this world would grow even more sleepless for me.

"Sieg. If you're gonna pull a face like that, then you should go save them."

A pause. "What do you think, Alty?" Part of me just wanted a second opinion, but I was also curious about a boss monster's moral outlook.

"Saving people is a good thing, obviously. Only, if you're gonna save them, then you need to commit. Don't misjudge the extent of your obligation to them. Guess that's about all I can say on the matter."

And so the monster before my eyes shared her eminently reasonable thoughts. However, her tone betrayed a measure of detachment. Though she acknowledged that saving people was a good deed, she had no desire to act herself. "You're not going to go save them?"

"Um, no. I'm a monster. I don't intend to help any humans besides you."

Contrary to her beneficent words, Alty's attitude proved cold. She was abiding by the rules of monsterkind. If I went to go save this kid, I'd be doing it alone. But the scream demanded immediate action. I had no time to waver. Now was the moment to decide.

"I'll go save them," I said, cursing my soft nature. "I'd feel awful if I abandoned them."

With that, I expanded *Dimension* in the direction of the scream. A few hundred meters ahead, a party of four was engaged in combat with a giant monster in a wide corridor. I ascertained that one of those four was in the grips of mortal peril, so I dashed over without waiting for Alty to respond.

"Ahh," came Alty's voice from behind, "I knew it. You're..."

Perhaps due to my focusing *Dimension* on the party of four, I couldn't hear the rest of the sentence. I tore through the corridor like an animal, leaving Alty by her lonesome. Little by little, the farther I sprinted, the damper the corridor got. I reached the battlefield at last—a zone of watery shallows at the center of

which a colossal monster with countless tentacles was running amok. At a glance, it looked like a kraken. Near it, around ten octopus-like minion monsters were squirming and wriggling around.

One of the four, a blond boy, was hanging upside-down in the kraken's grasp, his legs wrapped in a tentacle. One of his comrades, a young woman, was trying to rescue him by charging in recklessly. The other two were also attempting to save him, but the octopodes had them walled off and unable to approach.

It was horrible. A party of adventurers all around my age, among them women and younger children. If I left them to die now, my stress levels would shoot through the roof, which was why I screamed at the top of my lungs: "I'll save you! I'm not an enemy!!!"

The first thing I did was tell them I'd come to help. Without that declaration, depending on the situation, they might have assumed me to be a poaching hyena and attacked me. Then, without waiting for a reply, I ran at the tentacled titan.

The situation at that juncture was only worsening. The poor kid hanging in the kraken's clutches was being pulled closer and closer to its enormous maw, and the girl who'd attacked the creature so futilely was now caught in another of its limbs.

"Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash!*"

The minion monsters, noticing me barging into the battle, attempted to block my way, but I sharpened my senses through my dimensional magic, dodging them with the minimum movements necessary. First, I reached the point under the girl who was being hoisted up and sliced the tentacle twined around her. I immediately resheathed my sword to catch her in my arms.

"Eek! Huh?"

It seemed the girl didn't know what had just happened. A tick or two later, she realized she was being carried in my arms, and she blushed. I didn't have the time to explain. I let her down and ran for my next target.

The blond boy's predicament was the hairiest. Seconds before the kraken popped him into its mouth, I narrowly managed to slice the tentacle that had a

hold of him. I caught him in my arms and rushed right away from the kraken.

“Ah... Ah...”

It seemed as though the boy was speechless from fear. I guessed he was a bit younger than me. His face was lily-white, and he was shaking all over. At this rate, he couldn’t move anywhere on his own power. I flashed him the nicest, most reassuring smile I could muster and patted him on the head. “You’re okay now. There’s no need to worry, so stay back a little.”

“Ah...right...” He’d regained some of his composure, nodding and removing himself from my arms. I waited for him to gain some distance before turning towards the monster once again.

All that remained was to slay the enemy. Holding my sword aloft, I used Analyze on the oversized squid.

【MONSTER】Carapace Kraken: Rank 7

I reckoned it was around five meters in length. Its innumerable tentacles made it mollusk-like, but its body was more akin to a crustacean. It was like a cross between a squid and a shrimp. From what I could see, its body moved comparatively sluggishly, and its tentacles were its main weapon and asset. Its traits told me it was aquatic in nature, but there was no indication it was using any special or unique abilities. That didn’t mean that dealing with its million-odd tentacles by myself would be anything less than a tremendous pain in the neck.

Just when I’d decided I had no choice but to augment my support spell even further, that was when fire streaked through the arena.

“Huh? Fire?”

I focused on *Dimension* but still couldn’t grasp where those flames had originated. What I knew for sure was that it wasn’t a spell cast by the four-person party behind me. The fire *did* move like magic, though. It burned the tentacles, clearly with the aim of aiding me.

“Could it be...” Under the assumption that they were Alty’s flames, I started

attacking the Carapace Kraken in tandem with the fire. As I rent the oncoming tentacles asunder, I found what appeared to be its sense organs and smashed them one by one. For the finishing blow, I leaped above it and plunged my blade into the crown of its head.

“Gyaaahhh!” came the monster’s piercing cry. Unperturbed, I thrust the blade deeper still, severing the creature vertically. I could tell from the tactile sensation that this blow was certain death, and I wasted no time distancing myself from the dread beast.

Black ichor sprayed from its wound like a fountain, and its immense frame splashed to the ground. Its tentacles followed suit, immobile. Before long, the kraken dissolved into light and faded away.

TITLE UNLOCKED: The Dark of Deep Waters
+0.01 to DEX.

I watched the notification come and go. Next, I set my eyes on the minion monsters in the vicinity. They didn’t disappear in spite of their lord’s demise. Instead, they flew into a rage at the one who had slain their master and attacked me.

Excellent, I thought. Since the monsters that had been trading blows with the other four adventurers were now heading this way, I knew there’d be no casualties. Relieved, I intercepted the octopodes. They attacked in ways that made use of their soft bodies, but they were still too slow. There was no way I could lose after deploying *Calculash*. It took no time to finish annihilating the throng.

I stood there, panting. I hadn’t sustained any damage, but because I’d spared no effort, I was breathing somewhat raggedly. Through *Dimension*, I verified that there were no more monsters in the area. All that remained on the battlefield was the party I had saved and the magic gems that had fallen to the ground of the shoal corridor. The flames that had backed me up had vanished before I knew it.

“Um, pardon me!”

It was one of the party members—the girl I'd saved first. She had her long blonde hair in pigtails, and her fashion sense stood out, as everything she wore looked expensive and rather unsuited to the Dungeon. Her indigo-blue attire, which emphasized cleanliness and practicality, looked not unlike a school uniform to me.

"Err, you guys looked like you were in trouble," I said. "Was I butting in?" I hadn't given any thought as to what would come after saving them, so I blurted out that strange question.

The girl shook her head vigorously. "No, no, I do declare! Not at all!" she said fretfully.

"*I do declare*"?

That was the first time I'd heard that turn of phrase from someone in this world—no, in *either* world. Of course, I'd heard it in stories before, but to hear it actually used in conversation surprised me.

"Oh, really?" I replied. "I'm happy to hear that."

"I'm ever so grateful you saved us in the nick of time! Heavens, I can hardly believe you struck that savage monster down in a single blow. If you don't mind, could you give me your name?!" Her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks were flushed red. Her nostrils even looked a bit flared. Simply put, she was all hot and bothered, which made her shapely, sheltered-princess features look less than elegant.

"Oh, who, me? I'm no one important," I said, not giving out my name because I really couldn't be bothered.

"Don't say that! Your name... Please, sir, your name!"

Cowed by her furious protestations, I caved. "It's uhh...it's Sieg."

"Ahh, so your name is Sir Sieg. That has such a lovely ring to it," she said, pondering my alias with a blissed-out expression.

If I had to sum up my first impression of her in two words: *Ah, so I've got a head case on my hands. I should've just left without a word. Not that it's too late to do so now.*

I tensed my legs, intending to flee the scene, but at that very moment, a spark popped near my ear.

“Yowch, that’s hot!”

A floating flame appeared, and I heard a voice—a small vibration audible only to me:

You can’t do that, Sieg. I told you, didn’t I? If you’re gonna take on responsibility, you need to commit.

It was Alty’s voice. It seemed she was accosting me using the same means she’d used that morning—the floating flame. With *Dimension*, I could “see” it there, hovering by my ear. I replied to the flame under my breath so that no one else could hear.

“I saved them, didn’t I? What else do you want from me, Alty?”

Isn’t it obvious from looking at them? That girl wants to show you her gratitude. I won’t let you leave until you graciously accept it. That’d be abdicating your responsibility. And that’s the one thing I refuse to allow.

This was the first time Alty had spoken in such a serious tone. Left with no other choice, I appeased her.

“Okay, sure. If you insist, I’ll at least listen to what they have to say. But do me a favor, show yourself and join the group. If I’m by myself, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Nah, I’ll just watch from the sidelines. ‘Cause I’ve got a good feeling about this.

“Oh, oh c’mon, get your butt over here. I’m kinda not wild about this girl.”

Think about it, though. You wouldn’t want word to get out that you’re palling around with a monster, would you? I’ve got the body of a fire monster. No matter how careful I am, there’s always the possibility of something going wrong. As such, I’ll stick to my little flame until they leave you alone.

“I guess you’re not wrong.” But to me, that sounded like nothing more than a convenient excuse. The hope she’d shared with me a moment ago to “see a romance blossom with her own eyes” flashed to mind.

The problem girl ignored my distress and sidled up to me to take my hand in hers. “Sir Sieg! Could you spare a moment for a chat?! Just a chat!”

“S-Sure, fine.” I nodded, folding to the pressure.

Hee hee hee...

It seemed Alty had no intention of butting in, electing to simply laugh and continue observing. There was nothing for it; I was determined to get through what the girl had to say as quickly as possible and then tie a knot on this whole thing.

Yet that determination meant nothing. It didn’t take long for my first impression—and my regret—to be validated.



“An exam?”

“Yes indeed! We’re tackling the Dungeon as part of an exam for our academy!” explained the pigtailed young lady, Franrühle Hellvilleshine, enthusiastically. The leader of the party of four, she summed it all up without anybody else chiming in for the most part.

She and the others were students from Eltraliew, the country located to the Dungeon’s west. I’d heard that the nation boasted an advanced magic-centric culture, with the diligence of its citizenry being a point of distinction. Another distinguishing trait was the large number of educational institutions there. Famously, the biggest academy in all the landmass, located right next to the Dungeon, could be found there. And that was the school Franrühle and her group attended.

“I see.” None of that had anything to do with me, though I wouldn’t have minded listening to what she had to say when I had more time to spare.

“The makings of a first-rate Dungeon diver cannot be obtained through the power of pedigree alone. The Dungeon diving exam can only be undertaken by a meritorious few among even the highest-grade class of students.”

Frankly, I wanted to bolt for the proverbial door, but thanks to Franrühle and her incessant chattering, I couldn’t extricate myself.

"Wow, that's amazing. And given how amazing you guys are, I'm sure you'll do just fine going forward. Right, well, I'll be getting out of your hair now."

"W-W-Wait! Hold your horses! I need to thank you! Please, let me thank you! If I let you go without any token of appreciation for saving my life, it'd tarnish my noble name!"

Every time I tried to bid them adieu, a frantic Franröhle would get red in the face and stop me. I wasn't known for my expert ability to read signals, but she was being so blatant that even I could tell. Franröhle clearly wanted me to accompany her. Maybe she wanted to use me to clear this "exam" of hers without a sweat. Or maybe, if I wasn't being conceited, she was sweet on me.

Hee hee, heh heh heh...

And if I wasn't hearing things, Alty's laughter was telling me that chances were it was the latter.

"C'mon, Liner, you ought to thank him too. Ah, Sir Sieg, this here's my little brother."

The boy who'd been on death's door stepped forward. Clad in a small-sized uniform, he bore a dignified visage. Compared to his sister, however, Liner was a bit lacking in floridness. He too was blond, but the color of his hair was dull, and the same went for his eyes.

"Mr. Sieg, sir, I'm truly grateful you saved us from that close shave. But it's as you can see. You seem like a competent Dungeon diver, Mr. Sieg. Could you knock some sense into my dear sister? Tell her to stop fruitlessly risking her life. Say, 'scram, you self-indulgent rich girl,'" he said, spitting venom with a dead-tired tone of voice.

Okay. All right. So this is what the kid who nearly died is saying.

"L-Liner! Hush your mouth!"

"Franröhle, we need to show this gentleman our appreciation right away. Surely we should retrace our steps, leave the Dungeon, and receive him at our estate. That would be best. Let's give up on this attempt and chalk it up as a wash."

From the look of it, Liner wasn't feeling the Dungeon diving. He was trying to persuade his sister to go home, but I didn't much care for the idea of getting dragged off somewhere by them. Wasting time being made welcome at some nobles' estate had no appeal to me. Not when I had a Dungeon to clear.

"That's okay, Liner. You don't need to 'receive' me or anything. I'm gonna rush on ahead..."

"Ah, wait, please, hold on! If you're gonna leave, then please at least break my sister's heart first. If you can give her a talking-to, I'll thank you however you like later!"

Liner was so desperate that I stopped in my tracks. His sister wasn't the only shameless one here. He was trying to use this chance to admonish her in some way or other. Yet Franrühle showed no sign of ever backing down.

"No," said Franrühle. "I, for one, refuse to withdraw—come what may. This examination isn't just my concern. The reputation of the House of Hellvilleshine hangs in the balance!"

I was trapped between two quarreling siblings. But then one of the other party members joined the fray.

"Hey there, mister. Would you, as a Dungeon diver, be interested in doing a job for me?"

This third party member was a semifer with a large blade at her waist, though due to the cloth headdress and loose clothing, her appearance was no different from a normal human's. She told me her name was Elna.

"A job?" That was the first time I'd heard such a thing. Of course, I probably would have fared better asking no question, but the gamer in me named Aikawa Kanami was beginning to assert himself. He heard "a job" and thought "a side quest."

"Yep, that's right! It's a job for you. Err...I've got a gold piece for you. If you could guide us through the Dungeon, it's yours for the taking. You seem like a real ace, so payment for your services as our bodyguard's included. This exam's a competition, and we wanna place first, see? And I was thinking, you look like the meown for the job. I mean, the man! Mya ha ha, sorry, my accent slipped!"

Long story short, it was indeed, to put it in RPG terms, a side quest. My curiosity was piqued slightly. And I was also curious what sort of animal ears would pop out if I took off Elna's headcloth. Judging by her "accent," the odds were high they'd be cat ears. I had yet to see cat ears in this world, and inquiring minds wanted to know.

"I, I do declare! Nice idea, Elna! I take it you have no objections to that, Liner?!" said Franröhle, doing her best to cajole her brother.

Upon seeing Franröhle's excitement, my presence of mind returned. "Sorry, but I don't think I *am* the man for the job. If you need a guide, you should search for a diver who's older and more experienced. I'm young, as you can see, and I'm wet behind the ears. I'm totally unqualified to be guiding anyone."

"Oh my, that's not true!" said Franröhle, exhibiting a bizarre blind faith in me. "You're far from out of your depth, Sir Sieg!"

Her faith in me was on the unhinged end of the spectrum, so she spooked me a little. I distanced myself from her a tad.

Elna, unable to just watch without doing anything, approached me and whispered. "C'mon, mister, work with me here. It seems like little miss princess has taken a shine to ya. I want her to calm down before she runs wild and *starts* something, and we can do that by you playing sellsword. Look, I know it's a pain in the ass, so I'll double your payment! Two pieces of gold! That's excessive amounts of money! And our dragonewt can be the one who actually leads the way. Just stick with us until the tenth floor! That's all we need. And if something comes up, I won't complain if you ditch us, so just tag along for the time being..."

Elna looked about ready to cry. Apparently, their "little princess" Franröhle's reckless rampages were frightening. It was certainly true that one had no idea what she might do in such a state. That was why I wanted to take my leave of her. But sadly, two pieces of gold were too sweet to pass up. Extrapolating from what they'd said, the four were the children of nobles, so it was safe to assume they were all loaded. I was sure she really did mean to pay me that handsomely. Besides, this would be my first side quest, and that was enough to give me a jolt. So in the end, I gave in.

“O-Okay, I’ll do it. I have some business deeper in the Dungeon, so I don’t mind if I’m just accompanying you folks to the tenth floor. Things sound rough for you too...”

Faced with the over-the-top payment, the appeal of a side quest, and most of all, Elna’s tearful pleading, I yielded.

“Thanks a ton, mister.” Elna reported back to her party right away. “You hear that, Fran? It’s settled! Mr. Sieg here’ll escort us to Floor 10 as hired muscle. Great news, ain’t it?”

“Oh, how delightful! You’ll become a knight who defends me, right, Sir Sieg?!”



“Err, I’m not a knight. But I look forward to working with you all, however briefly.”

The other three greeted me as well, stepping closer.

“My name is Liner. I’m counting on you, Mr. Sieg. I wanted to go home, but there’s no helping it now. In the unlikely event I need to, I’ll protect my sister as a human shield since that’s my sole saving grace.”

“I’m Elna the semifer, and I’m our warrior. That taciturn girl’s Snow. She’s our scout!”

“Hey there,” said Snow, finally speaking up.

“And I’m the seventh scioness of the House of Hellvilleshine, Franrühle! It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Sir Sieg!”

With the salutations of their “leader,” Franrühle, we were now a temporary party. Meanwhile, the laughter in my ear just wouldn’t stop.

Heh heh, how lovely. Tell me this isn’t great. It’ll be fun. And you won’t even have to worry about the route to the tenth floor. It’ll be a cakewalk. You’ve got the Guardian of the tenth floor at your side.

Alty seemed positively delighted by this development. And so our newly formed party of five resumed its Dungeon dive. The challenge posed by the group’s exam was the acquisition of designated items. By gathering the items dropped by bosses that existed on each floor, they could provide proof of their exploits. The academy would only recognize them as “first-rate divers” if they made it back with all the items to be collected from Floors 1 through 10. And just as Alty had said, the party’s “exam” would be child’s play. Since the sentinel of the tenth floor was aiding us in secret, it could even be called a farce.

There were five of us, and that wasn’t including Alty. That meant I would shoulder only a fifth of the toil and face a fifth of the danger. Or at least, that’s what I figured.

How wrong I was. Reality was always a harsh mistress.

Our party’s dive commenced. How could I have known that being in a party of five meant I’d get five times as worn out compared to fighting alone?



“And now for the finishing blow!” shouted Franröhle. Her splendidorous sword cracked open the head of the giant bee boss monster, which began to lose its power of flight, dropping farther and farther down. As it lost altitude, more and more of its body disintegrated into light, expelling Franröhle, who’d been above it, into the air.

As Franröhle was my employer for this job, I ran below her so I could catch her. With my sword sheathed, I caught her carefully such that no pressure was placed on her. The scene was a rehash of our encounter with the kraken, and she blushed in exactly the same way. But I couldn’t focus on only her. I had to check to see if everybody else was safe too.

Liner was constantly backing Franröhle up, which left him totally exhausted. He was breathing very heavily, his shoulders moving up and down violently. As for Elna, I saw that she’d made quick work of the boss’s minions. Since the semifer valued her own life most of all, she never stepped out onto the front line of battle. Then there was the dragonkin scout in the back, and she...didn’t seem to want to do much of anything.

It was simple. These four weren’t functioning as a team in any way. Taken as individuals, their respective strength levels were weirdly high, but, presumably due to their driving motivations not aligning, they moved as disconnected units. The sheer amount of toil that acting as their go-between required dwarfed whatever fatigue came from fighting alone.

“We did it!” said Franröhle. “With this, we’ve cleared Floor 8! And we’re doing it incredibly fast thanks to Sir Sieg’s participation! That’s my knight for you!”

“C-Congratulations, Miss Franröhle. But please don’t forget that to make it happen, your brother’s always on the verge of death...”

Liner, who was so short of breath I wouldn’t have been surprised to see him cough up blood, drew close. “Hff... Hff... It’s okay, Mr. Sieg. An adopted noble like me has no worth outside of protecting my sister. If I can’t be of use here, then I’m so much trash. I’m like a garbage dump. Ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha! Ha haaa...” he laughed with an *I’m-dying* expression.

He had let slip so much that provided a glimpse of his complicated home life that I was sick of it. But I refused to touch it. I wasn't about to set foot in *that* mire, so I chose not to respond to any of it. I resolved anew not to ask any questions—as soon as this gig was over, I'd peace out of this party.

Before long, Miss Elna, who'd been fighting in the safe zone, joined the rest of us. I could instantly tell from her battles that she didn't care about acing the test. Her stance was all about prioritizing her own safety. She helped the two Hellvilleshines only when doing so cost her nothing. Her indifference was proof that she was motivated only by calculations of what would butter her bread. I liked her stance itself, but she was the type you never wanted to trust to have your back.

"Phew... Nice work." Snow had returned too, as listless as ever. She was the number one problem child out of the lot of them.

【STATUS】

NAME: Snow Walker

HP: 511/533

MP: 211/240

CLASS: Scout

LEVEL 14

STR 10.22

VIT 10.01

DEX 5.24

AGI 5.43

INT 7.91

MAG 10.84

APT 2.62

INNATE SKILLS: Draconic Protection 1.09, Optimal Moves 1.89, Ancient Magic 2.02

Mind's Eye 1.07, Blood Magic 1.00

ACQUIRED SKILLS: None

She was the girl with the highest level and the most blessed with talents, and thanks to her being a dragonkin, her base abilities were relatively potent as well. Apart from Dia, she possessed the highest aptitude stat out of any of the Dungeon divers I'd encountered thus far. And best of all, her stats were comparable to mine at this point in time. I won't lie. I wanted her on my side something fierce.

The problem? She was fatally checked out.

Despite her faculty for magic, she didn't use any at all. Her attacks were perfunctory, leaving everything to her muscles. Clearly, she wasn't taking her assignment terribly seriously. Upon asking Franrühle about Snow, she told me she was there to satisfy the number requirement. Then I asked Snow herself.

"Hope we get a death," she replied. "Then I can go home." She didn't elaborate.

A pampered princess who rushed headlong into danger. A boy knight obsessed with his sister. A semifer warrior who was out for herself. A dragonkin with zero motivation. As far as I was concerned, on the whole, this was one disaster of a party. Could there be a worse one? My opinion of this unseen academy was only sinking. An academy had people who taught things. Did those teachers see these four and think nothing of the group? If it had been me, I would've stopped them. By hook or by crook. Yet now that I'd agreed to this sellsword shtick, I couldn't just quit midway through.

Franrühle finished collecting the boss drop items, and I listened to her give her orders to the rest. "Excellent work, everyone. Now then, let's hurry on over to the ninth floor. You know, at this pace, it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for us to break first place!"

With that, my employer moseyed on her merry way. For their assignment, they had two objectives left: defeat a boss on the ninth floor and obtain the forever-flames on the tenth floor. According to Franrühle, since the tenth floor lacked a boss, they only *really* had one goal left to tackle. And since a boss was

currently stifling a laugh near my ear, I knew she was probably right.

Laying into a boss on the ninth floor shouldn't have been a problem, considering the strength levels of the party's members, but I had no doubt the strain of the constant anxiety would pile up inside me.

Compared to the efficiency of how I played RPGs back in my world, and to the ideal teamwork Dia and I displayed with our two-man team, this disconnected party's lack of coordination was Stress City. Honestly, I wanted to bail. I super wanted to bail.

No, man. Calm down. There's virtually only one goal left. One more, and I'm home free. I focused on the positives to soothe my spirit. You know what? I'm doing great.

This dive was much more worthwhile than getting to the tenth floor by myself would have been. Once this was behind me, it would definitely serve as a good experience to have had. I was way off course compared to my initial plans, but this had turned into a tribulation that was even harder than soloing the first ten floors. In fact, since one didn't come into an opportunity like this every day, I ought to be delighted.

Thus psyching myself up, I started walking at the head of the line. I suggested that since I was a deft hand at enemy detection, I should take the lead position alongside the party's scout.

"All right, shall we proceed? Let's lead the pack, Snow."

A pause. "Sure."

Snow was walking next to me now. I stole a glance at her face. She was a dragonewt, yet her appearance wasn't all that different from a normal human's. The only differences I could see were the small horns poking out of her bluish-black hair and her scaly tail. Her horns were decorated with an exotic head ornament, so I couldn't help but see her horns as an extension of that. As for the tail, she was wearing clothes with a low hem, so it was easy to ignore. Were it not for her listless, relatively small-irised eyes, she would have looked like your typical beautiful maiden in native dress.

"What is it?"

Snow noticed me sneaking a look. *That's a high-level diver for you.* Her personality left a little to be desired, but she was the juiciest asset out of the lot, so I figured I'd try talking to her.

"I was just wondering, why are you taking this test? You don't seem very up for it."

"I need the credits."

"Credits?"

"Uhh, credits are, err...eh, whatever. Ask me some other time..."

Okay, her personality left a *lot* to be desired.

"Well, I can't say I know too much about what credits are, but they're necessary for your academic life, right? So, you don't have enough credits, but if you pass this exam, you will. Is that the gist?"

I was drawing on my knowledge of how things worked back home. It couldn't be far removed from college credits.

"Wow. Impressive. That's exactly it. You know a lot for someone who doesn't attend the academy."

It seemed I'd hit the mark. Snow looked surprised.

"I see. So you're only taking the test because you've got no other choice. And that's why you're, well, unenthusiastic about it...but are you going to be okay doing so little? If you don't clear the test, you won't get your credits, will you?"

"It's okay; just taking the challenge has significance...apparently. If I participate at all, I'll get the credits."

"Ah, that explains it..."

That explained why she had zero motivation. Honestly, she reminded me of the college students in my world. They attended lessons and lectures and the like for the credits, but since they had no interest in the content, they just slept through it all. I got the feeling her situation was similar.

Then Franröhle's voice interrupted our conversation from behind. "Sir Sieg! We don't need you and Snow both at the front, so *do* come over here!"

I turned around, to find her sulkily beckoning me. I couldn't afford to hurt her feelings, so while I wanted to learn a little bit more about Snow, I did as I was told and fell back in line. I started walking beside Franrühle so I could protect her specifically. I was at her left, with Liner at her right. Elna was at the tail end, on the lookout for danger coming from the rear.

"Say, Sir Sieg," said Franrühle, after a moment's silence, "is there anything about me?"

"Huh? Anything about you?"

"Anything about me that *interests* you. Such as, oh, I don't know, something you'd like to know? What I do with my time?!"

She'd raised her voice so suddenly. I was flummoxed. It looked as though a silent dive was not to her liking. However, to tell the truth, there was nothing I wanted to talk to her about. The only person in this party I was interested in was Snow. Sure, Franrühle's talents were also a cut above your average Joe, but she compared unfavorably to Snow in that respect.

That said, if I kept this up I'd be asking for trouble, so I started humoring her. As we shared our pastimes and special skills as if this were some interview for a prospective marriage, we cleared our way through the eighth floor. Though I was a mite distracted, I was more than fine as long as I battled weakling monsters. For all its faults, the party's suite of talents did tick all the boxes. Even if nothing else did.

Around the time we descended the stairs to the ninth floor is when I ran out of silly little small-talk topics. With the end of the exam drawing near, the party's jitters were intensifying. Since they'd done their homework, they knew the whereabouts of the boss they were targeting. Still at the head of the pack, Snow moved towards the boss area without missing a step. Little by little, the corridor grew darker and the footing trickier until we were heading down a scraggy stone path not unlike the inside of a cave.

The name of the day's last boss was "Legion Bats." We'd be facing multiple giant bats, and they possessed an annoying ability. If one struck a fatal blow against one of them, the other bats joined together to heal it. As the battle took place in the darkness, it hinged on how well the party could handle several

monsters while making sure their light sources didn't get extinguished. Or at least, that was what was written in the conclusion of the academy lesson on the subject.

In reality, with *Dimension* on our side, it'd be no sweat. If it was darkness of the non-magical variety, my spatial perception powers rendered it meaningless.

Sure enough, the Legion Bats fight ended in short order. The bats attacked us once we entered a limestone cavern-style pocket, but through *Dimension*'s enemy detector function, we could counterattack without issue. All that was left to do was fight it by the academy textbook. So long as the group's individual shortcomings didn't send them into a downward spiral, the bats had no hope of victory.

The strain of it all was piling up, but we were able to clear the ninth floor in next to no time. After some scattered high-fives, we headed towards the tenth floor. We went down the Pathway, staying on our toes as we descended.

I turned my attention to the flame by my ear.

We finally made it to the tenth floor. I'm ho-ooome!

Floor 10 was brimming with a luminance unbecoming of the dingy, dreary Dungeon. Everywhere one looked in the massive chamber was fire and flames. That was the entirety of the floor. These flames weren't hot enough to burn visitors, but even so, they made a guy think twice before setting foot inside.

We picked the road where the flames died owing to the Pathway's barrier and walked through the tenth floor. Snow chose a random spot, took out a bottle, and stored some of the fire inside it. It was a strange spectacle; the fire was sucked in as if a clump of it had been torn out, and it continued to burn within the bottle even though there was nothing in there to burn. This was no normal fire. It was more like a will-o'-the-wisp filled with a deep-seated hatred.

But with this, their assignment had been completed. I was finally free of the party.

"All right, looks like it's clear sailing from here. Congratulations, everyone," I said, hoping to lead into a farewell.

"I'll say, mister, you really helped us out," said Elna. "We're lucky we got to

join hands with a diver like you, let me tell ya. I honestly thought one of us would get hurt and force us to go home at some point! Ah, here's your money, just as promised."

She handed over my pay.

"Sir Sieg! As long as we have you, may I ask you to escort us back to the surface?! Oh, I know! Since we have you, you might as well escort us back to Hellvilleshine Manor! And then I'm thinking we can treat you to dinner as thanks! We always wanted a bond of kinship with a young, strong, honest, and kind diver like you! What do you say, sir?!"

Picking up on people's feelings wasn't a strong suit of mine by any stretch, yet even I could tell that Franrühle was infatuated. If I'm honest with myself, I was happy that a girl with her face and figure liked me that way. However, I was pretty sure that if we grew closer, it'd only add to my troubles.

"I'm sorry, Franrühle. I have business farther down. I unfortunately can't escort you back up."

"Oh... Oh, I see... I can hardly twist your arm after you saved us like that. Just know that we Hellvilleshine siblings welcome you to our home with open arms! And feel free to turn to us for help whenever you might need it."

"Wait, me too? Well, I guess if it's you coming over to hang out, Mr. Sieg, then I'm happy to have you."

Franrühle had decided without consulting Liner that he too would welcome me.

I forced a smile and bade them adieu. "Thank you very much. If the chance presents itself, I'll take it."

"By all means! And if you ever get the chance, visit us at Eltraliew Academy! Ah, the Hellvilleshine Manor is in District 3 of Whoseyards! If anything ever comes up, don't hesitate to call on us!"

Ever reluctant to part ways, she kept on promoting herself. If I'd crossed paths with her back in my world, I'd probably have thought her hardworking and likable. But here and now, I coolly concluded she was of no use to me. To round things off, I said my goodbyes to the other two.

"Ya look gullible, mister," said Elna, "so take care not to get bamboozled. See ya!"

"You're not cut out for the Dungeon," said Snow. "I suggest you look for another vocation. Well, bye then."

For reasons I didn't understand, her parting words were quite harsh. Seeing as we'd dived together as comrades, however briefly, I wanted to think she said that out of concern for me.

And thus did I part ways with the party of academy students. Franrühle alone kept looking over her shoulder and waving. It was charming. When the four fell out of view, I was the only one left on the tenth floor. The flames that spanned one side of the room had me sweating.

I spoke to the chamber's master. "They're gone."

Looks like it. Wait a sec.

Part of the flames in the room started morphing into the shape of a person. Then bandages came out of nowhere and wrapped around the fire. With nothing concealing her but those bandages, it was almost like she was in her underwear, so I took out a spare article of outerwear from my inventory and tossed it her way. Alty swiftly donned the clothes.

"Whew-ee! My flesh-and-blood form's preferable, right? That way, we match!"

"Well, yeah, I guess I'll take that over you whispering in my ear."

The scorching heat and her voice right next to my ear. That shit was right out of a horror movie.

"Plus, I'm definitely cuter this way, right?"

"Ha ha, you're still mostly fire! Become actual flesh again and then we'll talk."

"Hee hee. Never honest about your feelings, are you?"

We engaged in frivolous repartee as we proceeded along the tenth floor. Perhaps owing to Alty's presence, the corridor's flames avoided us as opposed to the other way around, so we made progress without trouble.

“So, this is your floor, huh? It’s pretty damn treacherous in here.”

“Sure, but look, this is the only place anyone can safely procure fire. And no monsters will jump out at you. In the eyes of other divers, it’s treasured as a rest point.”

“Yeah, well, seeing as it’s like I’m in your belly right now, it’s got me on edge...”

“How sharp of you to notice. I expected no less of you, Sieg. We really are inside me. You can call the tenth floor an extension of my being.”

Alty licked her lips and smiled coquettishly. Upon hearing that, my legs started moving faster.

The tenth floor wasn’t that big, all things considered. Thanks to Alty, we were also able to evade the fire entirely, which meant I was able to descend to the eleventh floor within moments. Upon reaching the new floor, we went on the hunt for fresh monsters.

I was currently at Level 10. I wanted to test whether I could hold my own in a fight here, so I deployed *Dimension* and scanned for eleventh-floor monsters. I soon spotted a bipedal gorilla-like beast prowling in the distance. It seemed that once one got past the tenth floor, the monsters went up a size.

“Alty, for the time being, I want to try fighting an eleventh-floor monster to see how things go.”

“Got it. In that case, guess I’ll play forward again,” she volunteered without my having to ask directly.

I waited until the monster was walking alone before launching my ambush. *Dimension* made taking the initiative was easy as pie. First, Alty slashed it with her flame blade, then I fired some magic from behind.

“Spellcast: *Ice Arrow*.”

It was the same spell I had used when I’d fought alongside Dia, but thanks to my having leveled up, the arrow was noticeably more solid. For bipedal monsters, their weak points were their legs. Entrusting things to my DEX stat, I took aim and threw the ice arrow accordingly.

“Nice work, Sieg!”

Alty followed up with the finishing blow. Its head pierced by the flame sword, the monster dissolved into light and faded away. Even compared to the monsters of the single-digit floors, it hadn’t taken much effort to take it down. Feeling a tad faked out, I picked up the magic gem it had dropped.

“Hrm,” said Alty. “Looks like eleventh-floor monsters are pushovers too.”

“Yeah. Your being in the front is really making this a walk in the park.” I kept up the act, pretending Alty’s dedication was moving me.

“Oh, it’s nothing. You can leave it to me,” she said.

“You’re a noble soul. For real, though.”

Alty must have felt the “faith” in her that I laced into those words. She looked cheerful as she led the way. “All righty, what say we proceed quicker? I don’t know much about what’s beyond the tenth floor, but at this rate, it looks like we can make it to the twentieth without half trying.”

I, too, was confident we could make it to Floor 20. From what I had seen of the way the eleventh-floor monsters moved, I couldn’t imagine I’d get injured.

Just as predicted, we hunted monsters with impunity as we proceeded through the eleventh floor. Since every battle was a breeze, it didn’t take long for us to find the stairs.

Things were going oh so smoothly. There was no sign of anything that could give us a hard time. But that only went for battling weakling monsters. I was sure that as a boss monster, Alty was a different story.

Alty was about to go down the stairs with a triumphant swagger, but I stopped her. “Hold on, Alty. The time’s right, so let’s stop here for today. My MP’s depleted, and I’m losing my concentration. I proved I can make it to Floor 10, and that’s enough for today.”

“Huh. You that tired?”

“Yeah. Forming a party with Franrühle’s group tuckered me out. Babysitting them left my MP running on empty.”

In reality, I had more than half of my MP left, but this was the minimum

amount I'd allow myself before hightailing it, accounting for the contingency of an unforeseen boss encounter. In other words, this was my limit for diving alongside the boss monster Alty. But my labor had borne some fruit. I'd finished laying the necessary groundwork. We'd forged a connection by diving down to the eleventh floor, and now we could take the next step.

"I see. Got it. Guess that's it for today, then."

"Let's turn back. And since we're together anyway, you might as well give me the details in the meantime."

Alty cocked her head in puzzlement at my now milder stance.

"Oh? So you mean you're gonna give me a hand with my wish?"

"I did say you've earned a measure of trust. But never mind that, just tell me already."

"Go me," said Alty, pumping her fists a little. "Well, to get into it... Like I told you at the start, my current goal's to observe a young girl in love. As for the specific method, I plan to secretly take hold of her. I've got a parasite power."

"Take hold of her? And that doesn't do her any harm?"

"Nope. Depending on the situation, I can give her an assist. It's basically harmless. It just means I can feel what that person's feeling. I intend to watch over her until her love becomes requited. If I can witness it unfold, then I'll probably disappear, just like that."

So in summary, if I could introduce her to a girl who fit the bill, Alty would stick with her for some time. And that would leave me free to level up in the Dungeon without cause for concern.

"Really? All right, got it. In that case, I'll find you any old girl. In my spare time when I'm not diving, that is."

"Oho, ya really mean it?"

"Just bear in mind, I'm not exactly suited for the task. I'm no expert on love stuff, and I don't have any connections. I'm sure it's gonna take ages. Are you okay with that?"

"That's fine. You fulfilled Tida's wish. You got results. That's what's important."

'Sides, I'm patient. I can wait decades if I have to."

I was happy she was happy with the limp, half-assed help I was promising her. Time to cut to the chase.

"Okay, so if and when I find a girl who's in love, what should I do? And for that matter, where can I find you, Alty?"

If she replied that she'd be following me twenty-four seven, then I was cooked. If that happened, getting rid of her through battle would enter my list of options.

"When you do... Oh, I know. You can just report your find to the flames on Floor 10. Since I'm on the hunt for such a girl myself, I won't always be there, but I think that if you talk to the flames, I'll be able to respond no matter where I am."

Thankfully, she wasn't going to be stalking my every waking moment. I didn't know if that was out of consideration for me, but either way, I was relieved.

"Okay, cool. Then that's what I'll do. Also, when you say you're on the hunt for a girl like that, do you mean in the Dungeon?"

"No, I mean in town. My strength drops considerably thanks to the barriers, but Guardians aren't chained to the Dungeon. It's not a big deal for us, going out and about."

"That's, uhh... That's surprising." I hadn't heard of such a thing, not even at the pub. This must be information the Dungeon Alliance wasn't privy to.

But that wasn't the only hair-raising tidbit she shared with me. "Tida strolled through town from time to time too. In disguise."

This was a prime opportunity to wring as much information out of Alty as I could. "Well, that's horrifying. Hey, I've been wondering—are there other Guardians besides you and Tida?"

"Nope, none. Pitifully, humans haven't released the seals beyond the twenty-third floor yet. I'm pretty sure a new Guardian is freed every ten floors. For now, it's just the two of us. Seriously," she added with dismay, "work harder, humans."

I wasn't expecting that. I'd thought that bosses were beings that existed to prevent challengers from advancing through the Dungeon, but it seemed that wasn't the case. From what Alty had just said, it sounded more like we were actually *helping* them.

As we conversed, we reached the tenth floor. The fire was blazing as brightly as ever; this space was difficult for us humans to bear being in.

"So, what're you planning to do?" I asked. "Is this where we part ways?"

"No, I'm gonna pop up to the surface. You found me an intriguing girl!"

"I did?"

"That Franrühle. I've got a fondness for the flames of foolish infatuation. Of course, from what I could see, that love won't be blossoming," she said, smiling lasciviously. "Heh heh heh, hee hee!"

"Oh, *her*. Gotcha." Alty had just stirred up *unwanted memories*.

"Don't 'oh *her*' her. From the look of it, she's into you."

"What? Oh...yeah." I'd gotten a sense of that myself, but I hadn't wanted to admit it. Yet, Alty was now slapping me upside the head with that sad fact.

"Heh heh, I know you don't feel the same way. But she looks like a ton of fun. I'm gonna go mess about near her a bit."

"Don't let me stop you..." It didn't much matter to me what became of that nuisance. No pangs of conscience there. Franrühle was all hers. On the other hand, the idea that Alty might give Franrühle her aid was a bit scary.

We walked up to the surface, all the while discussing how to grant Alty her wish. In the end, we decided to act separately for the most part, to report to one another whenever one of us found a suitable candidate. While that required me to routinely meet up with Alty, a path had opened up where I didn't have to fight against a Guardian, and for that I was grateful. I could call the plan I came up with a slam dunk, yet at the same time, I could feel the sludge of self-hatred pooling within me. And that was only natural. In all likelihood, Alty had faith in me. Trusted me. But here I was, answering her trust with lies. All because of the pathetic excuse that she was a scary monster. I

hated my own weakness of spirit. A murky, unpleasant sensation surged inside my heart.

If I used “????” I could probably dispel this malaise. But I didn’t want that number going past 9. Thinking about it in RPG terms, I got a bad feeling that the condition hitting the double digits might trigger something.

Don’t. Not yet. This emotion isn’t anything I can’t handle.

And with that, I ended the day’s dive and returned to the surface.

Chapter 2: Who Be the Slave?

"I'm patient, sure, but do be on the lookout, all right? I'll reward you for your efforts. Right then, back in a bit."

After we made it back to the surface, Alty immediately told me she was off to Eltraliew Academy and went on her way. A school chock-full of adolescent boys and girls. Wouldn't that in itself be enough to grant her wish? But Alty made sure to hold me to my promise before parting.

I watched her go, then heaved a sigh. The air out here was so nice and fresh. The dangers of the Dungeon behind me, a sense of security wrapped me in its comfy blanket. But just as the sun in the sky was sinking, so too did my mood. "Ah..."

The plan had initially been to go find out about Dia's severed arm and test my ability to dive solo in the process, but I'd been pushed every which way by stuff I couldn't have seen coming. I processed everything that had happened that day as I walked over to where my comrade in arms was hospitalized.

From that point onward, I planned to visit him regularly. I wanted to report back to him the fruits of my dive.

I soon arrived at the biggest hospital in Vart and walked right to the wards, entering Dia's room. I'd figured he'd be sleeping, yet the room was filled to the brim with mystic light. The light-bubbles that I'd seen during the battle against Tida now crowded the space.

"Dia...what're you doing?"

"Ah, Sieg! What do you mean, what am I doing? This is my physiotherapy."

Dia was sitting cross-legged atop his bed. Light kept emanating out of his arms.

"Uh, Dia? Didn't the doctor tell you to rest?"

"Yeah, but I wanna get right back to normal. This week is basically for me to

get rehabilitation, so..."

"Never mind that, just rest already."

I put a hand on his head. He looked at my arm for a moment, then nodded.

"Okay, Sieg. If you say so, I'll rest."

"Good. Rest. You don't want to extend your stay here, I'm sure."

"Ha ha, yeah." He smiled. "So tell me, Sieg, did you hit the Dungeon?"

"Sure did. I went all the way to Floor 11. I think I can go farther too."

I didn't want to tell him about any of the details, especially the whole deal with Alty. I intended to make that Guardian stop being a problem all on my own. Dia was still recuperating, and I didn't want to give him any reason to worry.



The prosthetic arm poking out of his hospital gown was what made me come to that decision.

“See? You’re fine on your own. You don’t need the likes of me. You oughta have more self-confidence.”

“Thanks, Dia. But I’d be happier with you around.”

“No, it wouldn’t work. The way I am now, I wouldn’t be any use to you. So wait for me. I’ll be back by your side once I’m worthy of you!”

“Okay, all right, got it.”

Dia stared at me, his eyes harboring renewed conviction. Through those eyes, I could sense that something akin to a delusional obsession had taken root. I’d let my guard down thinking this was the same Dia I knew, and I winced despite myself.

“Let’s see,” Dia continued. “I’ve got seven days till they let me out. Oh yeah, if I’m not wrong, I think that day’s during the Festival of the Blessed Birth too.”

“Oh, really? So the Alliance has festivals, huh?”

“Yeah. Every year, the Festival celebrates the heroes who founded the Alliance. In the week leading up to the Day, Whoseyards up north’s gonna be a whirlwind of activity. And on the Day of the Blessed Birth, there’s gonna be a big ol’ ceremony at the cathedral.”

I hadn’t caught wind of any festivals, so Dia was helping me out by explaining. “Huh, I had no idea. I’m from a faraway country and all. That actually sounds like perfect timing, though. If you’re discharged by then, why don’t we go check out the Festival to celebrate your clean bill of health?”

“Oh, nice idea! Aww right! I’ll get better sooner so we can enjoy the Festival!”

“If you wanna get better sooner, you’ll stop practicing magic, right?”

“I... I get it, okay?!”

The topic of the Festival had lent the room a merry atmosphere.

It’s nice to have friends. My having been in a party with Alty and Franrühle’s group had only made that sentiment stronger, but it’d take him seven days to

be discharged. That left me with tons of time on my hands. Sure, the fault ultimately lay with me, but it was lamentable all the same.

My visit lasted for about an hour. I informed him of my present state and asked him more about the Festival, and in the blink of an eye, an hour had passed. While I didn't want to leave, I didn't want the visit to last too long either, so I wrapped up our time together at an appropriate moment. Dia waved goodbye until I slipped out of view.

And now, I was alone again.

I walked through town, contemplating ways to kill time. I'd prioritized freeing myself of Alty, so it was only just past noon. I had plenty of HP and MP left, but I couldn't just dive right back into the Dungeon. Not when the excuse I'd given for leaving it was a lack of MP. I wanted to avoid the off chance that Alty spotted me going back inside.

As I strolled, I formulated a plan. Unlike mere days prior, I now had an infinite sea of options, not least because selling off Tida's gem had made me moderately wealthy. That said, I'd already stocked up on all my everyday necessities, and I'd plopped everything I needed for the Dungeon into my inventory, so I couldn't think of anything to buy.

I walked with a frown on my face, and I ended up at a residential area a fair way away from the Dungeon. The rustic feel of the wooden houses clashed with the gemstone lines adorning the streets. Looking around, I saw the denizens of Vart leading their ordinary everyday lives: a group of children walking down the road, tuckered out after horsing around; a tired old woman carrying some baggage; a swordfighter dragging his feet, no doubt having returned from a dive himself; a lady hanging freshly washed clothes to dry.

Up until now, I'd stayed around the city outskirts near the Dungeon, so this was my first time seeing the general public go about their lives. It got me thinking.

"Wait, have I got enough for a *house*?"

I gripped the pouch that contained my gold coins. I already had a "residence," of course—that corner of the pub they'd so graciously given me. But I couldn't just impose on their kindness forever. Under normal circumstances, a Dungeon

diver was supposed to pay for lodgings with their own income. And what was sitting close at hand but pieces of gold? Forget about basic lodgings; it was enough to get me a proper house.

I walked, but this time, I wasn't walking aimlessly. My stride sure-footed, I had a specific destination in mind.



And then, before I knew it, the sun set.

I now had a wooden house that was fairly spacious for a single occupant. Back in Japan, they'd call the place a 4LDK. Within one of the rooms, I was speaking with a lady seated opposite me.

"So, sir, you're amenable to a yearlong contract for this property?"

"Yes, thank you."

After paying Dia a visit, I had gone straight to a real estate store. As soon as I mentioned how much money was in my possession at the reception desk, they rolled out the red carpet for me and the contract proceeded without a hitch. As buying land and a home demanded a stiff asking price, I opted for a lease agreement, not least because I wasn't planning to stay in this world for very long. I'd set my goal to return to Earth within a year, so I chose a one-year contract.

"I'll come back at a later date with the fine print...but since it's you, sir, you're clear to use this home starting now," replied the woman, whose customer service smile was so impeccable it made me, as a fellow service industry worker, want to take notes.

"Wait...really? I can?"

"You paid your lump sum, and this contract is already written. It's no problem, sir. All that's left is the contract with all of the optional extras."

"Well I'll be..."

"Now then, sir, if you'll excuse me."

Not one to waste time, she settled the matter of the contract and took her leave of my new home, leaving me alone. I immediately looked around the

house. Using *Dimension*, I'd ascertained that it had been scrupulously and thoroughly cleaned, but there were things I couldn't glean without checking them out for myself. Still, no matter what I touched, not a single patch of dust was to be seen. It was so perfectly hygienic, it was enough to satisfy *me*, a kid of the modern era who had been raised in a concrete jungle.

The house was first-class even among single-family homes. I was told that in constructing the place, they had made free use of this world's magical architectural techniques, so it excelled at resisting earthquakes and heat. In addition, ley lines stretched through the house's interior, and it was fully furnished with magical devices, allowing me to wash with water, use hot water, and use an open flame, among other things. Moreover, the kitchen was more lavish than the pub's.

What made me happiest of all was the lock. As a modern-day kid with modern-day sensibilities, I always wanted my doors nice and locked, so I was particularly fastidious about ensuring there were no gaps in that department.

In order to test the perfection level of the locks, I jumped outside. On the door sat a lock that utilized both iron and magic gem material. The lock itself was a large, old-fashioned one, but it kept the door firmly shut all the same. I used a magic gem-crafted key to lock and unlock it over and over, making sure it was safe and sound. When I realized I now enjoyed the same level of security as back in my world, I was nearly moved to tears. My making excessive demands of the agency had paid off.

The down payment amounted to ten pieces of gold, but I'd been able to acquire a house that was close in quality to a home back in my world. That said, that price didn't include maintenance or loss costs. Undoubtedly, those expenses would be quite high. Even so, I didn't want to compromise. It was my belief that with a high-quality residence to go home to, my rest would also be high-quality. If I could buy mental or emotional stability with my money, then I reckoned I shouldn't be too stingy about it.

"Ha ha, aha ha ha!"

It was so much fun. The time I spent scrutinizing the many varied properties for sale. The time I spent contemplating what I needed. The time I spent voicing

my sticking points. All of it was a happy pill for me. Spending so extravagantly was so enjoyable that I couldn't help myself.

"Ha ha ha, ha, ha..."

After a brief moment's laughter, I heaved a sigh. Waylaid by an overwhelming ennui, all my elation was morphing into regret. Put simply, I'd gone overboard. I'd gotten too carried away. At the same time, I realized that I was acting even less normal than I thought I was. That entire day, I hadn't used "???" even once despite having dived with those problem children, Alty and Franröhle among them. Maybe I'd stockpiled stress and my body had moved on its own to release that stress.

"Ah man, I went too far. I can sleep wherever there's a roof over my head. I need to be using my money on Dungeon dives, not shit like this..."

I could just eat at the pub. Cooking meals at my place was pointless. I didn't need hot water either. If I wanted to bathe, it would've been more efficient to just hit the public bathhouses. And most excessive of all was the lock. What was this house meant to be protecting? I could place anything and everything into my inventory, so there was nothing that needed storing here. Besides, since the house was made of wood, somebody could just break in the door and stroll right in.

Out in the yard, I sat on the ground holding my knees, staring vacantly at the adjacent road. It was a fantastic location. It got plenty of sun, and it was close to the Dungeon. The place stood alone atop a hill, where there was a nice breeze and a great view of the residential area below.

Before I knew it, the sky had grown totally dark, dyeing the town black. Little by little, flames were lit here and there, and the hustle and bustle gradually subsided. As I viewed the scene, I grew introspective.

I... I'll use the money I've got left on the Dungeon! I swore to myself.

