

Tarisa Warinai

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8

DUNGEON DIVE

Aim for the Deepest Level!



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Chapter 1: Palinchron Regacy

The continent of Varences was considered the “country proper” by the frontier territories. There was something called a boundary line there, splitting north from south. The farce of a “border war” had played out over that boundary line for a long time. The two opposing factions ruling the continent sent their soldiers to the front and had them kill each other at a moderate pace for a moderate amount of movement in terms of gains and losses.

To be honest, I had absolutely no interest in this kind of behind-the-scenes power struggle or profits. It’s precisely *because* I didn’t have that interest that I was able to wear this fine military uniform, earn the grand title of general, move thousands of troops, and walk atop the outer wall of this fortress on the front lines.

The heels of my boots clacked on the stone floor as I walked beneath the clear blue sky. Straining my eyes to look toward the north, I was just able to see the large army of the Northern League as they retreated over the horizon. Simultaneously, at the foot of the rampart I was walking along, soldiers of the Southern League gave a thunderous cheer for their tactical victory.

I watched over those scenes for just a few moments, smiling, before turning away from them. The outer wall I was currently moving along formed the perimeter of a triangle, and I walked from my position at one vertex to the opposite side, to escape the clamor. It felt good to walk somewhere so high up with the cool wind blowing. Above all else, it felt good that my plan was proceeding so smoothly. Of course, that smooth sailing was not what had led to our victory in the little skirmish between the Northern League and the Southern League. What I meant was a much more personal and selfish plan.

I straightened my uniform and continued walking along with my trifling feelings of guilt.

“Ha ha, what fancy clothing. It doesn’t suit me at all,” I told myself.

The formal clothing was the embodiment of the word “imposing.” The

materials of my officer's uniform were luxurious, with even the threads being made from magic gems. Atop a uniform design that was sure to inflame the hearts of young people, the rank insignia on my shoulder gleamed in the light. It really was fantastic. In fact, it was *too* fantastic, and being the coward that I am, I couldn't stand wearing it.

"So, I finally put this on..."

I'd known I would have to wear it sooner or later. After all, the Regacy clan I was born into was the cream of the crop even among nobles and had produced a large number of famous military personnel. From childhood, the boys of the family were continuously taught the motto "For the country, for the people," and were forced to train for that purpose. My father, my grandfather, and even my great-grandfather—all of them had worn this same uniform to war, and all had lost their lives on the battlefield.

Consequently, when I was a child, I'd assumed I would train as a knight and, when I came of age, become a soldier of my country and continue to do that until I died. I truly believed that. However, in reality it had been the complete opposite. After all, I was actually trained as a turncoat, and once I came of age, I'd become a man who lived only for his personal desires, and I would play that game until I died.

A strange laugh slipped out as I realized that I'd ended up in this uniform anyway, despite taking wrong turn after wrong turn on the road of life. Naturally, none of the childhood friends who had vowed to make it this far were here with me now. I'd left everything behind and come here alone, only for myself.

Now I'd be able to fight with all my strength, without any hesitation. That's right, there wasn't a single person who could stop me. Not a single—

"General Regacy! So this is where you were!" a voice called out from behind me, just as I was becoming uncharacteristically intoxicated with my own loneliness.

The man was wearing the same military uniform that I was; however, his rank insignia showed he was slightly below me. To put it simply, he was one of the competent men the bigwigs in the Southern League had assigned to me.

“Ah, were you looking at the Allied Nations just now?” My subordinate asked the question sincerely as he followed my line of sight off into the distance. It would certainly seem that was what I’d been looking at, as I had walked aimlessly along the wall, staring out at the sky, all the way to the eastern tip of the triangle. I wouldn’t deny it.

“Ha ha, I guess so... I’ve got a lot of conflicting feelings about that place.”

“Conflicting feelings?”

He was wise enough not to pry, but as I looked at his face, I was able to tell that he really did want to know what I’d been thinking about. Having nothing to hide, I told him my thoughts.

“Actually, it’s about time for the ‘hero’ to arrive on the battlefield of the Border War. I’m waiting impatiently for that.”

“A hero? Do you mean reinforcements? If it’s an acquaintance of yours then that’s quite reassuring!”

“Yes, he is an acquaintance of mine. I guess he could be called ‘reinforcements.’ There’s no doubt that he is the hero of the Southern League.”

The boy I was counting on would be a “hero” for all of humanity. Although he was probably still in denial, there would be no escaping that role once he won the Brawl.

“But, it seems like we’ve achieved a sweeping victory before he even arrives!” The excitement of the earlier battle had yet to dissipate, and the officer spoke proudly of our victory.

“Hey, now, you’re getting carried away with a small victory like that? There will be more opponents soon enough. Don’t let your guard down. If you do, I won’t be able to relax.” I told him off sternly for his overconfidence and bravado. Soon, a new enemy would appear. If the army was distracted, my efforts would all have been for nothing.

“Ha ha ha, so our recent battle was that low-stakes, huh? Maybe it was to *you*, Mr. Palinchron. You really do see things differently than the rest of us.”

“Hey, hey, you make it sound like I’m overpowered, but I’m really just good at

using all the tricks up my sleeves to win fights. Don't look at me like that." He seemed to be overestimating me, so I wanted to at least try and be a bit humble.

That seemed to completely convince him, and he continued without argument. "I suppose so. You always do all the behind-the-scenes tactical strategizing, Mr. Palinchron. Sometimes you do some magic, but most of the time..."

"Yup, I've never once commanded directly on the battlefield. I'm sorry, but that's just the way I am."

Our conversation continued on as if we were trusted comrades.

"Still, ever since you arrived, the flow of battle here has completely changed," he mused. "It's not just