Just then, I heard the sound of running animals from beyond the darkness.

"Hm? Spellcast: *Dimension*."

Through my magic, I more or less grasped the situation. I knew those were horse hooves pounding the ground. A carriage was rushing down the road. It

looked identical to the one carrying slaves I had spotted in the past. As expected, this one's interior was also jam-packed with people wearing collars. Slaves.

My head having cooled down through my lavish spending, I harked back to that truly deplorable old idea of mine—to search the menus of the slaves for ones with useful talents.

It didn't have to be slaves, necessarily. Anybody who was weak or disadvantaged enough to lick my boots and do my bidding would suffice; at the end of the day, I just needed to search for suitable pawns. It was disgusting and rotten, but one couldn't deny the sheer efficiency of it. What did I have over anybody else when it came to spending my money? My menu-sight. It enabled me to verify the specifics of both objects and people. I figured that was an advantage not even veteran merchants could obtain. And thanks to their being slaves, I was sure that were many whose talents weren't being put to good use, whereas I could discern who was worth using at a glance. If there was a better way to shop than that, I didn't know of it.

I checked how much capital I had left and worked out a plan in my head. Then, I plunked the magic gem key into my inventory and got back on my feet, determined to actually buy someone this time. With regard to my house, I'd slipped up. I can admit it. What money I had left, I'd manage more effectively. When it came to stuff without menus, such as, say, houses, I might have had catching up to do, but when it came to stuff with menus, my judgment was foolproof.

Following the slave carriage, I walked. The farther I walked down the low-traffic back alleyways, the deeper I penetrated the rougher side of Vart. As one might expect, a space dealing in slaves wasn't exactly in a respectable area. Regardless, I had HP and MP to spare. If I got caught up in a dangerous situation, I could handle myself. Level 10 was a higher-tier level, even within the Dungeon Alliance. Thinking to myself that I was on par with my boss at the pub or with Krowe, my stride turned weirdly brisk, like I was light on my feet. I took a largish piece of cloth out of my inventory and coiled it around my head like a scarf, concealing half my face. And with that, I ventured into the darkest reaches of town.

Finally, I arrived. The disquieting building that lay at the bottom of this dark pit. The establishment wasn't the same slave trafficking house I'd visited before, but though the location was different, the format was similar.

I opened the door situated inconspicuously in a back alley. What awaited me was a gaudy and resplendent reception hall totally unlike the drab entrance outside. The eyes of the people inside—the customers, I assumed—turned to me. Undaunted, I thought back to the information I had acquired prior and walked in boldly and confidently. Thanks to that, they appeared to assume this was not my first rodeo. Losing interest in me, their gazes moved elsewhere.

I didn't ask the receptionist for any explanation, simply walking ahead as I collected information through *Dimension*. It didn't take me long to understand this market's structure. Evidently, as the night wore on, the slave market gradually shifted in character from conventional to illegal. And the later the hour, the higher the prices the slaves fetched. Eventually, slaves who weren't simply victims of war started emerging onto the stage.

I entered the building's biggest auction room and camped out in a seat off to the side. Then I watched the slaves on stage as they were introduced one by one. There were young women who I bet had been kidnapped. There were rare and unusual semifers. There were very young children and people with physical idiosyncrasies whose skin or hair were patchy and discolored. There were all sorts.

The later the hour became, the more the atmosphere in the venue heated up, blasting primitive, unmasked fervor from all sides. It was enough to make my head spin. I'd known that going this deep into the thick of it all, this is exactly what I would get. I'd braced myself for it. But there was a difference between what I'd foreseen in my head on an intellectual level and standing face-to-face with the real thing.

I didn't think of myself as a spotless saint, but I didn't think I could possibly adapt to a den like this. The heady, chemical stench of drugs invaded my nostrils, mixed with various kinds of body odor. The crass laughter of the well-heeled moneybags who ruled this arena. The woebegone eyes of the slaves standing on the stage. What chipped away at my heart the most was the state of the slaves. The menus communicated the unvarnished truth, whether I

wanted them to or not. Just from all the instances of “Confusion,” “Mind Taint” and “Impaired Memory” I saw in the Condition sections, my face threatened to start twitching.

But I had an objective to accomplish, so I pushed through and continued perusing their menus. So as to distract myself from their names, I focused on their levels, stats, and skills like an employer looking at resumes. I definitely didn’t want to look at their names. If I did, I’d be beset by pesky empathy.

Then, new slaves got up on stage and the presenter called out. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, I’ll tell you all about the next articles for sale, Numbers 7 through 10.”

I paid no mind to the presenter’s words. I just continued using Analyze, making only their numbers populate my mind.

Number 7: high level and high stats but nonexistent skills.

Number 8: well-balanced stats and an impressive total of four skills, but defective vis a vis their Condition.

Number 9: bad stats, bad skills, subpar Condition.

Number 10: average stats, and...

“Let’s not,” I blurted out.

I stopped myself lest things got *too* real. I thought I’d come here with tremendous force of determination, but even that much wasn’t enough. It looked as though there was no way I could remain calm enough to keep searching this slave market. I couldn’t stomach the adults grinning and laughing as they bid on people without any reluctance or remorse, yet I was no different from any of those fat cats.

Once I made that connection, it became impossible to carry on. I didn’t want to so much as keep breathing the air here. I gently rose out of my seat and made to leave.

Then, a voice came from behind me. “Oho, laddie. Leaving already?”

Vacating my seat so abruptly must not have been my wisest move. I’d already stood out due to how young I was, and it appeared I’d caught one man’s eye.

He was tall, and while his curly light brown hair was neatly coiffured, he'd let his beard get stubbly. His attire was that of a merchant but he had a sword at his waist; I wasn't able to tell from appearances alone whether he was somebody's guard or a client himself. *What's the read on this guy?*

He had caught me off guard. I attempted to exit right then and there, and my excuse ended up mealy-mouthed. "I'm not feeling well..."

"Oh no—is all this too much for someone your age to handle?"

"No, that's not it..."

No need to engage in a whole conversation. I made to leave without another word.

But the man continued speaking so I could hear. "Ah, that girl who was just bought's got some wretched luck. That noble's famous for his unsavory hobbies, don't you know?"

That stopped me in my tracks, and I caught sight of the slave currently resisting and screaming she'd rather die than be his property. She must have heard tell of that particular noble's proclivities.

I averted my eyes, only for the smirking man to come into view.

"What are you trying to tell me?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing! I'm just teasing you because you seem like such a hoot."

Shocker, everyone here's a garbage human. I decided not to engage and to hit the road.

"Now then, allow me to move on to our next article. Number 13 is from Fania—a girl with that rare blend of black eyes and black hair."

Fania? Black eyes and black hair? She was the same as me. That insane coincidence brought me to a halt once again. Try as I might to make myself scarce, I couldn't run away from the weakness of my own spirit. I hated myself for it, but I told myself this was the last slave I'd check out, and I snuck a sidelong glance at the stage.

Standing there was a girl whose name I already knew. She was the slave who had introduced herself to me, and I to her. Our first encounter had taken place

only a few days prior, and I still remembered her feeble voice: “*I’m Maria. My name is Maria.*”

Once more, I was met with those hollow eyes. And as it happened, she noticed me too. It appeared she remembered me, as a glint lit up her empty eyes and our gazes intersected.

“Hmm, what’s this, mister? There something about that slave?”

“No, not really.” I wasn’t paying attention to the dumb guy’s dumb words.

“Laddie, you do realize people like me come pick on you because your expression gives you away, right?”

But I just kept staring silently at the girl named Maria. She was a totally ordinary little girl. Her menu hadn’t changed since I had last viewed it. She remained good at cooking and a little on the blessed-by-talent side. There were loads of people who were more or less the same as her in that regard. Yet it was with her I’d spoken. It was her whose name I knew. And that was all my stupid, damnable sense of empathy needed to kick in.

“Oh, looks like the bidding’s begun,” said the man, prodding me further.

That caused my pent-up antipathy to swirl inside me. By way of the battle against Tida, I’d grown accustomed to sorting out my emotions, but now I realized that was the very reason this feeling had nowhere to go.

“Akh, at this rate, it looks like that depraved noble’s got another fresh purchase. Maybe the gentleman plans to clean the place out tonight. Penny for your thoughts?”

Then it dawned on me: the terrifying realization that with enough money, I could rescue at least one of the slaves here. I just had to speak up. That would suffice to prevent this Maria’s voice from becoming stained by unspeakable heartbreak. I could save the girl with black hair and black eyes.

The scales in my soul tottered. Could my callow heart withstand leaving little Maria to the dogs? As a result, I ended up interacting with the man in order to ask a question.

“Hey, so, how does one participate in this auction?”

"Hm? So you are gonna participate after all? If you wanna place a bid, just raise your hand and name your price. You can mimic what everybody else is doing."

That was what I'd wanted to double-check. Now I was sure I wouldn't be messing up the procedure. Yet in the end, my cold, logical side tried to stop me. *Saving one person means nothing*, it chastised me. *This is an unsightly act*, it scolded me.

In response, I marshaled my excuses. If I saved her now, it'd take a small bit of the load off my heart. Even if saving *one* slave was an unsightly act, if spending this money made sure my heart didn't get overloaded and "???" didn't trigger, then surely it was money worth spending. Luckily for me, my pockets weren't empty just yet.

I raised my hand. "Auctioneer, I'll double the last bid," I said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Maria's eyes reeled wide open. That look was the same as when we'd first crossed paths—she'd stared back at me like she'd stumbled upon something.

A commotion stirred the whole floor. There were those who looked at me with puzzlement. Those who clamored and kicked up a fuss, clearly amused. Those who talked among each other, curious. Every one of the rich folks in the place was astir—they'd found an amusing new human toy to entertain them.

"My my, a bid from a young man who's clearly flush with money!" shouted the auctioneer, speaking faster and seizing on the opportunity to liven up the crowd. "The going price has reached beyond one piece of gold. Might any of you gentlemen now be interested in this slave who measures up to the young man's discerning eyes?!"

The man next to me laughed. "Ha ha. You ratcheted it up too quickly, kid. Look what happens now." He pointed at one of the nobles who'd bid before me.

"I bid double *his* bid!" he shouted, loud enough to be heard over the noise.

"Oho, a bid from Lord Febre! And another doubling! Now the price is for the creme de la creme! It's jumped up to four times the market price!"

The noble looked at me. He was seated far away, but I could tell his impression of me was less than pleasant. Meanwhile, the auctioneer was thrilled that the price had gone up way beyond his expectations.

The man beside me shrugged. “See, now you’ve got him all worked up.”

“Urgh...”

I’d certainly been rash. Giving in to that impulse had been idiotic. I’d inadvertently created interest in a run-of-the-mill girl. Maria’s asking price kept rising. They were fools; her talents weren’t worth nearly that much. In inverse proportion to the wild enthusiasm infecting the bidders, I grew calm and collected.

“You seem to be in a pickle, laddie. If you want, I can bid the right way for you,” the man beside me said with a sneer.

Those words swayed me. After coming this far, I could tell what his ulterior motives were, willing or not.

“The right way? Why’re you lending me a hand, anyway?” I said, phrasing it rough so he didn’t take me too lightly.

He just drew nearer, smirking. “Oh, no reason. It just seems like fun, that’s all.”

“If you can, then go ahead. But I’m not made of money.”

“Oh, I can, don’t you worry. What’s your limit?”

The way he said it made it sound so easy for him that once again I was shaken. The gears in my head turned of their own accord, calculating the money I could manage parting with.

“Three pieces of gold. That’s my limit.”

“I think you can do four. Wait a sec.”

“Look, it’s not like I trust you.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Just wait, all right?” With that, he started participating in the auction. He raised his hand and raised the bid a smidgen.

I watched without a word. He was cutting in by small amounts, but he didn’t

seem to be standing out. Still, he at times waved his hand at other bidders, who waved back. It appeared the man knew a wide circle. By the end, he was vying with Lord Febre alone, but he nonchalantly bid three gold coins and change, and just like that, it was over. That ending was so low-key that it felt almost odd.

“There, I won ya the bid.”

Just as he’d promised, he bought Maria for me. Only, he’d gone a bit over the amount I’d told him I could spend.

“I said three pieces of gold was my limit.”

“Damn, I went over, huh? Well then, guess I’ll go make Lord Febre an offer.”

“I did ask you to do it, though. I won’t renege.”

“Ha ha, you really are a hoot. That’ll be four pieces of gold,” he said, demanding his share even as he was doubling up with laughter.

I frowned and raised my eyebrows, then sighed and caved in. “Fine, I don’t care.”

“Wait, you’re fine with that?”

“I see now that no matter what I do, I’m dancing in the palm of your hand.”

“Well, if you give up that easy, it’s no fun. Ha ha, let me enjoy this a little longer.” With a wicked smirk on his face, he rose from his seat and beckoned me over. “You can’t bear to watch, right, laddie? Let’s leave this joint and go pick up your merchandise.”

I couldn’t hide how I was feeling from his all-seeing eyes. I could sense that if I tried to fight back, I’d fail, so I just did as I was told. “I’m leaving now.”

We left the place and were taken to the back of the building by the clerk in charge. There, the newly purchased slaves were crammed together, and among them stood Maria. Her eyes were boring a hole through me. The man completed the formalities with the clerk and took Maria into his possession, after which he immediately walked up to me and proffered the palm of his hand. I took out four gold coins and handed them over.

“Yep, that there’s four gold coins. The slave choker’s unmarked, so you’re free

to do as you like.” The man pocketed his earnings and tendered Maria to me without any funny business. Given what an oddball this guy was, I’d thought maybe he’d bargain for even more, so it felt anticlimactic. I drew Maria to my side, then told him outright.

“You being *you*, I thought you’d lay some surprise conditions on me just now.”

“No sir, I’m more than satisfied just seeing you so flustered and out of your element, so I’m not gonna bully you. If anything, I’ve grown somewhat fond of you.”

“Sicko.”

“But I helped you, didn’t I? Or maybe, if I hadn’t been there, you would’ve had second thoughts?” he remarked, continuing to rib me with that I-see-right-through-you tone.

I figured interacting with him any more than this was a bad idea. “Our business is done. I’m taking the girl with me.”

“Don’t be so hasty! Let me introduce myself before you go! I’ll hear out any complaints later.”

“Tell me your name if you want. I won’t tell you mine.” I decided it wouldn’t hurt to learn his name.

The man smirked. “The name’s Palinchron. I’m a knight of Whoseyards to the north. And I’ll have ya know I’m one of an elite few: the Seven Celestial Knights.”

He made a sword-swinging motion, and it was so fluid and natural that I could almost see the nonexistent sword in his empty hand. His skills with the blade were clearly the fruit of assiduous practice and repetition. Feeling threatened, I stepped back and checked his menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: Palinchron Regacy

HP: 301/312

MP: 59/62

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 22

STR 7.89

VIT 9.87

DEX 11.89

AGI 5.67

INT 7.34

MAG 4.77

APT 1.80

INNATE SKILLS: Observant 1.45

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.89, Holy Magic 1.23, Martial Arts 1.87, Spellrite 0.54

He boasted a level that was top-class among humans, an above-average aptitude stat, and skills that were combat-oriented and sported high numbers to boot. This Palinchron guy was a force to be reckoned with. My body stiffened, and on instinct, I deployed *Dimension*. My right hand flew behind my back, ready to draw a sword from my inventory at a moment's notice.

“Ha ha, whoa now, don’t get so wound up,” he said, throwing up his hands to show he had no hostility. “I just came to have a gander.”

“A gander at what? The slaves?”

“No, at *you*. It wasn’t easy, tailing you unnoticed and sitting beside you.”



He admitted to tailing me like it was no big thing. I was astonished, and I had every confidence he wasn't lying—that was how high and uncannily well-rounded Palinchron's stats were.

"Wh-Why follow me?"

"I heard my master's sweet on you, so I ended up being the first to come size you up."

His master's "sweet on me"? That was news to me.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Is this master of yours Franrühle?" She was the only one I could think of.

"Franrühle? Nope, it ain't her. Wasn't expecting a Hellvilleshine girl to pop up in our conversation. You really are an intriguing one, kid."

"I know nothing of this master of yours."

"Oh, is that so? Well, that's just fine. I'm just the first in line to meet you out of curiosity. I was merely observing, so you haven't got a thing to worry about." He turned his back on me and raised a hand in parting. "Be seeing ya, kid."

Then he walked outside. I wanted to run after him and grill him, but his lofty level barred me. I didn't know what would happen if we fought each other. If he was going to leave me alone, then it suited me not to chase him too insistently.

When Palinchron disappeared from view, the tension in my body dissipated. I glanced at Maria, who was still staring at me. I realized then that she'd been watching that whole time. Sensing the idiosyncrasy lurking inside her, I dropped my shoulders—I'd made nothing but trouble for myself.

I took her by the hand. "Follow me."

Maria nodded slightly. "Yes."

In the end, I was left with one "slave" I'd impulsively paid to free. And yeah, I knew now that I lacked the force of will to overlook the slave issue. And also, that even if I obtained a huge sum unbefitting of my station, I couldn't spend it wisely. That had been proven without a shadow of a doubt. I vowed to never visit a slave market again, returning to my new home with Maria's cold hand in mine.



The moment I got home, I checked out the bathtub, which made ample use of magic gems, supplying heat from the ley lines stretching outside. Needless to say, turning on that heat cost me money. By means of magic energy, the water in the tub turned nice and hot.

Maria had been made somewhat presentable by the slave market, but she was still dirty compared to your average person.

“The water’s hot, so how about taking a bath? Just get clean enough and I’ll be happy.”

“A bath, sir?” She goggled at it.

“Do you not know what a bath is?”

“No.”

“It’s just cleaning yourself with water. It’s hot, so be careful.”

“Huh. I see. Understood.”

Slowly, ploddingly, she began preparing to enter the tub. She was a girl of minimal words. I was guessing that while she was interested, she still had her guard up, which was probably why I was having a tough time judging what kind of person she was. All I knew was that she was good at cooking and hunting—in other words, what her menu told me of the numbers at work behind her.

I left the bathroom and headed to the kitchen, where I took the food I’d stocked up on from my inventory. As the kitchen was also furnished with magic gem tech, I could easily turn on an open flame, but I chose instead to produce some bread and veggies and make her a rudimentary sandwich and salad. However, Maria didn’t come out from inside the bathroom. I decided to call out to her through the door between the bathroom and living room.

“Maria, are you gonna be a while yet?”

“Ah, no, I’m finished. It’s just, the water on my body...”

“Dry yourself with the cloth that’s thereabouts. You can slap on whatever clothes you want.”

“Understood.”

I had the minimum necessary for daily life ready to go from the start, and I encouraged Maria to use what was available.

Through the door, I could hear her rummaging around, and before long, she emerged from the bathroom wearing new, beige clothes. She said nothing and simply came over to me. It was a bit awkward as she was a little girl right out of the bath, but I remained expressionless so as to feign unflinching composure.

Her hair, which fell down to her shoulders, was still wet and disheveled. I dried her hair using a nearby cloth and prompted her to come to the table where her meal was laid out for her.

“Sit there. It’s late, I know, but have some dinner.”

She exhaled listlessly. She seemed nonplussed that she had a meal. She came to the table with an unsteady gait and took a seat, and I sat across from her. I started eating without a word, but Maria just sat there with the sandwich in her hands, that mystified look still in her eyes.

“Something wrong?”

“No, it’s just, this isn’t what I was told would happen...”

“Oh? What were you told?” I was curious what slaves heard on the grapevine.

“That I’d rue the day I was born a girl and bite my tongue within a day’s time...”

I instantly regretted asking. I nearly spat out the bit of sandwich in my mouth. This was reaffirmation that I should stay far away from any topic that had to do with slaves.

“You’re going to violate, torment, and break me, I presume?”

“Not me. You can rest assured for now.”

“‘For now,’ you say?”

“Just bear in mind I might sell you off as early as tomorrow if I feel like it. I think I’ll be needing the resolve to do just that, so consider yourself on standby. The fact I took you in today was a mistake on my part. I lost myself for a

moment."

I didn't know what I'd do with her from here on out. Maria wasn't cut out for Dungeon dives by any standards. My buying her had been nothing more than a stopgap measure. If the situation called for it, I might be forced to make my money back by reselling her. That was the only conclusion I could draw if I thought about it with a cool head.

Yet despite my words, I surmised that I wasn't actually capable of such a thing. My will was too weak to do even that much. That was why Maria was here to begin with. And more than anything else, she bore too much of a resemblance to my sister. I was determined to find some value in her besides clearing the Dungeon.

"Hm...then why did you buy me?"

"I've got a question for you. Why were you staring at me?"

I answered her question with another question partially because I didn't want to share my reasons, but also because chances were high that if she hadn't been staring at me, none of this would have occurred. This was me venting, or at least something close to it.

"Because of your black hair and eyes," she replied through a mouth full of sandwich.

An uncomplicated answer. It was true that the combination was rare in this world, but it was still a bit bathetic as a reason.

"That's it? But you've got black hair and eyes too."

"That's precisely why. This hair and these eyes are the reason my clan was eradicated. They're why I go for such a high price. I couldn't help but be curious about you, since you have the same coloring as me," she said, running a hand through her own hair.

I had a feeling she was telling the truth. As such, I thought I'd properly answer her question.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Incidentally, it was pure coincidence I bought you. We have a strange bond of fate linking us, you and I. Thanks to that, my heart ached

a lot more than anybody else's would have, and I bought you to satisfy myself. That's all there is to it. I swear, that's all it was."

In reality, my circumstances were a tangled web, but it was a long story and I didn't want to get into it.

"Understood. But did your heart not ache for the other slaves?"

"It did. I don't want to think about them, so don't bring them up."

"Is that so? Well, you might be fine with that, but my own heart aches for the other slaves, considering how I got off."

Maria's reservations regarding talking to me were fading away, and her personality was coming to the fore. Her brutal honesty stuck in my craw a little.

"You're pretty cheeky for a slave. You think I won't have a change of heart if you offend me?"

"I'm confident in my eye for character. I'll be fine." She continued eating her food with perfect aplomb.

My knowledge of the world wasn't exactly robust, but I found it impossible to believe that this was the typical attitude for a slave to take. Just moments ago, Maria had been quiet, intent on observing and not speaking. Had she really gazed into the heart of me in less than a minute?

"How can you be so sure?"

"You're the type of person who, when they encounter the meek and feeble, both sympathizes with them and feels relieved," she answered with flawless accuracy.

I was dumbfounded.

"By saving people in distress, you can ride a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. All in all, you could never bring yourself to lay a hand on me. You're too kind a person."

Maria's eyes were trained on mine. They were no longer the lifeless eyes from when she was on the stage at the slave market. They'd morphed into eyes similar in character to Palinchron's—the kind that saw through anything and everything.

Her character assessment took my breath away. Or maybe it was better described as choking. Maria had evaluated me with confidence, picking out things about me that even I hadn't grasped. The girl who knew me better than I did was beginning to scare me. By force of habit, I used Analyze on her.

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 31/41

MP: 35/35

CLASS: Slave

LEVEL 3

STR 0.89

VIT 2.02

DEX 1.23

AGI 0.73

INT 1.07

MAG 1.91

APT 1.52

CONDITION: Confusion 0.42, Languor 0.89

INNATE SKILLS: Perception 1.44

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.67, Cooking 1.07

Her menu was nothing to write home about—save for one strong point. Put simply, the Perception skill was Maria's core. I suspected she'd used it to pick me out of that wide venue full of people, and right now, she was using it to unmask my inner being, thereby putting her in an advantageous position.

I played hardball so that she wouldn't walk all over me. "I won't hurt you, but I could still sell you."

"Do as you please," she said, undaunted. "I can hardly stop you, after all."

I exhaled. She'd had everything taken from her, yet her attitude was firm and resolute. In the face of that, I felt something not too far removed from respect for her. I was embarrassed at myself for thinking she'd bend to my will just because she was technically a slave. That wasn't at all the case. I was face-to-face with another unique person, not a pawn, and this was what it entailed. Sure, Maria was a special case, but I'd been trying to obtain someone different from the usual slave to begin with, so that was a moot point.

I sighed. "Are all slaves this much of a pain in the neck? Talk about a lapse in judgment." Perhaps due to how defeated I felt, the emotions I took care to keep inside me were showing on my face.

"W-Well, I mean, I hold a grudge since my clan was massacred by city dwellers..." she responded, a little panicked.

"In that case, you should've just trembled in fear like a normal person. It'd have made things easier."

"You really do love it when people are *weak*. Makes me want to vomit."

"I'm saying I'd have liked someone who knows how to behave. You know what, whatever. I give up. Just do whatever you want. You should sleep in that bed over there. I'll sleep over here. I'll think about things tomorrow, so don't wake me up."

I didn't bother washing the utensils I'd used to finish my meal before throwing myself on the sofa. I'd given up on maintaining the reins, prioritizing sleep for the moment.

"Wait, hold on a second!" shouted Maria. "The choker! Aren't you going to register it? Otherwise, some rando might snatch me up!"

I didn't know what Maria was so anxious about. I lifted my head to find her pointing at the blank, unregistered choker. I recalled the information I'd learned at the slave market: when one spills blood on the choker, the master-slave relationship becomes official, the contract sealed. I'd heard it was to prevent slaves from fleeing.

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it, that *is* a thing, huh? Stay still a sec."

I picked up the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, which had been leaning against the wall.

“Eek!” Maria’s blank expression suddenly changed.

“Oh, sorry. You’re afraid of blades, huh?” I said, taken aback by her reaction. “No need to worry. My hand’s not gonna slip, so stay still. Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash.*”

I lightly swung it downward. It sliced through the choker without being a millimeter off. Apparently, one could go to a dedicated facility to do it, but this method sufficed for me. I knew that since the choker wasn’t contract-sealed, I wouldn’t get in trouble for destroying it.

“Argh!” she screamed, though she didn’t recoil from the sword swing.

“If you wanna run, then run.” I leaned the sword against the sofa and lay myself back down. If she wanted to run, then there was nothing for it. I’d just chalk it up as my having paid four pieces of gold for some peace of mind. In fact, I’d be grateful if she ran so that I wouldn’t have to think about her anymore.

Maria looked stunned. She picked up the broken choker and muttered, “There is such a thing as good-natured to a fault.”

“I’m not ‘good-natured.’ I abandoned so many people. I’m just a coward who only feels safe near weaklings.”

A pause. “I was just joking earlier.”

My eyes were already shut. My hand was grasping the sword, just in case, but apart from that I was totally reclined.

Yet Maria continued talking. “I can run, you say... But there isn’t anybody in this country who’d help me. I don’t have anywhere to go back to. That’s why I’m a slave to begin with. I don’t have anywhere to run to. Half-baked kindness won’t change a thing.”

“I know. I just don’t care. I’m going to sleep.”

Those who were brought here as slaves couldn’t survive without relying on the masters who bought them. That was what Maria told me, and it occurred to me that that meant the people who helped those slaves also had nowhere to

run, myself included. If I could be said to have a place to go back to, it wasn't in this world. I was something of a slave myself, I reckoned. A slave who existed solely to clear the Dungeon.

But if I'm a slave, then who's my master? The Dungeon? The "game"?

"Goodnight...mine master..." I heard her say, my eyes shut.

"Don't take the piss." Her calling me "master" after all that? Now that was premium-grade sarcasm.

I heard her tuck herself into the bed, and I was relieved I'd finally be getting some winks in. Just like always, I tried working out a plan for the days to come during the time it took me to fall asleep, but I guess I'd been more exhausted than I realized because I plunged into the depths of darkness in no time.

It had been a long, long day. And now I had a new housemate...



I washed my face the moment I got out of bed and carried out my Dungeon dive preparations for the day. Now that I'd chilled out a little, I also contemplated how to deal with Maria. The day before, I'd threatened to sell her as a tit-for-tat response, but I decided instead to go with the original plan and put her to use as a Dungeon diving companion. Naturally, the chances were high that she couldn't handle combat stuff, but there was something I wanted to try using her for. Moreover, that Perception skill was an unknown quantity I aimed to test as well.

Maria woke up after me, and I told her the gist.

"...and that's what I want out of you."

"No way, no how. I'd die. It wouldn't take much to kill me. It's not happening."

"If you don't like it, then scarper off. But if you intend to live here, then I'm putting you to work. Surely that's not some huge surprise?"

Maria caressed her chokerless nape; she appreciated the reasonableness of that demand. "In that case, I'll help around the house."

"I can do housework myself; I don't need you for that."

"But there's only so much I can do. Are you suggesting I earn money using my body?"

"No, I'm not. After all, according to a certain someone, I'm too nice a person."

"Well, the Dungeon is just too much for me. That's where even specialists have to lay their lives on the line, isn't it?"

"Look, just give it a try. If you think it's no good, I'll think of something else for you. Right now, all I want is help with the Dungeon."

"Huh...and here I thought you were some softy born with a silver spoon in his mouth. To think you're a Dungeon diver, of all things. Looks like my days may be numbered."

She hung her head in resignation, but there was no pathos there. Perhaps she'd already given up on life. From where I was standing, she didn't seem all *that* resistant to the idea of her own death.

"I'm not gonna let you *die*. Or even get injured, for that matter," I promised, Dia's dismemberment fresh in my mind.

"O...okay..."

Maria just stared, bemused by my intensity. She must have thought it was impossible, as anyone would. It was common knowledge that a day seldom went by where divers didn't breathe their last in the Dungeon. Those eyes told me that she believed a feeble little thing like her dying there was a matter of course. Not on my watch, though. If we didn't have any hope of victory, I wouldn't be trying to take her with me.

Up until now, I'd split my EXP gains down the middle with Dia, but that phenomenon didn't occur with the party I'd worked with temporarily. It was a winner-takes-all system at base; the one who did the slaying got the points. I often heard people say it was difficult for mages who focused on providing backup to level up. Despite that, my party divided EXP half-and-half. In short, my party was uniquely privileged when it came to level grinding, which tied into Dia's current level. In all likelihood, all Maria had to do to level up was walk the Dungeon alongside me.

"Maria, I've devised a way for you to make it through the Dungeon. That's

why I want you to come with.”

“Huh. Okay, I understand.” Bowing to the conviction in my voice, she nodded at last.

“First things first, let’s prepare by hitting the shops.” I made to exit our house.

“Yes, mine master.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “M-Master? You don’t have to sweat over what to call me. My name is Siegfried Vizzita, so call me whatever you want.”

“I’m your slave. Isn’t it obvious I’d call you Master?” she said, smiling faintly.

“What are you talking about? You’re not a slave anymore. You’ve got no choker.”

“I mean, I’m starting to think life would be *easier* for me if I *were* your slave.”

“Be that as it may, don’t call me Master. It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m sorry, but calling you Master is the absolute minimum show of respect for a slave like me. If I don’t abide by that—”

“You’re just messing with me, aren’t you.” I could tell she was poking fun at me around when she started gabbing about her manners as a slave.

She chuckled. “Oh no, not at all.”

I couldn’t get a read on her, but since her eyes were no longer hollow, I said nothing more on the subject.

“I *am* your slave, you know. We both know in our hearts that’s true.”

I knew little of the slave culture. I didn’t have enough information to blindly deny her words, and I couldn’t distinguish between what was meant to be taken earnestly or as a joke. As such, I didn’t respond to that remark.

〔MARIA HAS JOINED THE PARTY〕

The party’s leader is Aikawa Kanami.

Putting a cap on all that talk about slaves and slavery, we stopped by the

shopping district. In order to assemble Maria's suite of equipment, we had to go buy weapons and armor. Naturally, I used my menu-sight to check the quality of the wares on sale, but there were no bargains or steals to be had in stores oriented towards the general public, where one could find haphazardly arranged shelves of mass-produced goods and nothing else. I casually asked the shopkeepers about higher-priced weaponry, only to be told I'd have to hit up auction houses or special stores connected to Whoseyards. As I was already using a top-class sword in the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, I didn't feel like traveling that far just to get more expensive weapons.

I gave Maria an easy-to-wield dagger and lightweight yet durable defensive armaments, and with that, I was done shopping.

"Even a knife feels pretty heavy."

"You'll get used to it in no time."

Clad in protective leather gear, Maria was holding her short blade using both hands. Even then, she was unsteady on her feet. Of course, she would become strong enough to wield it, but not so much because she'd get "used to it." I was planning to level her up to boost her STR stat.

We turned up at the entrance to the Dungeon, our equipment perfectly optimized.

"Maria, try climbing onto my back."

I had a laundry list of things to check. I squatted down and presented my back to her, making it easier for her by using my scabbard as a seat.

"Huh?" she said blankly.

I understood where she was coming from. If I were in her shoes and somebody told me to go piggyback riding before risking our lives in the Dungeon, I'd also wonder if he had a screw loose.

"I'm being serious. Just trust me and climb on."

"Wha?"

"I'd like to blow right through the first five or so floors, and rather than you running all that way, we'll be faster if you just stay on my back. It'll also make it

easier for me to protect you.”

“Ah, okay, I get it... Wait, hold on, *what*?! I’ve never seen or heard of anybody going through the Dungeon on a piggyback ride!” Maria had been about to nod, only to shake her head.

Damn, almost.

As for why Floor 5, I figured it was the deepest level where Maria wouldn’t die instantly. That was based on my scant battle experience, though, so I honestly wasn’t super confident in my assessment. Nevertheless, this ranked high in the list of things I wanted to test out. I couldn’t back down readily.

“I’ve never heard of it either, but I wanna try it. We can stop after just a little while. I’m asking nicely.”

If my reckoning was right, it should have been possible. The STR stat of skilled divers, including massive swordfighters, was around the 5.00 mark, and the same went for their VIT stats. Meanwhile, my STR and VIT had reached the 6.00 mark, which meant that I was now endowed with the strength and stamina of a two-meter-tall man who’d done crazy amounts of muscle training. I wanted to test out how much effort it would take me to carry a 40-or-so-kilogram girl. At a guess, she wouldn’t start feeling heavy until around Floor 5.

“I... I suppose I’ve no choice.”

Reluctantly, bashfully, she climbed aboard. I could register her weight in the scabbard, but she was weirdly light. In the past, she definitely would’ve felt heavier to me. I was now convinced my guess was correct.

“All right. I’m gonna try running now, so hold on tight.”

“Understood.”

After making sure Maria was holding on, I deployed *Dimension* and dashed off.

“Eek!”

I ignored her brief little shriek and ran through the Dungeon’s Pathway. My AGI stat was almost double digits, but I didn’t know how fast that’d make me. It wasn’t as though I had a point of comparison.

Maria put on the brakes right away. “W-Wait, hold on! Please, stoooop!”

I slowed down. “Too much for you, huh?”

All she was doing was clinging to me, but even that appeared to consume quite a bit of stamina, given she was gasping for air.

“N-No, Master, I was just surprised by what a monster you are. I had to stop you because my posture was bad... Okay, now we should be good.”

This time, she was all in, clinging to me for real. Because we were glued firmly to each other, both of our faces turned red. I didn’t turn to look at her, lest she see how much I was blushing.

“All right, shall we?” I asked.

“Yes. I can take it.”

Once again, I blasted off without reservation. The farther I ran, the more strength Maria mustered in her arms for clinging. I crossed paths with other divers, and while they were astonished by my excessive speed, I just kept going, putting everyone behind me. Since I was whizzing at an uncommon velocity, I figured they couldn’t get a good look at my face. However, I was standing out, so there was no guarantee nobody would remember what I look like. Until recently, I’d tried to avoid standing out, but I’d given up on that around the time I’d sold Tida’s magic gem in Vart. Part of the reason was that I’d grown too strong to be able to continue to conceal it.

“Wow! You’re so fast! It’s like I’m riding Alwowna!”

She must have grown accustomed to the speed, because she was in high spirits now. I was guessing “Alwowna” was the name of some kind of animal. She was probably fine with this speed due to her experience riding said animal. “Hunting” was among Maria’s skills; it could be the case that before she’d become a slave, she’d hunted astride a horse-like animal.

“Better not to talk too much,” I said. “You might bite your tongue.”

“Ah, right. Understood.”

With that, I accelerated. It took us less than half an hour to reach Floor 5.

“W-Wow! Master, we’ve arrived!”

I was panting something fierce. There was a considerable price to pay for getting here this fast. I'd estimated it wouldn't get hard for me at just the half-hour mark, but even with a VIT stat of 6.00, it seemed as though sprinting for thirty minutes was no easy feat. Perhaps VIT wasn't directly connected to what we'd call "stamina" in my world.

"Ah, are you okay?" she asked nervously.

"Hff, hff...yeah, I'm okay..."

I got the result I was expecting in one regard, but the stamina thing wasn't where I wanted it to be. Then again, I knew for sure that I could run while carrying Maria, which was a great return on my investment—if there was ever an emergency, I was good as gold to whisk us to safety.

I caught my breath and let Maria down, drawing my sword and pacing away from the Pathway.

"You're already on the move again? Couldn't you rest for a little longer?"

"I don't want to waste too much time. Don't worry; I won't lose to any of the enemies on Floor 5 even while out of breath."

"To my knowledge, even mid-level divers find Floor 5 to be a dangerous area."

"Yeah, so I hear. But I'm fairly sure I'll be fine."

"I'm saying *I'm* in danger here," she rebutted, her voice trembling.

Earlier, Maria had been having fun riding her human roller coaster, but she'd now remembered that she could die at any moment. I knew how strong *Dimension*'s enemy sonar and I were, so I was confident there was no way I'd slip up and let her get injured. But Maria didn't know me well, so she was filled with anxiety. I threw out my chest to erase her apprehension.

"You'll be okay. If I wasn't sure I could protect you, I wouldn't have brought you."

"I, I see. But I'm worried mostly because you're the type who'd probably mess up when it matters most."

She was faltering over her words, but still she got her dig in. I likely had her

Perception skill to blame for mouthing off like she was cutting into my core. Taking her admonition to heart, I nodded.

“I’m giving your safety my full attention.”

I expanded *Dimension* over a wide area. I wasn’t worried about MP usage; now that I was Level 10, my MP was around twice the amount I’d had when I’d visited Floor 5 in the past. I spent plenty of MP, picking up on zones with heavy concentrations of monsters and high EXP-yielding boss monsters as we went. We were on the hunt for zones that afforded the most efficient grinding.

We were headed northeast; a few hundred meters ahead lay a zone densely crowded by monsters. I could tell that among the zones that met my requirements, that was the closest.

“Let’s go this way.”

We traveled a few dozen meters and stationed ourselves in a space with an unobstructed view. I re-confirmed where the monsters that were my targets were located within the perimeter. As I hunted them, I performed checks on Maria to make sure she wasn’t about to get attacked. With that, I could finally commence my experiment in earnest.

“Maria, wait here. I’m gonna go hunt some monsters a sec.”

“Huh? Wait, hold on, sir, hold your horses! Do you mean to abandon me here?”

“It’s okay. I have a skill that senses the positions of monsters, so if you’re ever in danger, I’ll come right back. Granted, if by some small chance you do encounter a monster, run the opposite way.”

“I mean, yeah, obviously I’ll run. But if I get cornered, that’s it for me.”

“If you get cornered, then...yeah, guess we’d basically have to give up.”

“Don’t give up on me!”

“I was joking. You’ll be okay; I really do know where monsters are inside the Dungeon. Honest.”

Going by her grumbling, she was perhaps better described as resigned to her fate than convinced. “Uh-huh...so, I’m going to die. And I’m going to get eaten

by a monster, at that. I'll die in a monster's stomach because I got picked out by my twit of a Master. That ranks third on my list of ways not to die after getting tortured to death and getting burned to death."

"Right then, I'll be back."

"Yes sir, go ahead and leave me to the dogs." She waved her hand, all but rolling her eyes as I dashed off to the monster-heavy zone.

Maria was right in that the possibility of such a scenario occurring was nonzero. Sure, the Pathway was situated behind her, but if she got flanked by monsters, I might not be able to reach her in time. So I set about annihilating the monsters at the fastest pace I could think of.

Floor 5 was teeming with beasts and insectoids. Occasionally you'd get special-type monsters against which physical attacks were less effective, such as hangshades. In those instances, I froze them using ice magic and smashed them to pieces, just like I'd done with Tida.

For the most part, each monster went down with a single strike. I surmised that the reason every monster was getting sliced like so many pieces of paper was probably due to the boost to my Attack Power provided by the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan.

Incidentally, my new policy was to not bother collecting any item drops besides the magic gems of boss monsters. I still had almost ten pieces of gold in savings, so I prioritized optimizing my time and EXP over picking up magic gems that would only fetch copper currency. And more importantly, this time the hunt was of a more experimental nature.

First, I wanted to measure how easy it would be to level Maria up. Depending on the outcome, I'd devote myself not to exploring the Dungeon but to leveling other people up. It was within the realm of possibility to raise up people one after the other and dispatch them deep into the Dungeon.

It was also important to measure how distant members of a party could be from one another and still function as a party. If that distance was great enough, I could have Maria wait on the Pathway the whole time. I was sure that having her wait all the way up on the surface would sadly be too far. After all, if it wasn't, then Dia would be getting some EXP off me while still in his hospital

bed.

After under an hour of hunting, I walked back to Maria. “I’m ba-ack.”

“Then it’s time to dash! We’re going to run right back home, surely?!” She looked haggard. It hadn’t even been an hour and she’d lost her cool entirely.

Thinking back, I too had nearly lost my mind from fear just from walking around the Dungeon when I was Level 1. It wasn’t that far in the past, but for whatever reason, it felt like a thousand years ago.



“T-To be honest with you, I’m scared witless. Despite how I may come off...”

“Yeah, looks like it. I took it too lightly. I thought you’d be tough enough to handle it.”

“To handle *this*? Who or what do you think I am? I’m just a feeble little kid, you know,” she complained gloomily.

I acknowledged inwardly that that had been a bit of a dick move, but that didn’t make me want to abort the experiment. I looked at her menu and checked to see if Maria’s EXP had increased.

【STATUS】

EXP: 1521/400

The battles had taken place around a hundred meters away from her, yet the EXP was added to her total all the same.

“Okay, good. Now you can wait for me on the Pathway.”

She exhaled. “The Pathway, sir? Well, that’s better than staying *here*. So, was there a point to bringing me here or what?”

“There’s a point. You’re being a huge help.”

“I don’t understand how.”

She aired her gripes, but she followed my instructions regardless. She must have been aware that the Pathway was protected against monsters by barriers, because she looked a tad relieved.

As we headed for the Pathway, I detected the position of the next monsters. I measured the precise distance between the Pathway and the monsters’ zone. This time around, I wanted to test out what would happen if we were around three hundred meters apart. If she still gained EXP, that meant I could level up my allies while they remained in the safety of the Pathway.

As I left her behind in various places, Maria’s eyes had grown teary, but thanks to *Dimension*, I was confident I could protect her, so I ignored all her

kvetching and continued on to the next experiment.

After a few hours' investigation, I established the following facts:

EXP sharing was divided equally no matter the level gap.

The distance limit for EXP sharing was approximately one hundred meters.

The distance limit changed if there were barriers, as with the Pathway.

In addition, I'd gained us a ton of EXP in the process. I figured it was right around lunchtime, so I took the emotionally drained Maria back up to the surface, consoling her the whole way there. Once again, she rode on my back.



【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 92/92

MP: 102/102

CLASS: Slave

LEVEL 7

STR 2.92

VIT 3.12

DEX 2.25

AGI 1.75

INT 3.07

MAG 4.91

APT 1.52

CONDITION: Confusion 0.28

EXP: 221/6400

EQUIPMENT: Steel Knife, Durable Mantle, Light Leather Armor, Leather Gauntlet, Silk Garb

Trembling all over, Maria stared at the palms of her hands. “They told me I’m Level 7 now.”

I sipped my thin-tasting soup. “Cool. Congrats.”

We’d finished the process of leveling up at the church and were now getting a bite to eat at the pub.

“But I didn’t *do* anything!”

“I have a skill for that. A skill that raises the level of an ally I bring along with me. That’s why I brought you with me into the Dungeon.” I was sure she’d understand the validity of our battle plan within the Dungeon.

“But that’s absurd! The adults in the village were around Level 5 at the highest! But you’re telling me I got all the way to Level 7 in a single day?! And that *easily*?! ” She pounded the table.

It seemed that she was still having trouble believing it. I put a finger to my lips. “Shhh! It’ll be a pain in the ass if anybody catches wind.”

I didn’t want people finding out about this power. If the nation’s rich and powerful learned of it, an arrest warrant would be issued with my name on it. Then again, they’d have trouble actually catching me. My current level was an order of magnitude higher than my first day in this world.

“I... I’m sorry, Master. I lost my composure,” she said, chastened.

“I keep telling you, enough with the ‘Master’ thing. In any case, if we use my ability, you can Dungeon dive too. In just a few hours’ time, you’ve become stronger than most adults.”

“A skill like that’s just plain cheating,” she muttered, tucking into her meal.

Cheating. That was what Maria’s oh-so-perceptive eyes told her.

“Yeah. I feel the same way,” I said, still partaking of my plate.

With this EXP share system in place, I could theoretically produce one skilled diver per day. And after I myself leveled up, I could probably speed up that diver-manufacturing process even more. It was safe to call my experiment a rousing success. Now that I better understood the party system’s mechanics, my list of options had expanded. I was reminded of the importance of

comprehending the specifics of the game. I wanted to go beyond the calculations of whoever set this up by experimenting with every little thing. By doing so, the time it took to reach the deepest level of the Dungeon would shorten.

“Welcome!” said Ms. Lyeen cheerfully.

The place didn’t get much business during daylight hours, but to my surprise, it seemed some customers had stepped inside. I turned to look at the people who’d come to drink during the day—and my face twitched.

“M-Maria,” I said under my voice. “Keep your head down, but act natural.”

“Huh? Ah, right, okay.” She was taken aback by the sudden command, but she looked down and away from them at once.

I held my breath, attempting not to draw the customers’ attention. Maria was giving me a puzzled look, but I just sipped my soup quietly. Then, Maria’s eyes picked up on something and her gaze shifted to what lay behind me.

“Hiya, Sieg. Fancy meeting you here.”

I said nothing.

Maria wiggled the spoon she was holding. “That’s your name she’s calling.”

I’d have liked to have pretended not to notice her, but since Maria reacted, I was forced to turn around.

“What do you want from me, Alty?”

“Yeesh, so cold. We’re helping each other out, aren’t we? Ah, sorry, kid, you’re cute, but don’t mind if I sidle in here.”

Alty had on the Eltraliew Academy uniform. *How’d she get her hands on one of those?*

She also had another girl with her. “Huh? Well, I’ll be! Is that really you, Sir Sieg?!”

It was Franrühle.

“L-Long time no see, Ms. Franrühle.”

“How wonderful! Alty told me she’d take me someplace nice, and I was

wondering what she meant! To think I could make your acquaintance again so quickly!"

Yeah, fancy that. Why did she come back so quickly? Wasn't she supposed to be in Eltraliew to the west?

"C'mon, Sieg, make way," said Alty, trying to wedge herself in at the table like it was her right.

Reluctantly, I moved next to Maria and made space for the two of them, both of whom gleefully took their seats and gave their orders to Ms. Lyeen. And just like that, I was trapped at this table of troubled individuals. I pondered ways to extricate myself even as I peered at the faces of my twin menaces.

Alty was clearly curious about Maria. She was waiting for the right time to introduce herself to the girl whose name she didn't know. As for Franrühle...yep, she took little notice of Maria.

"Ah," I said, "this here's Maria. She's my Dungeon diving ally as of recently."

"Hello. Maria here," she said, undaunted by the strange presence these two *personalities* exuded.

"I'm Alty. Pleasure to meet ya."

"My name is Franrühle. I'm the seventh daughter of the House of Hellvilleshine."

"So what's this about, Alty? I'm a busy man."

"Heh heh. It's a coincidence we bumped into you here."

"Yeah, I'm not buying that. You run into me when I just so happen to be breaking for lunch? Tell the truth, you knew where I was through one of your abilities, didn't you?"

Alty had no way of knowing I was an employee at this pub, and even if she did know, why would she come to the pub and not go to a normal restaurant during this time of day? I had to conclude that Alty had a skill that clued her into my whereabouts. Based on what she'd told me the day before, I guessed she could listen in on me wherever there was fire.

"Oho, you hit the nail on the head, smartypants. I can magnify my field of

perception through fire. That said, today it honestly was dumb luck I was able to figure out what you were up to. This is the work of *destiny*. And destiny is my business. You understand.”

Destiny was her business. In other words, she’d brought Franröhle here to “make an unrequited love not so unrequited.”

I answered as coldly as possible. I couldn’t afford to let her harbor the most meager hope regarding that particular romance.

“You’re the one who said there was no there there. Stop being cheeky and try your chances with some other girl.”

“Heh heh, sure, but I feel like trying with her anyway.”

We spoke in abstract terms about the romance thing. Franröhle and Maria’s expressions intimated they had no idea what we were talking about.

“Alty, would you just relax and wait for me? I’ll do what I need to do, but I’ll do it my way. Quit rushing things.”

“Can’t be helped, huh? I don’t mean to get in your way. I won’t say any more.”

With that, Alty went quiet. Franröhle had been waiting for her turn to talk; she leaned forward and peppered me with questions. Where did I live? Where did I eat? What places did I like? Clearly, she believed this was her chance to suss out where I might be at any given moment. However, I blatantly lied that I didn’t live in any one place. I was unyieldingly determined not to give her any information about myself.

In time, the conversation shifted naturally to the Dungeon. For one, I had no actual interest in anything besides that. Moreover, Franröhle herself didn’t seem to dislike discussing it.

In order to make this ambush of theirs the tiniest bit worth my time, I decided to fish for information, but Alty cut in.

“Hold on, you *ran*? All the way to Floor 5, with Mary on your back?”

“Yeah, why? Did I mess up?” Alty had been quiet this whole time, so I was concerned I really had done something wrong.

“Nah, I just wasn’t expecting that. I mean, you’re a dimensional mage, aren’t you? Can’t you use space-shifting magic?”

“Wait a second—how do you know I’m a dimensional mage?”

There were other parts of what she’d just said that caught my interest, but that bit was the most important for now. I’d never made mention of that fact, and I’d never actively cast *Dimension* for Alty to see.

“Ah, were you keeping that a secret? Sorry about that. I know how you fight and what magic you use inside and out. You’re exactly like an old acquaintance of mine. He used to use space-shifting magic...if I recall correctly. Pretty sure he did, anyway.” She tapered off, as if she herself couldn’t believe what she’d just said.

“Vague much?”

“It just came rushing back. Memories from way back. Wonder why. In any case, there’s dimensional magic that can reduce the distance to travel in the Dungeon. Back me up, Fran. You’re at the top of the school academically.”

Alty probably wanted to give “Fran” a chance to shine, but she seemed off her game.

“I... I’m sorry, dimensional magic? Well, it certainly rings a bell; I do feel like I’ve heard of it among the minor elements. Unfortunately, while I may be a good student, I don’t know all the details about the magic of an element that won’t appear on my exams.”

“Hold on, what? Is dimensional magic really that minor an element in this day and age?”

“It’s so minor I don’t believe there’s a single person at the academy with that element.”

“Wow, I can feel the generation gap.”

Alty’s expression was one of genuine surprise, but what caught my attention was how she’d been talking like she was an old maid. It seemed she was discussing stuff that didn’t exactly fit her age with Franrühle. I was curious as to the nature of their bond, but at the same time, I didn’t want to get too involved,

so I stayed silent.

“If you don’t know, Fran,” said Alty, “I guess I’ll do the explaining. Dimensional magic is all about controlling space. So, understanding, manipulating, and linking pockets of space. Ultimately, it even lets you create and destroy it. There’s a spell that can tie one space with another. I think it’s called *Connection*. If you use that, you won’t have to run with Mary on your back.”

“Tie one space to another? You can really do something like that?” Franröhle asked her.

I was also surprised to hear about creating and destroying space. I knew that one’s magic transformed as one leveled up, but destroying space? Just hearing that made a chill run down my spine.

“Oh, totally. Just visualize it. Imagine a door connecting two pockets of space. Why don’t we try creating the *Connection* spell? At your level, Sieg, I’m sure you can,” said Alty excitedly.

I didn’t know whether to believe her, but I did as I was told, building the image in my mind. Yet Franröhle and Maria tried to stop me.

“Alty, why, I never!” shouted Franröhle. “There’s no way one can *create* a spell!”

“Y-Yeah!” said Maria. “Creating a spell is like something out of a fairy tale.”

Taken aback, my mental image dispersed. Alty and I exchanged glances.

“Hold on, Sieg—can people not create spells anymore?”

“Don’t ask me. I was under the impression that that stuff would come naturally at a high enough level.”

“I’m in the same boat,” said Alty. “I thought magic’s devised through a combination of talent and imagination...”

I was in agreement with Alty in a way I never saw coming. Maria, however, was quick to object.

“There’s no way that’s true!” she started. “You can’t teach yourself magic. Sometimes, the child of a line of mages might recall the spells of their ancestors, but that’s the exception, not the rule. And even then, it’s nowhere

near *creating* a spell from whole cloth. For the most part, people can't acquire magic unless they engrave the wisdom of their predecessors into their blood. Magic is never born out of nothing."

"To be exact," said Franrühle, "when someone swallows a gem inscribed with magic formulas, they're making the blood coursing through their body memorize it. Family lines of mages give rise to children who can use magic from birth because their blood remembers. But even then, that only happens if one of their parents swallowed a magic gem. In other words, there's no way to grant access to a spell without swallowing a gem at some point. The kind of magic you two are thinking of doesn't exist."

Franrühle spoke using terms she'd studied at the academy. It was information I hadn't picked up from my chats with other Dungeon divers. Both she and Maria seemed well-versed in magic.

"Okay, okay," I said to appease them. "Thanks for teaching me about magic. So, to sum up, the correct way to learn magic is by swallowing a magic gem inscribed with magic formulas...do I have that right?"

"Yes, that's correct," said Franrühle.

"Yes," said Maria, replying simultaneously.

"In that case," I said, "how about we go buy us some of those magic gem things?"

Since Maria had finished eating, it was time to weave an excuse to slip away. Maria must not have wanted to prolong this meal with perfect strangers either, because she readily agreed.

"That sounds like a good idea. I'm full now, too, so the timing's just right."

Maria and I got to our feet.

"Ah, in that case," said Franrühle, "allow me to accompany you! I can guide you to a shop I know that has a collection of top-class magic gems—"

"Hold on a minute, Fran, you've got things to do today, don't you? You're already running short on time just from hitting this place. You should give up on the idea."

“Agh, drat it, you’re right. I’ve no choice but to do it some other time.”

“Okay,” I said, “we’ll be going now. You two can take your time finishing your meals.”

To get out as quickly as possible, I paid Ms. Lyeen right away.

“See ya, Sieg. See ya, Mary.”

“Sir Sieg! Let’s meet again, should the opportunity arise!”

Having said our goodbyes, Maria and I stepped outside. I recalled the path to the shop that had to do with the magic and set out for it, Maria trotting briskly behind me.

“Wait, you’re really going to go there?” Clearly, she had been under the impression that that had been nothing more than a pretext to escape the magic gem conversation.

“Yeah, might as well. It piqued my interest.”

“If you’re just curious, that’s fine, but gems with magic carved into them are expensive. I’m sure to the folks who attend the academy, it’s just run-of-the-mill shopping, but they’re eye-watering prices for regular folks.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got money.”

It seemed as though one needed a tidy sum in order to acquire new spells, but I wasn’t broke quite yet. While I’d spent ten pieces of gold on the house and four on Maria, I still had the equivalent of around seven to rub together. I had no intention of touching Dia’s share of twenty gold coins, but they were still in my possession, so I wouldn’t be running out of capital any time soon.

“Let’s go give it a look-see. If possible, I’d like to give you some spells to use.”

“Huh?”

Maria was a higher priority than I was. I preferred the blade, and even if I learned new magic, almost all of my MP would go towards fueling *Dimension* anyway. I couldn’t even imagine a normal spell surpassing *Dimension*’s sheer utility and practical value.

Maria goggled at me. “Magic? Me?”

“I’m trying to make you Dungeon dive too. I’ll happily make that investment.”

She was Level 7 now, so I wanted her to help with simple battles. Going by her stats menu, her forte was the MAG stat. If she learned any magic, she’d already stand above your average diver.

“Has it not crossed your mind that I might just run away after picking up magic?”

She wasn’t very enthusiastic about the prospect, going as far as to suggest she might pull a runner on me.

“I don’t think you will. I mean, you don’t have any place to go anyway, right?”

“That’s only true if I’m powerless. Now that I’ve leveled up so much, if I were to gain magic, it’d be a whole different story. What if I ran away, sold information about your abilities, and used that money to strike out on my own? What would you do then?!”

She certainly had a point. Then again, even if that did happen, I wouldn’t sweat it. Her becoming independent would be a joyful event.

“You can run,” I replied gently, “but I’d hate it if info about me made it out there. So if you do run, could I ask you to keep mum for me? Please.”

“If I ran away, I wouldn’t have to care about you anymore, Master!”

“I’ve got a feeling you won’t do me dirty like that. It’s just a hunch, of course.”

My lighthearted tone had her speechless. We were operating from different viewpoints. To me, whatever happened was fine by me. No matter how things played out with Maria, I felt I could chalk it up as acceptable losses. That was why I was so nonchalant, so flippant. To Maria, on the other hand, a slave defying their master was a serious crime. She thought serving her master was a matter of course. That was why she took everything into serious consideration.

Through her silence, Maria continued criticizing me. I didn’t mind talking at length about her freedom again, but it’d just be repeating what was said the day before. Besides, Maria had to have intuited what I wanted to say despite the silence, what with her Perception skill. As such, I didn’t bother opening my mouth.

Maria sighed. “Just a hunch? A line like that, you’re supposed to boldly declare.”

Just as I’d predicted, her Perception had seen through to how I felt. She’d concluded it’d be useless to argue with me due to our different viewpoints, so she chose to chastise me for that instead.

“I don’t know you well enough to declare it boldly, though the kind of kid who’d say what you said isn’t the kind of kid who’d do something like that. Well, I don’t think so, anyway.”

“Talk about tortured logic. You’re so naive.”

It was the logic of plot beats in movies and comics back in my world. You know, narrative theory.

“Yeah, I guess so. But I’m not changing my policy. C’mon, let’s go buy you some magic.”

“You’re naive. Hopelessly naive...” she started muttering, walking with me.

She had a litany of complaints, but it seemed she’d abide by my policy for the time being. Going by that, I figured I was probably in the clear, though to be honest, my hunches were hardly reliable—I didn’t have an eye for character in the least. All I ever did was sneak glances at people’s stats and menus, evaluating them based on hard numbers. An eye for character was a lofty power I’d probably never acquire in a million years.

The magicarium wasn’t located terribly far from the pub. That was the common term for establishments that dealt in all things magic and sorcery.

“Welcome! Come in, come in.”

The moment we entered, we were greeted warmly. The word “magicarium” conjured images of the kind of witch’s house you’d find in a fairy tale, but the place was closer to a bookstore on Earth than anything else. The bookshelves were arranged neatly so as not to impede customers from getting where they wanted to go.

I spoke to the tall lady with the elf ears sitting at the counter. “I’d like to buy some magic gems for learning spells.”

“Magic gems? Sure thing, sir. Let’s see...lately, our inventory’s been getting a bit scarce, so...oh, uh, you can look at this catalog. Please choose from among these options.”

The lady pulled out a beaten-up old catalog from beneath the counter. I flipped through it; it listed the names of a large quantity of spells but with sticky notes reading “out of stock” all over.

“These ‘out of stock’ stickers...”

“Yes, I’m afraid they really are out of stock. As of late, there are shortages all throughout the Alliance. There aren’t that many to go around in the best of times, but we’re running especially short thanks to the tournaments and events that are coming up. Nothing that’s left is very high quality. You can make advance orders, but we’d only be able to give it to you after the events. When there’s a shortage of materials, production becomes slow. That’s just the business.”

This world had fighting arenas, and by extension, they had to have combat tournaments for those who made a living with their proverbial fists to decide who stood at the top. It seemed this was the season participants snatched up spells. Discouraged by the poor timing, I perused the catalog. Just from a cursory skim, there were thousands.

“Bear with me, ma’am, this is going to take some time.”

There were attack spells and healing spells, elemental spells and support spells—the basic categories of spells that even I was familiar with. Then there were the spells I wasn’t so familiar with, like everyday life spells and ceremonial spells.

To start with, I wanted to give Maria a support spell, but everything that looked useful was out of stock. Meanwhile, she was curiously looking around the store.

“Come take a look, Maria. If anything catches your eye, I’ll buy it for you.”

“Ah, yes, sir. Coming.”

“If I may have your attention, sir,” said the lady, startled. “Are you by any chance planning to give that *child* a spell to learn?”

Apparently, a child buying magic was a rare sight. I was on the taller side, so I was able to do my shopping without being treated like a kid, but Maria wasn't tall enough for that to apply to her.

"Is that a problem?"

"No, well, it's just, that child is a tad too young. I believe you'd be best served if you first checked whether she has the background she needs to use the magic."

So in other words, she didn't want to sell to a kid, if possible. In a roundabout way, she was refusing the sale. She pulled out objects like a crystal ball and a sheaf of papers from beneath the counter.

"You can tell using those?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, I can. By placing this crystal in her hands, we can see the quality and quantity of her blood, which will then allow us to determine the genre and volume of spells she can acquire."

Sounds convenient, I thought to myself, staring at the orb. It looked as though in a world with magic and magic studies, such tools had also been developed. The words "the genre and volume of spells she can acquire" were also food for thought. Presumably, that meant there were limits on the spells people in general could learn—and that I oughtn't get my hopes up that I could learn every spell in the catalog with enough money.

"Now then, little lady. Would you mind touching this?" The shop assistant presented Maria with the crystal ball.

"No ma'am." Maria reached out, immediately giving rise to a red mist within the orb.

"Wait, huh? Whoa, that's... That's incredible. You have mid-level magic power. What's more, you've two elements—fire and void!"

I wondered what level I or Dia would register as. I grew too scared to touch the orb myself.

"Wow, little lady, you're something else. I've been at this job a long time, but I've never seen someone your age with this much magic energy."

"Th-Thanks..." Maria hid her face with the catalog; she must not have been used to receiving praise.

"Now for you, young man."

She handed it to me. After a moment's hesitation, I made up my mind and reached out a hand. The orb became completely transparent; what little cloudiness had been there vanished.

"Huh?" said the lady. "I've never seen that happen before, or that color. Wait, can that even be called a color?"

She fetched a nearby thick tome and searched for something that touched on the phenomenon she'd just witnessed. I had a rough idea already, so I tried stopping her.

"That's okay, ma'am. You don't have to look it up on my acc—"

"No worries, sir, I'll find the answer in a jiffy. Looks like this transparent color is for something called 'dimensional magic.' It's a very minor and old element. Only, because it's invisible, I can't measure the volume using this orb. My apologies..." she said, bowing her head.

That was all I needed to know. Judging from my menu, I wasn't lacking capacity. In fact, I almost definitely had more than the orb could measure anyway, given mine was several times that of the mid-level Maria.

"I don't mind. Just knowing my element is enough for me."

"If only I had other measuring tools besides the crystal. Sadly, I don't have any here. Let me get you the catalog for dimensional magic. If I remember right, I have a catalog for minor magic here..."

She produced a thin catalog and gave it to me. I gave it a cursory look. There were elements such as star, sun, light, and darkness. Even in a catalog of minor elements, dimensional magic had particularly few spells.

"Connection and Form. There are only two spells for dimensional magic..."

"W-Wow, only two. Ah, but it looks like we do have those gems in stock. There are so few dimensional magic users out there that we still have some lying around."

“In that case, I’ll take both.”

“Huh? Are you sure that’s okay when you don’t even know how much capacity you have?”

“Eh. If I’m lacking now, I’ll have enough to be able to acquire them eventually.”

“Y-You’re being awfully casual about it, lad. Might you be a rich man?”

“Buying this magic is no big deal for me, sure.”

“Color me jealous. Okay, young man. I’ll go get them, so wait here for me, if you please.”

She rose from her seat and withdrew to the back of the emporium. I decided to see about Maria’s magic in the meantime.

“How about you, Maria? Anything look interesting?”

“There’s nothing decent available. All of the useful fire-element attack magic is out of stock. Actually, I guess there must not be many people without elements, because there are some fairly all right ones left.”

I looked at the catalog Maria was reading. It was true; the fire-element stuff was all out of stock. Even the most basic spell, *Flame Arrow*, was gone. The same was true for ice element stuff, but since I viewed my dimensional magic as my main focus, I wasn’t going to lose sleep over it.

“How about you try this one? *Firefly*.” I pointed at any old spell.

“Wait, that one?” she replied.

Apparently, it could blind the enemy using fire. The notes in the catalog warned that it wasn’t an attack spell because the fire wasn’t very hot.

“I don’t need you to have an offensive build. I want you on support spell duty.”

“I see. Over on the element-less side, it’s highly recommending *Impulse*. That’s a proper attack spell,” she said, pointing at where it said Impulse in the element-less column.

According to the catalog, it was a short-range vibration blast. An enemy that

got hit at close range would be blown back several meters.

“Cool, I’ll buy you those two. They’re reasonably priced. Oh, and maybe I should buy myself whatever ice spell too... Why the look?”

“You really love throwing around piles of money like it’s nothing.”

“I damn near died earning this money. Why would I let it rot unused?”

“A normal person would save it.”

I had no concept of saving my money. Not when I planned to break free of this world.

“Here we are, young man. Thank you for waiting. Your gems.”

“Thank you very much. I’ve also picked out her spells. I’ll take *Firefly* and *Impulse*. And to round things off, I’d like the *Snow Fleck* spell as well.”

“*Firefly*, *Impulse*, and *Snow Fleck*, right? I can get them right to you. Only, *Snow Fleck* doesn’t fit either of your elements. You know you can’t learn it, don’t you?”

“Oh, don’t fret it, ma’am. It’s just a rich man’s vagaries.”

The elemental affinity assessment she’d carried out for me earlier didn’t turn up ice as one of my elements, but seeing as I had unmistakably used my ice spells in the past, I needed to put it to the test.

She sighed. “Vagaries, you say? Well, if it means business for me, I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’ll pay up front.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

All in all, it cost me less than two gold coins. *Impulse* was a bit expensive, but the others were of limited utility and consequently cheap.

Just like always, I pretended to take my money out of the pouch hanging at my back, while actually taking it out of thin air.

“Huh...” said Maria, looking at me like I was a pink elephant. “You really did just throw down a small fortune like it’s nothing...”

I'd have appreciated it if she'd stopped giving me that look every time money came into the picture.

"Thank you; please come again. You *are* rich, aren't you? Now then, allow me to go get the little lady her gems."

I took my change of silver coins and the dimensional magic gems, which emanated a strange and curious hue. The gems themselves were the same as the ones I could obtain in the Dungeon, but the craftsmanship applied to them was on another level. Patterns and formulas and the like were densely engraved all the way into each gem's interior, and those magical etchings were giving off a peculiar chromatic shine.

"Man, they're pretty. Swallowing them feels like a waste."

"Some choose to wear theirs," explained Maria helpfully. "There are accessories like that too."

She showed off her knowledge—there were people who made wedding rings of holy magic gems to ward off misfortune. While she was sharing this with me, the shop assistant arrived with Maria's gems.

"Here you are, little lady. These are yours. I'll also be giving you state certificates. If something ever comes up, please come back here. Since you're so flush with funds, I'll handle any post-sale service you may need as well."

"Thanks. By the way, should I just swallow them here and now?"

"I don't mind if you do. Shall I bring you some water?"

"Please. This will be my first time, so I'd like a specialist nearby."

"You got it, sir."

The lady went to the back to get me some water. She seemed accustomed to doing so. Then Maria and I used the water we received to gulp down our gems. I swallowed three, including the ice magic spell, while Maria swallowed two.

My body resisted the idea of swallowing gems, but at the sight of Maria swallowing hers without a word of complaint, I gulped them down, not to be outdone.

Seeing Maria swallow them down, the lady sang her praises. "Great.

Congratulations, little miss. I do believe you can use magic now. Just not inside these walls! Ah, as for you, young man, I'm not sure whether you can use it."

"I know, I know. All right, Maria, how about it? Think you can do it?"

"How should I know? This is my first time." Maria was staring at the palms of her hands; she clearly didn't know what, if anything, had changed.

"Ma'am, we're going to go test our spells outside."

"There are no other customers at the moment, so I'll come watch," she offered kindly.

We stepped outside and were guided to the shop's yard, where a straw figure was set up as a target. Customers came here to test fire their spells all the time.

"Now then, little miss, I'd like you to visualize the spell in your mind. Gather the magic energy coursing through your body into the palms of your hands. Imagine that energy heating up, until at last, flames flow out from your hands like a flood. Then, say the incantation: *Firefly*!"

"F... *Firefly*!"

Fire burst out of Maria's hands. The shop worker was accustomed to this; she must have guided all sorts of people to cast spells. I sensed it was okay to leave Maria with her; I had to test my own magic.

"Whoa! That was amazing, little lady! My my, you're a natural, you are. Now then, on to the next little test. I'd like you to visualize gathering up colorless magic energy. Picture it—colorless magic energy gathering and trembling so that it might fly out of your palms. You're suppressing that trembling, suppressing it...and then you shout out the incantation! *Impulse*!"

"*Impulse*!!!"

I saw the straw figure fly off in the corner of my eye as I checked my menu.

【MAGIC】

ICE MAGIC: Freeze 1.04, Ice 1.06

DIMENSIONAL MAGIC: Dimension 1.42, Connection 1.00, Form

UNIQUE MAGIC: Layered Dimension 1.02, Dimension: Calculash 1.04

I saw *Connection* and *Form* there, but not *Snow Fleck*. According to the elemental affinity assessment, ice wasn't among my elements. Was I only able to acquire dimensional spells? If so, why did I have *Freeze* and *Ice*? Maybe I couldn't learn *Snow Fleck* because I didn't have enough capacity left, but that was just conjecture. Seeing as the magicarium's affinity assessment was so vague, I had no choice but to experiment. For the time being, I'd figure out all the details concerning the spells I'd just acquired.

【CONNECTION】

MP consumed: 100

A high-level dimensional magic spell. In accordance with the caster's caliber, it can link dimensions.

【FORM】

MP consumed: 1

A basic dimensional magic spell. It can confer space-time to a target.

That was no different from what the explanations written in the catalog said. Based on the description, I had high hopes regarding *Connection*. If that description was meant to be taken literally, I could maybe zip right back to my world, just like that.

Maria, having finished her magic training, came up to me. "Master! I can use magic too!" she said, delighted.

"Don't call me 'Master' out in public. Also, pipe down a second—I'm about to cast a spell myself."

If *Connection* provided a way back to Earth, then I'd be even more delighted. I

cast the spell, ignoring Maria's presence. I visualized my one and only desire—me returning to my world!

"Spellcast: *Connection!*"

I held out my hands and formed the spell with every intention of pouring all of my magic power into it. From my palms surged magic energy that tampered with the dimensions. It sucked in the air around me, condensing space and generating a barrier made of light purple magic power. Actually, on closer inspection, it wasn't a barrier—it was an amorphous magic door, shimmering like light on water.

I put a hand to the door. If it was just as I pictured, it led straight to my world. I tried pushing it open.

"Ugh, it's not budging."

I tried pushing and pulling, but no dice. The shop worker approached me, intrigued.

"Huh. First time I've seen that. So this is the dimensional spell *Connection*. Seeing a spell I've only ever seen in books with my own two eyes? I'm moved, quite moved indeed. But that thing's not going to open like that. If you don't cast it again and make its counterpart, it won't function."

"Huh? Its counterpart?"

"Come on, sir, cast the spell again, if you would."

I reckoned I'd better follow an expert like her—she clearly knew more about this spell than I did—so I cast it again. "Spellcast: *Connection!*"

Just as I'd been told, I created another door near the first one.

"Now one door should lead to the other. If my tomes are correct, that is."

It looked as though I now had access to a teleportation door I could plant where I liked.

"I see," I replied. "All right, pass through it, Maria."

"Um, I'll pass. It looks shady, and I'm too afraid."

I shared the sentiment. Sure, I was the one who'd made the door, but passing

through an immaterial gateway required courage. Reluctantly, I pushed the door with my right hand. This time around, there was no resistance and the door opened. The other door also opened, and I could see my right hand appear on the other side. It gave me the willies.

“My literature was right,” said the woman. “Congratulations, young man.”

“Th-Thanks.”

“That said, please erase the doors before you leave. They’re in the way.”

“Ah, right.” I withdrew my hand, and by picturing the mental image of erasing the doors, they vanished without incident.

In the end, it wasn’t a way to effect my Great Return. To put it in video game terms, it was more like setting up warp points. If I wanted to use this spell for the Great Return, I’d have to somehow place one of the doors back on Earth. Of course, if I could do that, I wouldn’t be going through these travails to begin with.

I pulled myself together and decided to have the shop worker look at my other fresh new spell. “Sorry to bother you, but could you tell me about the other spell too?”

“The other spell? Oh, you mean *Form*. Hmm. The explanation re *Connection* came with an illustration, so that was easy to understand, but *Form* doesn’t have much documentation. I’m afraid all I know is that it grants ‘dimensionality’ to something.”

Unfortunately, I’d be groping in the dark with that one. I concluded I had no choice but to test it blind.

“In that case, I’ll just try casting it and see what happens. Spellcast: *Form*.”

My mental image was decent but not great; regardless, I fired the spell into the air. What came out of my palms was a lavender-colored bubble.

“A bubble, eh?” Captivated, the lady poked it with a finger.

It didn’t pop. It vanished in a mist-like puff.

“Yep, it’s a bubble,” I said.

Only, I alone knew that wasn't all it was. As the controller of the bubble, I understood it intuitively. The space inside the bubble was out of sync with the surrounding space. As the spell wasn't classified as water-element, it was only natural to suspect that the bubble's contour wasn't made of water. It was spatial dislocation that had spawned this spherical outline.

"Well, sir? Did you figure something out?"

"No, not really," I lied. "As far as I know, it's just a normal bubble."

If I explained to the authority on magic the sensation this spell gave me, she might share an effective way to make use of it. However, I'd just obtained a spell that few could cast even within this fantasy world. The part of me that wanted to keep it as hidden as possible won out.

"Is that so? What a shame."

"Looks like I don't have much use for *Form*. But thanks anyway, ma'am, you've been a tremendous help. We're both beginners."

She shook her head. "Oh, don't mention it. Just doing my job."

I saw Maria poking at one of the bubbles. "Maria, you happy with what you've got?"

"No problems here. I figured out the trick to it."

She was brimming with confidence. I had a feeling all that praise the shop worker had given her about her talent had put a pep in her step.

"Okay, we'll be taking our leave. Thank you for everything. I think we'll come again."

"Bye, sir. Bye, little lady."

"Thank you for all of your help, ma'am," said Maria. "Bye."

We exited the magicarium, the lady waving at us until we stepped out of view. I had a feeling she was waving not at me but at Maria. It was obvious even from the outside looking in that she'd taken a liking to her. If I found myself wanting more magic, I'd come back here. If I brought Maria with me, the lady would probably give us freebies and discounts.

Maria had waved back. Her expression was sunny, and I was sure mine was no different. Find me someone who doesn't get jazzed when they gain a new power and I'll find you someone who doesn't exist. Obtaining new spells is an event that gives a gamer like me a nice rush. And by learning this magic, we'd both gained our next toehold into the Dungeon.



The bear-sized crustacean came at me with wolflike speed. If it wasn't a monster, I'd have a tough time explaining this strange spectacle. The red crayfish-esque monster swung its pincer claws at me. I deflected the attack with my blade and tried to cut it at the arm joints, but it twisted its body away at the last second, defending against my strike with its sturdy carapace.

I'd been bungling this battle; I was treading on muddy ground, so no matter what I did, it felt off. The crayfish, meanwhile, was moving quickly and nimbly.

I felt I lacked the trump card I needed to finish this fight, so I decided to retreat, but that was when Maria shouted:

“Firefly!”

A small flame clung to the monster's head. Blinded, it reflexively brought its claws up to its face. Not one to pass up this opening, I closed in, successfully slicing its claws off at the joints. It shrieked.

Next, I wielded my sword against its vitals. Its other joints, the thin bits of its limbs, its sense organs—I didn't know what its weak points were, so I butchered it anywhere I could.

“Gyaahhh!”

It turned into light while still in its death throes. I watched as it faded away, panting heavily, and I smiled wryly. I'd done it!

Title unlocked: Fen Lurker

+0.05 to MAG

“Phew...damn that thing was a ball-ache.”

Maria had been devoting herself to supporting me from afar, and now she was drawing nearer. “Congratulations, Master.”

“Again with the ‘Master’ thing? Quit it already,” I said, picking up the monster’s item drop.

After learning the spells, we had re-entered the Dungeon. Maria had leveled up, so we were making our way through at a decent clip without any gloominess on her part. I wanted to test out placing a *Connection* door on the tenth floor, so that was where we’d set our sights this time around. At present, with Maria’s assistance, I’d just taken down a boss on Floor 8.

“That one gave you more than a little trouble. What was tripping you up?”

“Oh, I just didn’t realize it’d be this hard to fight when my footing’s off, that’s all. You were a big help back there. Good timing.”

“No, no—it looks like that’s basically *all* I can do during a boss battle,” she said, striking an affected sulking pose. She was less than thrilled I’d ordered her to keep to the back and focus on providing support.

Before reaching Floor 8, I’d had her slay weakling monsters with her dagger, which had the side effect of making her excessively confident. Maria must have been thinking that she’d be of use against even a boss monster since she’d made such a good showing so far. As one might expect, rapid leveling up could make anybody get ahead of themselves. The Maria I knew was thoughtful and judicious, but even she had gotten so amped up that she was no longer as grounded. Becoming more than twice as strong over the course of a few hours brought with it its share of problems, and I had misgivings letting her participate directly in higher-level battles. I could see the monsters’ every move coming through *Dimension*, but there was a chance I might not be able to completely protect Maria from a move I’d never seen before.

“Actually, you might have been okay against that boss too. It’s just that I didn’t know what it could do. You should wait until you level up a bit more.”

“Isn’t it times like those that you ought to use a slave like me as an expendable pawn?”

“You’re not a slave. Besides, I’d hate to be like that.”

I was de facto treating Maria like a friend, but she had put herself in the slave box. If I did it her way and she died like a pawn, I'd hate myself so much I would want to die, but Maria just wasn't getting it. Or maybe she did get it but was saying things like that anyway...

She sighed. "You're as soft and naive as ever."

"Not really. I'm just using you where your talents can shine. I want you working for me in other areas. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Lies, lies, lies," she said, twirling and juggling the knife in her hand. "You're just overprotective."

Now that she was Level 7, her DEX must have risen high enough for her to be able to play with her knife like that. I supposed she was keen to experience her augmented abilities because she'd been fidgeting restlessly for a while now.

I couldn't overlook Maria's attitude. I had to say something. "I'm not being overprotective. I'm telling you what I'm telling you because you're looking so twitchy now. If you up and die on me, I'm the one who's losing out. From where I'm standing, I want you to work enough to cover at least four pieces of gold."

"Would you look at that? Another lie. You should try saying something you actually mean one of these days. Didn't you tell me you're fine with me running?"

I had no rebuttal for that. *Well, damn. Come to think of it, I did say something like that, didn't I?*

I was deflated; I'd lost yet another argument. During our Dungeon diving, in all of our chatting and conversation, never once did I win an argument. Part of it was her gift of gab, but it went beyond that. It was like she had an ear to my inner voice.

Just then, I sensed a monster approaching through *Dimension*.

"Ah, there's a monster around the corner on the right. Guess you should be able to take it on by yourself."

"So, here's our next customer. Leave it to me!"

It was a quadruped beast-type monster. Since I knew the beast-type monsters

of Floor 8 didn't possess any special abilities, I let her use them as practice. This one was a Rank 8 monster, a Bound Dog. It was said to be difficult to slay unless multiple Level 7 or higher divers got it surrounded. Yet Maria attacked it alone with a single dagger. I backed her up by following from behind.

The Bound Dog responded agilely to the human ambushing it from around the corner. It leaped back as only a beast-type could and dodged Maria's attempt at first blood. Absorbing the impact of the leap with its four paws, it immediately charged at her. I stayed calm and observed, as did Maria.

Maria jumped towards the charging beast, placing a hand on its back and slashing it as she leapfrogged it. Now wounded, the monster repeatedly rushed at her (as opposed to me, as I'd distanced myself) at speeds a normal person could never track. Needless to say, it was faster than Maria's current AGI stat, but even so, it couldn't catch her. Maria's physical ability was at or below the average for Level 7, yet owing entirely to the skills she had, she was still a match for this hound in all its agility. The Perception skill supplied a window into its state of mind, allowing her to keep an eye on its behavioral patterns, while her Hunting skill optimized how she carried her body and executed her attacks.

With a combination of these two skills, she stabbed the monster dead in its weak points. By its umpteenth bull rush, the Bound Dog was worn out and battered. Maria had aimed for its muscle tendons, causing its vaunted pride to plummet. She finished the job by scorching it with fire magic, cutting off its tendons, gouging its eyes, and stabbing it in the heart. She was a superb hunter, which made her stronger than her stats might otherwise suggest. Compared to me or Dia, she was a whelp, but compared to the average diver, she was outstanding.

I didn't interfere, letting Maria mop up the monsters of Floor 8 herself.

"Hff, hff... I'm sorry; that one gave me a bit of a run for my money."

"You kidding? This is fantastic for your first day."

"Actually, dealing with such beasts is my forte. Then again, back in my village, I only ever dealt with smaller animals."

"Really? That explains a lot." It explained why "Hunting" was one of her skills.

"In the past, I could see how I had to move but my body couldn't catch up. Now it's different. I feel so light, and I can work up the strength. It's amazing; I can fight even beasts that are this terrifying."

Delighted, she flicked her dagger to cast off the blood. Slaying the monster earned her a sense of accomplishment. Perhaps she'd always been cut out for the hunt. To me, it appeared as though her natural talents were blossoming now thanks to the benisons of Level 7 bestowing her with a body that moved like she wanted it to.

I left the monsters to her afterwards, and it proved drama-free. Even against enemies that physical attacks didn't work on, her Perception enabled her to ascertain their weak points and attack with magic instead. In fact, it was fighting those more special monsters that exhibited Maria's faculties in earnest. Her insight empowered her to keep choosing the most effective attacks, and in that way, it was similar to my own battle tactics.

We exited Floor 8 and made it to Floor 9. On this floor, there were more monsters that Maria couldn't cope with on her own. If her attacks didn't land, her eyes, as good as they were, wouldn't give her the win. Whenever that was the case, I had her provide backup with her *Firefly* spell while I did the fighting. On our way to Floor 10, I hunted monsters here and there, checking to make sure Maria's help from afar was having an effect.

We arrived at Alty's floor—the chamber of roaring flame. After confirming that nobody else was around, I approached the fire. It was time to experiment.

"Alty, can you hear me? Alty? Hello? Can you hear—"

The fire turned into the shape of a mouth. "Yeah, I can hear ya. It is my abode, after all."

Maria was behind me; I could tell she was surprised.

"I had my doubts, but I guess you really do reply."

"Sure do. However, my body proper's a bit busy right now. Sorry, but could ya keep it brief?"

"Got it. So, I'm thinking of placing some magic of mine here on this floor. Do you mind?"

"You mean the dimensional spell we were talking about, right? Sure. I'll give you a place for it right now." A section of the fire dissipated, opening a path. "I made you a space without any fire down there, so go and try putting it there."

"Okay, I will." I walked down the path to the fireless space. "Spellcast: *Connection*."

I pictured it. The mass of purple magic energy comprising a mystical door. The power leaking out of my palms came together in the shape of the gateway, but it failed to maintain its form and faded away.

"Damn! The chamber's magic energy's too strong; I can't make the door!"

Connection was a delicate and fragile spell. On the Pathway, the barriers prevented the door from lasting. Outside of the Pathway, monsters would destroy it. That was why I'd set my sights on Floor 10, where there were neither barriers nor monsters to contend with, but here it seemed the surrounding magic energy was too volatile.

"Hrmm," said Alty. "I've been trying to push the magic energy away for you, but I guess it's not happening. It's 'cause this room is proof I'm alive. It looks like I can open a hole in the fire but not so much the magic energy."

"You can't do anything about it? Everything changes depending on if I can place a door here or not."

The usefulness of diving down to Floor 10 had waned. Since Maria was with me, I had utilized her, but for future dives, it'd presumably no longer be necessary. I wanted to cut down the time it took to get here as much as possible.

"Urgh...I just can't do it," she said apologetically. "It's like telling me to hold my breath."

"I see."

"You may be able to use Tida's chamber, though, seeing as its owner ain't around anymore. Chances are good the room's magic energy is gone."

"Tida's chamber... That'd be Floor 20, huh? That's kinda far..."

"Oh, for you I'm sure it's just a skip and a jump away. Pop by and try it out for

me.”

“You make it sound so easy. Plus, I’ve got Maria with me now, so I’m pressed for time.”

“Hmm...gotcha.”

“I’ll try at a later date. Thanks for your help. I’ll throw a thank you your way.”

“That’s okay. Us allies have gotta help each other out. If anything comes up, you can count on me.” Her flame-mouth turned back into normal fire.

That was that. I’d learned I couldn’t use *Connection* on the tenth floor. My next objective seemed to be Floor 20.

Maria broke her silence. “Is it over now, Master?”

“Yep, that’s it. We’ve done all we can do today.”

“Was that voice Ms. Alty? The girl we saw during lunch?”

It may have been a mouth of fire, but Alty’s voice had been no different from her usual self’s.

“Yeah, that was Alty. She’s a fire specialist. She can do this sort of thing.”

“Whatever that was, it was beyond ‘specialist.’ What in the world *is* she?”

“I don’t know much myself. She’s an enigma, but you can’t deny she knows her stuff. When it comes to the Dungeon, she’s unrivaled.”

I decided not to let slip that Alty was a monster. Since Alty and I were now cooperating (after a fashion), I refrained from disseminating information that would be to her detriment. And above all, I hated to imagine what’d happen if it did get out.

“Is that right...”

Maria may have picked up on the fact I was withholding information, given the curt reply. But if she was happy leaving it at that, then so was I. I gave my menu a rote check and determined that my MP was too low to continue the dive.

“All right, I say we head home.”

“Wait, we’re going back already?”

“Yeah. We were battling in the Dungeon this morning too, so I haven’t got much MP left.”

“I see. In that case, please leave the monsters on the way back to me.”

It seemed Maria still had strength to spare. I reckoned it was because Perception and Hunting were passive, continuous skills that didn’t eat up any MP. Considering *Dimension* required MP as fuel, I was envious.

Just as she’d declared, Maria mopped up almost all of the monsters on the way back. There were a few close shaves here and there, but as I swooped in for the save, we sustained no injuries worth mentioning and made it to the surface. Thus ended Maria’s first day of diving. One could call it a huge success.

We proceeded to convert the day’s spoils into money. The sum we earned astonished her; in just one day’s dive, we’d netted our living expenses for the next few months, which would have been unthinkable to Maria before.

“Holy wow,” she said. “I knew Dungeon gems were valuable, but not *this* valuable. Now I see the rumors of high-income divers are actually true.”

A pouch full of the money we’d earned in her hands, she stood there, trembling. Her words made the strangeness of it sink in for me, and I wanted to share in that sensation with her.

“Yeah, I guess so. Being able to earn this much this easily is kinda screwy, huh? You know what, you can take half of it.”

“Huh?”

“You gave me a hand. I figure you deserve a good half of it, so...”

“Oh c’mon!” Maria shook her head. “That there’s what’s screwy! I mean, absolutely everything was thanks to you, Master! It’s all because you were there!”

She thrust the pouch back at me. However, I didn’t really see the point of adding this piddling amount to my fortune. Perhaps my sense for how to spend money had gotten out of whack, and I had the windfall I’d gained from Tida’s head to blame. As such, I decided to trust the opinions of a lower middle class

person like Maria.

“Half’s too much, huh? Makes sense. Okay, so how much do you want?”

“Master, I’m your property. I don’t get paid at all. I’m happy if you just bring me back home.”

Maria was still unwilling to step away from being my slave. I could let it go as a joke earlier that morning, but I couldn’t have her be that stubborn about it. At this point, I felt I had no choice but to speak my mind.

“Well, that’d make *me* feel shitty. Surely you of all people get it by now? I’m not big-hearted enough to be sheltering slaves. That’s why I want our relationship to be more carefree.”

A pause. “That’s not true. You have a big heart, Master. You’re not normal.”

I was all but pleading now, yet Maria still couldn’t accept it. And I couldn’t swallow the idea that I was a big-hearted individual. If I were, Maria wouldn’t be here. That said, I had a feeling that if I kept arguing with her, I’d be the one to get taken to task. In the Dungeon, the results would have been disastrous.

“Okay, fine. We’ll meet in the middle, then. You can’t object to that, surely?”

“Meet in the middle, you say?”

“You did put your life on the line back there. I just want to make sure you’re not totally unpaid.”

“That is true... What you pulled this morning *was* pretty bad.”

“See? And I won’t split it 50-50 either. I just want you to take a little.”

“Understood. If you insist, I’ll take a tiny little bit.” She mustered her resolve and agreed to take her pay.

Really wish she didn’t have to muster her resolve over something so silly.

She took a deep breath and named her price.

“So then, I’ll take five or so pieces of copper, if you please.”

Five pieces of copper. That was about enough for one solid meal. *The kid doesn’t know a thing...*

I didn't have to say anything; it was clear I wasn't pleased with her choice. In response, she grinned. *Maybe she said that knowing it was too little.*

I shrugged. "A few pieces of *silver*, more like."

"What am I, a princess? Don't be ridiculous. Even just ten pieces of copper's riding the line."

"Okay, then take a single piece of silver. That's the lowest I'm going."

"If I have to take more, then give me eleven pieces of copper."

"You only went up by one coin! Meet me in the middle here, would you?"

"Hrm. Fifteen pieces of copper, then."

"Look, if it's copper you want, take eighty. Don't forget this payment's for you sticking your neck out."

"I didn't forget. It's why I'm asking for fifteen."

"C'mon, you can go up at least a little. You're supposed to meet me midway every time I name a sum..."

"I suppose it can't be helped. Let's go with twenty."

"Finally starting to get serious, are we? All right, then..."

Our negotiations were half in jest. Maria must have enjoyed this sort of back-and-forth, because she was tenacious to the end. Ultimately, I got her to take fifty pieces of copper. The look on her face... She was dumbfounded. I was just relieved that she could go shopping for herself.

After we had fun negotiating, I decided to bring Maria back home and go back outside myself. She asked where I was going, and I truthfully replied that I was heading to work. She also asked what I did for work, to which I answered that I did assistant stuff at the pub.

That yielded her most shocked expression that whole day. "If you're earning *this* much money diving, why are you doing odd jobs for chump change?"

I had no real answer for her, but I managed to persuade her that gathering information at the pub was indispensable for diving, and with that, I headed out. Her look of amazement didn't subside as she watched me leave.

Chapter 3: The Fourth Ally

I left Maria at home and arrived at the pub. Reporting for work after some time off, I came back to find that nothing had changed. I greeted the manager and Ms. Lyeen and got straight to work. As always, I worked diligently, changing tables and washing dishes, mainly.

Needless to say, I didn't neglect to gather information either. When there was a customer who looked approachable enough, I'd obliquely bring up various subjects. If I left it at eavesdropping through *Dimension*, I wouldn't get enough information about Floor 20 and how to get there.

Eventually, I drew information out of a warrior and familiar face, Mr. Krowe. "Wow, so there aren't many monsters on Floor 14."

"Nope, there ain't. Fourteen's completely different from Thirteen's wetlands. It's a barren wasteland. A big huge desert without a drop of moisture. There aren't many monsters, and there aren't many area bosses either. Almost nobody explores that floor or goes hunting monsters there. Usually folks just stick to the Pathway and go straight to Floor 15."

"I can see why. If it's a desert, it must be hot."

"That's the number one reason, yeah. When you're subjected to those temperatures, it snatches the water outta your body. I hear it's a floor with lots of unexplored places, and that's why."

"I see..."

Mr. Krowe and I had enjoyed a bond of camaraderie since my first day of work when he had taken the time to talk to me. I'd be working and he'd generally be drinking.

As I was speaking with him, a group of people entered the pub. They were an unusual bunch; I didn't recognize any of them, and their outfits weren't the crude and rough garb that many in Vart wore, but rather clean, beautiful raiments that were works of art. My primary impression of them was that they

all looked well-off. Walking at the head of that affluent party was a woman, and I could sense from her general comportment that she was powerful. I used Analyze.

【STATUS】

NAME: Sera Radiant

HP: 256/256

MP: 101/101

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 21

STR 6.22

VIT 7.91

DEX 8.89

AGI 10.02

INT 5.60

MAG 7.77

APT 1.57

INNATE SKILLS: Intuition 1.77

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 2.12, Holy Magic 0.89

Her level was in the twenties, which put her squarely in the top echelon of humanity. And now she had graced our humble tavern. Her bluish-silver hair swayed as she walked. She had bangs in the form of a single tuft hanging on her left side, and the hair on the back of her head reached her waist. She had animal ears poking out of her hair, and a wolf's tail, so I reckoned she was a semifer. What stood out the most were her sharp, wolflike eyes—through which one could get a sense of how stern she was. Her attire looked easy to move in, and she had on a minimal amount of silver protective gear in addition to the sword she wore at her waist.

The woman scanned the pub, searching for something. The other patrons were starting to take note of the group and wonder what they were all about.

The woman must have grown impatient, as she then spoke for all to hear. “I’m told a man named Sieg works here.”

My heart skipped a beat. Getting singled out like that was the last thing I was expecting. At her words, gazes shifted to me. Since the regulars all knew my name, it was unavoidable. The woman followed their eyes and called out to me.

“Are you ‘Siegfried Vizzita’?” She glared at me, the look in her eyes yet more severe.

I didn’t know how to respond. The problem was, I didn’t know what this person was after. Going by the mood in the air, this was no trivial matter, and the presence of her fully armored entourage did nothing to put me at ease. I’d have liked to play dumb if I could have, but even if I were to lie, they’d just get confirmation from someone else.

“Yes ma’am, I’m Sieg. I’m an employee here.”

“So you’re him.” She took a breath and continued talking to me in solemn, austere tones. “My name is Sera Radiant. I’m one of Whoseyards’s Seven Celestial Knights. I have come for one order of business, and that is to challenge you to a duel.” She raised up her still-sheathed blade to signal her intent.

The pub’s patrons turned noisy, not just because of the suddenness of it, but also because some were amazed purely by the personage of Sera Radiant.

“I don’t understand. Why do you want a duel with me?” I asked as calmly as I could. I remembered the words of warning the knight named Palinchron had given me, but I still didn’t know why things had turned out this way.

“WHY?! What *gall*, to say such a thing!”

Ms. Radiant approached me, openly fuming, but Mr. Krowe wedged himself in between us.

“Whoa there, pal. You may be a knight of Whoseyards or whatever, but ya can’t come strollin’ in with an attitude like that. This is a pub. Don’t pick a fight with the staff!”

Other customers with whom I had something of a rapport started getting to their feet. This had every indication of turning into some big to-do as folks who were confident they could throw down interjected one after the other.

"I was happy watchin' the drama up till ya came out with a *duel*. Somethin' that's that much trouble's a different story."

"Don't you lot look down on Vart!"

"We may not've known him long, but the boy's more than a stranger to us."

Seeing all those people rising up for my sake got me a bit choked up. I must have earned that much respect from them before I'd realized it.

"Ain't that right, boss!" shouted one of them.

The pub's manager, who had come out of the kitchen at some point, was standing behind me, his pose intimidating.

"All right, fellas, your bloodthirst's too palpable. It ain't like the Whoseyards lady's gonna tear the place up right here and now. That said, miss, this is a pub. A business. If you're gonna hinder my operations, then things're gonna get real messy for the both of us."

He was almost Level 20 himself, and he stood his ground against this menacing covey.

She bowed. "Forgive me. It would seem I was seeing a little red. I apologize if I've interrupted your business. Understand, however, that we've a mission that we are to carry out at all costs, and that is to duel this man and take back milady."

While she'd let her indignation get to her before, it seemed that she was actually an intellectual, logical woman.

My boss grinned in response. "Oho, now that's interestin'. Hey, Sieg. You seduce some noble's daughter or somethin'?"

"Err, do I look that way to you?"

"I dunno. Gentle-lookin' guys like you...well, they can be surprisingly...you know."

“No, I don’t know. I didn’t seduce anyone.”

At first, the air had been stark, but the moment he realized that this might be a snarl caused by love troubles, he stopped taking it so seriously.

“Ms. Radiant, was it? You heard what Sieg said. Of course, if you’ve got business with him, then you’ve got business with him. I’m sure ya wanna talk to him about it, but could ya wait till the boy’s on break first?”

“Yes. I never wished to cause trouble for your establishment. You’re quite right; please allow us to wait until the man’s break time. And of course, we’ll place orders as well.”

She and her group took seats at a larger table.

“And that’s the skinny. These fine knights o’ Whoseyards just came to get some food. You folks just keep drinkin’; there ain’t nothin’ to worry about.”

“Wait a sec, boss, you sure about this?” asked a customer.

“Why wouldn’t I be? It’s got nothin’ to do with the pub, does it? This is Sieg’s problem. It don’t look like their anger’s unfounded, so all I can do is watch.”

“I mean, that’s true an’ all, but still...”

That stance was inconvenient for me. I wanted everybody to come in with the assist.

“Um, sir? Their anger *is* unfounded. I have no idea what this is about.”

Ms. Radiant glared at me with a frightening look on her face. “You knave, you still mean to play innocent?!”

“What am I supposed to think when the knight reacts like that?” he said. “Well, just talk it out later.” Happy to let his employee reap what he’d sown, he went back to the kitchen.

“Heh heh, it seems you’ve only got until break time to live,” she muttered. “Better brace yourself.”

At the realization that I’d have to work my hours while subjected to her constant death glare, I heaved a deep sigh. “The hell is this nonsense...”

Yet all I could do was keep my nose to the grindstone as usual. All while

enduring the stares of those armored individuals...



"All right then, ma'am, who is this about? Is it about Dia?"

Perhaps due to the discretion of my boss and Ms. Lyeen, I managed to finish work earlier than usual. The time I'd spent on the clock had been like lying on a bed of needles, but I'd made it to break time and sat at Ms. Radiant's table. Her knight associates were in the rear, blocking all escape.

Palinchron had told me it wasn't Franrühle, so I went with Dia. I knew he identified as a he, but he could definitely pass as a young lady too.

"Dia? Who's that? Stop playing dumb. We're talking about...Lady Lastiara," said Ms. Radiant, saying Lastiara's name under her breath. It seemed she didn't want the name to get out.

"Lastiara? Oh, you mean that pest."

Every day I had spent in this world so far had been so eventful that it took time for me to recall the girl from day one. I remembered her by her scary eyes and smile. She was the loose cannon who'd invaded my room at the inn, pinned me down, and cast spells on me. While she'd saved my life in the Dungeon, her creepiness outweighed the debt of gratitude I felt towards her, so I didn't want anything to do with her. After encountering Alty and Franrühle, my impression of her had lost some of its edge, but she was still higher on the list of people to be wary of than not. Case in point, it appeared this whole situation was thanks to her.

"A pest? So not only do you kidnap her, you insult her to boot!"

"Wait, back up. I *kidnapped* her?"

"Yes! Kidnapped! She disappeared, and in her farewell letter, she wrote that she'd...that she'd *elope* with you!"

"Uh-huh. She said she was eloping, did she?"

I hadn't even seen her recently. The accusation was obviously farcical. I had half a mind to knock Lastiara to next Tuesday the next time we crossed paths. At my current level, I could go toe to toe with her.

Ms. Radiant was so worked up that she became not so articulate, but she kept harping on me regardless. “Ahh, milady, she! She’s so sweet and tender of heart, but you were all she could talk about at the cathedral! She bumped into you randomly in the Dungeon, but each and every day, she’d wonder aloud to us Seven about what kind of man you were, or tell us what she’d done for you, but how could a...a *knave* like you understand how we felt listening to all that!”

“Please calm down. Here, have some water.”

“Is this any time to be drinking water? Out with it! Where did you hide her?!”

“I’m telling you, you’re barking up the wrong tree. I haven’t seen her in days. She was lying to you. This is *her* we’re talking about; isn’t it possible she just ran away from home for funsies?”

I honestly thought she must have done it as a lark or to get a rise out of them. I felt bad for Ms. Radiant, but no amount of yelling at me would get us anywhere.

“Heh, heh heh heh, heh heh heh heh. Lady Lastiara running away ‘for funsies’? She’s far too demure and thoughtful to do such a thing. Heh heh, I knew it from the start. I knew you’d act innocent. That’s why we must duel. I shall dispose of you by means of the duel, and once you’re out of the picture, we can conduct a thorough search for her.”

“Uhh, ma’am, that’s nice and all, but I don’t have a reason to accept the duel, so...”

“Even if you don’t accept, either way, you two will never be wed. Unless you defeat all seven of us, we will hunt you to the ends of the world.”

“You can hunt me all you like, but she won’t be there. In fact, by all means, please come to my home. You’ll see she’s not there.”

We were not on the same wavelength. For one, our impressions of Lastiara were nigh polar opposites. I figured words wouldn’t suffice to persuade her, so I invited her to my house.

“Heh heh, I know what you’re thinking. You’re trying to confound us with false information. We’ll catch you out, just you wait and see.”

“Hmm, well...” There was no talking sense into her. I didn’t know what was going on, but Ms. Radiant didn’t doubt for a second that I must be culpable. I could continue to profess my innocence until I was blue in the face, but I couldn’t have them hanging around me like hawks, and I wanted to withhold as much information about myself as possible, especially how I leveled Maria up. At this rate, they’d follow me around the clock—including into the Dungeon.

In the back of my mind, I calculated the loss-reward and ended up concluding that dueling them wouldn’t be so bad. My level had risen such that my acceptable limits for risk had widened.

“Okay, let’s do this duel of yours. If I lose, I’ll tell you anything you want. I don’t know where Lastiara is, but I promise I’ll give you my aid.”

“So you’ve finally relented. Or rather, I suppose you’ve come to see the gravity of your crime and are now offering your head.”

“Sorry, but could you not kill me? I’m agreeing to the duel, but on one condition. Allow me to set the following rule—no serious injuries. If you kill the opponent, you lose. If you get the opponent to verbally surrender, you win. Nonviolence is number one in my book.”

“Hrm. Fine then. Normally I, too, dislike getting violent. I’ll make sport of you until you no longer feel the urge to do evil.”

Out of one side of her mouth, she said she didn’t like getting violent, and out of the other, she said she was going to “make sport” of me. This was not a person I wanted to interact with if I could help it.

“And if I win, you’ll never show yourself before me again,” I added.

“Very well. But keep in mind that naturally, the duel will be a one-on-one match.”

“Right, that’s what I had in mind as well.”

“Such resolve. Heh heh, let’s take this outside.”

The knights behind me made way, and I moved to walk past them. Worrying glances flew my way from all around the pub. Ms. Lyeen, who’d been listening in as she waitressed, called out to me. “Sieg, you—”

"It's okay, miss. We set the rules, so even if I lose, she won't kill me," I said with a smile, loud enough that the manager and the folks around me could hear.

"That may be true, but...be careful, hon."

She was worried about me, but I kept smiling. This duel wasn't that catastrophic. If anything, it was a good thing. I wanted to clear up something that had been nagging at me. Humanity had folded their arms in the face of Tida, yet I had defeated it. Where did I fall on humanity's strength chart? Now someone past Level 20 had oh so conveniently appeared. And while she was rather incensed at the moment, she was at heart a woman who prized propriety and charity, which made her easy to game. She'd assented to the extremely forgiving rules I'd proposed. It was only natural I'd start to consider this the perfect chance to see how I measured up.

I used Analyze and compared our menus. My level was about half of Ms. Radiant's, but my stats were on par with hers. Where she had a small leg up on me stats-wise, I was sure *Dimension* would compensate.

I also had new spells that I wanted to try. Plus, I was interested in a straight PvP battle. I had to roll with the punches in a forward-looking way. She'd come all the way to the pub. How could I not avail myself?

"Let's fight here, Ms. Radiant."

I wanted a place that was out of the way for our battle, so I guided the group to the back of the building, and it seemed to suit them well. The preparations for the duel proceeded apace. Finally, we each swore our oaths over the quarter's ley line and drew our respective blades.

"Spellcast: *Dimension*: *Calculash*. Spellcast: *Form*."

The sensation of my magic spreading out was coupled with several bubbles brimming from my sword. I was putting *Form* into practice. When I last dived with Maria, there were a handful of times that I'd had nothing to do, so I'd kept experimenting with my magic and hit upon a new way to use it. In the Dungeon, there were many situations where I used *Dimension* and *Form* in conjunction, and that was how I realized *Form* boosted *Dimension*. *Form* alone didn't have much of an effect, but I had a feeling its true worth came through when used

alongside other spells. In brief, *Form*'s bubbles allowed me to read and perceive space more powerfully. The sensation was like I could shove *Dimension* into the bubbles. That was the mental image, anyway.

I pointed my bubble-wreathed sword towards her eyes.

She snorted. "Heh, a strengthening spell? You lack the Founder's holy magic, and your stance is a poor imitation. A fatuous reprobate like you is no match for me." With that, she cast a spell of her own.



“Growth.” White light emanated from her body. It looked similar to the holy magic that Dia had showed me; in all likelihood, it was of the same element. I used Analyze to peek at the relevant part of her menu.

【STATUS】

CONDITION: Body Boost 1.00

I was relieved that her status was so easy to understand. It was just a simple body-strengthening effect. I felt bad for her—she now had to deal with dimensional magic she couldn’t have seen before.

“All right, here I come.”

“Come at me whenever you like.”

She took an oblique stance and stuck the tip of the blade she held in one hand into the ground. The stance was unique. As far as I could tell, it didn’t offer any advantages, but seeing as she boasted a high-level swordplay skill, there was no way she could be a pretender.

In order to boost my intramuscular pressure, I pooled my strength into my pivot foot. There was no indication she would make the first move. Judging by appearances, she intended to give me a workout. I wouldn’t have minded continuing our standoff, apart from the fact that as a matter of principle, I was all about maximizing my time. Releasing the energy I’d pooled into my pivot foot, I dashed to cover the distance between us in one lunge. At the same time, I swung my sword, aiming for her right hand.

She dodged my attack with ease and, in the same fluid motion, swung her sword at my neck. Her counterattack was flawless, and through it, one could catch a flash of the blood, sweat, and tears she’d put into training. However, my eyes were tracking the trajectory of her blade fairly comfortably. Due to the special qualities of my magic, I was virtually unable to fail to see something. I shifted my body backward to sidestep the attack.

The exchange was over in an instant. By dodging her slash, I ended up back in my starting position.

“Oho. Even a knave like you knows how to fight, I see,” she said condescendingly. And I couldn’t blame her, considering she’d been the one who pulled her punches during that exchange.

I replayed what had just transpired in my mind’s eye. I’d been aiming to slash the back of her hand, while she’d been trying to have her sword come to a stop at my throat. She was clearly proficient enough to do so; that much was clear. I gulped, but it wasn’t fear that had me all but gasp. It was admiration. Longing, even.

I hadn’t felt this way during the battle against Tida. That was because Tida’s moves had been sweeping and broad. It had swung blades at me, sure, but that wasn’t swordplay. That was just raw strength born of its physical might and speed.

This fight was different. She was different. Her power was more of an art, born of polished technique. The way she carried her legs, the way she turned her waist, the way she relaxed her shoulders, the lack of rigidity in her elbows, her wrist strength—absolutely everything was tempered by discipline and training. And the fact that my eyes could follow her accomplished sword swings filled me with a sense of euphoria. Such was the overwhelming beauty of our clash just now. The part of me that lay at the root of my being, the part of me that daydreamed and loved video games, was feasting on this. I was beginning to get taken in by her blade—but suppressed that excitement at once. After all, my objective here wasn’t to appreciate her art of the blade. It was to measure my power level in the scales of strength, as well as to drive these knights away for good. I was here for business, not pleasure. I mustered the willpower and suppressed my urge to draw out more of her awesome swordplay.

“What’s the matter? You’re not going to come attack me?”

“No, ma’am, I’m just thinking.”

It seemed that keeping my distance and being engrossed in thought had left her nonplussed. Perhaps by insinuating that I was now wavering as to how to attack, I’d inadvertently put on airs.

“Well, well. It seems you’re not your average idiot. I could tell from how you moved just now as well. I suppose that through our interaction, you must have

picked up on how truly strong I am. I'll hand it to you; I'm not surprised you were able to lead milady astray."

"False accusations, but okay."

"It's been a while since I last faced such an enthralling opponent. Oh, I know; allow *me* to make the next move."

She completely ignored my denial, but not because she was seeing red. It looked more to me like it was because she'd developed an interest in me. I could sense it in my bones; she was ready to unleash her raw talent. She was just radiating an air of intimidation that thick. This swordswoman was the cream of the crop.

With that, her body became a blur. Every motion was efficient and purposeful, with nothing wasted, and this was the movement technique that it generated. She was moving at such speeds that if I couldn't anticipate her moves, she'd be faster than my eyes could track. Of course, I'd gleaned from her menu that she was a knight who specialized in AGI beforehand, and that made all the difference. I managed to track her attack all the way through.

Her attack came at me from below. I tipped my blade sideways and we crossed swords. With a shrill clang, my sword sprang up, but when our blades came into contact, the bubbles of my *Form* spell clung to her sword.

The second that *Form* touched her sword, the speed at which I obtained information on my opponent rose sharply. I now only grasped the sword's motion, switching to a spatial perception paradigm that focused on it and it alone. *Calculash* became more finely honed, communicating where both of our blades were moving by the millimeter.

The experiment had been a success, and my hypothesis had been confirmed —against a swordfighter, *Form* was quite effective. There was nothing else I wanted to try out. All that was left was to bring this brief battle to an end while concealing my abilities as much as possible.

I expended a vast amount of magic energy and instantaneously intensified *Calculash*. The swords' motion was etched into my brain in microsecond intervals, and I calculated the hyper-optimal path for my body to take.

During our third clash, our swords missed each other by a hair. During our fourth, our swords grazed, sending sparks flying. And during our fifth, her sword alone sliced through empty air, while mine stopped at her throat.

“What?!” Disbelief written on her face, she stared at my stationary blade.

“So I win, right?”

The reason I’d won was because of the information I had on her—information she lacked on me. In terms of raw strength, I was a league below her. However, I was aware of her strength in the form of tight numerical values, while she had no way of knowing about my particular strengths. There were also gaps in our mental preparedness going in, but it was mostly the gap in information, which was just too much in my favor. And most importantly, she hadn’t even realized such a disparity existed to begin with. Before she could unleash all of her techniques, she had lost to my unexpected max-speed burst. If this had been a true battle to the death, her head would have been flying. Funnily enough, my menu-sight exhibited its true potential not against monsters but against other people.

The knights were in a tizzy. There were some among their number who even had their hands on their blades. Realizing the powder keg situation, she let go of her sword, setting an example. They waited for her to speak.

“Heh. I acknowledge it. I lost. A knight never wastes their time and energy struggling out of spite. Don’t any of you dare draw your swords.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am.” Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief; if I’d been closed in by this many hostile knights, I might not have had enough MP left to be in the clear. Even if I’d focused purely on escaping, I might not have come out unscathed.

“Such humiliation...to lose to a knave like you...”

“Please do as you promised and withdraw. Immediately, if possible.”

“Grrr... Drat it, a duel-sworn oath is absolute. I shall not renege.”

Ms. Radiant was no dummy. I didn’t know much about what being a knight entailed, but it seemed they didn’t go back on their word. If other knights acted similarly, that made things easy for me. But my optimism was dashed when

Palinchron's face flashed through my mind.

"But, but wait! The promise I made was to never show my face to you again, wasn't it?!"

"Uh, yes, that was the promise you made, ma'am."

"In that case, I'll send a *different* knight after you! Don't get cocky just because you beat me!"

"Wait, what?" *I don't know if that doesn't qualify as struggling out of spite...*

"I'll leave things at that for today! Consider it a kindness!"

With that, she turned her back to me and exited the area. The other knights followed suit. As I watched them leave, I found myself thinking once again that I oughtn't rely on duels. Maybe next time I should ask them to have nothing whatsoever to do with me. I determined that I would put more thought into the terms of the duels to come.

When the group of knights stepped out of view, I made the *Form* bubbles disappear. A lot had happened, not all of it good, but the fact that my experiment had succeeded was a huge break. Had it not been for *Form*, those last three sword clashes wouldn't have played out the way they did. It offered me a leg up so massive that nothing else could match it, especially in sword fights.

I heaved a satisfied sigh, and at that moment, I heard someone start clapping.

"I knew you could do it, Kanami."

My body stiffened. I scanned my surroundings. Her voice had come from atop the roof. There she sat, her hair gleaming in the moonlight. The girl with the inhumanly golden eyes and bewitching beauty smiled her heart-stopping smile.

The imagery was so magical, it was like I was looking at a work of art.

It was the girl who was the mainspring behind the duel—Lastiara Whoseyards.



A voice from overhead. I instantly looked in its direction and drew my guard

up.

I'd made the same mistake with Tida—I hadn't paid enough attention to the space above me. That shortcoming became especially apparent whenever I focused on a fight.

Lastiara dropped down from the roof. "Long time no see, good sir. My apologies; did I keep you waiting?"

Her gold and silver hair swayed as she approached me.



She was casually wearing the same fancy silk clothing as when she broke into my room. Everything was the same, save for the silver sword she now wore at her waist.

Our gazes met. Her eyes were just as boreal cold as ever—was she really even human?

“I was fine without your company.” I glared straight into her deep eyes. I was different from the last time we had met. I was more used to this world and had gained the strength to fight back. I wasn’t feeling the same amount of pressure either. Still standing at the ready, I looked at her menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: Lastiara Whoseyards

HP: 670/689

MP: 312/315

CLASS: Hero

LEVEL 15

STR 11.01

VIT 10.56

DEX 6.78

AGI 7.89

INT 12.38

MAG 8.78

APT 4.00

CONDITION: None

INNATE SKILLS: Weapon Combat 2.12, Swordplay 2.02, Pseudo-Divine Eyes 1.00, Magical Combat 2.27, Bloodknack 5.00, Holy Magic 1.03

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Book Reading 0.52, Doll Body 1.00

【CELESTIAL BLADE NOAH】

Attack Power 7. Wearout Level 99%.

The information I'd failed to check once before now flowed into my head. Her level, her skills, her weapons, all of them were first-class. But they were all within acceptable limits. I'd be able to hold my own against her should we ever come to blows.

"You're so cold. I've been waiting for this day, I'll have you know."

"I'm cold? Okay, sure...even though it's your fault I had to go through that ordeal just now."

"But to you, a little hiccup like that is no big deal, surely?"

"A... A *little hiccup*?" That was what Lastiara had just called a duel between two of humanity's most skilled fighters.

"Never mind that; we need to address your polite register. You always speak with such rote formality, it's like you're keeping me at a distance. Given that we are to be betrothed, I believe you ought to stop being so distant." She smiled.

We were to be betrothed? How brazen of her. I drew up my guard even more. I kept getting tossed every which way by her self-centered behavior.

"All right, fine, I don't mind. Casual register it is. After all, I don't actually wanna show somebody like *you* any respect."

She chuckled. "You're so cocksure now that you have leveled up—ahh, there / go again with the polite register. Such a stiff manner of speaking isn't appropriate when chatting with you, Kanami."

"Let me start by assuring you that I'm not gonna bend to your will. You can attack me, but I don't feel like I'd lose."

"Attack you? Perish the thought. I'm just connecting with you through my good offices and out of the kindness of my heart."

"And your good offices wound up siccing Ms. Radiant on me, is that it?"

"Quite. You got a lot out of it, didn't you?"

She said that as if it were completely normal. It appeared she truly believed the duel was no big deal. It never occurred to her that it might have affected my standing in the pub, or that it had colored the knights' impression of me. And then there was the danger factor of a sword duel to consider. She hadn't spared a thought for any of that.

"On what planet would I get a lot out of this?"

"If the accusations were false, you could have always kept patiently explaining the situation, right? But you accepted the duel. Tell me you didn't think to yourself, *Oh, they're just one of the Seven Celestial Knights, huh? They're no match for me, but this is a good chance to flex my muscles.*"

Lastiara had completely seen through my thought process leading up to the duel. Was this the power of her eyes—of that "Pseudo-Divine Eyes" skill? It felt like I was up to my own eyeballs in eye-skill users lately. There couldn't have been anyone who was harder to talk to. I missed pure and innocent Dia. Against Lastiara's astute remarks, I lost all words.

"Hit the bull's-eye, have I? Sorry and you are made of different stuff. The density of the soul that resides in each of your bodies. Level gaps barely matter. That's what I wanted to tell you, and that's what I wanted to share alongside you. In truth, you're not the only one who thought this was a great opportunity."

She blushed as she spoke; her nostrils flared. And at the same time, her eyes were shining radiantly with madness. Her tone grew more and more theatrical; I could tell she was high on her own supply.

"The stage you and I live on is a high one, and the spotlight of the saga is near. We're loved by the world, chosen by it. The world granted us gifts. You and I are chosen ones, Kanami. It didn't take long for us to become lonely. We're the only ones who can stand by each other's side. That's why I'm saying we should join hands."

In order to keep from getting sucked into her lunacy, I had to choose my words carefully.

"There may be some truth to that. But it's also narrow-minded. So what is it you want to do, exactly?"

"Wait, huh? Wasn't expecting such a low-key response. I gave that pickup line a fair amount of thought."

Lastiara viewed my calm and composed reply as odd. I hadn't gotten swept up in the heat of the moment.

"See? In the end, you're half-joking, which is why I'm half-listening to what you're saying."

"I'll admit half of the reason is because it amuses me. But I'd like you to trust that half of me *is* serious about this. I am honestly looking for a partner in life. Putting it simply, I want you to add me to your Dungeon dives. So, what do ya say? Wanna be comrades?"

"Nope. I refuse." I didn't think about it. I just replied. It was a knee-jerk response.

"Wow, that was fast! Huh? C'mon! Give it a little more thought!" she said, waving her hands disconcertedly.

"Of course I'd refuse. You're too much of an unknown quantity."

"If I had no air of mystery, where's the fun in that? Wouldn't it be more enjoyable if you learned more about me as we spent more time together?"

"I'm not in this for fun."

"Huh? Then what're you diving for?"

"Well...to go back home."

There was nobody around, but that didn't necessarily mean that nobody would overhear, so I didn't specify where home was. Lastiara knew there were two worlds, so she had to know what I meant.

"Wait, you want to go back?" She seemed surprised.

"Of course I do. I haven't thought about anything else since day one."

"Well, huh. If that's the case, then I should think you need me all the more."

It was true that with Lastiara's support, Dungeon diving would be a cinch. She had Dia-level talent, and on top of that, she had abilities suited to being the advance guard. Truth be told, I wanted her in my party badly.

“Having you around on dives would be great for my heart, but I just don’t know enough about you. It’s out of the question unless I know that, at the very least, our interests align.”

“Hmm, our interests, huh? I think they’re pretty aligned.”

“Then tell me, what are you after?”

Lastiara’s motives. Why had she healed me on my first day here? Why had she raided my room in the middle of the night and forcibly leveled me up? Why was she letting the Seven Celestial Knights go after me? Why had she let the knight named Radiant duel me, and why was she now trying to sell herself to me? Unless I knew her reasons, I’d probably keep her in the “enemy” box in my head for the rest of my days.

She must have realized I wasn’t going to back down, because her expression shifted slightly. “I’m after one thing...” she muttered. “I wanna go on an adventure.”

Her eyes were as unhinged as always. But unlike what I’d seen up to now, there was a very human longing in them as well.

“An adventure?”

“Yeah. A thrilling adventure. And I wanna go on one with companions, if possible. I wanna enjoy the Dungeon to the fullest. Ah, and when I say ‘companions,’ I mean people who don’t treat me any differently from a normal person. Also, they’ve gotta be able to keep up with me. That bit’s important.”

“Well, I guess I do meet those requirements...”

“I was so bored for so long. Since the minute I was born, I was trapped in a cage. I had nothing to stimulate me. It was a prison where I had to be happy with whatever they gave me. I was so envious of the characters in my adventure tales. I was jealous of the lives they got to live—whether they won or lost, they did so as a result of their free will. I was so, so jealous.”

Her heart was easy to understand now. There was no guile in her voice; she was legitimately spilling out all of her unadulterated, infantile envy. It was like a child throwing a hissy fit.

“Okay, I get the gist.”

“If you get it, then I’d like you to quit shrinking from your responsibility to me. Before I encountered your delightful company, I could contain myself. And then I found you. The boy with the skill called ‘Outworlder,’ who was at Level 1 with wounds all over, on death’s door after a solo dive—and I was so overtaken by jealousy that I couldn’t control myself anymore. What sort of adventure would you, the protagonist of some stirring saga, be going on? It was all I could think about. So I want in on your adventure. Please? Pretty please...”

At first it was phrased as a demand, and then it became a plea. Her approach wasn’t consistent; her emotions were fluctuating by the second. The more we spoke, the more her instability came to light. She was frighteningly fickle, like a house of cards that could collapse at any moment. It was as though on an emotional level, she was younger than she looked. I inferred from what she’d said that she was your classic sheltered girl; maybe that was why. The impression she gave others was that of a child who had fun crushing ants underfoot.

“I also got the full picture of how childish you can be...”

“I’m serious here,” she said indignantly, though she continued to negotiate with an earnest look on her face. “I’ll lend you a hand in realizing your goal of going home, so lend me a hand for my dream. Please...”

Dealing with Lastiara still came with its share of dangers. If those dangers were identifiable, however, then I could find uses for her. And the deal she’d offered just now didn’t sound bad. If I could control her more immature side, I couldn’t ask for a greater talent than her. Besides, letting her get away now would come with a massive negative for me. She knew I wasn’t from this world. I didn’t want that information to leak. As such, it would be best to keep her in my sights.

I didn’t have all the time in the world, so I quickly brought my calculation of the pros and cons to an end and spoke my carefully chosen words. “I welcome anyone who’s willing to work with me. We can form a party and see how things play out—”

“Yay! Thank you!” She clasped my hands.

“But if you act funny, then I’m knocking you on your ass. One strike and you’re out of the party!”

If I concluded she was uncontrollable, I’d silence her. I had to promise myself I’d do that. Not that I was sure how far I was willing to go to do it.

“Sure, no problem. I just want to have fun with you in the Dungeon, that’s all. I won’t do anything weird.”

“Plus, you need to clear up Ms. Radiant and the knights’ misunderstanding for me.”

“Hmm, I dunno about that. They think we’re lovers, and I’m pretty sure that means we’ll only have a few pursuers. Those guys see courtship and romance as sacred, so that makes things more convenient for us.”

They saw romance as sacred? I agreed that love was a noble thing, but in my eyes, that way of thinking didn’t fit this dog-eat-dog world. Not that any amount of contemplating would get me anywhere. That wasn’t what I needed to dwell on at the moment. What was important was the bit about the pursuers.

“Wait, hold up. Are the pursuers from your place included in this package?”

“You get both me *and* sparring partners! Now that’s bang for your buck!”

Sure, at this juncture, opponents of that level were sparring partners. While I felt Lastiara was taking me for a ride to an extent, I figured it might not be to my detriment to take them on. The proof was in the pudding, and dueling knights would be educational. They were neither too strong nor too weak, and they boasted an ample number of knightly techniques. And because of the duel-sworn oaths, there was little danger. For the duel with Ms. Radiant, I had chosen a short battle, but if the situation permitted, nothing was stopping me from carefully observing the enemy’s moves. And if it became a pain, I could just dump the whole thing.

“Hrm...well, I guess it’s all right.” I nodded, albeit far from enthusiastically.

She gripped my hands tightly. “Sweet. You nodded. I just saw you nod. No going back on your decision later!”

【LASTIARA WHOSEYARDS HAS JOINED THE PARTY】

The party's leader is Aikawa Kanami.

The notification appeared before my eyes. I'd been using the party system all this time, but I didn't know it in and out; apparently, that exchange had fulfilled the requirements for a new party member. Now my party stood at four members. In the past two days, it had increased by two. I was pretty sure that having more members couldn't be a bad thing.

"Now then, let's go to your home base, shall we, Kanami? Man, I'm so looking forward to our adventure tomorrow."

"I take it you plan to follow me home, then?"

"Sure do," she replied with a smile, as if that was a given. Her smile was a feminine one. It wasn't androgynous like Dia's or childlike like Maria's. She was a girl who was my age. There was no way I could fail to register it.

"W-Wait a minute. Let me think," I said, flustered.

Lastiara intended to make my home her base of operations. I didn't know how party members typically associated with one another in this world; was sleeping in the same place common practice? I could see it being a means of saving money for broke beginner divers. I was guessing members of a party were generally willing to support one another in a communal setting, but when they gained enough money, they ended up staying under separate roofs.

In my case, while I'd told her we were now comrades, in peacetime I wanted to keep away as much as I could.

"Hrnn...you still thinking, Kanami?"

"Sorry, I was just a little taken aback, is all. Could you not stay at my place? I don't know how it is for this world, but in my world, a boy and a girl of around the same age who aren't related sharing a roof isn't considered acceptable. Let's stay in different places. You've got money, don't you?"

"I don't know much about either your world or mine, but in the books I read, the hero's party stayed at the same inn all the time. I think that sounds more

fun, and it's not like I've got infinite money, so shouldn't we save where we can?"

It looked as though Lastiara wasn't an encyclopedia of adventurer's wisdom herself, but she had gleaned some things from her books. And if the people in this world's adventure stories did something, then this world's adventurers probably did the same thing. And it was certainly true that it was better to save money where possible. I couldn't deny that.

"Well... Well, huh. I guess you've maybe got a point."

I didn't think there was any need to worry that Lastiara would kill me in my sleep. If she wanted me dead, she would have offed me when she broke into my room at that inn. The only real problem was my own awkwardness around a female housemate. And Lastiara was beautiful, at that. As a guy, that was great and all, but my interest in the opposite sex was moot right now. I didn't have the time to be thinking about such pointless fluff.

"Is it really that concerning?" asked Lastiara, who'd been watching me agonize over the matter. "Can't we just be casual about it?"

"All right. You should come with me. I have a lot of rooms."

"Huh? A lot of rooms? It's not an inn?"

"Yeah, I've got a house. I bought one the other day."

"Nice, but... But that shabby, rundown inn was like something out of an adventure story. Like the one where you stayed that other time."

"You mean my first day in this world. That was a pretty expensive inn too."

"Wow. So you're saying there are inns that are even more beat up than that? Sounds like fun, huh, Kanami?"

Lastiara evidently regarded poverty through a romantic lens. I was sure that if somebody suffering from poverty were to overhear her, they'd fly into a rage. This lack of consideration was her main flaw.

Since our negotiations had ended, we began preparing to return home.

"One more thing—don't call me Kanami. I'm going by the name Siegfried Vizzita here, so call me Sieg."

“Okay, Sieg. By the way, what does that name mean?”

“I’m using the name of a famous hero in my world. ‘Vizzita’ sounds like the word for visitor in the lingua franca. If somebody who knows my world hears my name, it’d startle them.”

“I see. A hero’s name, huh? What a coincidence—I’m named after a hero too.”

“Speaking of which, your surname is Whoseyards, right? That’s the name of the country itself. Do you have royal blood? If you do, I’m not a huge fan of that.”

To the north of Vart was a country called Whoseyards. The fact her surname was also Whoseyards meant there had to be some kind of connection there.

“Nope. Such surnames aren’t uncommon in the Dungeon Alliance. More than a hundred power players and nobles call themselves kings and queens. In the Alliance, the government is composed of many different monarchs. It’s a vestige from back when they incorporated small countries like crazy.”

“Huh. Now I know. I don’t know much about this world. That’s interesting.”

“The leader of the Whoseyards in the past was a great big fool, so that’s funny. It’s one of my favorite adventure tales. After he took the country, he didn’t kill the person who called themselves the sovereign—he sang their praises. He failed loads of times, but he never gave up. He fought for decades, his only wish to put smiles on the people’s faces. Then he...”

Lastiara was clearly having fun recounting the story. I listened while we walked along the road home, and Lastiara never tired of telling the tale. I figured it couldn’t hurt to know about this world’s history, and I also thought about what would follow once we made it there.

Maria was waiting for me. We were a party of four now, but Dia, Maria, and Lastiara each thought they’d formed a party of two with me. It had gotten a bit complicated; I pondered how to explain it to each of them, but I decided not to dwell on it. They’d just introduce themselves to each other and that’d be all. It shouldn’t be a big deal, I concluded. I didn’t feel any pressure or excitement as I continued towards the house where Maria awaited.



When I returned to my new house with Lastiara in tow, Maria came to greet me with a smile.

"Welcome ba—?!"

I chalked the fact that she recovered right away and moved to make the unexpected guest welcome up to Maria's disposition.

Soon after, all three of us were seated around the table for dinner. On it sat Maria's cooking. The ingredients were simple and modest, but the dishes she'd made us were elaborate. It was clear Maria had bought the ingredients with her own money and spent a long time preparing the meal. Naturally, however, she'd only made enough for two.

I could hardly take Maria's plate from her, so I placed the one that was meant for me in front of Lastiara. She might have been one of us now, but she was also a guest in our home, and it wouldn't do to leave a guest without food.

When I placed the food in front of Lastiara, I could sense a dip in the temperature in the room. I felt a wave of cold streaming from Maria's direction, so I looked her way. Maria was smiling a contented smile even as she kept glaring at me.

She... She's smiling, so she's happy, right? I couldn't be sure.

"Wow, this looks amazing," said Lastiara delightedly. "This is exactly the kind of cooking I wanted. It's so warm. Can I really have this?"

I surmised that for someone as sheltered as her, this commoner's meal was a novelty.

"Err, well, I think you're good. Right, Maria?" I asked nervously.

"Yes, of course. I don't mind."

As always, Maria's smile was watertight. Despite the presence of the unexpected guest, she was so rock solid that it was almost alarming.

"See? You, you're good, Lastiara."

"Then I suppose I'd better dig in." She put her hands together, then reached

for the wooden spoon.

“But Master, this means you no longer have a plate for yourself,” said Maria. “By all means, please eat my porti—”

“You prepared this using your own money, didn’t you? It’d be a travesty if you couldn’t eat it. I stockpiled some emergency food for myself, so don’t worry. Just ea—”

“That’s what I thought you would say, **Master!**” she said, uncommonly loudly at the end of the sentence.

It seemed she didn’t much care for my reply. I understood that my not eating the food she had prepared for me was disappointing, but did it really warrant such anger?

“Hmm, looks like I shouldn’t eat this after all,” said Lastiara, giving up on the spoon.

“No, no, I insist,” said Maria calmly. “Please partake, Ms. Lastiara.”

An I-have-an-idea expression formed on our guest’s face. “Oh, I know. It’d be terrible if one of us went without. As comrades, we need to avert such a situation. Hey, Sieg, why don’t we eat this together? I feel like I remember a ton of scenes in my adventure books where the heroes shared the food when there was too little to go around.”

“Wait, hold on a second. You mean you want us to peck at the same plate?”

“To my knowledge, that’s something comrades do. Besides, it sounds fun. Let’s try, Sieg.”

Lastiara brought her seat and plate over to me. It seemed that in her innocence, she didn’t doubt what she’d read in her adventure books.

“In that case, let Master and me be the ones to share a plate! Please enjoy your dish, Ms. Lastiara! I’d never make my Master and a guest of ours stoop to such a thing!”

“You don’t have to fret over me as a guest. From here on out, I’ll be one of you.”

Maria exhaled. “One of us, you say?”

Maria had been under the impression that Lastiara was only stopping by for a night. Meanwhile, Lastiara spoke in the assumption she'd be sharing good times and bad with us.

I seized on this chance to interrupt. "Why don't you two share a plate? You haven't had much of a chance to get to know each other, and this could be an opportunity to get acquainted. And as it seems I'm the host, I'll eat my meal nice and easy."

That way, both Maria and Lastiara's wishes would be granted. A wise call, if I did say so myself.

"Capital idea, Sieg."

"What?! Hold on a moment!"

Lastiara stood up as if the matter had been fully settled, brought her plate back from in front of me, and took her seat next to Maria.

"All right, let's eat together, Mar-Mar!"

"No, I appreciate it, but I'll refrain—"

"You don't need to hold back. Let's feed each other, okay?"

"Huh?!"

It seemed a decision had been reached. I could breathe easier now. If the two of them got along, then I'd break out the proverbial champagne.

The girls' meal turned into a boisterous one, while I started eating at a relaxed pace.

"Hee hee," laughed Lastiara. "I love her! She's so tiny and adorable. And she's got no choker, but her class...heh heh...her class...tee hee hee. Heh heh. She's so intriguing! And sweet, and lovable—"

"Augh! Please don't cling to me like that! Ah! Don't touch me there—"

Magnificent.

To tell the truth, I was worried that more party members would mean more potential trouble and more to take care of. But it seemed I didn't need to be concerned. It all depended on how one went about things. If, like what was

happening right now, I played what was headache-inducing about Maria against what was headache-inducing about Lastiara and they canceled each other out, then I could actually pare down the number of hassles to deal with. With that, I could think about the Dungeon without distractions.

I ignored the two in front of me and ate my fill of Maria's tasty food at a comfortable pace. This was very valuable time for devising a plan for the Dungeon. As such, once I was finished eating my dinner, I suggested the two continue to socialize.

"Oh, Lastiara. While we're at it, why don't you sleep in Maria's room with her? Think about it. Comrades, gabbing the night away in the same room. It's like a scene out of a storybook, right? Since you're both girls, it shouldn't be a problem."

It was late, and since all that was left to do was turn in for the night, I allocated a room for her. I now more or less understood how to get her excited.

"Oh, nice idea! I'll do just that!"

Lastiara smiled from ear to ear and went to whisk Maria away like a dog or cat looming over its ultimate prey. Maria's expression was harried; she seemed to be pleading with me to help, but I pretended not to see.

Through this arrangement, I was confident that not too much of my time would be taken up. While living in a house alongside girls was awkward, it wasn't so bad if they took up each other's time.

I returned to my own room. Using my remaining MP, I started my daily spellcasting training. Stats weren't the only thing that greatly affected a spell's degree of completion—so did how well one visualized the spell. I knew I couldn't rely too much on level grinding. I had to engage in plain old practice as well.

I had reason to believe my training was paying dividends, because I was now able to craft constructs of ice in the palm of my hand. Compared to day one, when all I could do was lower the temperature in the room, it was a leap forward.

Needless to say, I balanced out my training by practicing my dimensional

spells as well. By obtaining *Form* and *Connection*, I'd expanded the possibility space for my dimensional magic. Via trial and error, I experimented with potential new applications. However, unlike with ice magic, dimensional magic was tough to visualize. Ice was something I was more than familiar with from back in my world, but space as an element was a nebulous concept I hadn't heard of outside of video games.

As I was pushing myself with my mind-bending training, the hours deepened, until at last I figured I'd better hit the hay. I lay in bed, and, ever-vigilant, I leaned my sword against it. Lastiara may have become one of us, but I had no idea what either she or Maria might do, which was why I wanted to check to see if the two of them were in bed before getting some shut-eye. If they weren't asleep, then I wouldn't catch any winks with peace of mind.

I elected to check on them with *Dimension*, which doubled as yet more training. However, I couldn't find them in any room in the house. Thinking they might be outside, I expanded *Dimension* further and ended up finding them. What my magic beamed into my brain was the two girls in the bath. Naked. Lastiara was gleefully washing the body of a none-too-pleased Maria.

Taken aback by their stark nudity, I canceled *Dimension*, but it was already too late. My perception abilities were too powerful. The data from that scene flowed rapidly into my head. Maria was blushing and sighing breathily at Lastiara's touch. Even just that much information was mortifying enough, but the information stream didn't end there.

Maria's body was slender and very young, but that didn't mean she had no attractiveness as a girl. She was young, but her breasts, while modest, were there. Her gentle curves were enough to kindle feelings of lust. She must have lived as a slave for some time because her ribs were poking out slightly, but that only increased her appeal as a guilty pleasure. She was dainty and delicate, and that made me want to protect her. To embrace her. That was the sort of gross shit that threatened to invade my brain. Her waist was womanly, and her legs were long and slender. Her pure black hair and eyes were nice and shiny too. She was pretty.

Next to Maria was Lastiara. A wet, voluptuous Lastiara. Her skin was white and spotless. Not even a doll could have such immaculately snow-white skin.

My impression of Lastiara hadn't changed since we first crossed paths. Her smooth, long, shining hair, and her facial features were flawless. Her golden eyes were captivating, and her long eyelashes were seductive. Her bust was big and her waist thin—she had the ideal proportions. She was a dignified work of art. The pinnacle of beauty. Before their naked forms, sentiments floated to mind that if I put to words, would exceed ten thousand.

If that had been the extent of it, that would have been bad enough. The real problem was that *Dimension* was too good a spell. During combat, it went as far as to inform me of the enemy's line of sight, weight, motion, and a plethora of other points. So of course, details I had no business seeing flowed into my head. That went for more than just their breasts and buttocks. Even their unmentionables were seared into my brain. Even worse, my stupidly high INT stat made sure I remembered all of it.

"Ah, argh! Ahhhh! What have I done?! Arghh!"

As an adolescent boy, I couldn't help but be aroused. I was compelled by the urge to see them naked, but my horrible guilt drowned out that impulse. I knelt on my bed and held my head in my hands, ruing my own actions. Up until that day, I'd never so much as peeked at a girl. I had never seen a girl's body apart from my sister's. And now I'd snuck a peek at them at the worst possible time. These girls trusted me enough to relax their guard, and I'd betrayed that trust.

I'd known from day one that I had to be careful about how I used *Dimension*. As a spell, it was just like a knife—it could be used for good or for ill depending on the hand that wielded it. As a user of the spell, it fell on me to employ it responsibly. To me, it was nothing more than a tool for getting back to my world. It was never to be used to act like a peeping tom. And yet, I had.

My heart erupted, swept by a tidal wave of emotions. Luckily, my "???" skill didn't trigger, perhaps because I wasn't afraid for life or limb. But that didn't mean I could afford to leave it as it was.

Lastiara was still safe ground. It was my emotions regarding Maria I had to actively repress. Otherwise, I'd think about it. I'd *remember*. And I had to avoid that at all costs.

I groaned for a bit, I regretted, I self-reflected, and I heaved a deep sigh.

Right, I'll pretend I didn't see that.

I knew that was logical. I knew it was my only real option.

It's okay. I didn't see anything. Nope. Not a thing.

By repeating that mantra, I soothed the rough waves rocking my heart. I'd become pretty good at not thinking about things, perhaps because I'd grown accustomed to suppressing my emotions through repeated activations of "???" I reckoned I'd reached a level where I could even control my memories. By repeating *I didn't see anything* for a span of several minutes, I could make myself believe it.

Through *Dimension*, I sensed the two of them exit the baths and try to sleep in the same room. I "saw" Lastiara drag a not-so-willing Maria to bed. It seemed she wanted to chat with her a little bit more, but it was only a matter of time before they truly retired for the night.

I dispelled *Dimension* and tucked myself into bed. A lot had happened that I hadn't seen coming, but that was serving me fine now—it enabled me to sink into a deep sleep. As it stood, getting proper rest was just another battle. In order to reach the deepest level of the Dungeon, return to my world, and reunite with the sister I loved, I couldn't lose focus for a moment. And to that end, falling asleep was of the utmost importance.

That's right. Empty your mind...

Chapter 4: The Party

“Good morning...Master...”

The next morning, as I was experimenting with my magic in the living room, a dejected-looking Maria appeared. I didn’t even want to ask what had happened before they’d gone to bed, but I had a feeling Maria was glaring at me, so I’d have to get on her good side later somehow.

Since Maria was up, I stopped my experiments. I’d been able to place a *Connection* door in a corner of the living room. Now I could warp directly from the Dungeon to my house. However, I hadn’t foreseen the fact that it wasn’t just activating the *Connection* spell that used up MP. So did maintaining it. Merely by keeping one door around, I’d gone down by almost 100 MP. It seemed there were various requirements for the magic.

Just when I was thinking about how I hadn’t seen Lastiara at all that morning, she came back toting burlap bags. Apparently, she’d packed them with tools meant for use in the Dungeon. I was amazed by the sheer amount of haphazard luggage. I lied that I had a magic pouch that could house as many tools as you could put inside it and popped Lastiara’s burlap bags into my inventory, which then became extensive indeed. With this many items, even our three-person Dungeon dives wouldn’t run into any shortages or impediments.

Once we finished preparing, I wasted no time. “All right, shall we head out?”

“Ah, yes, Master, I’m coming.”

Maria accompanied me out of the house, Lastiara following behind. While we were on our way to the Dungeon, Lastiara pulled me aside.

“Hey, Sieg,” she whispered. “You’re taking Mar-Mar there too?”

“What of it?”

“From what I can see through my Pseudo-Divine Eyes, she’ll have a rough time of it with her menu. I assumed from her Cooking skill that she was in charge of holding down the house.”

“Maria is with me to help with dives. Of course I’m taking her with us.”

“But she hasn’t got the talent for it. She doesn’t have many skills, and the most important stat, APT, isn’t high enough either. She’ll be helpless on deeper floors, won’t she?” She was suggesting that I leave Maria home.

“I’m not choosing people based solely on their talents. And there are things even Maria can do in the Dungeon.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s fine. But don’t cry to me if she dies on us,” Lastiara said coldly, her expression nonchalant.

I wanted to object, but if I was being honest, her harsh view was more fitting for the Dungeon than not.

“I won’t let her die,” I said. “Not on my watch.”

“That’s fine too. I love that kind of dramatic flair. And if it ends in tragedy, that’s just as entertaining as otherwise. Hee hee hee.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Putting that aside, have you set our objective for the Dungeon? I’d like to aim for the thirtieth floor or so.”

“Floor 30? That’s unexplored territory. Our current objective is Floor 20. For now, we’re going to reach that floor while leveling up in a careful way.”

“Hmm, well, that’s a problem for me. The enemies up to Floor 20 are too weak to be fun, so I wanna head straight for the depths of Floor 20 nice and quick.”

“I’d love to advance through the Dungeon quickly too, but—”

“I’ve got an idea.” She took a step forward. Upon reaching the entrance to the Dungeon, she unsheathed her sword, its white blade glinting in the sunlight.

“To avoid some dreadful tedium, I’ll scatter all the small fry. You just watch over Mar-Mar, got it?”

She entered the Dungeon ahead of us.



Countless beasts crowded the somewhat wide corridor. The cluster of

monsters was squirming and crawling. It was a sight I'd normally never be confronted with given my enemy detection ability. Ever since I'd heard tell of monster packs at the pub, I'd been careful not to run into any. If I was attacked by multiple monsters, there was a chance I'd lose my life even if I was above each individual monster's power level. Dungeon diving typically entailed multiple people hunting single monsters. If pressed, battles should at least be one-on-one. That was the number one rule.

Yet Lastiara was currently fighting a whole swarm of monsters all by herself. Just as she'd declared before storming the Dungeon, she was taking on every monster alone. Her talent was proving a match for them in spite of their sheer numbers. Maria and I were watching from far to her rear as I observed her battle via *Dimension*.

She was wearing garb made of thin silk that offered next to no protection. She coolly dodged the monsters' claws and slashed them, over and over and over. There was no technique to it. Her high-level Swordplay skill notwithstanding, her blade work was exceedingly rough. Every once in a while, she'd unleash a striking, lightning-fast flash of her sword, but far more often, her slashes were random and willy-nilly. It wasn't that she was skilled with the blade so much that she was adept at handling her own body as a weapon. I knew she could cast spells too, but there was no sign that she wished to.

"Wh-What is she?" asked a dumbfounded Maria as she watched Lastiara fight.

I looked at Maria's menu and checked her EXP gains. It was crucial information, as it was the first time we were diving as a group of three. In fact, this was even more important than learning about Lastiara's combat methods. If this was like a video game, a change in the number of party members should lead to a change in the EXP distribution. I had to find out whether being a trio brought about some kind of penalty or bonus. For all I knew, it might change how EXP was gained entirely. I left the EXP acquisition to Lastiara and continued examining how our EXP counts were fluctuating.

"What on earth is she, Master?"

"I've got no idea myself," I replied as I analyzed the information. "All I know

for sure is she's special. For now, you can just think of her as a knight girl who loves Dungeon diving."

"I... I see."

In that short time, Lastiara finished annihilating the enemy. A group of over a hundred monsters had all faded into light. She shook the blood off her sword and walked our way. She had almost no monster blood on her clothes. It had been easy for her.

"Man oh man, that took ages. I might even be a little tired!"

"That's why I keep suggesting we take a detour."

"Ew, no. A detour would mean taking a roundabout path. For the time being, let's blaze our way deeper."

"Good grief."

Lastiara didn't care for being on a lower-numbered floor, so she'd opened a shortcut through a path previously blocked by a swarm of monsters. I'd suggested we go around them, but I was happy that she'd saved us the trouble. Moreover, the steady stream of EXP was more convenient for analyzing how the party system functioned. Thanks to that, I'd settled on four tentative conclusions:

If only one person was fighting and the others were resting, the EXP still went to all three.

The size of the area covered by the party system didn't change appreciably regardless of whether the group had two or three members.

When the party was composed of multiple people, there was a slight penalty on EXP gain.

The EXP gain was divided evenly, just as with a two-person party.

With that, I reckoned I had a decent grasp on the general workings of the party system. "All right, then, what say we move on through?"

"I'll lead the way again!" said Lastiara.

With her at the head once more, we made our way through the Dungeon. The

reason we were moving so briskly must have been because she wanted to reach deeper recesses posthaste, like a little kid making a beeline for the toy section. Her speed was considerable. Your average person would have run out of breath in short order. We were keeping pace, but I was worried about Maria. I was fine, but given Maria's lesser stats, her fatigue might have been mounting. I shifted my attention to her.

"Maria, what's wrong?"

She was walking right behind me, her face pale. Her hand was wandering as she hesitated to grab my shirt by the hem.

"Master...are... Are you unfazed, watching Ms. Lastiara?"

It seemed that after watching Lastiara fight, Maria was afraid. And I could see why; someone who wasn't themselves a force to be reckoned with would view Lastiara as an avatar of bloodshed. Back when I was low-level, I'd viewed her uncanniness with alarm and apprehension as well.

"Hmm, well, Lastiara can be a bit scary, that much is true. But believe it or not, she's got a pretty innocent and unspoiled side to her too. She's not a bad person."

It's not what you say, but how you say it. Lastiara wasn't a bad person. What she was was a handful.

"Her innocence is what makes her so scary."

Maria's remark was on the money. I, too, felt that Lastiara was the type who'd step on bugs with an innocent smile. I understood where she was coming from. She was wondering whether she would ever become the bug Lastiara stepped on.

"Don't worry. If push comes to shove, I'll protect you. I'm pretty sure I'm strong enough to defend you from Lastiara, you know."

"Huh? Master, you can defeat *her*?"

"It wouldn't be certain victory, but I think I'm the favorite by a large margin. It looks to me like she's got a lot of weak spots when it comes to her mentality, and I bet I've got her beat when it comes to technique with the sword too. So

it'll be okay."

In reality, there wasn't much of a gap between me and Lastiara, and if I was forced to defend Maria from her, I'd be fighting with a handicap. If I could fight freely, we were evenly matched. But to reassure Maria, I pretended I had the edge.

"Is that so? But I'm supposed to be the one protecting you, Master..."

Thankfully, she seemed to buy it. At the very least, she was no longer white as a sheet. Then again, Maria was good at putting up a tough front, so I couldn't be sure she wasn't still fearful.

Regarding her fretting over her position as a slave, I reckoned the conversation would go back to the question of whether she was my slave or my friend, so I replied immediately. "You don't have to worry about that. If something comes up, do me a favor and just think about yourself."

She grimaced; her expression was that of someone who'd hit on something. "But... But that'd be..." She shook her head, doing away with that look on her face. "Never mind, sir..."

I couldn't read her expression anymore. I couldn't tell what she'd set her mind to.

Maria smiled. "In the end, I'm not strong enough. That's what it amounts to. Upon reflection, I know full well Ms. Lastiara isn't a bad person. If anything, she's a nice person."

"Huh? She is?" I'd said she wasn't a bad person, but I wasn't convinced she could be called a nice person either.

"Yesterday, I spoke with that innocent girl in the same bed at length. I think I've a better grasp of her character than you do—because for whatever silly reason, she's taken a liking to me."

"That's true. She does seem to love you to bits..."

Maria's expression turned cheery, and she was lighter on her feet. She went from behind me to in front of me, and she started progressing while dragging me through the Dungeon as opposed to the other way around.

"Let's pick up the pace," she said. "Otherwise Ms. Lastiara will leave us behind."

"Ah, right, got it."

I proceeded through the Dungeon, Maria's back to me all the while. I couldn't see the look on her face. Actually, I could, thanks to *Dimension*. But I couldn't tell what sort of face she was making on the inside.

And I didn't have it in me to inquire either.



I got the sense that by repeatedly tackling the Dungeon, I was gradually getting more and more used to how to deal with monsters. And now that I was accustomed to the forms of the monsters that appeared, I was having an easier time of things.

I'd played a lot of video games back in my world, so there weren't many monsters that I had never seen hide nor hair of before. Usually, any given monster in this world would at least resemble one of the stock monsters in a game. At first, the unrealness of it all threw me for a loop, but at this point, whenever I encountered a new one, I just ended up thinking, *Ah, that one's like one of the monsters from that one game.*

We reached Floor 19 without taking damage, and the enemies we encountered on the way kept reminding me of those video game monsters. Lastiara had, using her overwhelming talents, opened paths through sheer violence. I tried telling her that we were going too far, but since she hadn't had any difficulty in any battle thus far, I couldn't stop her from venturing deeper and deeper.

Lastiara was walking down the Pathway on Floor 19 with a spring in her step when a giant monster appeared, blocking the way and leaving no space to squeeze through. It had two hoofed legs, a lower half covered in dark brown fur, an upper half that was like a ripped human's, a bovine head, a mean look in its eyes, and an enormous axe in each of its hands.

A minotaur?

"Whoa," said Lastiara. "What is *that*? What a weird one."

“It... It’s so creepy...and big...” said Maria.

Unlike me, Lastiara and Maria had no experience playing video games, so this must have been their first time seeing a creature that looked like what I knew to be a minotaur. To them, it was strange and bizarre.

I checked its menu.

【MONSTER】

Carmine Minotaur

RANK 20

Yep, it’s a minotaur. Since the name was being translated for me, I’m sure at least a little was getting lost in translation, but even then, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy—this was supposed to be a totally different world with a totally different culture and everything. Seeing terms I was familiar with pop up—like minotaur—didn’t sit well.

“The monster’s name is Carmine Minotaur,” I told Lastiara. “It’s probably a brawn-based monster. You wanna kill this one too?”

“Hmm. Why don’t I protect Maria for a bit? I’m feeling a tad nervous about my image in her eyes.”

Surprisingly, Lastiara left the battle to me. Normally, she wouldn’t hesitate to slice and dice, even if she’d never seen the monster before. It seemed she’d finally begun to take note that the carnage she was wreaking was turning Maria off.

“No, that’s quite all right,” said Maria. “If it’s come to that, I’d rather be alone.”

“Oh no! When did you start disliking me that much?! We shared the same bed last night! We’re bosom buddies!”

“More like I was your prisoner.”

“Oof. Still, when you act standoffish towards me, it just makes me want to do it more,” said Lastiara as she drew closer to Maria and hugged her.

“Eek! Excuse me! Why are you hugging me? There’s a time and a place!”

“We’re all set,” said Lastiara. “Leave her to me, Sieg.”

Apparently, to Lastiara, that constituted protecting Maria. Having fun with her comrades in the Dungeon was one of her goals. She must have been enjoying herself. She had a leery Maria immobilized with one arm. Maria’s STR had reached a relatively high level, but she was powerless against Lastiara’s lofty stats. I was relieved that it meant Maria couldn’t come running after me, laboring under the false impression that I was in danger.

I turned to face the minotaur. The snorting and huffing hulk had drawn conspicuously close. I had never faced a Rank 20 monster before. From what I’d experienced up until then, a monster’s rank equated to the recommended level for divers to fight it. The recommended levels, which I’d learned at the pub, and the rank I saw through the monsters’ menus were never far apart. In other words, under normal circumstances, Level 20 divers would fight this monster.

I’d gained a level the day before, but I was only Level 11, a far cry from the recommended level. That said, I was by no means inferior, stats-wise, to Level 20-ers. If the information on the minotaur wasn’t deceptive, I was in for an even match.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*. Spellcast: *Form*.”

A three-meter-wide axe came swinging. I dodged it by a hair as I crafted my spells. I didn’t dodge it by a hair deliberately. That was just how rough the lower floors were. If I’d been by myself, I’d have liked to fight the thing after raising my level more, with one hundred percent confidence I’d win, but at this moment, Lastiara was with me. If things looked dicey, she, being more or less my equal in terms of strength, could back me up. Even more importantly, she could use healing magic. She didn’t like magic, so she rarely used it, but if I got injured, she’d mend my wounds. Knowing that gave me a nice sense of security. Before now, in the event I got injured, I’d have had no choice but to surface. Now, however, I could take some hits and continue the dive regardless. I could afford to take a few risks here and there.

As I evaded the minotaur’s attacks, I made a large quantity of *Form* stick to its body, after which it could no longer see me. The more the spell’s bubbles clung

to the target, the greater my spatial understanding abilities became. I'd confirmed that fact during the duel with Ms. Radiant the day before.

With the threat the minotaur posed now nullified, I conducted my next experiment. "Spellcast: *Form*. Spellcast: *Freeze*."

I created especially large bubbles and stuffed magically chilled air inside of them. In the past, *Freeze* had served only to lower the temperature of the room, but now I could generate much, much colder air.

As I battled, I finished crafting the new spell. I made the bubbles of cold air slip into the other bubbles, which I moved slowly down to the minotaur's feet. It couldn't pay attention to each and every one of the countless bubbles. The new spell impacted the enemy's legs without a hitch. The cold air trapped inside burst out, freezing the minotaur's legs and binding it to the ground. With its legs trapped, it was thrown wildly off balance. Such was the power of combining *Form* and *Freeze*. To name this new spell:

"Spellcast: *Snowmension*."

I was happy it was a success. I'd been disappointed I couldn't acquire Snow Fleck the other day, so I'd devised a means of imitating the spell. After creating an opening using *Snowmension*, I leaped upon the minotaur to cut off its head. The sword sank through its flesh but was stopped midway by its neck bones. I'd feared the blade wouldn't work due to the level difference, but it seemed I was okay on that front. I just couldn't slice its head clean off.

I gave up trying to decapitate the beast and withdrew my sword, slashing its veins on the way out. A river of blood gushed from its neck, and it flew into a rage, swinging its huge axes this way and that. Its blind fury was probably working against it, as its attacks weren't very sharp. It was still brawny, but it wasn't as fast anymore. I dodged it by a hair, but this time, it was on purpose. I then gouged the minotaur's eyes out. Checkmate.

The minotaur shed a veritable ocean of blood. I focused on dodging its axes while it bled out. That wasn't hard, given how erratically it was moving after I'd blinded it. I also made sure not to get sprayed by any of the blood while I was at it.

Less than a minute later, the minotaur's strength was spent. Like always, the

monster turned into light and vanished, leaving a magic gem in its wake. It wasn't an easy victory like Lastiara's battles, but it was a passable result against a Rank 20 enemy. I checked the EXP gain.

【EXP】7122/25000

On the deeper floors, a single monster yielded hundreds of experience points. One wouldn't expect this amount of EXP to have been split between three people. I picked up the magic gem and examined it.

【QUASI-3RD-GRADE MAGIC GEM OF FLAME】

A highly concentrated magic gem harboring the power of flame. Dropped by monsters of the flame element. Contains *Rage*.

The quality of the gems had risen, and their descriptions had gotten longer. If I swallowed it, I'd probably learn a spell, but it was raw, so to speak. I was too afraid to throw it in my mouth.

As I was staring at the gem I'd obtained, Lastiara and Maria, who'd kept their distance until then, returned to my side.

"Nice work, Sieg. And to think you said it was too soon for Floor 20. That was easy as pie for you."

"I wouldn't call it easy. It was a real battle. I don't wanna fight unless I can absolutely crush them."

"Hold on, you mean crush them even harder than you did just now? Aren't you just mowing through them like a harvest reaper at that point?"

"That's exactly what I want."

"Yikes..."

I wanted to mow my way right down to the deepest level. That would be ideal. But going by Lastiara's expression, she just couldn't understand.

"I know that runs counter to your ideal. But that's the reason we go well together."

"I'm sorry, but if our mindsets don't align, then they don't align."

"Not so. I'll leave all of the dangerous-looking stuff to you, and I'll do all the boring, safe stuff. That way, you have your fun and I have my peace of mind. No one loses out. So we go well together, right?"

"Hrm, well, I guess so. But it's different from what I was expecting."

"That tends to be the case in the real world."

"It does?"

While Lastiara and I were bantering, we walked even farther down the Dungeon's Pathway. Meanwhile, Maria was checking to see if I'd gotten hurt anywhere. She touched my arms and legs, feeling for cuts or bruises. I wondered if she was going to do that every time I fought. *Maria, she...*

"Maria, I haven't got any injuries. You don't have to fret over me so much."

"I... I'm not fretting over you..."

She was clearly anxious about my safety. So much so that it was abnormal. Maybe she believed that if I were to snuff it, she'd lose her bulwark against Lastiara.

I stroked her head and smiled. "Don't worry."

Maria glared at me, red in the face. Maybe she was pissed I was treating her like a little kid. I hurriedly stopped and faced forward. Lastiara was ahead of us, walking ever deeper.

"We almost to Floor 20 yet?" I asked her.

"Yep. It's not long now."

All this time, Lastiara had been at the fore, showing the way. That wasn't solely due to her general temperament. She had told me that she had made it to Floor 23 by herself before. That floor marked the point humanity had yet to get past. Needless to say, she'd mostly traveled down the Pathway. However, just like a moment ago, there were times monsters cut into the Pathway. The

deeper the floor, the more that tended to happen. Her experience going down that perilous path was heartening to have. She paced through the Dungeon without hesitation, and we were drawn in her undertow.

Finally, we reached the threshold of Floor 20. There were several monster attacks on the way, but Lastiara and I had plenty of MP left. In order to be ready for whatever came our way, I deployed *Dimension* nice and thick and slowly descended the stairs.

Floor 20 was a wide-open chamber of aged stone. Just like Floor 10, there was no mazelike element. Unlike Floor 10, it wasn't wreathed by blazing fire. As Alty had conjectured, the space no longer had a lick of magic energy. It was the perfect place to experiment with *Connection*.

There was, however, a problem. At the center of the dreary room stood two men.

I wasn't expecting to bump into other divers on such a deep floor. One of them was a looker with pure blond hair. He was a calm and quiet knight, and he seemed a few years older than me. The other was a middle-aged man with an ocher mantle. Judging by his glossless grizzled head of hair, he had seen his share of hardship. I could glimpse a sword coming in and out of view under his cloak. He, too, was a knight. On my guard, I used Analyze on them.

【STATUS】

NAME: Hine Hellvilleshine

HP: 321/333

MP: 34/102

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 24

STR 10.21

VIT 8.95

DEX 9.29

AGI 11.88

INT 12.21

MAG 7.77

APT 1.98

INNATE SKILLS: Optimal Moves 1.21, Wind Magic 1.77

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 2.02, Holy Magic 1.23

【STATUS】

NAME: Hopes Jokul

HP: 253/282

MP: 0/0

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 20

STR 4.41

VIT 6.25

DEX 11.72

AGI 8.21

INT 13.41

MAG 0.00

APT 1.12

INNATE SKILLS: Weapon Combat 1.89, Workmanship 1.45

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.78, Holy Magic 0.00

The blond one was Hine and the grizzled one was Hopes. They were both high-level, first-class fighters. As I was observing them, it dawned on me that I'd seen the blond one before. He was one of the people with Lastiara when I met her on my first day in this world. He hadn't said much, so he hadn't stood out,

but there was no mistaking him.

I turned to Lastiara and told her somebody she knew was there.

“What?” she said, surprised.

In response, the two knights came closer and saluted.

“We awaited you, milady,” said the blond one.

“Is that you, Mr. Hine?” said Lastiara.

“Yes, it is. I have come here on business.”

As I’d guessed, they knew each other. Yet this “Mr. Hine” shifted his attention to me.

“You’re that boy from back then... I see, so you’re her lover...” he murmured.

Oh. So he’s with Ms. Radiant and her crew. However, the look on his face was placid. He wasn’t glaring at me like Ms. Radiant had. Far from it, I could sense he was expecting a lot from me. I couldn’t read his true intentions. For now, I opted to clear up his misunderstanding.

“Oh, no, I’m not Lastiara’s—”

“Mr. Hine,” said Lastiara, “I’m sorry, but I want to be by Sieg’s side at any cost. I want to live my life alongside him. As you’re aware, my days are numbered. As such, is it really such a sin for me to spend my remaining time with the one I love?”

She spoke using the polite register she’d used when we first crossed paths, lamenting in affected tones. I’d wanted to avoid the whole lovers conceit if possible, but Lastiara had different designs.

Mr. Hine breathed a heavy sigh and slowly drew his sword. “We can no longer see through your lies. Regardless, it doesn’t matter if you truly love him or not, or if you’re just playing. It doesn’t affect what I must do.”

“That saddens me, Mr. Hine. Are you saying I would tell a lie? I could never act so shamefully as to pretend to be in love!”

Her performance was convincing; she had tears in her eyes.

I dunno. She’s the one who’s in the wrong here. No doubt about it. Personally,

I'd have liked to have backed up Mr. Hine all the way. But I had to be calculating. In terms of Dungeon diving talent, Mr. Hine was inferior to Lastiara. Moreover, it looked to me like he was a consummate professional married to his job while Lastiara was a free spirit. If I thought about who was more useful to me, I'd have to choose Lastiara.

Mr. Hine replied calmly. "Thanks to your 'love' justification, our honorable superiors are in a state of chaos. Even just a council to determine how to respond to it would likely take a month." He sighed. "The precepts of the Church of Levahn can sure be inconvenient."

"You think I'm using the precepts for my own benefit. Ahh, what a sad, sad misunderstanding."

What was sad was how much of a misunderstanding it wasn't. Lastiara was being utterly shameless. The bigger problems, however, were the "honorable superiors" and "council" he'd mentioned. Lastiara had told me her standing in society wasn't that lofty, but given what Mr. Hine had just said, it seemed she wasn't just some well-to-do young lady after all.

"I would like you to return to the cathedral, and I shall make that happen by means of a duel, as a knight ought to. By observing that formality, we won't be violating the teachings. Now then, Mr. Hopes. If you please."

The grizzled knight stepped forward from behind Mr. Hine, a faint smile on his face. He gave off a slightly flippant vibe.

"Yes, yes, you got it. But you sure you don't gotta do the deed? If you ask me, this is your duty, lad."

"The duty is no one's in particular. It's the duty of the post named the Seven Celestial Knights. I must stand watch over our lady. It wouldn't do to let my guard down. While it's only been a few days since she disappeared, she may have already graduated to the level of a Celestial Knight."

"Well, you are the most suitable choice for watching over her. I won't say you're not. Nothing for it, then. You. The lady-killer over there. It's time to duel."

I drew my sword. "Let me say one thing. I have nothing whatsoever to do with

Lastiara's love life. But since she's my comrade and ally, I'd like to help grant her wish. That's all there is to it. Truly."

When it came to matters of love and romance and sex and whatnot, I was out of my depth. I couldn't put on an act quite like Lastiara, so I had no confidence I could play along. So I pretended I was unfamiliar with the love affair to see where that got me.

"Oh, okay then," said Mr. Hopes, feeling awkward. "Gotcha. You're a cool cucumber, aren't you, laddie?"

Well now he's gonna make me feel all awkward. So that he didn't catch onto how disconcerted that had made me, I moved the dialogue forward, undaunted.

"In addition, I don't actually desire a duel."

"That won't do. If we don't duel, we'll constantly interfere with you kids' diving. We'll chase you to the ends of the earth. Shameful, I know, but I'm just doing my job. I'm honestly sorry," he said, scratching his head.

He wasn't fronting. He really did look sorry, not to mention annoyed by the hassle. I could also glimpse, deep in his eyes, the determination of a pro. He had a mission to carry out.

I'd wanted to avoid a duel if possible, but if they were going to outright declare that they'd do their best to get in our way, I had no choice. I'd use this as training.

"If you're just doing your job, then I can't fault you. Plus, I more or less accept that this is a prerequisite for making Lastiara one of us too."

I took a step forward. It was time to begin my practice match. Even if I lost, all it meant was that Lastiara would go back. I wasn't too worked up, but at the same time, I didn't feel like readily giving in either.

"Right then, duel's on," said Mr. Hopes. "A duel to claim our little lady. Rest assured, I won't take your life."

"Understood. I also don't intend for this to be a match to the death."

Mr. Hopes drew his blade, and we bowed. Since we were on the Pathway,

that was enough to make the duel more or less official. I could sense the air between me and Mr. Hopes growing increasingly tense.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash*. Spellcast: *Form*.”

If this match followed the natural course, I reckoned I’d win. That was because Mr. Hopes’s AGI stat didn’t measure up to mine (however much Mr. Hine’s did). Then again, he counted Workmanship among his skills. If that skill had the potential to catch me off guard, it’d sway my chances of victory.

Slowly but steadily, we closed the distance between us. My stance was that of a relaxed amateur, and Mr. Hopes’s stance wasn’t much different. Neither of us crouched low; we simply held out our swords in our respective right hands. And when the swords came within reach of their opponent—two flashes of steel. We’d attacked simultaneously, but to my eyes, it appeared as though Mr. Hopes had matched me on purpose. Our swords traced the same path and clanged like bells against the walls of stone.

Then came the second clash, followed by a second clang. Once again, Mr. Hopes deliberately mirrored my blade’s trajectory, as he did for the third clash, and the fourth clash, and the fifth, and the sixth... Each time, it sounded like a bell’s toll.

I noticed that Mr. Hopes’s swordsmanship was purely reactive. While he had talent, he didn’t compare favorably to Ms. Radiant. He didn’t have an art of the blade unique to him and his disposition. It seemed all he could do was draw on his experience and match his opponent blow for blow while waiting for the opportunity to counterattack.

I decided to calmly increase the speed of my sword bit by bit. Given that he was vigilantly eyeing his chance for a counterattack, I had no reason to be disconcerted. I had only to exceed him without getting impatient or showing any openings.

Mr. Hopes tried his best to keep up with the accelerating arcs of my sword, but he soon reached his limit. Even though we made the exact same moves, the gap in our speed spelled the end of the duel. Before long, his sword failed to restrain mine, which was thrust at his throat.

The music of the clanging sword fight had drawn to a close, leaving only

echoes.

“I win.”

Mr. Hopes threw up his arms in surrender. “For real? I lost. Ah, sorry about that, Hine.”

Seeing that, I sheathed my sword.

“You did it, Sieg,” said Lastiara. “As I expected of the man I trust. What do you think, Mr. Hine? Verily my knight, Siegfried, has consecrated this victory for me.”

She was blessing my victory in true ladylike fashion. *Yurgh that's creepy.*

Mr. Hine didn’t seem at all perturbed. “So it would seem. Since it’s come to this, we have no choice but to withdraw for today.”

“My bad,” said Mr. Hopes. “Criminy, I really don’t think I can beat him in a head-on fight.”

Mr. Hine stepped away from his position at the center of the room and beckoned to Mr. Hopes. They were no longer blocking our way forward.

“It appears you have the minimum necessary strength.”

“C’mon, Hine, my lad. Minimum necessary strength? You know how to wound an old man like me.”

Mr. Hine looked my way, his eyes as placid as ever. “We leave our lady to you, Sieg—albeit temporarily.”

“Mr. Hine,” said Lastiara, “will you not challenge my knight yourself?”

“There’s no need. I can’t speak for Mr. Hopes, but I must strictly adhere to the precepts as an exemplar. Besides, though it may be one-sided on your part, it is still the tender passion of love. As your instructor, I’m rooting for you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Ahh, I’m so happy that my passion is coming across, Mr. Hine. I’m sincerely grateful.”

Sparks were flying between the two. Their manners of speech were polite, but their words were nothing but pretense, and they were being palpably wary

of one another.

"You can't speak for me? Ouch," muttered Mr. Hopes, looking downcast. I felt like the man's standing was becoming clearer. Despite his age, he was a piteous sort.

"If you boast strength rivaling the Seven Celestial Knights, Sieg, then it's a different matter. Our superiors will be relieved to hear it. And you, milady. You aren't trying to destroy it until the ceremony, I trust?"

"No, of course not," said Lastiara without hesitation. "I will be back for the Festival of the Blessed Birth. Come what may."

A pause. "Is that so? In that case, Siegfried Vizzita is to be seen as the hero with whom Lastiara fell in love at first sight. I will issue my report accordingly, so I will be returning."

"That's what you have been saying since we conversed at the cathedral. Kindly go away now," she said, shooing him off.

The two knights smiled wryly and started back towards Floor 19. When Mr. Hine passed by, he whispered, "Please mind milady."

His voice was soft, and different from the firm voice he'd used thus far. It was tinged with a heartfelt fondness. Surprised by his affectionate tone, I looked at his face. He was smiling. On his handsome prince-in-a-fairy-tale countenance, the smile stood out all the more. Taken in by a smile that could enchant even a guy like me, I nodded.

Mr. Hine nodded back, and with that, they went up the stairs to the nineteenth floor.

Once the two were out of sight, Lastiara exhaled like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "Who could've guessed he'd be waiting for me here? Threw me for a loop, that did." Her act dissipated like so much mist, and she reverted to her usual self.

Maria, who had taken a step back and watched, and who hadn't been able to grasp the situation, came over to me.

"Are... Are you okay, Master?"

“Yep, I’m fit as a fiddle. That was just a fun little diversion for me.”

“Who or what are those people? And also, what’s this about... About being *lovers*?”

“Those people were folks from Lastiara’s home. As for the ‘lovers’ thing, it’s all made up, so don’t worry about it.”

“It’s made up, you say?” Maria looked me square in the eyes as she turned my words over in her head. It seemed she was trying to read in between the lines, but that we weren’t lovers was the only unvarnished truth I’d said.

“Yep, it’s all lies. When knights of their ilk pop up, you should step aside and watch; think of it like you’re watching community theater.”

Maria exhaled. “Understood.” I didn’t know whether she was actually on board with that, but she nodded.

“More importantly, it’s time to test out *Connection*.” I walked to the end of the chamber to set up the door.

“Oh, that’s that spell you were talking about, right?” said Lastiara, who came over to me, intrigued. I’d explained how *Connection* functioned on the way there, and she evidently wanted to see what this high-level dimensional magic could do.

“It’s quiet here, and there isn’t much magic energy in the air. This is the perfect place. Spellcast: *Connection*.”

I spent some MP and generated a magic gateway. Back on Floor 10, *Connection* had dispersed right away, but here on Floor 20, the spell went smoothly. Having grown accustomed to casting and forming spells, I was able to complete it in nary a moment. The door now stood alongside the wall.

“All right, success.”

I pushed the door open to check if it led to my living room. Splendidly, it did.

“Wow, so that’s a magic door, huh?” said Lastiara. “Let me through a sec. Whoa, that’s amazing!”

She wildly stepped in and out of my living room, which consumed more of the MP needed to keep the door there.

“Don’t just jump through willy-nilly! The door’s fragile! Ah...”

As the door was opened and closed for the umpteenth time, it dissolved into mist, leaving Lastiara stranded on the other side.

“Uhh, Master? This is bad, isn’t it?”

I had no choice but to cast it again and pray the door on the other side hadn’t also disappeared. “Spellcast: *Connection!*”

I could tell my remaining MP was depleting in staggering chunks. I opened the door to find Lastiara on the other side in a cold sweat.

“Ah, Sieg! Bugger me; I suddenly couldn’t open the door anymore!”

“Yeah, because you broke it.”

“I... I *thought* I might have done. Err...sorry about that.”

“Don’t make us sweat like that. C’mon, come back here.” I took her by the hand and moved her back over to our side.

“Wonder why the door in the house didn’t disappear?”

“This morning, I spent more time and magic energy making it. It’s only natural for that door to be sturdier.”

“Ahh, I see.”

I sighed. “That took a good half of my MP.”

“I’m so sorry. I regret doing that.”

It wasn’t often one saw Lastiara so cap-in-hand.

“If you’ve lost so much MP,” said Maria, “then wouldn’t it be wise to go home and rest? You did just successfully cast *Connection*, after all.”

It was just as she said. Even though we’d stuck to the Pathway, it had still taken time to get to Floor 20. Considering my stamina, I could probably call it a day. But I knew Lastiara wouldn’t agree. The floors she saw as the fun ones lay beyond.

“Huh, what? I don’t think that’ll jive for me.”

“I’ve accumulated a decent amount of EXP,” said Maria, “so I’d like to visit a

church. If I don't level up, I won't be of use to my Master."

"Ah, you don't need a church—you've got me," said Lastiara. "Despite how I look, I can play priest."

"Huh? You can, Ms. Lastiara? I appreciate it, but I don't feel as though I can rest easy unless it's done by someone who specializes in it, so..."

"No, it's okay, really! I've actually leveled up Sieg before!"

Yeah, forcibly. I smiled wryly at the memory.

Maria saw my strained smile. "Master..."

It looked as though she was leaving the decision to me. I gave it a moment's thought. "It's true that Lastiara can do it. Have her level you up. And you don't have to worry about my MP either. It's not like I'm totally out. I've got enough until it's time for my shift at the pub, so let's continue on a little longer."

"Is that so? Well, if you say so, Master," she grumbled, disappointed.

Lastiara addressed her in the cheeriest voice she could muster. "There's nothing that'll interfere here, so it's perfect for leveling up. Come here, honey."

I'd checked Maria's menu, so I knew she had enough EXP to level up, and because Lastiara possessed a skill that was similar to my menu-sight, she knew too.

Somewhat peeved, Maria walked over to Lastiara

"Don't be angry with me, Mar-Mar," stammered Lastiara.

"I'm not angry."

"You totally are..."

I couldn't see Maria's face from my position, but it was clear from Lastiara's expression that Maria was ticked off, her protests to the contrary notwithstanding.

After a short while, white light enveloped the two.

"Right, you're up a level now."

【STATUS】

NAME: Maria

HP: 102/102

MP: 112/122

CLASS: Slave

LEVEL 8

STR 3.42

VIT 3.52

DEX 2.66

AGI 2.01

INT 3.55

MAG 5.71

APT 1.52

CONDITION: None

EXP: 512/10000

Maria had indeed leveled up, and she had the drive to fight. But it just wasn't enough. Comparing her menu to my menu made that abundantly clear. We were only off by three levels, but the chasm between our stats spoke for itself.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 350/352

MP: 221/553

CLASS: None

LEVEL 11

STR 6.69

VIT 6.78

DEX 7.74

AGI 10.12

INT 10.01

MAG 24.07

APT 7.00

I figured Maria didn't want to lose her place among us in the Dungeon, but reality was an unfeeling mistress. The happy look on her face when she was diving flashed through my mind. I was without words.

I knew what the result would be, but I couldn't stop her. Lastiara smiled faintly at the sight of us.

"Now then, let's be on our way, Master. I know I'm strong now, too, so this time—"

Lastiara and I could see her stats, so we knew the deal. Maria couldn't, so she was full of beans. I calmed her down and told her not to overdo it, making her promise never to fight until she had my permission to do so, and only then did we advance to Floor 21.

Behind us, Lastiara was hiding her mouth with her hand.

Floor 21. My first real floor in the 20s. This was big. It was common knowledge among Dungeon divers that the difficulty level rose sharply starting from the twenty-first level. It had taken the Dungeon Alliance less than a year to clear the levels up to Floor 20, yet it had taken them upwards of a decade to clear Floors 21 to 23. One of the reasons was that a good number of elites had gotten picked off by Tida, sentinel of the twentieth floor, but the main reason was how the nature of the Dungeon completely changed from that point on. On lower-number floors, giant monsters didn't appear. From the twentieth floor onward, they did—and in innumerable numbers. It was next to impossible to construct the Pathway amid that.

The world beyond Floor 20 could be described in scant few words; it was

hardly worth the effort. The only people who dared navigate it were the eccentrically inquisitive, dingbats, or those blessed by providence. At least, that was how the Dungeon Alliance regarded it. And it was in this hellscape that one girl was currently dancing and hopping gleefully around.

“Aha ha ha! Damn, that thing’s strong! Ah, they went to you, Sieg! Ha ha!”

The girl checked every box—she was eccentrically inquisitive, she was a dingbat, and she was blessed by providence.

Two enemies that Lastiara had failed to fell were coming for me. They were both huge. Earlier, it had taken me time and effort to take down one minotaur. Now, I had to contend with two even bigger, stronger monsters.

“Maria, don’t step out from behind me under any circumstance! There are too many of them—if you stray too far, you’ll be in danger!”

“O-Okay!”

They were fantastical four-armed, four-legged simians called Furies. While they were slow, their multiple limbs afforded them a large number of moves, making them a nuisance to deal with. I deflected the stout arms reaching for me with my sword, swatting them away with all my strength and occasionally retreating while carrying Maria in my arms. I wasn’t able to do battle with unhindered mobility because I couldn’t place Maria anywhere far from me while on a floor with a high appearance rate of monsters. Every fight therefore became a fight to protect her.

The words Lastiara had said to me before entering the Dungeon flashed through my mind: *“Don’t come crying to me if Mar-Mar dies on us.”* She’d been right. At this rate, Maria would die. I soon came to the realization that I couldn’t hold anything back.

“Spellcast: Dimension: Calculash, Layered Dimension, Form, Ice, Freeze!” I let loose every one of my spells.

A violent torrent of magic raged forth, fueled by my magic energy, which was an order of magnitude higher than when I was low-level. A great number of magic bubbles shot out, feeding me all the details about the room. Naturally, bubbles containing my ice magic were mixed in among them in order to freeze

an enemy if and when an opening presented itself. At the same time, I lowered the temperature of the whole space, which aided in the casting of ice spells. In doing so, *Ice Arrow* and *Snowmension* became easier to generate.

I swept aside the four arms of a fury with my blade. I hadn't swung my sword this frantically since the battle against Tida. Due to the nature of my magic, I seldom fought as hard as I could. The fact that I couldn't avoid going all out was proof positive I'd lost any space to breathe.

If you're up against the wall, use Maria as bait and run. That was what any diver with his head about him would do. But my heart just wouldn't allow it. I found myself preferring death to letting her die. I felt that until a short while ago, I'd been able to calmly run up the numbers and move in an accordingly calculating fashion. But now something was different. Something was decidedly different between the me from a minute ago and the me now. When had this nagging sense of discomfort started gnawing at me? And why was I feeling it? I had no idea. I just knew I hated how new problems only ever arose when I was already in a tight spot.

That frustration dulled my movements, and one of the fury's arms grazed my shoulder.

"Urgh!"

A graze was all it took. It tore my mantle and flayed my skin, sending blood spraying. This was getting precarious; it was merciless on both my body and my emotional state. If my sense of impending danger got any worse, it'd most likely trigger "???" My Confusion, which had depleted naturally over time, would jump back up again. I'd managed to resist activating it this whole time, so I really didn't want to do so in a place like this. The mix of desperation and hesitation was blunting my judgment.

"Master!"

Maria's quavering voice shook me to my soul. If I lost focus, "???" threatened to trigger.

"It's okay, Maria! Lastiara will save us if we hold out a little longer!"

And indeed, this was a fight that could be won if I bought some time. I didn't

need “???” to clear my mental fog. We just had to wait until Lastiara, who could move freely, came and slaughtered them. She was thinning the Furies’ numbers all by herself. She’d break through this spot of peril for us. That was why I had to hold out. I was in for a protracted fight. The key was buying time.

While I was focusing purely on intercepting, the two Furies closed in on me in a pincer attack, but I was in a good position. I put into operation some of the *Snowmension* bubbles close to the enemies. Suddenly freezing over, they were thrown off balance, slamming into each other. I seized on that chance to take Maria and gain some distance.

“You ready yet, Lastiara?!”

“Sorry, yes! No more waiting!”

Lastiara had finally rendered all of the other Furies into so much light, after which she came running to our aid. From there, it only lasted a moment. With their movement obstructed by my ice magic, the two Furies ate Lastiara’s sword, her blade piercing their vitals. Ruthlessly, she continued the assault on our shrieking foes. With a speed the Furies couldn’t keep up with, she stabbed them in each and every one of their weak points. Soon, they collapsed into a big pool of blood.

After seeing that all the Furies had turned into light and disappeared, I immediately issued my command. “Retreat! Retreat! Go back to Floor 20!”

“Yes, Master!”

I didn’t even pick up the magic gems. I just went back up the path, ignoring Lastiara’s “Must we?” Evading enemies using *Dimension*, we ran all the way back to the chamber on the twentieth level—the safety zone.

While I was wheezing, trying to catch my breath, Lastiara made her displeasure known. “So, why’d you pull a runner?”

“I didn’t know the enemies’d be this strong.”

“I did tell you. I told you to be careful ’cause they get a bit strong.”

I’d been an idiot for taking her at her word. I’d taken Maria there to use the strong enemies for level grinding, but I should have remembered that Lastiara’s

values were not my own. “You call that a *bit* strong? Those things were stupid strong!”

“Were they?”

“Battles on Floor 21 are too different a beast, so that’ll be it for today. As things stand, Maria won’t be able to join the fray.”

“Hrm. Well, in that case, wouldn’t we be better served just having her wait at home?”

“Maria’s one of us. No way we can do that.”

“Oh, really? There’s no way?”

Lastiara clearly figured that if Maria hadn’t been here, that enemy would have been perfect for my level. It was true that if my objective was to clear the Dungeon, it made more sense to try doing Floor 21 as a pair. I knew that full well, which was why I was at a loss for words.

Behind me, Maria was looking vexed and disappointed. I could hear her small voice clear as crystal. “And I leveled up too... I’m almost the same level as Master, but I can’t do anything...”

Maria had grown stronger at impossible rates, but she was hamstrung by being in the “ordinary person” box. While she’d become a top-class diver in a matter of days, she wasn’t anything beyond that. She was a far cry from Lastiara and me, who exceeded the common sense of this world. She couldn’t reach our heights. We were too special, and now, there was a rift between us. Despite the fact we were at basically the same level, she couldn’t even participate in battle.

Such was the gap between our innate talent. The gap between the blessed and the normal. The APT gap.

“Don’t worry about it, Maria,” I said. “If you level up, you’ll be able to fight too.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes, that makes sense. I just need to raise my level! That’s all I—”

“You have it backwards,” interrupted Lastiara, with the expression of someone who couldn’t stand to sit back and watch. “The more we all level up,

the more Mar-Mar will be left eating our dust. She'll never in her life be able to catch up to us."

I'd had a vague inkling that was the case, but Lastiara told her the truth I hadn't.

"Huh?" Maria didn't understand.

"There's a huge difference between your growth rate and ours. So if we all level up, the gap between us and you will only widen. There will never come a time where you can help Sieg in some way. On the contrary, you'd only be tripping him up and exposing him to mortal danger."

"Lastiara, hold on—"

"I won't 'hold on.'"

"Maria *is* getting stronger, if a little at a time! Besides, she could become the right person in the right place under the right circumstances!"

"I thought I might not mind standing by and admiring her tragic scene unfold while watching the boy who kept fooling himself, but I'm thinking twice about it now. It seems I'm more fond of her than I'd realized."

Me, fooling myself? That couldn't be... I didn't want to admit it, but Lastiara's intense gaze wouldn't let that slide.

"No..." I said, trailing off. "That's... That's not true..."

"You can see her Aptitude too, can't you? A low Aptitude means it's hopeless for her. Her base growth rate is just inferior, period. Yet here you are, dragging her around the Dungeon. It's mad. Do you even know why you're doing this?"

"I..."

Yes. I knew why. I'd noticed that the APT stat affected a person's growth rate when she turned Level 7. Maria's relatively stunted growth was apparent compared to mine and Dia's. She simply lacked the APT, and she would definitely hit a wall in the future. The reason I'd dragged her here despite knowing that was—

"Enough..." said Maria before I could let it all out. "I don't need to hear any more."

Her face was pale. From her expression, she knew what I was about to say. And I knew that she knew. I had just pretended I'd never noticed. But Lastiara was right; I'd been fooling myself.

When Maria saw Lastiara fight, and when she saw me fight, she'd realized that she was dead weight. Dejected, her expression turned dark. I could even catch a glimpse of feelings of emptiness there.

Emptiness. Her eyes, turning into the hollow eyes of once upon a time. *Argh, no, don't think about it. It's too traumatic.* Maria looked too much like *her*. I didn't want to see her that way. That was why I'd given her my patronage. So yes. The reason I was dragging her around was me playing favorites with her. Nothing more.

The sight of me being so stricken after coming to that realization got Lastiara's neurons firing. "Heh heh. I see, I see," said Lastiara. "Oh, it must be nice. I envy you, the both of you."

That look in her innocent yet pitiless gaze was back. Those cold, inorganic eyes that few could comprehend. She gazed at us, and there was envy there but also adoration.

"You really are a piece of work, aren't you, Lastiara?"

"I could say the same about you two. Leading such intriguing lives, but only barely."

"Oh, sorry it's only barely."

"But no, that's good. You two are both so good at fooling yourselves, so I think I can wring more enjoyment out of you yet. Don't worry your little heads—I'll be watching from the sidelines, making sure you don't die or break on me!"

She grinned at us, a tinge of mania in her eyes. As of late, I had thought I'd started understanding what she was thinking, but it seemed I wasn't quite there yet. I was used to her craziness, though, so I just heaved a sigh before replying.

"Like we could be anything but worried after hearing that."

"Ms. Lastiara," said Maria from nearby, her expression mirroring mine, "I ask

you to exercise a little more prudence.” While she’d been rattled by Lastiara’s truth bomb, she still had the energy to fire back regarding the tactless way our companion had laid it out.

“Excellent. I’m glad,” said Lastiara. “If you two can still hurl insults at me, then you’re fine. If I’d never spoken my mind, something nastier would’ve befallen you down the line. I’ve read so many adventure tales that I’m well-versed regarding parties. Don’t you think you ought to act more grateful?” She was smiling, unfazed by our invective.

“Like I’d thank you,” I replied.

“I’m afraid that naturally, I can’t thank you,” said Maria at the same time. Her bitter smile was past not only disappointment but also discontent. Lastiara’s cheeriness was insensate, but it was also simpleminded and innocent, and it had dragged out a faint smile on Maria’s face. Lastiara was why she’d despaired, but also why she had recovered.

Through my own wry smile, I spoke lest the wisp of cheer fade away. “Good grief. You’re as unnerving as always.”

“Me? Unnerving?” Lastiara answered.

“You’ve got no common sense or restraint and you’re always so erratic. You’re pretty scary from where we’re standing, isn’t that right, Maria?” I smiled softly.

“Yes... Yes, I don’t know what Ms. Lastiara will do, so I’m always on edge around her.”

“You too, Mar-Mar?!”

Through our repartee, the air between us gradually lightened up, even if we were putting on brave faces. We had a pile of problems, but the mood was on the uptick. Afterwards, by continuing to use Lastiara as the butt of our banter, we managed to fully shift gears away from that depressive slump. The laughter we shared was superficial, but it helped us get to the gateway on Floor 20 and back home again. Each of us had identified the issues the others had, but we’d somehow avoided the worst-case scenario.

We had avoided the worst-case scenario...



Having returned after escaping Floor 21, we all started unwinding. Lastiara told us she had business to take care of and hastily went outside, leaving me and Maria in the living room. I was peeved. She'd kicked up a tempest only to leave me picking up the pieces.

"You okay, Maria?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I let leveling up go to my head. It's what I get for not knowing my place and aiming too high." She bowed her head calmly.

As far as I could tell, she was no longer paying any mind to what Lastiara had said.

"No, it was a lapse in judgment on my part. I put too much trust in my plan and didn't know when to quit. I ended up dragging you into pits of danger I had no business dragging you into."

"Heh heh, I thought you would say something to that effect, Master. Thank you very much."

"What're you thanking me for? My slipup almost cost you your life."

Her smile didn't go away. "Yes, but you made that slipup trying to do what was best for me, didn't you?"

No, that's not it. It wasn't that altruistic. "You say that because you're so self-conscious. But I don't have the time or energy to be thinking about what's best for anybody else."

"No, that's not true. You didn't want me to be sad, so you couldn't make up your mind when to call it quits, correct? You couldn't bring yourself to crush my dreams, could you?"

Maria had the notion I was a decent human being, but that was a mistake. My dragging her everywhere was for no one's sake but my own.

"I'm telling you, I'm not that selfless."

"Heh heh. I knew you were a kind soul, Master." Then her smile gave way to a gloomier expression. "But there's no denying that I'm of no use in the Dungeon anymore. And now that I know I'll only ever be a hindrance to you, I don't know

what to do with myself.”

The way her mood had suddenly nosedived took me aback. She looked so down in the dumps that it was like she hadn’t been smiling a moment ago. I should have known there was no way it wasn’t gnawing at her. She couldn’t possibly have sorted through her feelings in so short a time.

“Cheer up, Maria. It’s not as though you’re totally powerless. You should take your time searching for what you can do here.”

“I can stay?” she asked, puzzled.

I was flabbergasted. “Hold on, were you planning to leave?”

“I have every intention of paying you back for your kindness, of course. But since I’m dead weight, I have no good reason to be staying in this house, so...”

“What happened to all that spunk you used to have? Don’t get *that* depressed, jeez. Are you stupid or something?”

Up until the other day, she’d been so self-assured, but now she was a shadow of that former self.

“That ‘self-assurance’ was fake.”

I didn’t know what had made Maria feel *this* down, but all the same, I didn’t want to see her so miserable. It reminded me of when I’d first encountered her. And I couldn’t have that. If Maria didn’t hold her head up high, I’d be the one in a bind. After all, if she’d stayed that self-assured, I would have had no compunctions about releasing her, but if she left wearing that expression, I’d be beside myself with worry and regret.

“There is something you can do: cook for me. I’ll leave the house in your hands.” Any arrangement was fine; I just wanted to give her a *raison d’être* and what sprang to mind was food. With her skills, entrusting the housework to her was a safe bet.

“But before, you said you don’t need me to cook.”

“I just said that in order to drag you to the Dungeon. I wanted you to come to the Dungeon at any cost, so I said some mean stuff.”

And that was no lie. Back then, I’d truly wanted her help in the Dungeon more

than I'd wanted her to cook for me.

"So that's what that was about."

"This time, I'm asking you to do it. I want you to stay in this house and cook meals for me every day," I said, a serious look on my face.

"Cook for you...every day?" She sighed, astonished. "You're being as dumb as ever, Master. That's an embarrassing way to phrase it. Even if you didn't mean it that way."

Please cook for me every day—a canned line that was a roundabout way to propose to someone.

"Yeah, as soon as I said it, I was mortified."

She gave me an exasperated look as usual, but if it meant she was back in her stride, I didn't mind any look she might give me.

"So then," said Maria, smiling, "you have my gratitude for the work you've given me. Thank you so much, Master."

"You got it. Thank you."

I didn't see the shadow hanging over her anymore, yet since I didn't have the power of observation to see through her false fronts, I couldn't rest easy just yet.

"Now then, why don't we cook together today? We might as well."

"Together, sir?"

For now, I would survey the situation by cooking alongside her. "I want you to show me how good you are. I'm a deft hand myself, but probably not on your level."

"Oh no, Master, there's no way I could ever measure up to you."

"You've got talent when it comes to cooking. I told you before, didn't I? I can see people's talents."

"I have a talent for cooking?"

"There's no doubt about it. Be confident."

“A talent for cooking, huh...” She trailed off. Then her expression got a mite cheerier. If she derived a solid reason to get up in the morning from this, it saved me a headache.

Moving to the kitchen, I started teaching her what I knew about cooking in an effort to get her to like it. And since she taught me what she knew about this world’s techniques, we got more into the conversation than I was expecting. We began preparing for dinner, and while we cooked, Maria looked increasingly cheerier, which reassured me that selecting this option wasn’t a misguided choice, and I continued having fun cooking with her. We forgot all about the Dungeon, albeit temporarily, and immersed ourselves in the joint activity.

Just when we had finished making dinner, Lastiara returned.

“I’m back! Mmm, it smells great in here.”

One might have mistaken her for a teen who always had to make it home in time for dinner. Her arrival made me realize it was getting dark out. It was time for me to head to work.

“Maria, I’m gonna head to the pub soon. I’ll be back.”

“Yes, Master. Have a good day.”

I thought I saw her expression change a tiny bit, but she smiled as she saw me off.

“I’ll get out early, so wait for—”

“Ah, Sieg,” interrupted Lastiara. “You don’t need to go to the pub anymore. I got you some break time.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. I got you unlimited break time from the manager,” she said nonchalantly.

“Hold on, what do you mean, break time? Don’t tell me you went to the pub just now?”

“I did. And I told Mr. Manager that we wanted you to be on break until you got yourself sorted out. When I told him more knights like Serry might show up otherwise, he okayed it instantly.”

"He... He really approved?"

"It was child's play; I begged him with tears in my eyes. Looks like your boss can't say no to a girl."

In other words, she'd wheedled him with her wiles. All in all, my boss went easy on beauties like her. That much was clear from how he'd handled Ms. Radiant and Ms. Lyeen. Everybody who was close to him knew it. I had no doubt he was taken in by the pretty girl's request and didn't even inquire much about the situation. And I didn't doubt that I really was off work now.

"Hey, Lastiara. Take a seat at the table right now. I've got a buttload of things to say." I sat myself down at the table at the center of the living room.

"No, wait, hold on. I want you to hear what I have to say first!" she replied. "It's not as though I made you take off work for no reason. I did it after thinking about all sorts of things, like money and time and stuff. I figured you were only there because you didn't give the other workers more work, so I pulled the trigger for you. 'Cause, like, you're so wishy-washy about the strangest things."

"I hear you. It may well be that I wasn't being terribly efficient. That said, I still wanted to gather a lot more information at that pub. Besides, the pub must still want me. I don't see how they can function while they're down a worker."

"I realized that too, you know. I know a fair amount about the Dungeon up to Floor 23, and if the pub stops being able to function, then you can just send Mar-Mar there."

If she said she had the information I wanted, I couldn't press her on the matter, but the state we'd be leaving the pub in was a different story.

"I'll grant you, for argument's sake, that you can provide me with intel. But you're gonna seriously make the case that they can switch workers for a role that easily? Besides, it's not even a given that Maria'll do that for us."

"What? All you did was wash dishes and set tables. Anybody can do that. And when it comes to helping with preparing ingredients, Maria would be better at it than you, given her Cooking skill. And most importantly, I'm betting the pub would take a cute little girl over you any day. As for whether she's willing to do it... Hey, Mar-Mar, you'll do it, right?"

She was still cooking. “If it will serve my Master, then absolutely,” she said, her voice all too full of verve.

Lastiara shot me a “see?” look. “Now, even if you need to gather intel, you can just ask her to do it for you. I’m serving you up some nice division of labor. And I know you can be overprotective, but surely not enough to naysay this?”

“Urgh...”

I didn’t want Maria working at the pub if it could be helped. There were plenty of ruffians and rogues among their clientele. Then again, her relatively high level basically solved that problem. Sure, she could never hold a candle to us, but she was the equal of experienced divers in terms of raw strength.

“That’s not the end of the discussion, though. None of that changes the fact that you did as you pleased without consulting us or that you asked for Maria’s approval only after the fact. Don’t consider your heedlessness tolerated.”

A pause. “Right, so, uhh, what’s for dinner?” she asked, after realizing the tides were shifting against her.

“I don’t mind getting into things over food. Any food tastes great when you’re lecturing someone.”

“The food’s not so great when I’m getting lectured.”

Maria laid the plates on the table and all three of us tucked into our dinner. As promised, I gave Lastiara a verbal spanking while I partook, though the scolding didn’t last long. Her methods aside, I understood that she had done what she had because she meant well. While she was a ne’er-do-well, it was all born of good intentions. Her leveling me up on my first day, her setting me up with the Seven Celestial Knights, her joining my party, her words of warning to Maria, and the stunt she’d pulled with the pub—they were all Lastiara’s way of looking out for us.

In the end, Lastiara hung her head and quietly apologized, and that was that. Following the tongue-lashing, the three of us enjoyed our meal, chatting about the next day’s Dungeon dive. We concluded that Maria would be in charge of everything apart from Dungeon stuff, while Lastiara and I would focus on diving.

And so another day came and went. To sum up my thoughts, Lastiara put us

through a lot, but there were also things we couldn't have surmounted without her. After dinner, I went to the pub and apologized to the manager.

It may not have been my imagination that I fell asleep easier than normal that night.



The next day, Lastiara and I tackled Floor 21 once again while Maria was holding down the house.

"Now we can finally do a proper, full-fledged Dungeon dive, huh, Sieg?"

"I'm sure there's a big gap between what you and I consider a 'full-fledged' dive, though."

Crossing the *Connection* gateway in the house, we'd zipped straight to Floor 20. Reaching a floor that deep so early in the morning was a novel sensation.

Lastiara was doing stretches as she walked behind me. She looked happy. Unlike the day before, I was leading the way. In order to make the maximum use of my abilities, I had reverted to the position that made the most sense. We walked down to Floor 21 with my enemy sonar active. Meanwhile, Lastiara kept chattering loudly and incessantly.

"All right, Floor 30, here we come!"

"Hold your horses. We're gonna take it floor by floor and see how it shakes out. Floor 21 will be our warm-up, and our objective for now is the end bit of the Pathway, so—"

"Could you not go on and on like that, Sieg?!" she said sulkily.

When it came to our Dungeon diving policies, we were totally out of sync. We'd talked about it that morning, but we still hadn't come to any real agreement. Not that I was bothered by it. I'd known from the get-go that Lastiara would be difficult to control, so I had no choice but to compromise. Yet if I gave too much ground and indulged her too much, it'd come back to bite me later on. Upon reflection, the ground between the overly proactive Lastiara and my overly passive self was the golden middle. It was best if neither of us was in the driver's seat.

“I may have to talk a bunch, but I don’t think anything I’m saying is wrong if we’re gonna be making our way through the Dungeon.”

“Oh sure, so while we’re making our way, you’ll be boring me to tears.”

“Being correct and being boring go hand in hand. I didn’t come here for a spot of fun.”

“Isn’t that a breach of contract? I’m helping you with your objective of clearing the Dungeon, so you’ve got a duty to help me with my objective of *enjoying* the Dungeon.”

“You’re right. This is a contract. So let’s meet halfway. You can, of course, have your fun. But don’t forget my objective. Try not to go overboard.”

“Agh...you’ve been stubborn all morning just to give me that warning, huh?”

If I didn’t remind her, I wouldn’t be able to rest easy. She was a totally different beast from both Dia and Maria.

“Only because you’re always misbehav—” Just then, *Dimension* detected a monster approaching. “Never mind, looks like our chat’s over.”

“Oh, we got company right quick. Wow, though. Your enemy detector sure is convenient.”

“There are lots of enemies beyond this point. They’re the monkeys we fought yesterday. I’ll run ahead and draw them out, so I need you to jump in later. I’ll tee up the combos.”

“Do you think I’m a boar or something? Whatever, I’ll follow your lead for now.”

“Let’s do this!” I cried, rushing in.

I was running in earnest, yet Lastiara was keeping pace right behind me. When it came to raw stats, she was a rascal I could feel safe around.

Turning a corner brought the strange monsters into view. The fury noticed our approach and tried to intercept us using its four brawny arms. I slipped past its attack and under its legs to get behind it. It tried to twist its body in order to attack me, but Lastiara didn’t let it. The fury stopped her blade using two of its arms, while the other two reached for me. I dodged and slipped further into its

blind spot. It looked behind it in order to not lose track of me, but gave up due to Lastiara. It knew that if it took its eyes off her, it was game over.

It was then I grew confident that our victory was assured. The moment its arms reached Lastiara, my blade ripped its back, causing the arms that were trying to grab her to stop for a moment. Lastiara didn't pass up that opportunity—slipping past its arms, she slashed its torso.

With an enraged bellow, it tried to smash her to pieces, only for me to gash it once again. Naturally, it again stopped moving for a moment. This was its pattern. As long as I was behind it, the fury could never land an attack. It was a trick I could only pull off because *Dimension* let me grasp how Lastiara and the enemy were moving.

The fury was trapped in a loop of giving us openings, and Lastiara kept slashing and slashing it until her sword finally pierced its neck. As the finishing blow, I stabbed its heart from behind.

Shrieking in its death throes, it bled profusely, and before long, it turned into light and faded away.

"You get hurt at all?" I asked as I picked up its gem.

"I didn't even get any blood on me. This is easy street. Honestly, I feel super sorry for that monster. It couldn't do a thing."

"If we go all out, this is the result. I absolutely love mowing them down like so much grass."

"I dunno; if we win too handily, it takes the fun out of it," she said.

"Don't worry—Floor 21's just getting started. Spellcast: *Dimension*."

I expanded my perception magic. The distinct trait of Floor 21 was the overwhelming physical power of the monsters that kept appearing in veritable hordes. And I knew the death shrieks had to have something to do with how that worked. Through *Dimension*, I had a grasp of all the monsters in the zone. Just as I'd expected, they were all coming this way, notified by their comrade's final scream.

"How's it look?"

“Exactly as I imagined. If you take down one, the other monsters in the vicinity come a-calling.”

The day before, I hadn’t had time to spread my sonar field terribly far, but now I could perceive the movements of the Dungeon’s monsters in general.

“So the more we kill, the more we get surrounded.”

“In theory. But it’s pointless against me. If I have *Dimension* active, there’s no way we can get surrounded. Come with me.”

“Roger that. Are we gonna keep two-v-one’ing them?”

“For the most part...but if things get annoying, we might just do them in one go. Even if we do get surrounded, this is us we’re talking about, so we’ll be fine.”

“Of course,” she replied, smiling as she followed me.

Both Lastiara and I were the stereotypical solo-player types. You could even say she shined when fighting one-versus-many, and that went for me too. We were strong when we cooperated, but that was because our respective strength levels and battle methods were similar. Under normal circumstances, there was no human who could keep up with Lastiara’s moves.

“In a moment, we’re gonna encounter another fury. This time, I’ve got a feeling we can ambush it from behind.”

“Gotcha. Ah, also, hunting monsters is all well and good, but do head for Floor 22.”

“If the situation allows, then I will.”

As it happened, the situation allowed and then some. If we ran at high speed, we’d never get surrounded, barring some calamity. That was why we could have a friendly chat. The Furies that had been such threats the day before were no longer thorns in my side. Their gimmick was horde attacks, and without it, they were easy pickings. We slaughtered them individually and moved ever closer to Floor 22. We did veer from the Pathway and take roundabout routes in order to avoid being surrounded, but we reached the staircase to Floor 22 without a hitch. It took less than an hour to get there, and we killed a dozen or

so Furies in the process. It really was like mowing grass or reaping wheat—a methodical process where the human always came out on top.

Near the staircase, we set about doing our healing while remaining vigilant of our surroundings. Owing to the long string of battles, our clothes were rather ragged by now. While it was easy overall, there were bound to be errors with that many fights in a row.

“A world unsoled... Bask in day’s faint light... *Full Cure.*”

Thanks to Lastiara, though, we were right as rain. She recited some verses and gathered magic energy before casting the healing spell.

As my minor injuries healed, I asked her a question. “Hey, Lastiara, is there some point to the poetry leading up to the spell?”

“Poetry? Oh, the incantation, you mean. Hrm, well, it’s just there to help with the visualization, so it’s not really necessary. I guess it’s basically a habit.”

Apparently, different people had different habits when it came to the same spells. The ways they visualized them varied, and so did the way they incanted. Maybe that was only natural, given the magic technique itself was inside their bodies.

“All right, now you’re all healed up.”

“Thanks.”

I checked our MP and EXP. I hadn’t done any proper monster hunting since the Tida fight, so I had accumulated a whole bunch of EXP now. As one might expect, the monsters on the deeper floors shelled out worlds more EXP. It wasn’t hurting that I was hunting on a floor that was above the recommended level for me. Because of our phenomenal APT stats, we could fight on floors that were deeper than our levels would otherwise suggest. Since we could do battle with high-ranking monsters while we ourselves were at lower levels, we could rack up EXP quickly.

“While I’m at it, I might as well level you up too. Stand guard, Sieg.”

“Will do.”

She must have seen how much EXP I had too.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 321/372

MP: 334/623-200

CLASS: None

LEVEL 12

STR 7.12

VIT 7.45

DEX 8.55

AGI 10.92

INT 10.88

MAG 26.91

APT 7.00

【STATUS】

NAME: Lastiara Whoseyards

HP: 670/709

MP: 283/325

CLASS: Hero

LEVEL 16

STR 11.71

VIT 11.11

DEX 7.12

AGI 8.39

INT 12.97

MAG 9.12

APT 4.00

I allocated the bonus point to my MP since the amount of MP I could use had grown less reliable due to my having to maintain *Connection*. I was still holding onto the skill points for later.

“I’ve got lots of MP left. Why are you down so much MP, anyway?”

“In order to maintain the gateway, I take a hit of up to 200 MP. Also, my MP’s constantly being depleted from enemy detection. And it takes even more MP for the support magic I use in battle.”

“Whew, that’s some fuel consumption. You need to economize.”

“No way. I don’t wanna risk dying on the off chance that skimping on MP gets me killed.”

“Hmm. That’s true; if you die, that’d put me right out.”

Conversing with Lastiara reminded me about something I’d noticed, and I took the opportunity to bring it up.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, but what’s that skill you said I had? The ‘Outworlder’ skill.”

“Hm? I see five skills for you: Swordplay, Ice Magic, Dimensional Magic, Outworlder, and ??. What about it?”

“What you see as ‘Outworlder’ shows up as ‘???’ for me. Maybe your eyes are higher level than mine? Tell me, does ‘Outworlder’ do something for me or what?”

“You can ask me, but I don’t know much myself. I’m guessing it’s a sort of signifier that you’re not from this world.”

“That’s it, huh?”

As we chatted, we descended to Floor 22.

I could have searched for a boss monster on Floor 21 if I’d wanted to, but there was little to no concrete information on floors this deep, so I discarded

the idea. Vanishingly few of the divers who frequented the pub made it to Floor 20.

The staircase from Floor 21 to 22 was oddly long, which meant that Floor 22's ceiling was oddly high.

"Floor 22. We're here," said Lastiara. "I almost died last time, but as a two-person team, it should be easy."

"You almost died? Sure, you were alone, but you're telling me you got driven into a corner by a normal monster?"

"I reached this floor back when I was under Level 10. I thought it'd be too easy if I got too strong. Boy, that was fun."

"You tried clearing these floors at such a low level that casually? Damn, you scare me. You got a death wish or something?"

Her life was on the line, and yet Lastiara had done a self-handicapping challenge run without batting an eyelid.

"Oh no, I'd hate to die. However you may see me, I know the value of a life. And watching other people die isn't my cup of tea either, I guess."

"For it not being your cup of tea, you seemed delighted when Maria and I were at death's door."

"Well, I adore when you're on the *verge* of death. Don't worry, I'll come save you right before you *actually* die, promise."

If Maria had heard that sentence, she'd probably have never spoken a good word about Lastiara again, yet Lastiara had made the remark so coolly. We started traversing Floor 22 as I was still getting over my astonishment at her abnormal values.

Unlike Floor 21, the corridors of Floor 22 were cramped but tall. To put numbers to it, the walls were a few meters wide but dozens of meters tall. The earlier floors each had their own distinguishing features, but this was the first time things were *this* different. It could be the case that the deeper the level, the more idiosyncrasies there were.

As I was pondering the corridors, *Dimension* spotted an enemy. It was an

avian monster. Dungeon monsters capable of flight tended to be small, but this one was an exception. Its body was several meters long, and it sported hawklike wings and talons. It also had three heads, each bearing compound eyes. After taking note of its ferocious canines, I knew I'd have to be careful of both its talons and its fangs.

【MONSTER】Rio Eagle: Rank 20

“Lastiara, a bird monster’s coming for us.”

“Oh, that one. If you wound it, it’ll fly away, so kill it in a single blow, would you? Let’s ignore the ones that don’t come down and counter the ones that do.”

“A monster that flies away? Interesting. You said there are ones that don’t come down—do these things come in swarms too?”

“Think of them as the monkeys from Floor 21 in bird form. The way to fight them is totally different, but knowing you, you’ll do fine.”

“Why are you so weirdly confident in me?”

“Because from where I’m standing, you’re the *main character*,” she replied profoundly.

I was about to fire back a quip when I noticed the Rio Eagle gliding towards us. I took my focus off Lastiara and concentrated on the enemy.

“It’s coming!”

“Good job being able to tell, what with how dark it is up there.”

I brandished my blade and engaged the approaching eagle. Lastiara did likewise. The bird beast swooped down at a speed that blew the Furies of the prior floor out of the water, and its talons were aimed at my throat. I stopped the blow with my sword and attempted to cleave the enemy in two right then and there, but the kinetic energy of its descent rocked my body, bending my upper half backward. When I swung for the counterattack, the monster fled past sword range.

Unable to stop its hit-and-run, I tried following it with my eyes as it gained altitude—and a thrown sword pierced its side. It was Lastiara's blade.

The Rio Eagle turned into light and faded away as my companion picked up her sword and the magic gem, smiling.

"The things are always a pain when it's one-on-one, but not so much when there are two of us. If one of us parries and the other attacks, they're easy kills," she said.

"So it seems. But that won't fly if there's more than one of them."

"I guess."

Lastiara tossed me the gem. I put it in my inventory.

"All right, now what?" I asked. "Do we kill more of them?"

"Nah, the things are real pests. Let's just give Floor 22 a pass from now on."

They certainly were a handful. Not only were they speedy, but their tactics were on point. Taking them on was probably too much of an annoyance to be worth bothering. Normal people wouldn't be able to see their air raids coming due to how dark the upper portion of the floor was, and even if they could, they wouldn't be able to put up a defense against the monsters' blistering speeds. If they managed to block the attack at all, the inertia of the blow meant that counterattacking was no easy feat. And if the counterattack ended up missing, the eagle would fly away only to repeat the whole process. Moreover, from what Lastiara had said, wounding it would only cause it to flee the battle outright. Compared to the other Dungeon monsters thus far, its sheer irksomeness was definitely S-tier.

"Yeah," I said, "not a huge fan of these guys either. Without long-distance attacks, they're just not worth it."

"We're specialized for close-to-midrange combat."

"Yeah."

As a pair of swordfighters, our only real long-range attack was throwing the blade. If I missed the target, my prized sword would end up who knew where, and carrying a second sword for throwing would slow me down overall. Put

simply, we just weren't cut out for fighting faraway enemies.

Of course, if I made full use of the inventory system to which I had access, I could devise a means of coping, but I didn't feel the urge to invest that kind of effort for this monster. If we had Dia with us, it'd be cake, but without him, it was probably better to ignore them. It wasn't often that Lastiara and I agreed on something, but we did in this case, so we ended up advancing while avoiding Rio Eagles where possible. However, after a few minutes of walking, I found that it wouldn't go that smoothly.

"Tch."

"What?"

I'd clicked my tongue after analyzing the information *Dimension* was giving me. I'd known that by taking down the Rio Eagle, other monsters in the vicinity would come our way. I'd chosen paths that would prevent us from being surrounded, but they were too fast, sealing our avenues of escape. Others were now in the process of encircling us. Two of the things were close, slipping past *Dimension*.

"Sorry, Lastiara. Two of them are coming for us, one from the front, one from the back."

"Nothing for it. If it's a two-pronged attack, what say we fight back to back for now?"

"Gotcha. But if we take too long, we'll get surrounded, so let's finish them off as quickly as we can. Spellcast: *Snowmension. Form.*"

Form's bubbles clung to my sword while *Snowmension* floated nearby.

"Those bubbles filled with cold air...I've never seen or heard of such a spell. Did you invent it?"

"I guess you could say that, but it's more like I combined two spells. It's a trap-type spell, so don't touch them. If the monsters hit them, their movements will be dulled, so take advantage of it."

"Copy that."

Right around the time we finished preparing, the two birds began gliding our

way. Lastiara and I were back to back, each of us facing a different foe. I grasped my opponent's movements using *Calculash*, succeeding in tracking the monster and stopping the first strike, but the impact made me miss a beat, causing my counterattack to swing uselessly through the air, much to my chagrin. The same thing happened to Lastiara behind me. I did, however, manage to transfer a *Form* bubble to the Rio Eagle. Thanks to that, my understanding of that one bird ratcheted up immensely, enough so that I was confident I could kill if it came for me again. However, the eagle flew far away, as if to laugh at my hopes.

"I'm sorry, what? Sticking a bubble to it is all it takes for it to flee?"

"These monsters really are cowards. Guess they fly away at the first sign of something being amiss."

Worse still, the escaped eagle unleashed a cry from someplace far removed. It was almost definitely calling for backup.

I expanded *Dimension* and found that faraway monsters had noticed us, including ones that weren't Rio Eagles. At this rate, we'd find ourselves fighting a whole host of different kinds of enemies.

"And now the one that got away's calling for all sorts of friends too..."

"I had a feeling. Last time, I just fled at full speed. What do you wanna do?"

"That's what I'm pretty much feeling like doing, myself."

"Agreed. They're formidable, but they play dirty, so they're not that fun to fight."

We exchanged glances, nodded, and dashed off, heading towards Floor 23. Because I was choosing which way to go using *Dimension*, there were only a handful of enemies on the path. Many of the different types of monsters on this floor were cautious by nature, so they ended up fleeing right before we could deal the finishing blow. As a result, we wasted MP for no EXP, which was harsh.

"Hff... hff..." We had made it to the entrance to Floor 23.

Lastiara was also panting; she'd clearly lost a lot of stamina. "Ugh, Floor 22's so annoying."

Still catching our breath, we began descending the staircase, Lastiara following me down. The monsters that had been chasing us withdrew. It seemed that monsters couldn't cross or straddle floors. Then, we walked down the Pathway, but the more we walked, the more stamina it took. We couldn't seem to adjust our breathing either.

The reason was simple. The temperature down here was strangely high. If Floor 22's distinguishing characteristic was its height, Floor 23's was its heat.

The front part of her garment aflutter, Lastiara put on a fed-up expression. I could tell she was sweating hundreds of times more than me. Apparently, she was a profuse sweater.

"It's so hot! It's soooo hot, like, for real, though! Sieg, gimme water!"

"Sure thing."

I stuck a hand into my inventory through a pouch and retrieved a leather flask. Lastiara had left it with me that morning. Its make was fairly sturdy.

Without the least hesitation, she guzzled the water.

Her personality comes out even in how she drinks water, I thought.

"Hey Lastiara, why is Floor 23 this hot, anyway?"

"Ngh. It's because Floor 24's got a magma flow."

"Whoa, magma? Have you seen it?"

"No, I heard tell from a diver who came to my place to hang out. I don't know much of anything about what lies beyond Floor 23."

"You know a diver who's been to Floor 24?"

"He's a famous one. Glenn Walker. He's the one they call the strongest diver."

Glenn Walker. If I remembered correctly, that was the name of the record holder for deepest dive. "I heard that guy didn't get past Floor 23 himself."

"To be exact, he didn't build the Pathway past Floor 23."

It seemed the record everybody spoke of had to do with how far the Pathway was drawn. Apparently, without that idea in the mix, Mr. Glenn, the strongest diver, could, in fact, go deeper.

"So that's why you know your stuff, Lastiara. You heard about it from the world's top diver."

"It's true that he's basically my source of information."

"What's he like?" I asked cheerily. It appeared I was easily taken in by the title of "the strongest." As a lover of video games and adventure, I was quite interested in this Glenn fellow.

"What's he like? Uhh...I don't know how to describe him except to say he's a pitiful bloke who's fond of me. No matter where he goes, he leads an interesting life, never able to obtain what he wants...though that kind of life's not as rough when you've some talent."

To Lastiara, Glenn Walker belonged in the category of people not blessed by this world. And here I'd thought he could only be the type of guy who was overflowing with raw talent, who was loved by the world and made everything go his way. That was my image of "the strongest."

"Huh. Is that right?"

"He's faint of heart, he never knows when to give up, and he's a masochist. He's a waste of space, but he's reasonably strong."

"I mean, the way you put it, he doesn't really *sound* strong."

"Well, in actuality, he's not *that* crazy strong, so..."

I could feel my image of the man who stood at the top crumbling inside me. The world's mightiest wasn't meeting my expectations. What a dream crusher this world was.

Dimension spotted the end of the Pathway. Due to our being on the Pathway, enemies didn't come for us, so we progressed smoothly. However, that guiding road finally came to an end and there we stood.

"So, this is our goalpost. That's today's objective complete."

I felt somewhat accomplished. At last, I could now say that I was on par with humanity's present pinnacle.

"All right!" said Lastiara. "Then our next objective's Floor 30. I don't really know what lies beyond this point either, so let's use your *Dimension* liberally

and dive nice and deep—”

“Not happening.”

In terms of time spent, getting here from Floor 20 hadn’t taken very long, but the fatigue had mounted from all the many first-ever encounters and battles. I was loath to travel any deeper into floors unknown in this state. My stamina wouldn’t allow it.

I related that sentiment to Lastiara, but of course, she remained unconvinced. Our quarrel ended with an agreement to spend the day exploring, but with Floor 23 as the core area. When I told her that without the Pathway to guide the way, we’d have to constantly map out the area, she reluctantly accepted.

Having come to an accord, we started walking. Drawing on a piece of parchment, I crafted a map of Floor 23 as we went. Thankfully, none of the monsters on this floor were a threat. Perhaps the giant monsters that appeared on Floors 21 and 22 couldn’t live in this kind of heat. The only wrinkle presented by the monsters of Floor 23 was the abundance of those with endurance and staying power. They weren’t troublesome foes in the least. Lastiara’s sheer attack power aided us there. No matter how tough an enemy’s hide, it was meaningless before her raw physical might.

Putting it all together, I concluded that the obstacle this floor posed was the way in which the heat drained divers’ stamina. Stopped in their tracks by enemies that were specialized for durability, the heat would dehydrate them and rob them of their energy. Upon reflection, it could actually be *more* problematic than Floors 21 and 22 in that respect.

“Augh...Sieg...water...”

Lastiara consumed what felt like gallons of water every few minutes. I was also rehydrating very frequently, but not to her level. Her terrible mileage threatened to give rise to an equally terrible state of affairs for us.

“Wait, Lastiara, are you *sure* you’re parched? At this rate, that huge amount of water’s gonna be depleted in no time, you know?”

“Yes, I’m bloody well sure! I’m so thirsty, it’s stupid!”

We’d spent several hours walking around. Lastiara wasn’t yanking my chain;

she was pleading for water with a serious expression.

“If we burn through any more, we’ll be forced to head back.”

“Did I... Did I really drink that much?”

“You were chugging the stuff with a hazy look on your face.”

The speed with which the water was being consumed was so great that it forced us to revise our diving plans. We lacked the water to be able to keep heading to Floor 24.

“Maybe I’m just a sweaty person?”

“Looks like it. Without several times more water than planned, it doesn’t look like we can keep diving.”

I wanted to turn back that second. It was one thing to fail when hit by some unforeseen situation, but I’d really hate it if we failed due to running out of steam in a predictable, preventable way.

“Aww, going back so soon?”

“We’d be going waterless here.”

“Hrm... Damn, guess it can’t be helped then, huh?”

Lastiara wasn’t pleased, but the thought of diving further without any water put a gloomy look on her face.

“For what it’s worth, I did get a general grasp of Floor 23, so we’re not empty-handed.”

“I left all the mapping to you; Can we actually get back using this map?”

“No worries there.”

So long as I had my dimensional magic, the concept of getting lost didn’t apply. Moreover, I was confident in my memory, and just for caution’s sake, I’d recorded the layout of the avenues without the Pathway running through them on my parchment. Ill-prepared I was not. Since Lastiara had been roaming around with a fuzzy awareness of her surroundings, she clearly didn’t know the way back, which made her anxious. To dispel her unease, I retraced our steps with sure-footed strides.

While it was a bit half-cocked, our endpoint today was midway through Floor 23. But going by the potential goal of one new floor per day, the day's dive was a rousing success. We headed for the *Connection* portal on Floor 20. We were attacked by plenty of monsters on the way back, but they were all manageable so it was no problem. There *was* one problem, however, and it lay on the floor that was supposed to be empty—Floor 20.

Dimension picked up on something, so before entering, I used my magic to examine the situation. Lying in wait were a young knight and a wolf with a bluish coat of fur. Given she'd made it to Floor 20, she was likely one of the Seven Celestial Knights. I expanded my perception field from my spot on Floor 21 and used Analyze on the girl.

【STATUS】

NAME: Ragne Kyquora

HP: 152/153

MP: 34/34

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 16

STR 3.22

VIT 3.91

DEX 11.23

AGI 5.22

INT 7.12

MAG 1.52

APT 1.12

INNATE SKILLS: Magic Power Manipulation 2.11

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 0.52, Holy Magic 1.02

【STATUS】

NAME: Sera Radiant

HP: 252/256

MP: 43/101

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 21

STR 6.23

VIT 7.92

DEX 8.89

AGI 10.02

INT 5.60

MAG 7.77

APT 1.57

The knight was named Ragne and the wolf was called Sera.

“Wait, that wolf’s Ms. Radiant?”

“Sieg, what’re you doing just standing there?”

“I mean, there’s a wolf that seems to be Ms. Radiant on Floor 20. And a kid named Ragne too.”

“So, two of the girls from my crib. Break a leg, Sieg.”

“Sure. I don’t feel like I’m gonna lose, but still...”

Lastiara probably thought they were nothing special, and truth be told, I was with her on that. We ascended to Floor 20 with a breezy mood. When we entered the room, the knight who’d taken up position at the center bowed to us. It was the same as yesterday.

“Milady,” said the knight with a shortcut hairstyle, “you unharmed?”

She was a vivacious girl who stood a tad shorter than me. I wouldn’t call her

an unsurpassed beauty, but her face was well-proportioned with an age-appropriate level of cuteness. She wore a high-quality short-sleeved shirt and an oddly long skirt, atop which a loincloth was coiled many times over, making her bottom half look quite heavy.

“Long time no see, Raggie,” said Lastiara.

Since she looked younger than me, I figured I’d call her Raggie too.

“So, Raggie,” Lastiara continued, “what brings you here?”

“Old man Hopes told me the boy would be around Floor 20 on a dive.”

“Ah, so that’s what this is about.” I heard Lastiara add, “Old man, we didn’t need this...” under her breath.

“Honestly, I just wanted to kick back at the cathedral,” said Ragne, smiling wryly as she looked at the wolf beside her. The wolf barked. “Huh? Ah, yes, yes, I’ll do it. I’ll do it now.” She drew her sword.

I addressed Lastiara in a low voice. “I can call that wolf Ms. Radiant, right?”

“Yep. Serry’s got lots of semifer in her blood. Looks like she’s talking to Raggie through magic. I’ve got my eyes, so it’s an open book to me, but let’s have some fun by pretending we don’t know.”

“Sure...I guess.”

I didn’t want to get into it and get my ear talked off. This was probably Lastiara’s way of hiding her cards, so I let it go. I drew my sword and stood in front of her. Raggie reacted by taking what looked like a note or memo out from inside the breast of her clothing. She started reading it aloud.

“Err, ahem. My name is Lady Knight Ragne Kyquora, and I challenge Siegfried Vizzita to a duel over our lady. The rules are the same as when the duel was conducted with Sera Radiant. Now let’s have ourselves a fair fight and junk.”

Wow was her heart not in it. To draw an analogy, it kind of felt like a senpai dragging their underclassman to a sports-focused afterschool club activity.

“Sounds good. Except there’s one thing I’d like you to change. Could you add in that if I win, you guys won’t bring the other knights to me?”

Raggie nodded readily. "Ah, yeah that's fine. Also, if we can, let's end the duel as soon as there's an injury. Don't wanna get hurt bad for something like this."

"Of course. That works for me."

It seemed she wasn't as invested as Ms. Radiant. The wolf beside her growled. It was giving Raggie a fright, so I wanted her to stop.

"So then, do we wanna start?" asked Ragne.

"Sure, we can start," I replied.

Ragne was about to brandish her extravagant one-handed sword, which didn't suit her style, when—

"Please, wait a second," Lastiara interrupted.

I shifted my attention to her, not knowing her reasons for cutting in.



“Sieg,” she said quietly so only I could hear, “that condition you just blindly accepted—that the duel ends when either side gets injured—puts you at a huge disadvantage. She’s specialized for that.”

“Huh? But her stats are so low.”

Raggie’s stats were the lowest out of all the Celestial Knights I’d encountered so far. I didn’t see anything in her that would warrant that stern expression on Lastiara’s face.

“She’s an anomaly. A kid with numbers behind her numbers. I won’t tell you more than this, so that I don’t favor either side too much, but try not to lose right at the start.”

Her eyes were dead serious. She’d been optimistic until I’d accepted Raggie’s new condition. It was the start of the duel I had to watch out for. Presumably, Raggie’s initial attack would be atypical and unpredictable enough to compensate for her stats.

Lastiara’s super favoring my side with that hint... I couldn’t afford to embarrass myself by losing after receiving information like that. I deployed *Dimension: Calculash* and focused it somewhat stronger than normal.

“All right, can we get this going?” asked Raggie.

“Yeah, all good now.”

We brandished our swords and bowed. The duel was on.

Right away, I tried to throw out my support spells—

“Spellcast: F—?!”

The unidentified blade was stretching towards my throat. As I could see it begin to lengthen through *Calculash*, I succeeded in shunting its trajectory by lifting up the blade in my hands. Then I gleaned the nature of the blade. She wasn’t moving the opulent weapon she was holding at all. Instead, from her free hand, a blade made of solidified magic was extending out towards me. It wasn’t that I saw it with my eyes and dodged; I only noticed because I had a high-angle view of her whole body through my magic. If I’d battled her normally, I’d have taken the hit for sure. It was only thanks to Lastiara’s words

of warning, and to the special qualities of my magic, that I managed to block the attack.

With her opening move deflected, Raggie retracted her blade of magic, her expression flustered.

“Gah! That was so clean!”

Without taking a moment to breathe, she launched her second and third attacks, which I parried using the point of my sword. We were around ten meters apart, but it felt like we were fighting a stone’s throw away from each other. It was akin to fighting a laser gun that was firing nonstop.

But just as Lastiara had said, it was only the opening move I had to watch out for. As long as I knew the trick, she was no match for me. Raggie’s technique wasn’t polished. Put simply, her sense for battle could use work. Hit accuracy was all-important, but she was lacking in that department.

I grew accustomed to the stretching blade, and when I began closing the distance while deflecting her attack, she threw up her hands in surrender.

“Ah, I just can’t deal anymore. Might be my first time losing with such an advantageous condition in place.”

Raggie boisterously heaved her elegant sword into the ground and threw in the towel.

“That was a fun match,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Oh no, thank you,” she replied.

We got close and shook hands with lovely smiles on our faces. It was sports-club enthusiasm writ large.

In the back, Raggie’s senpai, Ms. Radiant, was barking her head off, but I chose to ignore it. Raggie answered her colleague with a half-smile.

“C’mon, it couldn’t be helped! This dude’s strong, and he seems nice, and he’s hot. Is there a problem? If milady didn’t beat me to him, I might’ve fallen for him, you know?”

In response, the wolf kept barking noisily. Raggie interpreted for us:

“Err, what was that? ‘We must not allow a maiden as sweet, lovely, and pure as our lady, so very like an immaculate flower petal made of winter’s first snow, to be snatched away by a knave like him’? If you ask me, our lady’s a right scheming stinker, but okay.”

“Golly,” said Lastiara, “you’re so mean, Raggie. I’m just frank when I talk to you, that’s all. ‘Scheming’? Is that what you think? I might cry...”

She pretended to be wounded by Raggie’s words, feigning boohoos and breaking down into tears. This caused the formerly barking wolf to start snapping at Raggie.

“Augh! Stop it, miss, please! See, that’s what I meant by ‘scheming’! She’s faking it!”

After the knight and the wolf roughhoused for a bit, I told Raggie to make sure that she strictly observed the terms of our agreement. Raggie vowed that as a knight, she would never break her oath. After calming the agitated wolf, the two made to leave the chamber.

“Ah, right, see you. Till next time, milady,” said Raggie. “And I’ll be seeing you too, Studs.”

Laid-back as ever, she started walking towards Floor 19, heading for the surface. Since we had a means of teleporting, we didn’t follow them up, waving goodbye until they disappeared from view.

And with that, I had beaten the third of the Seven Celestial Knights.

Chapter 5: Crossroads (The Festival)

After driving off Raggie and Ms. Radiant, we headed back home. Maria, who had been doing the cleaning and laundry, noticed we'd popped back in and greeted us with an awkward look on her face.

"Welcome home. You're back early today; I haven't set about preparing your meals yet."

Apparently, since we'd returned before the arranged time, our food wasn't ready. As I had time to spare, I thought I'd go do some shopping and visit Dia, when:

"Hey, Sieg, let's go to the Festival," said a smiling Lastiara, who was sitting in a chair in the living room.

"The Festival?"

"Yeah. Right now, Whoseyards is in the middle of a festival. In four days, it's the annual Day of the Blessed Birth, but all through the week leading up to it, the whole country puts on a festival."

"Oh yeah, I did hear about that."

If I remembered correctly, it was Dia who had told me. Since he was going to be discharged from the hospital on the Day of the Blessed Birth, I had a feeling I'd promised him we'd hit the festival together once he was out.

"This'll be my first time participating in the festival," said Lastiara, "so I'm mighty intrigued."

"I'm not uninterested."

A festival in a new culture? I was curious. Plus, I didn't really go to festivals very often back in my world either. It wasn't that I didn't want to check them out, I just couldn't. As such, festivals had a certain amount of pull for me.

"Then it's decided. Let's go check it out!"

"Sure. I've gotta go out to buy more water anyway."

The event may have been mostly meaningless, but it was perfect as a change of pace seeing as I had time to kill. The only thing on my to-do list at the moment was restocking water.

“Hold on, please wait,” said Maria, who was beginning to make our food. “Is that what they call...” She trailed off.

I looked at her, and I could see a disappointed expression flit over her face. But she instantly suppressed that expression and said nothing more. Did she think we’d leave her behind? Lastiara, for her part, was simply suppressing a smile and didn’t add her voice to the conversation; I had to be the one to invite her.

“You can come with us. Make your preparations now.”

“Wait, you really mean it?”

“It’s a matter of course.” If I didn’t invite her, I’d stop being able to call her a friend or a comrade. To me, it was only natural, but it seemed that to her, it wasn’t.

“But what about your food—”

“Let’s eat out today. Together.”

“O-Okay Master.”

I had basically ordered her to comply.

“Shall we get going?” I asked. “Lastiara, lead the way.”

“Heh heh, sure thing,” she said, chuckling as she gently got to her feet.

I was happy that Lastiara was happy, but she could be a true pain. She’d wanted to bring Maria along, but she didn’t say it. She’d forced me to invite her just for her own amusement.

“Don’t just stand there chuckling; guide us already.”

Lastiara stifled her laughter as she took the lead, and together we exited through the door. Whoseyards wasn’t all that far from my house. After all, being close to the Dungeon also meant I was close to the other countries’ borders.

After an hour's walk, we could already begin to take in the liveliness of the festival. Lastiara hadn't been exaggerating when she said the entire country took part in the festivities; there was a party atmosphere right up to the very edge of the nation.

When we reached the main street, there were a number of stalls, their vendors loudly soliciting customers. The stalls were varied, from those with food to those selling small items. The culinary culture on display aroused my interest, so I went around observing the food.

There were cheap and simple sweet treats and confectionery, just like in my world, but also foodstuffs I'd never seen before. Moreover, all of the cookware and cooking tools were new to me. This world used magic gems as heat sources, and knives that operated via magic, which really drove home the fact that this was a festival in a fantasy world.

Flame-broiled and grilled food I didn't recognize, bunches of nuts and berries in off-putting shapes, meat skewers cooked in unique ways, loaves of bread too giant to be eating while walking around—it was all so novel. Faced with food whose flavors I couldn't begin to imagine, I couldn't hide my exhilaration. I was jumping around so restlessly that I must have looked like some country rube.

"Master, you're goggling too much at normal food stands..."

"Ah, sorry, it's just, everything's so new to me..."

"Everybody everywhere celebrates the Festival of the Blessed Birth once a year. And the stalls are all your standard ones too."

To Maria, this was all the same old, same old, inspiring no particularly strong emotions in her. Not so for me, though. I was at a festival born of a culture that was totally foreign to me. Everything was fresh and exciting. But since Maria didn't know my background, she was left wondering what I was so enthralled by.

"Back in my hometown, nobody threw a festival like this, so it's super new to me."

"Huh? Didn't you say you're from Fania, Master?"

"Uh, right, yeah, I am. But I used to live in a remote region of Fania, where

there are no festivals. That's why this is a first for me."

"A 'remote region,' Master?"

The more we dwelled on the topic of my supposed hometown, the more the lie fell apart. I pretended I was busy enjoying the festival and pulled away from her.

As I was examining my surroundings, I passed by a group wearing fancy costumes. They were wearing animal headdresses, mimicking wolves and bears and the like. Maybe participating in this festival in such costumes bore some cultural significance. I figured Lastiara was well-versed in all things Whoseyards, so I asked her.

"Hey, Lastiara. What were those costumes for?"

Lastiara, who was still at the head of the pack, looked back at me. "No idea!" she replied, stoked. "What was that?!"

"Wait, you don't know either?"

"This is my first time here too!" she said, staring around just like I had been doing.

I'd been too amped up to realize how amped up she was as well.

"Hold on, is this really your first time?"

"As embarrassing as it is... For a number of reasons, this is the first time I've come into town while the festival's on, which makes Mar-Mar the only one of us who's been before!"

"Whoa, that's insane. Not one but *two* people who have never been to a festival before..."

"So yeah, I'm curious about what those costumes were about, too," said Lastiara. "You tell us, Mar-Mar!"

She stopped leading the way and came over next to Maria. We began walking side-by-side, listening to Maria's explanation as we went.

"Those costumes are in prayer for good health. They're derived from a legend that's spread throughout the continent. By dressing up like the companions of

Saint Tiara Whoseyards, they're hoping to receive that saint's blessings of protection. They say the closer the Day of the Blessed Birth approaches, the more the saint's power returns to the land, so there are a lot of people who participate in the festival in costume."

"Oh yeah!" said Lastiara, clapping her hands together. "Now that you mention it, I feel like I've heard that before!"

"Come to think of it, Miss Lastiara, your name is similar to that saint's name. Did your parents give you that name to confer the saint's blessings?"

"Oh, that's our Mar-Mar," she replied nonchalantly. "You got it."

Maria smiled faintly. "What an auspicious name."

But I wasn't smiling. Maria didn't know Lastiara's surname of Whoseyards. I couldn't help but think there was something to that.

We continued walking about the townscape of Whoseyards as we listened to Maria explain stuff. The most thriving section of the city was its heart, so we naturally ended up headed there.

"All right, Mar-Mar, let's do some shopping together!"

"No thanks. The festival food's fairly expensive; It's a waste of money."

"But if we don't eat, what was the point of coming here?"

"I'm happy just looking."

"Aww, seriously?"

Maria spoke sense. Even I could tell the wares on offer at these stalls were rather costly, and I wasn't exactly well-versed in this world's market prices. To Maria, who was used to festivals, it was overpriced without any added value to it. I didn't want Lastiara feeling blue, though, so I sent her a lifeboat.

"Give it up, Lastiara. I'll go shopping with you."

"Nothing else for it, huh?" she replied, disheartened. It seemed Lastiara had wanted to hang out with Maria more than me.

The festival air was doing wonders for me. Just by marching down the street, my spirits were being lifted to my very core. Likely because I wasn't too familiar

with festivals even before coming to this world, in just under an hour, my mood had reached a peak, and the same went for Lastiara. When I stumbled upon a stall displaying some curiosity or marvel, I shouted for her and veered closer.

“Hey, Lastiara! Look at how weird this one is!”

“Whoa! That’s brilliant. What is it?!”

At first, I’d put on airs, acting cool and unaffected, but there was such a plethora of the wild and new that I was unable to tamp down my excitement. Since Lastiara reacted much the same way I did, we both got all the more excited. Such diversions were at their best when shared with someone else.

“You do realize that’s meant for kids, right?”

Behind us stood Maria, watching with pitying eyes. But as we’d grown accustomed to her cold gaze, it didn’t bother us.

We bought and ate snacks as we walked, and eventually, we reached the grand plaza in the central part of town. There, we found not only shops but also diversions much like amusement park attractions. They weren’t, however, what I’d consider lavish or modern. Instead, it was simple fare like target shooting or cutting shapes out of cookies. But that was enough to get us excited. I had no experience with this type of entertainment. Moreover, there were games and activities that didn’t exist in modern times. It was only whetting my interest more and more.

At the moment, my attention was on what target shooting was like in this world. It made use of arrows wrapped in cloth in place of the arrowheads, and it seemed the goal was to shoot animals running around within a fenced area. The cloth had a sticky paint on it, allowing one to determine whether they’d hit a given target. This game would never fly in my world, both from safety and animal rights standpoints.

Animals were bouncing around the pen. Their nimbleness was such that the thought crossed my mind they were more than animals—they were monsters. But I lacked the knowledge to tell one way or the other.

There wasn’t anything great in the way of the prizes on offer, but my body twinged at the challenge; this thing wasn’t going to be all that easy to shoot. Yet

just as Maria had said, there were no grown-ups lining up for it. Since Lastiara and I were slightly taller than average, we'd come across as two adults playing a kid's game. I didn't want to draw any negative attention to myself.

"You're a kid, Maria; why don't you do it for us? Then we'd be able to join in without looking weird."

"I... I'm not a kid! I'm almost thirteen!"

I thought maybe she'd have something to say about how pathetic that whole idea of mine was, but instead she was more offended about being treated as a child. Thirteen was older than I'd have guessed, but it was still well within the childhood range as far as I was concerned. I didn't think of myself as an adult, so naturally, someone who was younger than me couldn't be one either. Of course, that view was informed by the values instilled in me back in my world.

"Lastiara, is a thirteen-year-old an adult?"

"Hmm, over here, she's come of age, yeah."

"I see..."

I lightly apologized to Maria, upon which a question occurred to her.

"Come to think of it, how old are you two?"

My age. It hinged partially on how accurately my words were being translated for them, but as far as I could tell from the calendar, there wasn't much of a difference when it came to the reckoning of time. It was probably fine to answer with the age I'd be considered back on Earth.

"I'm sixteen. Probably."

"Sixteen?!" replied Maria.

I was on the taller side, but my face was a sixteen-year-old's, so this was the first time someone had reacted with that much surprise. "Huh? Is it that shocking?"

"I thought you'd be around twenty. You're tall, and you're so mild-mannered..."

Chances were, the average height in this world was relatively low. I could see

that being the case. The mild-mannered part, on the other hand, came out of nowhere.

“I’m also sixteen,” said Lastiara. “More or less.”

“You are?!”

Lastiara was on the taller side as well. Furthermore, her proportions put most adults to shame, which made her seem even more grown-up.

“What?” said Lastiara. “Is it that unexpected?”

She shot me a puzzled look. I smiled faintly and shook my head. I wasn’t too surprised.

Maria was trembling. “We’re only three years apart, but we’re worlds apart...height-wise...bust-wise...”

It was true that one wouldn’t think they were only three years apart. I looked at Maria with pity in my eyes, and in response, Maria pulled herself back together.

“Our... Our ages aside, you two *look* like adults! If you indulge in this kind of thing, you’ll get laughed at!”

That was what it boiled down to in the end. If you *appeared* older, your actual age didn’t matter.

“You don’t have to get that up in arms over it...”

“Pay attention to all the not-so-warm stares you’re drawing! It’s embarrassing!”

There were certainly pairs of eyes that were looking at us and the fuss we were raising with cold amusement. However, those were the eyes of folks looking at a group that was worked up by the magic of the festival, not as if we were pathetic wretches. Besides, if you asked me, most of the people were staring at Lastiara, captivated by her uncommon beauty. Her mere presence drew eyes to her. Her sheer prettiness prevented her from ever being able to melt into a crowd. It was also probably why so many were looking at me with envy. At first, we’d tried to have a good time while not standing out too much, but we’d given up on that fairly early on.

"Hee hee," giggled Lastiara. "Whenever Mar-Mar gets all shy and embarrassed, it puts me in a more chipper mood. Did you think I'd give up that easily, Mar-Mar?"

In high spirits, Lastiara availed herself to the target game's sign-in. Maria tried to stop her, but since the more she tried to stop her, the more gleeful Lastiara got, she ultimately resigned herself.

Shortly thereafter, Lastiara received a bow from reception, and the game was afoot. The goal was to shoot the animals within the field of play as many times as possible from a set position. The more animals shot within the time limit, the better the prize.

Lastiara nocked and fired each arrow carefully and conscientiously. Every shot was flowing and elegant, and her accuracy was peerless. She proved superhuman, like an archer who often pulled off miracle shots in adventure tales.

That godlike prowess combined with how gorgeous she looked inevitably turned heads. Initially, kids kept gathering one after the other out of awe and curiosity. Then the adults in the vicinity were drawn in by the kids, only for their eyes to become glued to her and her beauty.

By the time the sand in the timepiece signaled her time was up, almost every one of the birds and beasts released into the field had been beamed. The children who had been watching nearby burst out with whoas and wows, and the adults who had been watching from afar applauded.

"Heh. That was surprisingly fun!" murmured Lastiara. She twirled her bow and struck a pose to play to the crowd. Then, pushed her way through the applauding spectators and received her prize from the stiff-faced receptionist. She must have understood that she was a freakish anomaly, because she didn't choose the higher-valued prize, opting for a cute necklace that even low-scorers could win. The necklace was almost entirely made of wood, save for the magic gem at its center. It was neither too cheap looking nor too extravagant. Lastiara put it around Maria's neck.

"A present from me, Mar-Mar."

Maria exhaled. "Thank you very much," she said quietly.

The folks around us were looking on with charmed expressions. I understood now; by gifting her prize to a child, she'd negated her impression of being immature. That way, there might be nothing to be embarrassed about.

The circumstances being what they were, taking on the challenge would make me stand out, but since Lastiara was standing out and then some, that ship had sailed. I concluded that I might as well just do it.

"All right, you're on. To fetch Maria a present, I'm gonna flex." In truth, I was doing it because I wanted to, but that was the excuse I fed the crowd.

"Ah, that's okay," said Maria. "I don't really want—"

"Leeet's do this, baby!" I interrupted, walking over to reception. Watching Lastiara go at it had me dying to give it a shot too.

Reception was devoid of other hopefules, possibly because it took moxie to follow an act like Lastiara's. I was handed arrows and a bow, and once the targets were washed, the game was on once again.

"Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash.*"

I surreptitiously deployed my magic. Only real big guns would be able to notice, but seeing as Lastiara was a big gun, she burst out laughing, unable to hold it in.

I couldn't bean the animals quite as elegantly as she had done, so I focused on beating her score. However, I had no experience with the bow, so I missed my first few shots. I may have been blessed with fantastic spells and stats, but it seemed I couldn't rival Lastiara in this department.

However, after making a number of adjustments, I got used to it. My superhuman senses and dexterity helped make my aim more and more accurate. I emulated the example set by Lastiara earlier and fired arrow after arrow as I leaned on my stats. Ultimately, I managed to beat her score.

The onlookers cheered and applauded, causing the air at the venue to get even warmer. I went to get my prize, but I had trouble choosing one. Anything would be fine as long as I could give it to Maria, but there weren't many options as far as accessories went. I ended up having to select a bracelet that was similar to the necklace. I walked right up to Maria and handed it to her. "Here

you go, Maria.”

She took it, an exasperated look on her face. “So immature...” She about-faced and made to leave the area, likely because she was loath to stand out even more. It could also simply be that she wasn’t accustomed to such a raucous atmosphere.

“Wait, hold on!” said Lastiara. “I wanna beat Sieg’s score! Let me have another go!”

But Maria ignored her and kept on walking. I didn’t want this turning into a quagmire, so I decided to chide Lastiara.

“One try each. C’mon, Lastiara, we’re leaving.”

“Nuh-uh, no way! I won’t let ya take the win and run!”

“If you wanna compete with me, let’s do it at the next festival. Now hurry up, would you?”

She grimaced. “I...can’t. I *can’t* wait for the next one!”

“Quit being so self-indulgent. If you’re staying here to do it again, I’m leaving you behind.”

“Rrgh... Quitting while you’re ahead, huh?” But she reluctantly left the area.

So as not to lose Maria in the crowd, we half-ran past all the curious gazes. By the time we caught up with her, there was no one paying us any mind. We’d drawn some attention earlier, but in the end, it was just part of the overall hubbub of the festival. As we slipped into the crowd, people stopped looking our way—apart from the envious stares.

“Hey, Mar-Mar,” Lastiara called out from behind her, “you don’t want to do it? If you’re worried about money, I’ll give you some. ’Cause I was the one who invited you here, after all.”

Maria sighed. “How could I, after *that*? I’m perfectly fine, thank you. I did it when I was a little kid.”

“Ah, so you’ve done it before. I guess that’s fine, then.” Lastiara started walking in front of Maria.

My eyes darted around, on the hunt for something fun or interesting as I pushed my way through the festival-goers. After some walking, a riverbank came into view. A rather large crowd had gathered there; some kind of event was being held. Upon seeing it, Lastiara took me by the hand.

“There’s something happening over by the river!”

“Wow, cool,” I replied. “Looks like they’re doing something that can only be done by the water.”

The goldfish-scooping game back in my world sprang to mind. Tingling with anticipation, I followed after her. We couldn’t afford to lose each other, so Lastiara used her free hand to grab Maria’s, and the three of us walked down to the riverside stall.

A net was placed both upstream and downstream, and a large quantity of fish had been released in the space between those nets. The river was only about knee-deep for an adult. A gaggle of children were scrambling like crazy to grab the fish barehanded.

“A fish-wrangling game where you try to grab as many as you can to take home and eat...I guess?”

I’d seen a game like this in my world too, so I was a mite disappointed. But Lastiara’s eyes were sparkling.

“I’m gonna do it! I’m gonna beat you this time, Sieg!”

“Ugh, fine. If I don’t participate, you won’t have a worthy rival.”

Just because I’d seen the game before didn’t mean I’d tried it. It did look fun, so I had no reason to refuse. Waiting our turns in line, we engaged in idle chitchat to kill some time. Maria taught us about fish cuisine and cooking, while Lastiara asked what we’d like to eat. Around the halfway point in line, a girl called out to us.

“Whoa, if it isn’t Sieg and Mar-Mar.”

The girl who was drawing near had an animal mask to the side of her head. It was the Dungeon Guardian Alty, and she had on many layers of warm-looking clothes.

I raised my guard and scanned the vicinity. After making sure Alty was alone, I eased up.

“What’re you doing here, Alty?”

“What do ya mean? Can’t a girl have some fun?”

“Sure, don’t let me stop you.”

There was nothing wrong with it per se, but seeing a Dungeon boss wander around aimlessly was bad for my heart.

“I was hanging out with my friends at the academy until a little while ago. Ah, don’t worry, Franny ain’t here to torture you.”

“That’s a relief.”

As Alty and I spoke, Lastiara started laughing from behind. Then she came to us with a pep in her step.

“Pfft, talk about a surprise! I was thinking to myself, boy, she can really handle herself even though she’s such a cutie, and then I *eyeballed* you—and what should I find but the unthinkable!” She was laughing, but her eyes were sharp, radiating a palpable fighting spirit. She must have seen that Alty wasn’t human, but rather a truly formidable boss monster.

“Hold on, Lastiara,” I said. “She’s an ally of mine—”

“I know. I can tell by looking at her, she hasn’t got the murder vibe. So, can I call you Allie? My name’s Lastiara. Nice to meet you!”

“Oho, so you’re that... Nice to meet you, Lastiara. It’s just, please don’t call me any kind of pet name; That’d make me feel too awkward. Let’s just call each other by our names.”

“Okay, Alty.”

“Thanks, Lastiara. Here’s to a budding friendship.”

They shook hands, beaming at each other. I was looking on nervously. Truth be told, I wouldn’t have been surprised if they had tried to kill each other right then and there. I seriously considered taking Maria and going home using *Connection*.

Alty must have noticed the look in my eyes, because she laughed and turned to me. "You really are a worrywart, Sieg."

"No, I'm just the only normal one here. So, what are you planning to do now?"

"Good question. Guess I'll hang out with you guys, if only for a little while. I can't hang out for too long, though."

"Well, if that's all, then..."

I'd have loved it if she had bumped off somewhere, but refusing her out of hand would be too unfeeling as her ostensible ally. Grudgingly, I okayed her tagging along, and Lastiara seemed all the merrier for it.

"Nice!" said Lastiara. "Let's compete together, the three of us. I wanna see how strong you are, Alty."

It seemed she was looking forward to duking it out with a Dungeon Guardian.

"Sorry, I'll pass," said Alty with a wry smile. "I'm no good with water. I'll just jeer and heckle from the side."

As was the standard, a fire monster like Alty wasn't best friends with water, so she fell back and started chatting with Maria. Afterwards, when our turns came, Lastiara and I stepped into the field of battle.

I worked out a strategy to defeat Lastiara by mustering all of my strength since I knew that was what she wanted. At the end of the day, what she wanted most was to play using her full potential, and she was by my side because she knew she could do that with me. I had an obligation to show her a good time. That was our agreement.

Not that all of it stemmed from a sense of obligation. Part of me did want to enjoy this world. And providing her with company was far from agony. If I was able to secure the weapon that she was while having some fun at the same time, I wasn't going to complain.

Making full use of all of my dimensional magic, I set about winning the game. As a consequence, the audience was pulled in and the competition was ratcheted up to a level that made the proprietor turn white.

In the end, I was stopped by Alty by force and endured a long scolding from Maria. But Lastiara seemed to be enjoying herself regardless, and to an extent, I was too. And I learned that as long as the Dungeon wasn't in the picture, Lastiara and I were fairly like-minded. What a shame—if only I hadn't had anything to worry about. If only I hadn't had a time limit looming over my head.

I wanna be with Lastiara longer. I want her in my life.

But I swallowed that sentiment immediately, bottling it up in the recesses of my heart. Just like with Maria before her, I had no other choice.

The festival kept on going. Putting a lid on that stray thought, I continued laughing alongside Lastiara and the others.



“Guys, I think I’m gonna go home soon.” The sun had set, and Alty communicated that her time was running out.

“Aww,” said Lastiara, pouting. “C’mon, let’s hang out some more!”

“Sorry, but I gotta show up at the academy tomorrow. I can’t hang out for very long,” replied Alty apologetically.

“Ah, I should head home too,” said Maria. “There’s nothing for me to do, so I might as well accompany Ms. Alty.”

After eating some food, Maria hadn’t used any money whatsoever. That could be why she’d spent so much time chatting with Alty, who also hadn’t spent a single coin. Maybe she wanted to go back with her because they’d become friends during that time.

“In that case,” said Alty, “I’ll be responsible for Mar-Mar and escort her. You two should keep enjoying yourselves a little longer.”

Maria was all smiles. Lastiara grumbled a tad, but the pair went on home without incident.

Once we were by ourselves, Lastiara smiled and said, “Now that Mar-Mari’s not here, do you wanna make merry for *real*? ”

“Nah, no thanks. I’m a bit tired myself.”

"I figured. I am too. How about we have a nice chat while searching for some intriguing food?"

"That sounds like the thing to do. Only, if we're gonna be chatting, could you tell me more about this world? I can't ask anyone besides you, so this is the perfect opportunity."

"I don't mind, but...that's only because you're keeping the fact you're an Outworlder on the down-low. Does it really warrant such secrecy?"

"There's never been one in the past. If word gets out, I don't know what'll become of me, so of course I'm being cautious. So please don't say that word when there're this many people around."

Lastiara had freely spoken the word "Outworlder" in public. The history of my world featured witch hunts and massacres of heretics. Even in this day and age, were extraterrestrials to be discovered, chances were high they'd be turned into guinea pigs. My pool of knowledge was shallow, but even I knew that an Outworlder was basically akin to a space alien. There was every possibility that I'd come to a standstill out of the fear that inspired.

"You really are a scaredy-cat, Sieg. Fine, I'll keep it secret where possible. That said, I think you ought to tell Mar-Mar sooner rather than later."

"Tell Maria? Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? She's one of us, isn't she? Companions confide in each other!"

"She's one of us, yes. But that's apples and oranges."

"Well huh...that's how you think, is it? Heh heh. Hey, if that's what you're going with, I guess that's fine by me."

Was Maria my companion, my comrade, my friend? Yes. But that didn't mean I felt like divulging my secrets to her so readily. And when I told Lastiara as much, she nodded repeatedly, clearly delighted. Her glee gave me pause. Whenever she got like this, she was thinking things that no normal person would call good.

"What's with you? Is something wrong with that?"

"Nope, nothing's wrong with it. In fact, I like it that way. You're right; even among companions, one doesn't talk about anything and everything."

With her love of drama, what was good in her eyes probably wasn't in mine. When she suggested something with that smile, I was best served by avoiding whatever she said like the plague. We hadn't known each other for long, but I knew that much already.

"All right, fine," I said. "I'll tell Maria when the opportunity arises and see what happens. She is one of us, after all."

"Wait, you *are* gonna tell her? Sure, that's fine too."

While she seemed somewhat disappointed, she bounced back in no time, looking cheery once again. Then she moved on. "All right, guess I'll talk to you about this world. I'm not really sure where to start, though. It's hard to know."

She had a point. If someone asked me to explain my world, I wouldn't be able to launch right into it either.

"I mean, you don't have to explain everything in one go. I'm sure it's complicated, so I don't think I'd be able to grasp everything right away. A little at a time, starting with stuff that's close to you, is fine. For example...you could start by telling me about this festival and then expanding from there bit by bit. Through that, I'll pick up on the customs and general knowledge of the people here."

"This festival, huh? That should be simple enough. I don't have much experience being at the festival, but I do have information for you."

"I'm particularly curious about the Day of the Blessed Birth that caps off this festival."

"The Day of the Blessed Birth? Sure thing. I'll tell you about it."

She offered a weak, fleeting smile. To her, the Day of the Blessed Birth might bear some special meaning. She continued speaking with deep feeling as she cherished her surroundings.

"This Festival is the run-up to a certain figure's birthday. It lasts around a week, and on the Day of the Blessed Birth, a lavish ceremony is conducted at

the cathedral in Whoseyards.”

“There’s a similar holiday in my world, so I get the picture. How many times a year does an event of that nature take place?”

“Let’s see... The main religion of the Dungeon Alliance, the Creed of Levahn, has a ton of saints, see. There are three Blessed Births to celebrate, and that’s not mentioning all the many festivals revering the divine. I guess you could say this is one of those big Blessed Births.”

“Interesting...”

While the customs were different, it was similar enough to my world. If you put people on different soil and under different skies, perhaps they think up the same sorts of things regardless.

“This is the Blessed Birth of Tiara Whoseyards, the saint who’s said to have laid the foundation for the magic transmitted through the continent.”

“Hold on. I’ve been meaning to ask you. Isn’t that name almost identical to yours?”

Lastiara’s origins were already shrouded in uncertainty from the jump without throwing that into the mix too. I had a bad feeling about it.

“Yeah, silly. Saint Tiara is *me*, after all.”

I sighed. I’d seen it coming, so that warded off some of the shock. All the same, this was doubtless going to spell trouble for me. I urged her to continue.

“Obviously, I’m not *her* her. She lived centuries ago. It’s just that I have the same body as her. My soul, not so much!”

“You have the same body as her? You don’t need anything beyond that to scare me. What’s that about? You can do stuff like that in this world using magic?”

“Yep, you can. Looks like they had the huge loads of time, money, and magic energy they needed, and they successfully recreated the body of the sainted Tiara. Boy, the works of man sure are frightening.”

I was aghast and stunned. At the end of the day, it was the same as my world’s cloning technology or genetic engineering. It seemed as though, while

civilizations and cultures may vary, they wound up at similar destinations. In that respect, it was much like the festivals.

“So you can accomplish feats like *that* through magic? So why’d they recreate Saint Tiara’s body, anyway? I’m guessing they didn’t do it for shits and giggles.”

“Of course not. They have a variety of goals. But I can’t tell you more than that. If I did, I’d end up explaining away the enigmatic part of me, and what fun is that?”

When it came to information about her, she became reluctant to divulge much. As she’d said before, she felt there was a certain storytelling appeal to the truth behind her coming out in bits and pieces over time. But I was too curious to let it go too easily.

“Hey, what happened to ‘companions confide in each other’?”

“They do. I don’t disagree. So let’s do it this way: if you tell Mar-Mar that you’re actually Kanami and not Sieg, then I’ll tell you about *my Tiara*.”

“Urgh, so that’s how you’re playing it...”

She was driving a hard bargain. I’d agreed to tell Maria at some point, but I’d never said when. I had wanted to put it off if possible.

“Okay, deal. But I’m going to wait for the right moment, so we’re talking far future here.”

“And here I was willing to tell you today. You are *such* a wuss.”

“I am not a wuss! If I were to tell her out of the blue, think of how Maria would feel. She’s already processing the shock of everything that’s going on right now. She got enslaved and lost so much. If I add my whole deal on top of that, it’d just trouble her all the more.”

“Heh heh. If you say so, it must be true, Sieg. Go ahead, delay the timing as you see fit,” she said, looking at me with chilly eyes.

“I *will* do as I see fit. And after I tell her, be sure to tell me your story.”

“Of course.”

Just then, I spotted a stall with strange and unusual food on offer. They were

fruits and nuts deep-fried in spicy-smelling oil. It was like nothing I'd ever tried, so I suggested the two of us get in line.

As we ate what we had just bought, Lastiara continued talking to me. While she couldn't discuss herself, she did appear to like telling me about history.

"I may not be able to explain the Tiara that I am now, but I can tell you about the Tiara of the past. Learning about the greats of years gone by will naturally teach you about this world, so it's perfect."

"Wow, was this Saint Tiara really that outstanding?"

"She was the definition of outstanding. She created the bedrock for all sorts of things. I mean, she created magic, for one. Plus, she created Whoseyards."

"That's pretty incredible."

"The other saints were too. Generally, they went around founding nations and saving the world. Stuff like that."

"They saved the world? These saints were human, right?"

"They were. But they could also hear voices others couldn't. By listening to those voices, they gained knowledge not of this world and worked their miracles unto the lands. As a result, many a life was saved, and as you can imagine, people started wanting to revere them by calling them saints."

Apparently, "saints" were defined as "people who could hear voices others couldn't."

"Were those voices, like, the voices of the divine or what?"

"No. What they could hear was the voice of the huge tree at the center of the continent...or so I was told. The World Tree is called Yggdrasil, and the saints could apparently hear voices from it. Actually, you and I might be able to hear them too. We're very...well, you know."

Lastiara and I were operating under special and unique sets of circumstances, so it would make sense. The potential of obtaining knowledge from those voices warranted a try.

"So where is this World Tree?"

“Far, far away. For this or that reason, the Alliance is in a remote region of the continent. It’s in the other part of Whoseyards, at the center of the mainland. It’d take weeks and weeks to get there.”

Each of the five nations that made up the Dungeon Alliance had counterparts somewhere else. That made the Dungeon Alliance “countries” more like exclaves.

The area where the Dungeon Alliance was located lay at the edge of this world’s map, far removed from the continent they called the mainland. From what I recalled from the library books I had read, the main portion of Whoseyards couldn’t be reached unless one resolved to travel for weeks on end.

Each of the five nations was large, so they naturally wouldn’t place the capital cities at the edges of the continent. In effect, the condition to participate in the Alliance was to be big enough not to take a significant hit establishing a portion of your country in the hinterlands.

“That’s a shame. If it had been closer, I’d have liked to hear her voice and receive a miraculous power.”

“I hear you. I’d have liked to receive the knowledge that formed the base of all magic, same as Saint Tiara herself.”

We were disheartened. I was half-joking when I said that, but from the way Lastiara had replied, it seemed one could actually hear her voice.

My companion’s sails were only down for a moment; soon, she lifted her head and continued talking. She was as quick to regain her footing as always. “Since we landed on the topic of Saint Tiara, I’ll talk about the nine elements of magic that she created. It’s an important subject for folks like us who make a living through battle.”

“I’d be thankful; I cast magic through intuition more than anything since my world hasn’t got magic.”

Back home, magic existed as a concept within fiction like video games, but it wasn’t an aspect of reality. Learning about the history of a world with magic was a fresh experience.

At that, Lastiara's eyes lit up strangely. "What? Magic doesn't exist at all where you come from?"

"Nope. No magic, and no monsters either."

"Whoa, that's crazy! Forget all this, I wanna hear more about *that*!"

"Uh, I'd really rather you teach me about magic..."

"But your world sounds more intriguing!"

I was totally stymied. She was now only interested in my world, which was a roadblock to my learning more about magic. It'd be too much too laborious to get her back on track when she was in this state. Left with no other choice, I started telling her about the standin for magic in my world—science. Then I told her about the heroes of my world. She visibly preferred the hero stuff, and when the listener was having fun, it made it fun for the speaker too.

Getting caught up in the moment, I waxed on and on about the history of my world to her. After I'd regaled her with the dozenth or so hero tale, and we'd indulged in about as many impulse-buy snacks, Lastiara and I finally headed home. Naturally, we never ended up talking about magic.

Once we reached home, we must have all been dead exhausted, because Maria and Lastiara went straight to bed and, yet again, I was able to fall fast asleep.



"Let me come with you to the Dungeon, please..."

The morning after the festival, while we were eating breakfast in the living room, Maria made a request of us, a determined look on her face.

"Say what?" I replied. "But why?"

I was perplexed. This was sudden. Maria's place in our group had more or less solidified after some discussion of the matter. I hadn't expected her to want anything to do with the Dungeon anymore.

"I'd be happy with just a little dive. Please test me out. I've gotten stronger over the past two days."

“Stronger?”

Did that mean she’d been training unbeknownst to me? Which would in turn have meant that she’d never actually given up on Dungeon diving to begin with.

As usual, I didn’t understand what was going through her head. They say girls are fickle, sure, but I just couldn’t keep up with how fast-moving these shifts were.

Lastiara whispered to me from behind, “Look at Mar-Mar’s skills...”

I did as I was told and used Analyze on her.

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Perception 1.45

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.67, Cooking 1.08, Fire Magic 1.00

“F-Fire Magic!?”

Maria had acquired a new skill. Fire Magic 1.00 hadn’t been there before, and I’d checked fairly recently.

I was taken aback. I’d seen a variety of people possessing a variety of skills, but I’d never seen anyone *gain* a skill. From what I’d heard, a person *might* gain a skill once over the course of their life. Given the existence of the Acquired Skills section of the menu, I knew skills could be gained, but I never would have expected Maria to gain one in only a handful of days.

Maria saw how my mouth was agape and launched into an explanation. “Ah, I forgot you could see, Master... Yes, that is correct. I was taught fire magic, and I’ve been practicing...”

“You were taught? By who?”

“By Ms. Alty, sir.”

“By *her*? ”

Talk about terrible timing. Maria had finally given up on the Dungeon. Her being given this spider’s thread of hope was the epitome of pesky. Thanks to

that, she was raring to come with us.

“Ms. Alty taught me magic that will do work even after Floor 20. She also told me how I can use the magic and various tricks to it...”

Alty, you shouldn’t have. You really, really shouldn’t have! If she was going to teach anybody at all, she could’ve taught me. Why did she teach Maria?!

“She gave you pointers and now the spells you can use have increased?”

“Yes. It’s no longer just *Firefly*.”

“Which must mean you received a magic gem, right?”

A pause. “Yes. I received a magic gem.”

If I wasn’t imagining it, she was a tad hesitant to say that last sentence. Magic gems were pricey commodities; perhaps she was feeling guilty about it.

“Well, if you can use more spells now, I *would* like to see what they’re like...”

More spells meant more potential methods to handle the Rio Eagles on Floor 22. While taking Maria all the way there wasn’t realistic, there was a way to summon her when she was needed. Upon arriving at Floor 22, we could take a waiting Maria into the area using *Connection*. Then, before hitting Floor 23, there was nothing stopping us from sending her back home using *Connection* again. It depended on the situation, but there was no doubt it would be helpful. And yet, despite that...to be honest, it felt so awkward.

“Please, sir, put me to the test,” she pleaded, eyes firm of purpose. “If it’s hopeless, I’ll head right home.”

I didn’t know what to say, shooting a glance at Lastiara, whose faint but amused smile told me she had no intention of adding anything. I gave it some thought. What would happen if I consented, and what would happen if I nixed the idea? I weighed the pros and cons for both of us, but no matter how I sliced it, a certain emotion got in the way, so I stopped searching for the optimal solution and simply offered a compromise.

“All right. But only after we test out your magic on an earlier floor and put together an effective battle strategy. Also, if you ever fall into a situation that could be considered unsafe, you’re going home.”

"Yes, sir. That works for me," she said, nodding vigorously. Her eyes housed a fiery determination to be of use in the Dungeon.

I racked my brains wondering how I could extinguish those flames. Lastiara chuckling behind me was irritating as all get out. If she wasn't going to add her two cents, the least she could do was be quiet.

Maria told us about her fire magic in more detail; I was surprised by its utility. Her power couldn't be dismissed as impractical or forever coming up short. I had no choice but to bring her along. Crossing through the *Connection* portal in the living room, we jumped to Floor 20.

Floor 21 was dangerous, so we went up the stairs to do the testing on Floor 19. We lured a single Carmine Minotaur, a handy practice target, to us and launched into combat after ensuring Maria's safety. She started incanting from the rear while Lastiara nimbly ran around the corridor.

The minotaur swung its great axe at Lastiara first. The walloping blow landed right on her, rending her flesh with ease—and her body vanished into thin air. That Lastiara had, of course, been a fake. The genuine article had dashed far away, unscathed.

"*Firefly: Mirage!* *Firefly: Phantom!*" shouted Maria, beaded with sweat.

Firefly: Mirage distorted light through differences in temperature, disrupting the enemy's ability to tell how close or far its target actually was. *Firefly: Phantom* used fire to create a humanoid illusion. By combining those two spells, she'd made the minotaur swing and miss.

Capitalizing on Maria's magical assist, Lastiara kept running all around the minotaur's vicinity without any sign of danger. As planned, she stuck purely to confusing it. She didn't pivot to offense, since our objective was to experiment and see how viable Maria's support spells were. Lastiara wouldn't attack until we finished observing Maria's largest fire spell, *Midgard Blaze*.

Meanwhile, I was escorting Maria as her bodyguard.

"Burn, nixfire! At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling—"

This was the first I'd heard that incantation. She hadn't said anything like it before. I suspected Alty had put the words in her head. I got the sense that the

more she incanted, the higher the temperature around her rose.

Once the incantation was complete, the spell was fired. “Swallow the stars! *Midgard Blaze!!!*”

With those words, Maria’s hypercompressed magic energy converted into flame. A pillar of fire rose up behind her, rearing up in the form of a giant snake. The fiery serpent opened its maw wide, slithering through the air just like the organism it mimicked.

Sensing the surge of fire magic, Lastiara distanced herself from the minotaur, which also took note of the mystic flames—but not before it was too late. The minotaur girded its tough, muscle-bound body in an attempt to endure the flame serpent, which bit down mercilessly, its scorching fangs digging into the minotaur’s flesh, its length coiling and constricting the enemy. The minotaur was at once crushed and burned alive. It brayed sorrowfully before it was reduced to ashes in the conflagration. The ashes then turned into light and disappeared, leaving behind only a magic gem.

Maria was wheezing. “Wha... What do you think, Master?!”

She’d done great, but I was more concerned than elated. That spell had taken a massive toll on her. All she’d done was use magic, but a chunk of her HP was gone.

【STATUS】

HP: 82/102

MP: 102/122

What did I think? It was just strange. It was hypocritical coming from me, but it was clearly not a spell that it was okay to acquire in such a short span of time. *The spell’s too strong for her. And the MP the spell demands ain’t normal either.*

Firefly’s application was anomalous enough already, but *Midgard Blaze* was particularly weird. The punch it packed was above her level, and there was also the hit her physical condition took after using it. No matter how high-level the spell was, it wouldn’t normally make her shed so much stamina just by casting

it. While I had once had to dig into my HP to cast spells myself, this was another thing entirely. In my case, I hadn't had any MP left, so my max HP was used instead. There was nothing more to it than that. *Midgard Blaze*, on the other hand, had depleted her HP even though she had MP left. The spell itself ran on HP. Sure, it didn't decrease her *max* HP, but it was still a deviation from the norm. The all-too-unique spell had me lost for words; I looked at Lastiara for help.

Lastiara sensed my gaze. "I've never seen that magic either. Nor that method of use. I can see it too. The spell doesn't just cost her MP."

"That's correct," Maria explained. "The two spells Ms. Alty gave me, *Midgard Blaze* and *Flame Flamberg*e, consume HP *and* MP. But since if the enemy lands a blow on me, I'd die in one hit anyway, I don't have to worry about my HP, do I?"

I didn't detect an ounce of hesitation or discomposure in her. She was speaking with a matter-of-fact tone. Of course, her reasoning was sound. If this were a video game, spending HP was just another option that might lead to optimal play. Yet Maria was made of flesh and blood, not ones and zeroes. She was right there, living and breathing. She was alive...

And she was suffering bodily distress. Firing that spell left her left huffing and puffing. This was real life. Her HP was down; I'd witnessed her take a step closer to the grave.

"That may be true," I rebutted, "but it's not pragmatic. From what I can see, you're worn ragged. In that state, your ability to concentrate and make judgments is impaired. And that'll be detrimental in combat. Let's not cross any thresholds we can't return from. It's not a spell you can cast over and over."

"My job is to craft spells from the rear. I'm not fighting on a second-by-second basis like you two do, so getting a little winded isn't going to affect anything. Besides, the idea that I shouldn't lose any HP while in the Dungeon is too optimistic and naive."

She was right. Logic was on her side more than mine. If we aimed to Dungeon dive in an efficient manner, that was the way to do it. My argument was based on emotion—on a bad premonition, nothing more.

Lastiara stepped between us while we were staring each other down. "Sieg, Maria's making more sense than you are."

"Maybe so, but still..."

"It'll be okay. She's only just satisfied the minimum baseline. There's no need to be worried, but she's also not strong enough to keep up with us in battle just yet."

In other words, according to Lastiara's cold assessment, even if that killer spell worked wonders on Floor 19, it wasn't up to snuff beyond it.

Maria wasn't giving up so easily. "Then let's test it, if you please. Let me hit Floor 21 one more time. I'll show you that my being with you will increase your efficiency."

Maria's will was ironclad. She wanted to fight on the front line.

"Yep, of course," replied Lastiara cheerfully. "And you'll see right away that you're not there yet."

With that, she walked towards Floor 20. Maria followed her with forceful strides. I didn't stop them; I understood what Lastiara was thinking. She was going to teach Maria a lesson sooner rather than later. Lastiara and I came to the same conclusion because we could see the same information.

Maria had a few more rounds in her chamber. I followed after them unhurriedly, running simulations of the exit strategy I'd be using, considering Maria's limitations. When we reached Floor 21, we assumed the formation we'd envisioned beforehand. Just like with Floor 19, Lastiara played interference at the front while Maria concentrated on casting her spell.

This time around, there would be enemies that could get past the wall that was Lastiara. When that happened, I would carry Maria away while she focused on incanting.

"I leave my life in your hands," she told me with the utmost faith in me. While she was focusing on her magic, she stopped being able to grasp her surroundings. She was truly leaving the safeguarding of her life entirely to me.

We started advancing, always keeping our formation intact. *Dimension*

detected a lone fury. We immediately took our optimal positions, ready to snipe. It was a rehash of what I'd done with Dia.

The target was a few hundred meters away. It was behind a single corner. I was told that because Maria's spell boasted high maneuverability, it could turn that corner no problem. I explained the monster's exact position and the structure of the corridor to her.

"Midgard Blaze!"

The fire wyrm that snatched away a big chunk of Maria's magic energy pushed its way through the corridor, landing on the enemy without a hitch. It sank its flaming fangs into the slow-moving fury, which quickly combusted. It did not, however, die immediately. Unleashing its final screams, it called for other monsters before perishing. This was where things got serious.

"Excellent; that's one done. But it's called for reinforcements. Quick, let's go someplace else."

Maria was wheezing, which was a given after losing HP along with her MP, but she was exultant. "I did it!"

She was staggering as she walked. Lastiara looked on with amusement while I watched and mulled it over dispassionately. We only had a few more battles left. I had to position myself so that I could retreat to Floor 20 at any time. Due to that, I couldn't ever put my back into any of the battles to come.

"Over here, you two."

Leading Lastiara and Maria, I ran to the next point to commence the second battle. After traveling a few hundred meters, we were flanked by two Furies, unable to shake off the swarming monsters.

Maria immediately launched her support spells, the twin *Firefly* combo, before switching over to incanting *Midgard Serpent*. Lastiara and I each took on one of the Furies, which locked onto us since we were in front of them. They didn't try to hurt Maria; however, as her magic energy swelled, the Furies' priorities shifted. Just before Maria's spell was complete, they tried to dodge our moves to contain them in a do-or-die rush.

I shoved my sword back into my inventory and dashed for Maria at top speed.

Taking her in my arms in a princess carry, I ran from the fury. Maria completed her spell as I did so.

“Midgard Blaze!”

Manifesting the flame serpent even as she lay in my arms, she fired it at the pursuing monster. Since it was charging straight for us, it had no means of avoiding the snake that hit it head-on. Engulfed in flame, it shuffled off the mortal coil just as the minotaur before it had.

The great snake’s onslaught was not done. After burning one fury to cinders, Maria continued to manipulate it, directing it to attack the one that Lastiara was containing.

“Lastiara!” I shouted. “The spell’s coming for it; fall back!”

“Copy that!”

She had been letting the fight with the fury drag on because she’d been waiting for the spell. She pulled away without any trouble, and the blaze beast attacked. Like before, the fury departed this life in one hit.

Our enemy had been exterminated for the time being. Maria stared at the vestiges of the incinerated monsters with satisfaction, but she was sweating more than normal. It was clear she’d frazzled her nerves, not to mention the HP in her menu had dropped sharply. She needed rest.

After hearing the Furies’ call, even more monsters in the area rallied. At this rate, we’d be surrounded by greater numbers of them. I determined the enemy’s positions and searched for a safe route back to Floor 20. While I carefully selected the route, I shouted to Lastiara, who was collecting a magic gem.

“Another monster’s coming now! C’mon, Lastiara, let’s move it!”

I started running, Maria still in my arms. Despite her reluctance to cause me trouble, I could hardly let the wheezing girl run herself. After advancing some distance, our way was blocked by a trio of Furies. This time, we weren’t encircled; we bade Maria stay at the rear, keeping the Furies at bay. I waited until she started incanting before turning my attention to the Furies in front of us. Lastiara and I coordinated our efforts, battling such that the three monsters

couldn't slip behind us. Since it was a straight corridor and the monsters were positioned right where we wanted them, we were able to buy enough time. The fire snake wended its way through the air from behind.

Thanks to *Dimension*, I successfully pulled away with the proper timing. Lastiara, meanwhile, couldn't dodge in time; she must have lacked a way to perceive what was behind her. I regretted not calling out to her. She was always moving in ways that beggared belief, so I'd gotten too confident that she could time it perfectly. The fire serpent seized one of the Furies, but as an aftereffect, my coordination with Lastiara fell apart. Another of the Furies used that chance to run towards Maria. I tried catching up to it, but I was stopped in my tracks by the third of its ilk. Lastiara tried to run after it too.

"Ms. Lastiara," Maria cried, "it's okay! *Streak, shredfire!*"

Maria stopped directing the fire snake and started incanting something else. Lastiara continued running to her rescue, just in case.

"*Flame Flamberge!*"

Fire jetted out of Maria's hand, instantly condensing into the shape of a sword. The flame blade expanded with more fire, stretching towards the fury bearing down on her. She did a good job piercing the fury's torso, but when she attempted to burn it, she found her "blade" lacked the firepower to do the job. Part of it was the brevity of the incantation, and part of it was the fact that the spell itself was simply weak compared to *Midgard Blaze*. The fury moved forward despite the fire sword in its gut, but was stopped by Lastiara's sword.

That did the trick; the fury fell to the floor and turned into light. The only one left now was the one I was facing, but Lastiara and Maria joined me, and we mopped it up. With the three Furies defeated, Lastiara and I collected their magic gems, but Maria was breathing so hard, she couldn't take a single step.

"Maria, let's turn back to Floor 20..." I said.

She couldn't reply. She tried to, but she was panting too hard. It had only taken a handful of battles to wear her out to this extent.

I carried her and headed for Floor 20 alongside Lastiara. Maria was saying something or other in my arms along the way, but I couldn't make out what.



Maria was sitting with her legs in a W, gasping for breath.

“...long story short, Mar-Mar,” lectured Lastiara, “what you lack is staying power. If you cast spells that are above your station, your MP’ll run out in no time.”

We were in front of the *Connection* portal on Floor 20, conducting a postmortem review now that we’d reached safety.

Maria hung her head. “So... So it’d seem... Looks like it’s not happening, huh...” She was painfully aware that Lastiara was speaking the truth. She had no rebuttal. She gently got to her feet and smiled.



“It appears it’s still no use, so I’ll go home. Sorry to keep you two...”

The smile plastered onto her pale face was uncanny. I had no idea what emotion was spurring it. I didn’t know what to say, so Lastiara replied instead.

“Yep, see you later, Mar-Mar. Today, I’m feeling like eating meat. Make me something bland. You know, the stuff common folk take big ol’ bites out of. Thanks.”

“Sure thing, miss. I’ll make you a delicious meal and wait for your return.”

The two were smiling at each other, and I was failing to understand how their nerves were wired.

Maria crossed through the gateway and returned home, leaving me with Lastiara on the twentieth floor. My companion did some light stretching.

“Phew. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

“What part of that was fun? I was in a cold sweat.”

“Now that she’s got that fire sword spell, she’ll be fine even if Floor 21 monsters approach her. That makes her safer than before, no?”

“I’m more scared that she does have a means of attack, given how half-cocked it is. I had more peace of mind when she couldn’t do anything.”

Though Maria had obtained a powerful suite of spells, her stats still weren’t the equal of Floor 21. She couldn’t keep up with the Furies’ agility. She couldn’t take or block their attacks. Needless to say, one slipup and she was toast. I could hardly just sit back and watch.

Damn you, Alty... Her meddling was the last thing I needed. I sighed and walked towards the staircase to Floor 21.

Lastiara followed me. “Shall we aim for Floor 30 today, then?”

“Nah, I’d rather hunt monsters at length on Floor 21...”

“So, you feel the enemies are strong enough to necessitate level grinding?”

“Not really, but...” I didn’t feel like the monsters were quite that strong. I had yet to take a clean hit, for one.

“If you’re gonna level grind, do it after we get a bit deeper. Won’t it be easier to grind if you first determine the level of the enemy that’ll be your next goalpost?”

“I mean, yeah, but...it’s all in how you say it...”

Lastiara just wanted to plumb the depths of the Dungeon, so she’d come up with a pretext to do so. I caved to her enthusiasm and nodded. It was true that I sensed no real danger from these enemies.

“All right, you win,” I said.

“Now we’re talking!”

We ventured further into the Dungeon. Nothing of note happened on the way to Floor 23. That floor didn’t house many different types of enemies, so we didn’t encounter any new ones and kept going down the Pathway. Needless to say, we avoided monsters as best we could so as to preserve our strength for exploring Floor 24. Yet we couldn’t seem to find the staircase.

“It’s not there either...”

“Nope... Rrgh, that’s so aggravating...”

Given this was our second time on Floor 23, we’d thought that we’d find the staircase to the next floor fairly quickly, but the reality was not so accommodating. We wandered around for a good hour with nothing to show for it. Lastiara’s frustration was mounting.

“Sieg! Spread your detection magic out wider!”

“I dunno...”

That was a last resort. At the moment, I had *Dimension* covering an area of only a few meters. Depending on the situation, I even turned it off altogether at times. I only used it to scout out the area once in a while, and I wasn’t using it for anything besides identifying monsters in the vicinity. This was both to conserve MP and because I didn’t think all this wandering was a bad thing. We didn’t know where we were going, but I was filling in the map and fighting reasonable battles all the while. It was eating up my time, sure, but we were at least filling up on EXP and money. And thus, I was taking nice, safe baby steps

towards my Great Return.

Lastiara, however, felt differently. The heat and mugginess of Floor 23 was making her irritation reach a boiling point.

“This is just a waste of time! At this rate, we’ll run out of water again!”

“Guess it can’t be helped, huh...”

If I let things go on this way, there was no knowing what Lastiara would get up to. Besides, I was thinking of tackling one new floor per day. Utilizing *Layered Dimension*, I spotted the next staircase. It was easy from there; it took less than ten minutes for us to reach it.

“Finally, the next stirc—?!” Lastiara started to say as we descended.

The second we stepped down, our breaths caught. We were hit by the vastness of the space. Up until now, the Dungeon had been a labyrinth with the only large open spaces being the boss chambers. Yet Floor 24 bucked that standard. Gone were the corridors, replaced by a spacious room not unlike Floors 10 and 20. That was not to say the view was unobstructed. It was shaped like a cave with pillars of stone. Even more striking were the bubbling rivers of lava.

Floor 23’s heat had been difficult for the ordinary person to bear, but this was downright lethal. In fact, your average person probably wouldn’t be able to breathe here. It was only because our leveled-up stats had strengthened our bodies that we could so much as remain standing.

“S-Sieg...”

“What?”

“You’ll find the staircase with your sonar, right?”

“Yeah...”

Neither of us wanted to remain here for very long. I magnified *Dimension* to a zoomed-out view and searched for the staircase. I couldn’t find it. The radius was a kilometer wide, so the staircase was farther still. It seemed we’d have to advance some distance before I could ascertain its position.

“Lastiara, the staircase isn’t close by. Let’s dive a bit deeper.”

“Yuh...” said Lastiara, unable to even reply properly. She was a waterfall of sweat, and she needed to find the staircase posthaste.

We picked up our speed and ventured deeper, avoiding the killer lava as we went. Luckily, monsters were few and far between on this floor, so the lava was all we had to worry about, and we were able to progress without bumping into any other obstacles.

We’d made it around five hundred meters from the starting point when I stopped in my tracks to use *Dimension* once more.

“I’m launching my sonar again,” I said, concentrating on my magic as I handed Lastiara more water.

“Yuh...”

It was then it happened—right when we’d stopped paying much attention to our surroundings. A sound like the popping of a bubble, blasting us from close by.

“What the—?!”

Seizing on us having dropped our guard, a monster leaped out from beneath the nearby lava. It was lizardlike in appearance, but it was dozens of times the size of lizards from my world. In its leap, it descended on Lastiara, attempting to rend her flesh with its claws. She evaded its attack just in time. Her astounding reflexes also allowed her to dodge the lava that had scattered around when the lizard had jumped out of the river. I was stupefied but relieved she had managed to sidestep it all.

The lizard thing distanced itself as it exhaled a visible miasma, and it was glaring our way. I used Analyze on it.

【MONSTER】Poison Salamander: Rank 23

It had the English word “poison” in its name, so I kept in mind the possibility that it could poison its enemies. Most suspicious was its miasma breath.

“Lastiara! Chances are its breath is poisonous! Stop breathing for a little

while!"

"Sorry...I already breathed in a ton of it."

She was closer to the thing, standing amid the breath particles permeating the air. Though she'd staved off its claws and lava spray, she hadn't been able to hold her breath on the spur of the moment. I checked her menu.

【CONDITION】

Poison 1.00

Looking more closely, I saw that Lastiara's complexion was horrid. Already weakened by the extreme heat, she had now been hit with poison. Lastiara was a beast, but this was rough even for her. In order to ease her burden, I slashed at the Poison Salamander at top speed, but the monster slipped away by jumping back into the lava—doing so only after emitting more miasma as a parting gift.

Now that it had come to this, we were left with no other avenues of attack. We couldn't even approach because of the lava. I was forced to use *Dimension* just to pinpoint its location, but even that was thwarted, as *Dimension* couldn't probe the flowing lava very well. For the time being, I covered my mouth with my cloak and went to my companion, who was looking like death warmed over.

"Dammit!" I said. "We can't do anything once it's submerged. Are you gonna be all right with that poison?"

"Ugh, my head's kinda spinning. Maybe it's the heat, but the poison's even rougher than normal... But it's okay—I'll heal right away with magic. *To illusion the waters cascade, the blood ne'er to return*," she incanted.

To prevent her from healing her poison, not one but two salamanders jumped out from beneath the lava. I drew a spare blade from my inventory and drove both away from her. I tried attacking them, but they escaped back into lava, once again breathing some miasma as a parting shot. A venomous mist enveloped our surroundings.

"Cure!" Lastiara finished incanting, but the spell was futile. The miasma just

caused her to get poisoned anew.

"Lastiara, if we don't shake these guys off, you won't be able to heal properly. Let's run."

"Frustrating, but yeah, you're right. I'm confident I can bring the things down during our next encounter, though."

"There's no guarantee there're only two of them. *Dimension*'s having a tough time detecting what's in the lava, so I don't know how many there are."

"Then I guess there's no helping it."

We started running the way we'd come, but the Poison Salamanders had different ideas. Their attack was foreseeable; I used my sword to slash the one that turned up. As long as they weren't in the lava, I could respond to them even if they were in my blind spot.

We endured the poison coursing through our bodies and kept running. We might have run all the way to the safety zone that was Floor 20 had the area around the staircase connecting Floors 23 and 24 not had so few enemies and so little lava to worry about. We decided to carry out our healing there.

"*Full Cure*. And another *Full Cure* for you!"

That ridded us of the poison and topped off our HP at the cost of a swath of MP. And I wasn't in tip-top shape myself in that regard.

"We're both down too much MP... How about we call it a day? If we go back now, I can set up a *Connection* door right here and we can be home in a second."

"Yeah, guess we should."

I thought Lastiara might be difficult about it, but she was oddly compliant. It seemed it wasn't just her MP, but also her stamina that was greatly diminished thanks to the poison.

She stood watch while I crafted the *Connection* spell. Then, we passed through the hastily made portal, and thus, our day of diving was at an end.



“You’re back so soon.”

Just like the day before, we scurried home to find Maria in the middle of cooking. She’d apparently gotten right to the housework after getting back.

“Let’s just say it’s not going as we would’ve liked,” I griped.

“I can tell,” she replied, letting out a quiet laugh and pointing at our clothes, where we had scorch marks and tears here and there. She must have concluded we’d been chased home early, and she wasn’t wrong.

Lastiara quickly threw away her damaged attire and changed into a different set. She didn’t take off her undergarments, but I had to look away anyway, so I would have preferred that she did it elsewhere. A disconcerted Maria hastened to stuff her into an adjoining room. Afterwards, a freshly clothed Lastiara heaved a sigh and took a seat at the table in the center of the living room.

“Phew-ee, it was so hot. I’m pooped! It was *SO* hot.”

Evidently, the sweltering heat of Floors 23 and 24 was her Achilles’ heel. She slumped over the table languidly.

“Lastiara, I’m gonna go buy items to ward off the heat. Wanna come with me?”

If we were going to face those floors again, there were a bunch of things we had to stock up on. I also wanted to gather more information on the lava zone, so I wasn’t about to stay home all day.

“Might as well go with you.” She staggered to her feet.

“Hey, you don’t gotta overstrain yourself. I can buy you whatever you tell me to buy...”

“That’s okay; it’s not like I can’t move at all.”

So we headed out, seen off by Maria, who was still preparing our meal. We made the rounds at several shops to purchase what we needed, then hit up pubs and libraries to find out how to clear the lava zone. The shopping went smoothly, but we couldn’t get much decent information regarding the latter. No matter who we asked, the only thing we heard back was not to go near the lava zone. The same went for the books and documents we checked. There was

nothing that seemed helpful on that front.

Our one lead now was the strongest diver, Glenn. He was an acquaintance of Lastiara's, after all. But she shot that down. According to her, he wasn't that easy to meet with. Ultimately, we concluded that the way to clear the lava zone was to ignore the monsters and just keep running.

Once we were done with our errands, I was about to start heading home when she proposed the following.

"Oh yeah! Seeing as it's a lava zone, maybe that Alty girl can do something? She is a fire boss monster, isn't she?"

It was an idea that had occurred to me, in a corner of my mind, but I'd dismissed it. I was stumped for a reply. I wanted to avoid interacting with her as much as possible, probably because of the hell that her fellow Guardian Tida had shown me. However, it was true that the idea was a valid one. It was almost like she was a character who was made for this very trial. If this were a video game, I'd go talk to Alty without a second thought. But since this wasn't a video game, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Alty, huh..."

"Not a fan? And here I thought it was a capital idea. Something wrong?"

It was more than a capital idea. It was most likely the only way forward. And since we'd ended our dive early, we even had time to go to Alty's abode on Floor 10. Moreover, I wanted to ask her about those spells she'd taught Maria. I had no basis for shooting down Lastiara's suggestion, so I reluctantly agreed.

"You've got a point. Let's go..."

Since our MP was in a bad spot, we decided to head to Floor 10 the easy way, through the Dungeon entrance. As long as we walked along the Pathway, we were safe.

Sure enough, we reached the burning chamber of Floor 10 without any issues to speak of. As before, I spoke to the flames after making sure there were no other divers around.

"Alty! Can you talk?!" I shouted unreservedly, my call echoing.

“Yep, I can talk,” she replied instantly, the flames swaying as her cute girly voice sounded through them. “Can I help ya, Sieg, Lastiara?”

I’d never get used to this. I lowered my voice and told her concisely about the day’s events and what the Dungeon was throwing at us.

“We’ve hit a bit of a wall. It’s about Floor 24...”

“Hmm, I see. I get the picture. You can leave it to me. I’ll teach ya a spell that’ll let you avoid the lava. I’ll teach ya one to protect your bodies from the heat too. I’m sure those temperatures are lethal to you humans.”

“Thanks much, Alty! I was so sick of that heat!”

I wasn’t quite as enthused as Lastiara. My misgivings hadn’t been cleared away. There was more to discuss.

“So, Alty, who’re you gonna teach those spells to? If you could, teach me—”

“I can’t do you or Lastiara.”

“What? Why not?!”

“You’re not cut out for it. I’m not trying to razz you or anything, you’re just too specialized for dimensional magic. It wouldn’t work.”

I’d gotten a vague feeling that was the case back when I’d bought those gems at the shop. I lacked the aptitude for anything besides dimensional magic, and there was the distinct possibility that I could never acquire new spells outside of that.

I gnashed my teeth. “All right, then why can’t Lastiara learn them?”

“She hasn’t got the blank space left,” stated the fire-mouth. “She’s already complete, so it’s a no-go. Surely you must know that too, Lastiara?”

Lastiara was taken aback, but she confirmed what Alty said. “Wow, how’d you know? It’s true, I can’t learn new spells. There’s no space in my blood to etch anything else.”

That was the first I’d heard of it; I was even more surprised than she was.

“That’s why,” Lastiara said to me, “I’m thinking of having Mar-Mar learn them. What do you think?”

Oh no, oh no, oh no. She had to be joking. That was an awful idea. I'd been under the impression that Lastiara and I were all-around great at everything. I never would have suspected we had so little wiggle room when it came to magic. But I soon sorted out my feelings and reset my heart, since there was someone else I could rely on magic-wise.

"Forget about Maria. If you can...please teach Dia instead. You remember him, right, Alty? Maria's no good. She's not suited to the Dungeon."

For a second, I hesitated to nominate Dia, but I wanted to prevent Maria from strengthening her arsenal of abilities, even if it meant Lastiara learning about Dia. Ideally, Lastiara and Dia would first meet in a scenario that was carefully and deliberately orchestrated by me, but I couldn't say that.

"No can do," said Alty. "I'm gonna teach Mar-Mar."

"Why?!"

"Why? Because Mar-Mar's got feelings for you, obviously. And I need to cheer her romance on. I won't dwell on whether her infatuation's pure or impure, mind you."

"Sorry...what?"

Now she was dropping bombs on me. For a moment, my head went blank. Unable to process Alty's words, I couldn't think of what to say. Alty, for her part, simply ignored my confusion and carried on.

"I'm rooting for her unrequited love as a Guardian. And if you could, Siegfried Vizzita, my ally, I'd like you to help me out with that."

But I wasn't in the headspace to reply to her request. "Maria's got feelings for me?"

I tried to comprehend those words, but my brain was refusing to. I didn't want to acknowledge it. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to.

When I'd first talked to her, Maria had basically called me the worst. She'd been rebellious and defiant, exhibiting not one iota of romantic interest in me. The whole time, she'd been biting and cheeky towards me. It wasn't the way a girl in love behaved. And she was the one out of all the people here I'd spent

the most time with—so if I hadn’t sensed that she liked me that way, it could only mean she didn’t. No way, no how. Not a chance!

“Alty, how could you?!” said Lastiara merrily. “Mar-Mar worked so hard to hide her feelings! To give it all away in a place like this!”

“Think about it, Lastiara. There are couples out there who only came together through the meddling of a third party. At the very least, I don’t get anything out of watching a girl acting selfless for the rest of her life by working for his needs and never confessing.”

“But I *do!*” said Lastiara. “I love the kind of endless, irritating crush that they can’t bring themself to do anything about!”

“That just means you’re messed up. It seems our proclivities differ.”

Their back-and-forth was entering my ears, and Lastiara wasn’t denying that Maria liked me. If anything, she was talking like it was a given—like she’d known for ages but never said anything. Did that mean that from where Lastiara was standing, there was no doubt about it? And if so, what was the correct response from me? How should I reply? Should I give my primary consideration to what I stood to lose or gain? Or should I put managing my own stress levels before that? Or should I put the ethics of it and Maria’s feelings above all else?

No, that was all wrong. It was wrong, wrong, wrong. My objective was to get back home. My primary consideration had to go to my Great Return. I had a reason to return. A reason I tried not to think about. A reason I danced around so I didn’t plunge into abyssal depths. But a reason all the same.

If I didn’t get back home... If I didn’t, if I couldn’t, then my only family, my little sister, my Hitaki—

No. No, don’t go there.

If I went there, I wouldn’t be able to restrain myself. And if that happened, it’d be my first day in this world all over again. My “???” skill would keep triggering. Of course, I could trigger it now to regain my composure by force. While I was scared of what would happen if my Confusion reached 10.00, one activation of ??? wouldn’t make it cross that point. I’d been good over the past few days, and the number had gotten low enough to where that was the case.

If I let it trigger, then all of my emotions would settle down, enabling me to work out the most logical solution. And that would help to effect my Great Return.

It would help, but my body turned stiff. I couldn't think of going in that direction as an okay thing for a person to do. If I forcibly switched to pure logic mode, I'd certainly never try to come to grips with Maria's crush. After all, thinking about it rationally and coldly, it wasn't necessary in any way with regard to my Great Return. If I activated ???, a girl's crush would be pulverized for the dumbest reason, and that would be disgusting and two-faced of me. If it was really true that Maria had feelings for me, I had to face up to that by my own strength of character. I'd been alive for a decade and a half or so, and that wasn't much life experience, but that was the answer my psyche gave to me, which dammed the flow of confusion and kept it from growing.

This was nothing I couldn't endure. This was no emergency. I took a deep breath and composed myself.

Alty didn't fail to notice. "Looks like you calmed down," she said, impressed. I endeavored to remain calm. "I didn't, not really. You startled me." "Well, you look calm to me."

"In any case, I now know that Maria might have a crush on me. And I know you're not backing down either. So it can't be helped. I've got no intention of getting in the way of your wish, and teaching Maria more magic's fine by me too. That said, I'd like you to teach Dia as well. My current policy is to keep Maria away from Dungeon stuff."

"Hmm, all right. I'll teach Dia too. They are my disciples, after all."

"D-Disciples?"

"I've actually been meeting up with them a ton behind your back. It's gotten to the point where they call me 'Teach' now."

She had dropped yet another bomb on me, and I was on the verge of succumbing to confusion again, but I managed to keep my wits about me.

"Also, uh... Also, just keep in mind the chances of Maria's love becoming

requited are slim. I'm not as cold on her as Franrühle, but I still haven't got feelings for her. Maria doesn't even enter into the picture for me; I haven't got that kinda time on my hands. I need to get to the deepest level of the Dungeon, and fast. Only then I can think about other things."

"That's what I thought you'd say. But it's not like I'm trying to force you two together. The feelings of both parties are very important."

"Good. Let's not force things. You're okay with that, right?"

"The okayest."

And with that, that hurdle was behind me. I managed to keep from getting truly shaken and bogged down by this weird side stuff. Now the conversation turned to when Alty would teach the two, but Lastiara poked her nose into it from behind.

"Uh-huh. So, Sieg, what is Mar-Mar to you at the end of the day?" Lastiara asked.

"What is she to me? I like her as a friend and companion. But she's a lot younger than me, and I've never thought of her that way."

"Really now. And when we get home, are you gonna tell her that?"

"No. It's not a hundred percent guarantee she does feel that way about me. All we know for sure is that it looks that way to you two. If I told her that and she replied she didn't see me that way, that'd make things between us embarrassing and awkward."

"I dunno, I think it *is* a hundred percent guaranteed."

"If Maria ever confesses to me, I'll tell her. Otherwise, I won't. I'll act towards her the same as I have up till now."

"Uh-huh, sure..." She read between the lines even as she nodded and nodded. A little while later, she continued, a radiant grin on her face, "That answer is so Sieg. And I don't hate it. It's more tasty drama to me." Her smile was infuriating. She seemed extremely satisfied.

Alty, on other hand, not so much. "Pshaw..."

"Alty?"

“Oh, it’s nothing. Never mind. Let’s talk about the spells. When should I teach them by?”

“Err, uhh, as quickly as possible, I guess. That’d be a big help for us.”

“Hmm, okay. In that case...”

Alty would teach Maria and Dia the spells in a day or two. I was sure it wouldn’t take those too much time to acquire them. We settled the particulars, and then I thanked Alty before turning my back on Floor 10.

“Thanks for everything, Alty. Right, well, be seeing you.”

“Yep, see ya, Sieg,” she said. “I’ve got high hopes for you,” she muttered.

Alty’s wish weighed heavily on my heart. It was stifling, suffocating. I didn’t want to spare any thought for romance, but here was Alty with the pointed reminder of our deal.

On our way to the surface, Lastiara probed me for all sorts of information. I managed to dodge answering most of her grilling, but since I’d brought up Dia’s name, that was the only subject I couldn’t avoid giving her the skinny on. Since I knew I couldn’t hide it anymore, I told her about Dia without fudging anything.

“Wow,” said Lastiara. “So before you joined forces with me or Mar-Mar, it was you and this Dia kid.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t hiding it from you. I just didn’t know when he’d get discharged from the hospital he’s at now, so I hesitated to tell you about him. He’s a kid who’s packing a ton of magic power.”

“A mage that you have that much faith in, huh?”

“Yep. He’s a top-tier mage. He may be too low-level now, but I think he’ll catch up to us soon enough. He’s got the talent to do so.”

In terms of raw stats, he had even Lastiara beat. And most importantly, he had a great personality. That was a trait you couldn’t overvalue.

“Someone with talent on our level isn’t someone you see every day,” said Lastiara. “Not by a long shot.”

“Too true.”

"I'm saying your standards are a little generous. I know...I'll go take a look at him and give you my assessment." She started walking forward. "That'll be best."

It seemed she wanted me to introduce her to Dia before tomorrow. It was pointless to object, given they would meet someday anyway. And since we had time on our hands, we headed for Dia's hospital.

As I led the way, I tried to dial down Lastiara's heart-pounding anticipation. The building wasn't too far. It took less than an hour to get there from the Dungeon's entrance in Vart.

I walked the same path to Dia's room as before, but I noticed something had changed about our surroundings. The hallways felt really well-ventilated. And that was because the walls were riddled with holes.

This remodeling was too avant-garde for me, but I pressed on to Dia's ward—which was in an even more disastrous state. There were holes everywhere, covered by simple planks. The floor and walls were charred black in places, and the furniture and instruments were no more than wreckage. Gone was the cleanliness and sense of security that had characterized the room when I'd visited Dia last.

And as if nothing had changed, Dia was there, sitting in bed.

"Dia..."

"That you, Sieg?!"

"H-Hey, Dia. So, what happened?"

"Ah, you mean to this room? Sorry, thanks to this, it looks like I need to pay repair fees. Do you mind taking from my share and paying at the desk for me?"

"That's no biggie. It is your money, so it's only proper. Never mind the money, though; can you tell me what happened?"

"Uhh...an enemy attack?"

Why was he asking me? "An enemy came? To the hospital?"

"Yeah, it was that Alty. I fought with the monster who was behind Tida when we battled it."

“Oh, I see.”

That would explain the mess. But I couldn’t imagine Alty picking a fight with Dia. The reverse, on the other hand...

“Did Alty come at you or what?”

“Err...truth is, she didn’t actually attack me. All this damage is my fault.”

“I knew it...”

“I’m sorry. We came to an understanding, but by then, the room was in this state.”

“Nah, it was unavoidable. I never told you about Alty. Anyway, I heard you learned a bunch of magic? She told me.”

“Yeah, she taught me loads! Now I can adjust the firepower of *Flame Arrow*, plus I got the hang of holy magic again. I’m a different Dia now!”

“Nice...”

I wasn’t sure how much adjusting Dia needed to do, given his inexhaustible pool of MP. Practically speaking, he could always fire at full power, but I supposed it was better to be able to adjust it than not.

“Hee hee,” said Dia, glowing at my praise. Then his face stiffened. He saw who was behind me, and he turned paler and paler.

“Wait, huh? What’re you doing here?”

Lastiara waved. “Long time no see, Mr. Sith.” Lastiara had reverted to the formal register she used with the knights. It looked as though they knew each other already.

“Wha...huh, but, why...what brings you here, Ms. Lastiara?”

On the outside, Lastiara was meek and mild, but inside she was having a party. Dia’s composure was the opposite of hers. Flustered, he got to his feet while still atop the bed, assuming a war stance.

“I’m surprised myself,” said Lastiara. “I never would have guessed I would meet you in a place like this, Mr. Sith.”

“Ms. Lastiara, don’t tell me you’re here to drag me back?!”

“Please calm down. I am here as Sieg’s companion, that’s all. Nothing more, nothing less,” she said gently.

“You’re Sieg’s companion?!”

While Dia seemed ready to fire off an attack spell at a moment’s notice, Lastiara approached him and took his hand tenderly in hers.

“Yes, I am. Therefore, no such thing as what you’re fearing will happen. Please be at ease.”

“R-Really?”

“Really.”

Lastiara smiled at him softly. Dia released the tension in his muscles. Lastiara’s performance was as impeccable as ever; she’d melted his guard in no time flat.

“Dia,” I said, finding my cue to reenter the conversation, “it’s true that Lastiara is my companion. But I’m surprised. I didn’t know you two were acquainted. How do you know each other?” I asked, looking at their faces.

Lastiara was about to reply when Dia interjected hastily.

“W-We’re from the same hometown! Not that we know each other that well!”

His response seemed way too artificial and forced. I glanced at Lastiara to see if it was true. For a second, she had a weird expression on her face, but it quickly gave way to her usual jovial smile.

“Exactly,” she said. “We’re just acquaintances from the same town.”

“Yep, what she said—But Miss Lastiara, I go by Dia here, so please call me that instead.”

“I see. As you wish, Mr. Dia.”

Their conversation felt off, but I didn’t bother pressing them. From what I could see, Dia didn’t want the truth to get out, and I didn’t want to put him out if I could help it. I pretended not to notice.

“It’s cool you’re acquaintances. After all, I think you’re gonna become fellow Dungeon diving mates.”

Dia offered Lastiara a handshake. “A companion of Sieg’s,” he said shrilly, “is a companion of mine! You don’t gotta be pay me any mind, and you can drop the ‘Mister.’”

“You’re quite right. Since we’re companions, I suppose I shall not be speaking so formally. It’s nice to meetcha, Dee-Dee.” She shook hands with him, gripping him forcefully and not letting go.

“D-Don’t call me *that*. I... I’m a boy, so just call me Dia, if you could!”

In his panic, he swung the hand that Lastiara had in her grip vigorously. She didn’t let go, continuing to admire her prey. Her expression, her eyes—they wouldn’t have been out of place on a predator licking its lips.

“Ah, sorry,” Lastiara said. “Your face is so pretty, I unconsciously called you a girly nickname. In that case, maybe I’ll call you Deeds. Or maybe—”

“Just call me Dia!”

“Heh heh heh. Sure thing, Dia.”

Judging from Lastiara’s attitude, she viewed Dia’s claim of not being a girl with increasing skepticism. But I planned to treat him as a him, so I didn’t interrupt their back-and-forth. Besides, if anybody expected me to suddenly start treating him as a girl after all this time...it’d be too much for me.

I’d thought their very different personalities might cause them to clash, but that fear had been unfounded as well. Relieved, I took one of the seats in the room and listened as they talked. Afterwards, I told Dia that Alty would come to teach him some spells. I also explained the problems Floor 24 was posing to us. Their discussion regarding magic was beginning to liven up, likely because the spells they each commanded were so similar. It appeared the two were contemplating how best to clear Floor 24.

I didn’t possess a clear understanding of the magic they used, so all I could do was listen from the back. I had no choice but to think by myself about what would happen after getting back. Presumably, Maria had finished cooking and was waiting for us to come home. But thanks to Alty’s uncalled-for remarks, I was beside myself with anxiety that I might not be able to act the same as before around Maria. If I didn’t rehearse it in my mind now while I had the

chance, I might accidentally betray myself through my behavior. While Lastiara and Dia continued discussing all things magic, I continued to think about how to approach my newfound Maria problem.

It went on like that until sundown.



After the hospital visit, we returned home, as we'd finished our preparations for the next dive.

"Welcome back, Master."

Maria greeted us with a smile. I had no idea what she was truly feeling behind that smile. Before I knew it, she'd acquired a set of formidable fire spells, *and* she might have had a crush on me...and I hadn't picked up on either of those things.

"Yeah, uh, thanks. We're home, Maria..." I replied, averting my eyes.

I'd run the simulation so many times in my head and yet it still came out so awkward. I didn't understand much of anything about her, but I got the feeling she was always seeing right through me with her Perception skill. If I spoke for too long, she'd likely pick up on how I was feeling. At this juncture, I couldn't even make eye contact.

"We're back, Mar-Mar!" said Lastiara cheerfully, glopping onto her.

For a second, Maria flashed me a puzzled look, but Lastiara swooped in for the save. Grateful, I scurried to my room.

That night, as usual, we all sat down to eat the dinner Maria whipped up for us, but the atmosphere was clearly strained. The seams holding the party together were unraveling faster. Lastiara's faint smile was thirty percent wider, and I was being vaguely distant towards Maria. Meanwhile, Maria was keeping a watchful eye on me so as to glean why that was. Every time she stared at me, I could do nothing but turn my face away. Even I could tell I was a bit red.

Maria was very young and short, but she had a pretty face. When we first met, she had looked shabby due to her circumstances, but now that she was keeping clean, she indisputably fell into the "cute girl" category. Unlike Dia or

Lastiara, her prettiness felt more *real*. She was the girl next door as opposed to a knockout or a pretty boy. I also felt a kinship with her black hair and black eyes. It made me realize how familiar and close to me she felt. And once my brain processed that, it was difficult to ignore her charms as a girl. As such, I used *Calculash* to avoid locking eyes with her, so I somehow made it through dinner. Following that, we all retired to our respective rooms as usual.

I'd survived the evening, which gave me the confidence that I could do something to mitigate this conundrum, whether or not I knew Maria had feelings for me.

That night, I managed to fall into a peaceful sleep, despite how oddly noisy the winds outside sounded.

The next day.

"See you later, Master."

"Yep, we'll be back..."

I must have still been reeling from the truth bomb from the day prior, because even Maria's simple little "see you later" got me out of sorts. I averted my gaze from her face as much as possible and headed to Floor 20, Lastiara following behind me.

Compared to the day before, Lastiara's getup was on the heavy side. Normally she dressed light because she liked running around, but now she had on a mantle to shield her skin from the burning heat. In addition, at her waist she had water and an antidote ready to drink.

We passed through the light purple magic portal and stepped into the cold, empty chamber. We made for the staircase only to notice that someone was standing with his back to it. It was a man clad in wind energy—the handsome blond knight, Mr. Hine. This time around, Mr. Hopes wasn't with him. He'd been waiting for us alone. And unlike last time, his loadout was stately and imposing. Before, he'd been equipped with a single silver sword, but now he wore two at his waist, as well as a largish silver gauntlet on his left hand. While he wasn't wielding anything heavy, he was decked out with smaller weapons of war. Particularly conspicuous were the ten rings on his fingers. A guy wearing a large

quantity of rings was bound to stand out.

“I have been awaiting your arrival, milady.”

He bowed, just like last time, but I sensed a coldness to the gesture. Something was different, and I didn’t mean the number of knights or his equipment. It was something else. Something weightier.

“Hello, Mr. Hine,” said Lastiara. “Are you unaccompanied today?”



“Yes, I am.”

Using *Dimension*, I checked to see if there was anybody hiding in the vicinity. Lastiara was looking at me, and I confirmed Mr. Hine’s assertion to her by nodding.

“You wish to duel with my knight today as well?” she asked.

At that, Mr. Hine stiffened a tad. Then he replied, nodding his head repeatedly. “Yes, that’s right. That is the case. I would like to challenge him to a duel. But before that, there’s something I would like to talk to you about.”

“Something to talk to me about?”

“Yes. And to your knight, Siegfried Vizzita.” He turned to face me.

I took a step forward to hear him out. “What is there to discuss, Mr. Hine?”

“Fighting isn’t the only way. For example, I could get you to acknowledge you lose the duel by securing you something you desire. That’s what I wish to discuss,” he said, his tone gentle.

If we could end this feud by negotiating, I preferred that as well.

Mr. Hine continued, his smile watertight. “Please, tell me what it is you want.”

“What I want, huh?”

“Is it money? Prestige? Name it and I shall make it yours. If, like milady, it’s amusement you’re after, I’ll arrange any recreation you like. So could you be so kind as to lose this duel for me?”

It was an eminently reasonable proposal. Unfortunately for him, money and prestige meant nothing to me. All I wanted was my Great Return, to make my way back to my sister, my only family. I wanted nothing else. And at present, the only thing that could grant me that was the deepest level of the Dungeon. In all my information gathering, I hadn’t come across any other possibilities. As such, all I desired was the power to reach the Dungeon’s furthest recesses.

Right now, the only ones I knew to be gifted enough were Lastiara, Dia and Alty. And I had no reason to throw away Lastiara, one of the few warhorses at my disposal.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hine. What I desire isn’t something you can get me.”

“Something I can’t get you?”

“What I want lies at the Dungeon’s deepest level. That’s why.”

Mr. Hine knitted his brow slightly.

“The deepest level... You mean that miracle? You seek the miracle the deepest level can grant, do you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s certainly true I can’t make that happen for you.” He looked down, all but burying his head in his hands. After being absorbed in thought for a spell, he muttered, voice quavering: “This is a disaster...”

He spoke the words hoarsely, gutturally, even, no longer with the smooth, dulcet tones I associated him with. He slowly raised his eyes, revealing a piteous, sorrowful look on his face. Gone was the impeccable smile. This was the expression of an ordinary person facing a tragic turn of events. A look of woe.

The sudden change was dismaying, but Mr. Hine paid no heed to my discomposure and continued speaking through his voice, made raspy by sorrow.

“Aghh, this is a disaster. Your desire is a disaster to me. It’s good to want a miracle. But this Dungeon... This is the one place you mustn’t. Oh, what woe—if only it were elsewhere.”

“What’s that mean?” I hadn’t the faintest clue what he was saying.

“It cannot be avoided. Let us duel.”

“Sure, if I have to, but...”

“As for the terms, do you wish to go with the usual? That is, if you win, I will never show myself before you again.”

“Yes, of course. But—”

Dread was crawling up my back like a worm, screaming at me to blow off the duel. But Mr. Hine wouldn’t let me; he kept talking without pause, never allowing me to get a word in edgewise.

"If I win," he said, with the softest voice yet that day, "then both you and milady must please leave the Dungeon Alliance."

With that, the smile was back on Mr. Hine's face. It was captivating, enchanting.

"Wha?" It took me a moment to understand what he'd said. Extrapolating from past duels, I'd assumed the price I'd pay for losing was nothing more than Lastiara going back home. Now it was a different story entirely.

In order to say no, I tried to take a step forward.

"Sehr Wynd."

But my foot never hit the ground. Instead, my body was assailed by a floating sensation. One of Mr. Hine's rings had broken, the dense magic energy turning into a blast of wind and sending me flying like I was a feather. It was only after I'd flipped around and lost my sense of direction that I realized he had just attacked me. He seemed so nice that I'd let my guard down, which had made me too slow to react. While I had felt a sense of discomfort, that didn't translate to the nervous tension I'd needed to respond in time.

"Dimension: Calculash!" I managed, deploying my magic even as the wind was blowing me back.

In less than a second, I grasped my position relative to the wall I was hurtling towards. I absorbed the shock of the impact by landing on my hands and feet, safely recovering by the skin of my teeth.

Still pinned to the wall, I ascertained the situation in the room as a whole. In the distance, a now unconscious Lastiara had been flung against a wall herself. She most likely wasn't dead, but I could tell at a glance that one of her arms was broken. Unlike me, she hadn't been able to avoid the impact. It wasn't that her reflexes were worse than mine; she'd just been standing in an unlucky spot. I'd been dozens of meters away from the wall, while Lastiara had her back right to it, giving her no time to think.

I concluded I'd be receiving no assistance from her, so I had no choice but to forget about her and focus on the enemy. I saw Mr. Hine draw his twin silver swords as he started closing the distance between us. I drew my prized sword

from my inventory and planted my feet on the ground. Then, before Mr. Hine could reach me, I crafted spells that would turn things in my favor.

“Spellcast: *Form! Snowmension!*”

Innumerable magic bubbles came into being. Mr. Hine answered my magic with magic of his own, another of his rings crumbling in the process.

“*Sittert Wynd.*”

A gentle breeze began blowing from his swords. While these winds weren’t as ferocious as the gale before, they sufficed to clear away my magic bubbles. Realizing *Form* wouldn’t work on Mr. Hine, I immediately stopped producing more of them. Deciding to focus on my sword instead, I tried to channel my energy into *Calculash*—only to learn that my perception field had gone out of whack. The gentle breeze was doing a good job of preventing it from picking up information on my surroundings.

Gritting my teeth, I attacked Mr. Hine using only the inadequate support spell. His twin swords came at me from the sides. I stopped one using my own blade, dodging the other by wrenching out of the way. As I’d never faced a double-sword-user before, I could only stave off his strikes through pure reflexes and intuition. My instincts were telling me that if I held back, I’d regret it.

In order to catch him by surprise, I put my hand to my back and retrieved a spare sword from my inventory, then blocked Mr. Hine’s swords with two of my own. He looked surprised, if only a little. Seizing the opportunity this presented, I knocked his swords away and planted a kick in his torso. The kick itself didn’t pack much power, but it was able to open some distance between us.

I backed away and used Analyze.

【*QUAKEGALE* MAGIC GEM RING】A ring containing the power of *Quakegale*.

【*SCATTERGALE* MAGIC GEM RING】A ring containing the power of *Scattergale*.

【*SKYGALE* MAGIC GEM RING】A ring containing the power of *Skygale*.

The ring containing the magic gem for *Skygale* fell to pieces.

“*Sehr Wynd!*”

He sucked in the wind around him, compressed it, and fired the lump of air at me. The fierce squall aimed to lift me up like I weighed nothing and blow me to kingdom come, but this time I’d been able to see the spell start up. I broke my landing against the wall with perfect form, without losing my sense of balance.

Mr. Hine didn’t chase me down, likely because I’d broken my impact so cleanly. With this much distance between us now, and a pause in the offensive, I regained some of my calm and called out to him.

“Mr. Hine! What are you doing?!”

As he gathered the surrounding winds to craft another spell, he replied, “What do you mean? This is a duel. It may not be the namby-pamby kind you swear over a ley line, but a duel it remains. It’s a *true* duel, where both fighters rain violence down on each other to see their desires granted.”

His voice was gentle. It was oh so gentle, clashing with the frightful contents of his remarks. Given how he had attacked me without mercy, I didn’t think we could resolve this by talking it out anymore, but it was really sinking in that my last ray of hope had been snuffed out.

“Rrgh! Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash!*”

There was no way to end this except to defeat Mr. Hine. I set my mind to formulating a battle plan and was aghast at the realization that it was my first time fighting an equally matched human opponent. I was afraid where this duel might lead. How hard should I attack him? I wasn’t sure. Should I aim to knock him out? That would be ideal, but he was strong enough that I couldn’t afford to pull my punches. Maybe I’d have to snatch an arm or two from him? That could be my best option, realistically. But I wasn’t confident I could actually follow through without hesitating. Should I screw up my resolve to take his life? Because that was the big problem.

This was a duel to the death between two human beings. Were I fighting a monster, I wouldn’t be getting these pangs of conscience. Even if monsters took

human form, I could tell myself to ignore that. But if I killed Mr. Hine, I couldn't tell myself he was just some monster. When it came to battle tactics, I could put something together on the fly, but this was not a quandary I could resolve so easily.

My body went stiff, rendering me unable to take the optimal course of action. This allowed Mr. Hine to complete his spell.

"I'll get you to listen if I have to lop off your legs to do it!"

The air around us bent and contorted. It looked like countless lines of skewed air floating above the ground, and it was messing with my eyes.

Mr. Hine pointed a silver sword at me. "*Reys Wynd!*"

The warp-lines sliced through the air like knives. In order to dodge, I tried concentrating on *Calculash*, but it was foiled once again by the soft breeze filling the room. My detection abilities weren't totally jammed, but it did give rise to some slight imprecision, which was enough to make all the difference. Sensing that it was dangerous to rely too much on my magic, I reached for some food in my inventory, grabbing a bag of flour and flinging it.

The warp-lines tore it to pieces, turning the large quantity of flour into an impromptu smokescreen. Since the flour in the air formed shapes, it served as a visual aid to discern the warp-lines more easily. In exchange, the smokescreen did obstruct my field of vision a little, but that was better than dealing with winds I couldn't even see coming.

I ran through the smokescreen at full speed as I dodged the warp-lines, rushing closer to him.

"*Wynd.*" Mr. Hine cleared away the smokescreen with his next spell. But by then, I'd dodged every one of the warp-lines.

I assaulted Mr. Hine with my blade. I couldn't bring myself to kill—a weak-willed guy like me was incapable of that. But as he'd said he would lop off my legs, I came at him with the same intention. That was my internal compromise.

Our swords clashed, sending small sparks flying. I wasn't going to put any distance between us anymore. Even if I tried reading his menus, he had so many weapons on him that I couldn't read the whole list in time. And if I stayed too

far away, I was a sitting duck for all the wind spells. I could try going for little tricks at medium-range, but the magic winds would blow them all away. Close-quarters combat was my only real option.

His unique twin-sword style was a threat, but not enough to cinch the battle for him right away. I got in close and brushed his swords aside. Funneling yet more MP into *Calculash*, I tried to carve out a chance to take the win.

Around the time the umpteenth spark flew, Mr. Hine's expression changed. He clicked his tongue in unknightlike fashion and dodged away from me. I was about to give chase, but I held my ground instead because I knew why he'd done it. He was directing that woebegone look towards Lastiara, who was moaning and groaning. She would come to at any moment.

Relieved, I brandished my blade anew. If Lastiara woke up now, it'd turn the tide. Mr. Hine was strong, but not strong enough to have a chance against the both of us. In which case, all I had to do was hold out until she was with us again.

Seeing me go on the defensive, Mr. Hine heaved a deep sigh before sheathing his twin swords.

"Can't say I expected you to be this good, kid. My plan's fallen through..." He was at once vexed and, in some way, delighted. It was like he was happy his plan had gone wrong.

He was a closed book to me; I raised my guard further.

"Mr. Hine, why are you doing this?" I legitimately wanted to know. What had driven such a nice guy to go so far as to ambush us?

"Why *am* I doing this? Maybe it's because I saw how much fun milady is having, playing with you," he said, his voice weak.

"How much fun she's having? What's that got to do with anything?" What about that was linked to his desire to chase us out of the Dungeon Alliance? Going off the information I had, I couldn't see the connection.

Mr. Hine smiled fleetingly before his expression became anguished. "I was wrong..."

All I could do was look on, dumbfounded. Outwardly, he seemed sane and sober, but I got the feeling that on a fundamental level, he was talking *at* me, not with me. I sensed the same instability as when I interacted with a particularly hyped-up Lastiara, which was why I couldn't find any words to say.

"Young one...at this rate, milady will die. At the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth, she will vanish from this world. So please, I'm begging you, take her away! Away from the Dungeon Alliance before the Day of the Blessed Birth begins!"

"Huh?" Lastiara... Lastiara would *die*? My heart was racing.

Mr. Hine kept talking, like a dam had burst inside him. "My words have stopped reaching her! She doesn't listen! So I have no choice but to lure her away, by force if necessary! Young man, please do not, under any circumstances—ANY circumstances—heed milady's words! She may seem frank and straightforward, but in truth, it's all made up! I enabled it, so I *know*! Don't ask the unstable, warped, barely human, fictional 'Lastiara' what she thinks—ask the little girl trapped inside her what *she* thinks!"

I was totally lost. Not only was he springing all of this on me out of nowhere, it was too abstract. A fictional Lastiara? The little girl inside her? I supposed it meant Lastiara wasn't indicating how she felt in her heart of hearts.

In the corner of my eye, I spotted my companion trying to get back up. Mr. Hine also noticed, and he threw me a parting remark as he retreated towards the staircase to Floor 19.

"I'll get you out of here, come what may... The loving couple should find happiness somewhere far, far from here..."

His eyes were glimmering darkly and ominously. That, coupled with his blond hair and good looks, gave me goosebumps.

He disappeared down past the staircase into the darkness, and all I could do was stand there and watch. I could hardly chase after him, not only because I couldn't leave Lastiara behind in the Dungeon, but because my legs wouldn't move out of sheer confusion.

I turned my gaze to Lastiara, who'd begun to awaken. Her supple and lovely limbs rose up, and her glistening and smooth hair flowed down. The scene was

sublime, unmarred even by this dingy, drab Dungeon.

It was true. She was *too* perfect to be real. All this time, it had struck me how unconvincing and unnatural her flawless beauty was. And it didn't stop there; her unstable personality, her unstable life, her unstable heart...all of it smacked of artifice. This lent credibility to what Mr. Hine had said, which in turn led me to believe that the bit about Lastiara's impending death was no lie.

Ahh, I was losing my cool again. The situation with Maria was already enough to exceed the level I could tolerate. Now a whole new problem had dropped into my lap. My head was aching big time. At this rate, Lastiara was going to die? Maria had feelings for me?

Why? Why was I getting buried under this avalanche? My heart cracking. The ??? skill I'd been keeping at arm's length was inching ever closer. I wanted to put up a brave front and hold it back. But I knew I was nearing my actual limit. I held my head in my hands as Mr. Hine's words floated through my mind:

"At the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth."

I remembered the date. The weeklong festival would be over in next to no time, marking the beginning of the Day of the Blessed Birth. I'd already known that for a long while, but now the apprehension in my heart would not abate. Mr. Hine's pleading rang in my ears. Fear racked my soul—the Day of the Blessed Birth was fast approaching, spelling Lastiara's doom.

Perhaps because ??? hadn't triggered in quite some time, my mind was filled to the brim with irrational, unfettered emotions before I knew it. And that horde of emotions was telling me something. It was a hunch, so to speak. A gut instinct, to put it colloquially. And to put it a bit dramatically, I could sense the hand of destiny at play.

My gut was telling me that, at the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth, everything would be squared. Yes, everything. Not just Lastiara's fate, but also Alty's, and Maria's, and even my own. Naturally, I lacked a single rational reason to back that up, but that was what I found myself thinking.

As I stood there, bewildered by my own premonition, my eyes met Lastiara's. She was back on her feet. The eyes of the girl I'd been told would die in a few days' time were shining yellow. It was a gorgeous glint that I was sure would

never vanish even if she were to perish, such was the allure of her eyes. Transfixed by her abnormal beauty, the number of days we had left came to mind.

The Day of the Blessed Birth was in two days.

We had all of two days left...

Afterword

Good day, or maybe good evening. Tarisa Warinai here. I'd have liked to discuss the inside story at my pace again, but since I don't have many pages to work with this time around, it seems I'm unable to go into too much detail.

The heroines of this volume are Lastiara and Maria, yet the cover shows only Lastiara. I didn't leave her out to spite her, but rather because I thought Maria should be the focus of the cover of volume 3, so I'm having her wait for her time to shine.

Story-wise, our roster of characters has increased a great deal. The focus was on Lastiara and Maria, but I'm keen to properly present the backgrounds of the other characters as well. That's because I received their character designs from the illustrator, Ukai-san. I don't want any of them to go to waste. My favorite out of all of them is Ragne. The kid's a force to be reckoned with. First, she's given "provisional first place" in the character popularity poll by force of the author's say-so, and then she gets an insert illustration all to herself, also by force of the author. But of course, my personal fondness for her doesn't affect the course of the story. Not consciously, at least. Probably.

Having learned nothing, I think I'll be committing the same blunder in the third volume as well. Please forgive me. Volume 3 contains an illustration of that one cool scene, so I think it's inevitable that my self-indulgence levels will only increase. *That scene in volume 3... All I ask is to see that scene illustrated...* (Reflect on my actions? No thanks.)

It's thanks to you readers who so graciously picked up these books that even the likes of me was able to get my second volume published. Of course, I have the advice of the readers of the web version, as well as Ukai-san for realizing my wild scribblings in illustration form, to thank too. Now then, let's see each other again in volume 3.

[DECIMAL GUARDIAN]

Thief of Fire's Essence

Alty



**"I WANT
TO MAKE AN
UNREQUITED
LOVE NOT SO
UNREQUITED."**



LASTIARA WAS
GLEEFULLY WASHING
THE BODY OF A
NONE-TOO-PLEASSED
MARIA.

MARIA WAS
BLUSHING AND
SIGHING BREATHILY
AT LASTIARA'S
TOUCH.

Bonus Short Stories

Ragne of the Seven Celestial Knights

Sigh. Another dawn, another day of patrolling the Cathedral.

It was my job and my daily routine. Walking around the place, being on the lookout for enemies I knew would never come. Until recently, I'd been swamped with things to do in my role as a knight, but ever since I was assigned to the Cathedral of Whoseyards, I had nothing but time on my hands.

It was surprising that this was the actual state of affairs for the Seven Celestial Knights, who were such universal objects of envy. Actually, to be precise, I guess it was the state of affairs for the Celestial Knights during this time.

It seemed that in the past, the job of the Knights was to tirelessly visit a bunch of different places and in so doing make their authority and prestige known. But starting with my generation, that aspect had ceased to be. And the reason for it was simple: the previous iteration of the Knights had no master to protect, but the current iteration did. That was all there was to it.

I was nearly finished making my rounds, so I did my final check—a knight's final check: confirming the safety of the master they were sworn to defend.

This Cathedral was branded as “special” in the nation of Whoseyards, and this room within it was considered even more special. I stepped into the splendorous corner where only the highest-ranking were allowed entry, where I was met by a girl and a boy.

“Ah, Raggie, it’s you! Palinchron, does this signal the end for today?”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question, my master. Ragne’s simply come to inform us that the slated time has come, and you weren’t able to finish your assignment by that time. As such, you can’t expect to have your play time or any such convenient fluff. Did you not know that that right is given to you only when you do what you’re supposed to?”

That girl was none other than the master of the Seven Celestial Knights, Lastiara Whoseyards. And the guy with the foul smile on his face was my colleague and superior, Palinchron Regacy.

“Looks like it’s another day of detention for you, milady.”

“Oh, mine friend Ragne,” said Lastiara. “Wouldn’t you like to hang out with me? So much so that you would ever so kindly tie up this incorrigible sadist for me?”

“Hmm, I dunno how feasible that is. The first obstacle is, I dunno if I can actually beat Sir Palinchron. The second obstacle is, I don’t particularly care to hang out with you. Then there’s the clincher. If I don’t leave well enough alone, they’re gonna dock my pay.”

“Then there’s no problem at all. I believe my friend will win, I believe in my friend’s affection and goodwill for me, and I believe in my friend’s willingness to make that sacrifice.”

“Well, that marks the end of my shift, so I’ll be heading out now. See you guys later, milady, Sir Palinchron.”

“Agh! Raggie!” she said, reaching out to me with theatrical levels of drama. “You can’t! You mustn’t! That’s so cold!”

I gave Palinchron a little bow and left the room. If I took her bait, I could have nine lives and they’d never be enough.

The moment I exited Lastiara’s chamber, someone called out to me. Not many here ever did, so I naturally drew a conclusion about who it was.

“Ragne! She... She’s asking for you to save her so earnestly! Why do you rebuff her so?!”

I knew it. It was my colleague and superior, Lady Sera, a fellow Celestial Knight. Apparently, she’d been watching the little lady from outside the room the whole time. The job description of the Seven Celestial Knights was now little more than guarding her and honing our skills in the meantime, but Lady Sera was the only one I could say used her time *that* way.

“Well, I mean, my ranking is on the high side, but I’m still the freshest rookie

on the block. I can't get in Sir Palinchron's way."

"That matters not! You're above him in rank, so do it boldly and unashamedly! Now go, Ragne!"

She was truly straight as an arrow, not to mention pretty. She wasn't one to give thought to the nuances of the position of a knight who'd just risen up from the boonies. But that was exactly what saved my bacon.

"Hrm. In that case, shouldn't you be going instead, seeing as you're higher-ranked than I am?"

"If I could, then obviously I wouldn't be in this bind! For some reason, I've been forbidden from approaching our lady during study time!"

"Gotcha, gotcha. So, you can't do anything about it, huh? Then there's nothing to be done, is there? Right, well, on that note, see ya later."

"Ah, hold your horses, Ragne!"

So ended that day's rounds. As I was wondering what to do with my time, I bumped into yet more colleague-cum-superiors.

"I was watching, Ragne. Sorry for the trouble."

"Thanks, Sir Hine. And hello, Director, Deputy Director."

It was them. The Top Three. I wondered what this was all about, the answer to which the Director supplied me with right away.

"No prob. You're always so good at jockeying around. Now that we've run across each other, what say you train with us?"

Apparently, they were going to partake in some intensive training in the Cathedral's gardens. Our Director and Deputy Director were now spending every day drilling Sir Hine, who was the rising star of the next generation of knights. That being said, the prospect of intensive training surrounded by three prodigies who were knights among knights was vaguely frightening, so I politely declined.

"Thank you, but I'll abstain. I'd just get in the way, but even more importantly, my fighting style is too unique. I'll hone my technique on my own power."

"Is that so? I suppose it's true that, as you said, only you can understand your moves."

"Please do invite me some other time."

And so I parted with the Top Three knights. I imagine the throaty scream echoing from the gardens afterwards was old man Hopes getting dragged into their training after the three found him taking a nap there. Since he didn't have an excuse like I did, once they spotted him, it was game over for him. Poor guy. I ignored his hoarse yelping and headed towards my quarters.

Another peaceful day. Same as every other day.

The master we were to defend was in her cage. Now and then, Sir Palinchron gave her lessons with a fishy smile on his face. Other times, Lady Sera chased her around. Sir Hine was, as always, a shining exemplar. The Director was, as always, strict and severe, and as always, the Deputy Director didn't stand out too much. Then there was old man Hopes, who was as pitiable as ever. The Seven Celestial Knights were the same as usual.

But we all knew this wouldn't last for long. We all knew this was just an extended leave with a set cutoff date. In about six months' time, the Festival of the Blessed Birth would begin, and the ritual to open the cage would be conducted. I knew that my actual job would begin starting on that day. But I couldn't help but think what I ought never to think—how great it would be if things *stayed* like this. Forever.

If only things could stay this way...then I... I...

I couldn't help but think that way.

Sigh.

How Dia and Alty Met

"I... I'm so sorry. Honest. I thought you were an enemy trying to finish me off, so I..."

"That's okay, Dia. In fact, you reacted correctly. It's Sieg who's too soft and easygoing for being receptive enough to talk to me from the jump."

That being said, when we had crossed paths and the battle had begun, she'd gotten quite the fright. But by never counterattacking and continuing to tell her I came in peace, I'd managed to get her to talk to me. And by teaching her how to handle fire magic as my gift to her, she came to trust in me lickety-split. She was tamed so quickly, I had to worry for her future.

"Man, you're such a good person, Alty. For me to have fired my magic at you in earnest... Urgh..."

She cringed apologetically after seeing how tattered she'd made my clothes. But the hospital room was more worthy of her concern than I was. Her magic had riddled the room with holes. If I hadn't been so well-known in Vart, she would have gotten kicked out of the hospital without a doubt.

"You don't gotta apologize so much. Seeing as I'm a Dungeon boss monster, that scuffle was inevitable. You did nothing wrong," I said, consoling her as I taught her how to cast spells.

After I'd repeated that sentiment more than once, her face, her expression gradually grew cheerier. And just as I'd planned, we grew closer and closer. By the time she mastered adjusting the firepower of *Flame Arrow*, she'd started calling me "Teach."

"*Flame Arrow!*"

A minimum-power fire arrow flew across the ward. It hit the wall but disappeared without leaving any burn mark to speak of.

"Aww yeah! Thanks to you, I can control *Flame Arrow* better! You're such a huge help! 'Cause apart from holy magic, I taught myself everything I knew! Ha ha!"

"You were able to fire spells with that much kick without formal instruction? Heh heh, you're making me lose my self-confidence as a fire magic specialist."

"That's... I don't think you've gotta worry about that. I mean, you shrugged off my full-power *Flame Arrows*, didn't ya?"

I was a monster who could manipulate fire. Erasing a fire spell was easy as pie for me. "As you might expect, I'm not the kind who can be done in through fire magic. But if you'd poured your all into firing holy-magic spells at me... Just

thinking about it gives me chills.”

If I’d slipped up, I might have been killed fairly easily, my lingering attachment to this world notwithstanding. If you ask me, it wasn’t Sieg who had taken down Tida, it was Dia’s holy magic. That was just how outside the bounds of normal this Dia girl was.

“If we were to exchange blows head on, I’d probably lose. It’s safe to say you’re my natural biggest threat.”

“Really? I don’t get that sense, speaking for myself...”

That was the reason I’d come here—to have a look at her.

“You have the sheer talent to surpass me, so you could stand to be more confident. I’m sure you can be of more use to Sieg than anybody else.”

“R-Really? I can help him more than anybody, huh? Heh heh.”

She scratched her head bashfully. I was showering her with praise, but she seemed to be happier about being helpful to Sieg. What a purehearted girl. I felt as though long-forgotten memories from the past would spring back to mind if I kept watching her.

The past...

That being the case, I had to ask: “You really like Sieg, don’t ya, Dia?”

“Yeah!” she said, nodding without hesitation.

But it all depended on what she meant by “like.”

“Tell me, Dia. What is Sieg to you, in point of fact?”

“Huh? Whaddya mean? He’s my Dungeon diving comrade.”

“Okay, and is he anything else to you?”

“Well, my *friend*, I guess? Actually, yeah, he’s my friend. Wouldn’t trade him for the world,” she concluded decisively.

That wasn’t the messy kind of “like” I wanted. But those feelings would probably turn into full-fledged infatuation in time. Her current single-mindedness was warped enough for me to like it, but it was a little removed from what I was angling for.

“Is that right?” I said, after a brief pause.

“Did I say something off?”

“Nope, you’re in the clear. I’m just a little angry with Sieg is all.”

“Huh? But... But...huh? Why with Sieg?”

“I’m a bit jealous of him for being so cherished by a kid like you.”

“Cherished? Ha ha. You may be right, honestly. I super respect the guy!”

In the face of Dia’s adorable smile, I vacillated a bit. But I snapped out of my hesitation. I couldn’t afford to dither, not anymore. I knew that if I didn’t make up my mind, I’d be too slow. If nothing else, I refused to repeat the mistake I had made a thousand years ago. So I stayed the course.

“I’m heading back soon, Dia. Oh, I know. Let’s meet again around the Blessed Birth, okay?”

“Yeah, ’cause I think that’s when they let me get out of here. See ya then, Teach!”

With that, I exited the hospital room and walked through the corridor.

I tried to reassure myself of everything, and to locate my own emotions. Vowing to put an end to my long, long, long existence by the Day of the Blessed Birth, I kept on walking ever forward down that dark hallway...

The Hellvilleshine Siblings

Thanks to the cooperation of Mr. Sieg, a Dungeon diver I had encountered by chance, we had successfully cleared the tasks set before us by the academy.

The party disbanded and I parted ways with Ms. Elna and Ms. Snow. And just like that, my sister and I headed to the Hellvilleshine Family villa.

“Of course, I have to follow my sister’s story along the way.”

Needless to say, I had to humor my honorable older sister as she chattered endlessly on the way there.

“I do declare, he’s truly superb, that Sir Sieg! He’s the same age as I am and

yet he's so strong! Did you see him tackle the Dungeon all by his lonesome? What a proudly independent knight errant! He's like the protagonist in a hero tale! You think so too, don't you, Liner?!"

"Yes, I think so too, uh-huh. It's totally and one hundred percent as you say. Couldn't agree more."

"It *is* totally as I said, isn't it?! He's completely different from the boys at the academy! He gallantly swooped in to save me when I was in a pinch without asking for anything in return! Ahh, just thinking about it is getting me all red in the face!"

No matter how half-heartedly I replied, she just kept waxing on and on about Mr. Sieg. I interjected with the usual periodic "uh-huhs" and "you're rights", but inwardly I was astounded by her single-mindedness and purity.

In time, we reached the gates leading into the villa. At long last, I could take a breather. I'd been able to bring my sister back home in one piece, and that alone wrapped me in a sense of satisfaction. But I couldn't let my guard down just yet. There were sure to be more of my brothers and sisters here at the villa, and I had to go greet them at once. I tried to enter our overly extravagant villa, but just then, someone came out from inside. At the sight of him, I broke into a smile.

"S-Sir Hine? What brings you here?"

"Oh my, if it isn't Sir Hine."

I'd heard some of my other older brothers were here, but no one had told me that he was here too. We must have looked puzzled.

"Fran and Liner? Ah, come to think of it, it is that time of the year, isn't it? I'm here on an emergency errand. I'm currently scrambling all over the place trying to get things done." He smiled faintly. He looked as handsome as ever.

You don't see that every day, I thought. Sir Hine was supposed to be the picture of perfection as a knight, yet here he was, opening up to us that he was flustered.

"Sir Hine, might you be, by any chance, exhausted? Shall we give you a shoulder massage or the like?"

“No, that’s all right. Although...let me ask you, do I look tired to you, Liner?”

“You do...”

“Heh heh. I’m glad I look tired. Means I’m running myself sufficiently ragged,” he replied, smiling like I had nothing to worry about.

I got the feeling that the big brother I knew was back in his usual stride. He was the ideal of the Whoseyards knight—someone with composure in spades but bereft of anything disagreeable, with a smile that gave succor to the people around him.

“Now then,” he said, “allow me to take my leave. I’m actually in the biggest hurry I’ve ever been in.”

“The biggest hurry you’ve ever been in? Sir Hine, if you’d like, I could come help—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll be fine on my own. In fact, I *want* to do this alone.”

The way he didn’t think twice before replying put me at ease. I’d expected it, of course. There was no way he’d ever need the help of a garbage knight like me. He wasn’t an adoptee like me. He was a *real* noble, and a real knight. This was the brother I knew and looked up to. And it was because I believed he could solve everything on his own power that I was able to reply back without any hesitation:

“Understood, sir.”

“Ah, one more thing. Is your school life at the academy going smoothly, Liner?” he said.

A man this perfect was worrying about a sub-maggot like me.

“I’m doing well, sir. Just today, we finished an academy assignment without incident.”

The only one in this family who showed me kindness was Sir Hine. He was different on a fundamental level from the other Hellvilleshines. He was a knight among knights.

“I expected no less,” he replied. “You’re strong, unlike me. You’re a little

brother to be proud of."

No, no, it was him one could take pride in. Despite being stronger than anyone, he was also more humble than anyone. He didn't even come up short against Mr. Sieg. There could be no doubt—Sir Hine was the one who was more suited to being in a hero tale. But I couldn't say that aloud on account of the overly pure sister right by us.

"All right, fare thee well, Liner, Fran."

"Yes, we'll be seeing you, sir."

"Adieu, brother!" said Fran.

And so we parted with our flawless knight of a brother, and we watched as he left with respect in our eyes, the same as always. So why the chill down my back? Why was I getting a bad case of the shakes all of a sudden? His parting words had left me with an unpleasant sensation. I got the sense a line was being crossed...

"Now then, Liner! You'll rub my shoulders, if you please!" said my sister merrily, snapping me out of my reverie.

"Huh? Why?"

"Weren't you the one who brought that up?"

"I offered to rub *Sir Hine's* shoulders. I didn't offer that to you."

"That won't do. I'm ordering you as your older sister. Rub them this instant!"

"Fine, I will."

With that, we went inside the villa, leaving Sir Hine behind...

Looking back, that was my fork in the road. And it all came to a head on the Day of the Blessed Birth. So began the redemption of everything on my tab up to that day. It was the start of the *true* story of Liner Hellvilleshine...

Lastiara's Wish?

"Ahem. Testing." She coughed. "Ahhh. Ahhhh."

In the city, where the flow of people was unceasing, I checked my throat out by the side of the road.

I needed to flex my acting chops for the first time in a while. What was it my dear teacher Sir Hine had told me? And what was it that that other, wilier knight had told me?

A woman who was clad in a tattered mantle but was in truth a sheltered maiden—that was the part I was playing.

And then I opened the door of the pub in Vart that wasn't too far from the Dungeon.

Although it was only just on the cusp of the peak hours of the pub, a motley group of divers was already inside to patronize it. Judging by the presence of people with scarred faces and large men who were basically half naked, I knew this wasn't the type of place a sheltered maiden was supposed to visit, so to stay in character, I pretended to be as frightened as a child in a beast's den as I looked furtively around.

Naturally, the pub-goers' curiosity led them to train their eyes on me. I spotted a pub employee among the crowd.

"Excuse me..." I said, my voice feeble and thin. "Is the manager of this establishment here right now?"

The girl, who I assumed was employed to bring folks in with her pretty looks, heard me and walked over.

"Err, uhh, welcome! Do you have some kind of business with the manager?" She was polite with me, despite the fact my character clearly didn't belong here. That made it easier for me.

"It's, well, I'd like to apologize for what happened the other day..."

The girl tilted her head in puzzlement, and who could blame her, given how little I'd said? I bandied the name I'd lined up for this moment. "I'm speaking of the duel between Lady Sera and Mr. Siegfried."

I had no doubt she'd understand now. She should glean who I was as well.

"Oh, that whole thing... So, I assume you're that young lady?"

“I believe I am the one to whom you’re referring, yes.”

The girl looked me in the eyes. “I...see. So you’re Sieg’s...”

“Err, is there some kind of problem?”

Upon inspecting my surroundings, I found the majority of the customers were looking at me in surprise. They were whispering:

“Hey, look over there.”

“That’s Sieg’s squeeze.”

“For real? She’s way too pretty.”

“Anybody who makes a move on *her* is a braver guy than me.”

I didn’t want anyone getting a good look at my face in case someone here knew me, so I lowered my head a little. The waitress must have gotten the wrong impression from that, because she hurriedly glared at everyone around us before answering my question in an even softer voice.

“No, no, no, you’re totally good! You just caught me a little off guard, that’s all. I’ll go get him right now. I’ll be back in a jiffy, so just wait here for me a sec!”

“Thank you very much, ma’am.”

She scurried off to the kitchen in the back. Just as she’d promised, a stern and rough-looking old man who could only be the manager came out in no time.

“Hey, boss. Amazing, ain’t it?”

“You won’t hear me say no.”

He was taken aback by me, but he nevertheless bowed slightly. I bowed deeply and proffered what I held in my hand: a goody basket of Whoseyards sweets and confections.

“I apologize for causing such a disturbance the other day. Please accept this small token...”

“Uh, sure...” He accepted the gift with a quizzical look on his face.

Wait, did I miss a step or what? I remembered the apology scene in one of the hero tales I’d read...

"Err, thank you for the Whoseyards courteousness, good miss. So, where's that rascally Sieg, anyway?"

Maybe he found it easier to talk to someone he was familiar with, like Sieg, over me. The manager was looking all around, but I couldn't afford to bring Sieg here now.

"It's my mistake," I said. "Because of me, he's still tangled up in a dispute with the knights of Whoseyards. He's not here right now."

"So he's getting hassled by folks like that semifer knight lady."

"Actually, none of the others are as extreme as her. Mr. Siegfried won't be in danger of getting hurt again, so please be at ease."

"Well, as long as he's safe."

The manager seemed pretty worried about his employee, which belied his gruff look. To ease his worries, I told him in no uncertain terms that Sieg would be okay. Knowing Sieg, he'd never get a scratch on him even if he got wrapped up in more duels, so it wasn't like I was lying.

"The thing is," I said, "it looks like it's going to take some time for this quarrel to be settled. Since Mr. Siegfried likely won't have the time to come to work during that time, I have come here in his stead."

"You yourself?"

"Y-Yes, that's right. I thought that it's incumbent upon the person who's the cause of all this trouble to come and apologize. I'm truly, truly sorry for the mess I've made!" Since they seemed to think this interaction was stranger than not, I decided to be pushy about it.

"Th-That's okay, there's no need to apologize so profusely. Raise your head, little lady."

That was it; he'd given me an opening and now was the time to lay my number one request on him.

"As such, may I ask you to please give Mr. Sieg the break he needs until such time that things simmer down? I'm afraid Mr. Sieg's clocking in may bring yet more trouble this establishment's way."

“I don’t mind, but...is he all right?”

“He is, sir. It’s only a matter of time. He’ll be fine.”

The manager was of two minds. Perhaps he was thinking of getting confirmation from the horse’s mouth, and I couldn’t let that happen, so I took him by the hand and pleaded with him—a surefire line of attack I’d learned from Palinchron.

“I know I’m asking you for a huge favor. But please... Please, if you could do me this kindness!”

“Yeah, okay, sure, I don’t mind. Please, just don’t tear up on me.”

Victory. I had successfully stolen Sieg’s work hours back for him. All that was left was to have a bland, inoffensive little chat and exit the pub as organically I could.

“Thank you so much for everything,” I said. “Now, if I may, I’ll be excusing myself.”

“Yep. Take care of Sieg for me.”

“Give him our regards!” said the waitress.

With that, I stepped back into the Vart townscape. I chose a pocket hidden from view so my face wouldn’t be seen and wended my way back towards home, where Sieg was. In the safety of the back alleys where no one was there to see me, I laughed at myself.

“Heh heh. It really is just a matter of time in the end. And that’s why you need to make what you can of your remaining time... And that goes for him *and* me. Isn’t that right, Saint Tiara?”

Man. I had no time left. I knew that. And that was why I needed to wring yet more enjoyment out of life. I smiled, curling my lips as I kept on walking along the dark, dark road.

Just putting one foot in front of the other...

Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 2

The central dining hall of Eltraliew Academy was humongous. Not only was it spacious enough to accommodate its more than ten thousand students, the ceiling was concert hall tall. It was lined with various round tables, large and small, but not just anyone could use them.

This academy didn't know the word "equality." Which of the institute's furnishings a student could use was based on their family's social standing. The higher-class among the student body could use the large tables, while the minor nobles could only use the small tables in the corners. Imagine my surprise when I learned that even the hallways the students could use was determined by the size of the donations their parents made to the school.

Evidently, bankrupt nobles couldn't step on the lawn, let alone the paved paths. It was perhaps due to the thoroughness of the discrimination that the students were divided into cliques quite neatly. The kids of the grand seigneurs and the great houses sat in the center, surrounded by swarms of hangers-on. Farther out from the center sat the mid-ranking aristocrats, such as those hailing from viscount families. Between that mid-level ring and the space occupied by the poor nobles in the corners, there was no one at all.

Naturally, I was sitting in the corner of the dining hall myself. Well, more the very tip than a corner. There I was, an island unto myself, munching on dirt-cheap bread. And it was all thanks to that damn fogy, the headmaster. He'd given me the status of "scholarship student" without giving me any actual financial support, which made me a social pariah. The nobles who were high in the pecking order glared at me, while the other students averted their eyes.

I'd vowed to repay my debt by shooting up the Elt-Order, the academy's battle rankings, but I was on the verge of losing heart. Yet I could hardly rest. Not when I had my little sister waiting for me back home. I continued to gather information as I ate my meal.

I was eyeing Ms. Philtia, the comely daughter of one of the grandest of noble houses, the Walker Clan. Encircled by an entourage of mid-level nobles, the tender smile never left her face. Her soft chestnut hair swayed as she moved.

At a glance, anyone would take her for sheltered and fragile, but in fact, she was the last boss of the Elt-Order. According to my menu-sight, she was *beyond* built different.

【STATUS】

NAME: Philtia Walker

HP: 345/345

MP: 255/255

CLASS: Knight

LEVEL 22

STR 7.23

VIT 7.33

DEX 9.45

AGI 9.44

INT 8.45

MAG 10.22

APT 2.02

She was not on the level of a student. The average level among the students was 5. More than ninety percent were in the single digits. Nor was she merely teacher-level. The instructors hovered around Level 10. In other words, she was higher-level than any of the teachers at this academy. On top of that, her APT was top-class. As such, she was given a special epithet that signaled she was neither student nor teacher. She was the Hero Princess.

And since she was Number One in the Elt-Order, I had to defeat her in battle if I ever wanted to leave this academy. *Well, her and someone else too.* Ms. Snow, another of the Walker Clan girls, the one they called Azure Fury. But it wasn't certain where in the academy she was, which removed her from the list of targets to eliminate forthwith.

“The great Hero Empress is Level 22...and I’m Level 1.”

In this world, it took people about a year to go up a level. The yawning chasm between us filled me with despair. Logically, it’d take me twenty years to stand a chance against her. And that wasn’t the only thing that seemed hopeless either. I used Analyze on those surrounding the Hero Princess, who was cheerfully gabbing away. There was the Number Two-ranked Elmirahd Siddark. He was Level 20, and people called him the Chairman Prince and the Overlord. There was also the Number Three-ranked Karamia Arrace, who was also Level 20, and who possessed the monikers Scion of the Swordmaster and Swordmaster Student Council President. Together, they were the Three Heroes of the academy, and the world was their oyster.

They were all monsters. *If they call you heroes and not students, then fucking graduate already.*

“So, whaddya think?” came a girl’s voice. “Can you beat them? Well, headmaster’s pet?”

Her name was Annus, and she was no ally. She just popped up to bother me because she loved gossip. She was a lively girl with dark blonde, shoulder-length hair. Though her family’s social standing wasn’t terribly high, relatively speaking, she too was another monster, as she’d clawed her way up to Number Seven through sheer merit.

“Who’d seriously take them on? I have to think of more clever ways of going about it.”

While she wasn’t on my side, she was one of the few who’d talk to me. She took a seat at my otherwise isolated table; clearly she was having fun pressing me to converse with her. She was basically the only person I could have a friendly chat with.

“Heh, do you now? So? What are these clever ways of yours?”

“I’ll befriend the Number One and have her lose our match for me.”

After a fair bit of thought, I’d come to the realization that there was no real reason to actually fight.

“Pfft! Ha ha ha! Now there’s a thought! It’s certainly true that that *would*

realize your goal."

"The problem is, I can't even talk to her, much less get buddy-buddy with her. Which is why I'm observing her, looking for an opening."

"I see. If you keep watching her, you may just come to understand Ms. Philtia in and out. Like, for example, troubles in her home life or something, I guess?" she said suggestively.

Since she was decently well-informed, her words carried weight. I asked her what she meant with a look.

"Keep watching and you'll see. I'm thinking it won't be long."

I looked at where Annus pointed. Having finished eating, the Hero Princess was hurrying to leave when one of her entourage asked:

"Ms. Philtia, are you off to search for Ms. Snow today too?"

"Yes, of course I am. How could I not make use of the Elt-Order system that came into being so recently? Today's the day I'm going to find Snow and duel her."

"But, but Ms. Philtia...you're at the very top of the rankings. Surely there's no need to duel her."

"She's listed as 'beyond rank.' *Beyond* rank. It's like she's been given a special bracket because they think no one can measure up to her. In order to become the true Number One, I am obligated to defeat her in combat! For if I beat Snow in this duel, I'm sure that Glenn will see me as—"

Her meek and tender expression morphed, and she left the dining hall alongside her groupie with an air that was unusual.

"And that's what I meant. She has it in for Ms. Snow. If you can use that to your advantage, maybe you can get her to lose at least one match to you."

"That 'Ms. Snow' or whoever is the one they call 'Azure Fury.' It sounds totally impossible."

"Even just finding her will be tough. And if you do manage to find her, if she doesn't like you, you might incur her fury and cause the Walker Clan to erase you, you know."

A pause. "All right, I'm putting off becoming Number One for now. I suppose I should set my sights on someone more trustworthy and reliable first."

"And who fits that bill?"

"That Liner kid."

Liner Hellvilleshine, Number Twenty-One. Through my continual observation and intelligence gathering, I learned of a weak spot I could leverage to ingratiate myself with him. Despite hailing from the high-status Hellvilleshine Family, he was always subjected to the scornful gazes of those around him. If the backbiting I heard through my eavesdropping was to be trusted, Liner wasn't born in a way they considered respectable. Truth be told, I felt a kinship with him. If we were in the same position, I reckoned we could even be friends.

"Oh, him. You're probably right; he won't care about your position. But..."

"Right? Honestly, I feel like destiny's at work with him."

"If you ask me, I think his big sister is a juicier target."

She was recommending the girl who was making a fuss near Liner. Number Twenty.

"Uhh, I dunno know about her. From what I can see, her personality's..."

That girl's unwonted behavior was constantly putting her little brother out. In fact, the moments she wasn't inconveniencing him in some way were few and far between.

"Honestly, I think that with Fran, you can get her to take an interest in you, Kanami. She's a trend chaser who only goes for lookers, just like me. You seem like you have baggage, so she might be just the ticket you need."

"I may have baggage, but...if she only cares about looks, I'd never be on the menu for her."

"Hrmm, I wouldn't say that. I think that aiming to befriend a high-ranking girl would get things rolling for you faster than targeting Liner. You've kinda got that kinda face, you know?"

"Umm, *what* kind of face?"

"The face of a lady-killer, I guess? For whatever reason, I'm getting dyed-in-the-wool ditzy kept-man energy from you."

"Don't go overboard with the mockery. Sorry, but I ain't smooth enough to be seducing girls. In any case, I'm going after Liner, no matter what you say. Somehow, I can feel something akin to a nagging memory from a parallel timeline. It's like a voice from above, telling me to befriend Liner and not her."

We had both contended our points, referring to "something" without a real reason to back us up, but strangely, I got the feeling neither of us was really wrong.

Annius shrugged. "If you insist, then do as you please."

"Sweet. I'm gonna go talk to him a sec. Thanks for the advice you're always giving me, Annius. If it doesn't go well, I'll get down on my hands and knees and beg you to lose a match against me, so wait here for me."

"No can do. The only person I'm willing to throw a duel for is a boy I'm head over heels for. Ah, by the way, my type is a tall hottie who's super kind to girls, who *looks* a little timid but does what a hero does when the chips are down. If he's famous enough to be a household name in the Dungeon Alliance, all the better! I can't have some nobody for a boyfriend!"

"Cool. I see you and I aren't ever gonna be close!"

"I don't dislike you that much, Kanami. If I did, I wouldn't come talk to you."

"I'll tell you *my* type. I like a girl who would nod after a guy gets on his hands and knees begging her to lose a match for him."

"Ack, such a shame. So I'm not your type, then."

"At this point, Liner's the only hope I've got left! I've got a hunch *he'd* throw the duel for me if I got on my hands and knees!"

"That's one trash evaluation criterion you've got there. But I don't hate it! Break a leg!" replied the gossip-lover, less than responsibly.

Having finished my meal, I got up out of my chair. In order to return to my sister, I was prepared to have no shame or regard for my reputation. So I crossed paths with Liner Hellvilleshine.

Consequently, this aberrant path back to Earth diverted yet more. My strategy of brown-nosing the higher echelons of the Elt-Order continued right up until I realized that my 7.00 APT stat allowed me to level up with relative ease.

When I realized that I didn't really need anyone else, I didn't know that it would be a point of no return...

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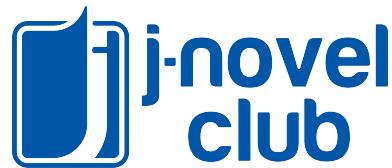
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 2

by Tarisa Warinai

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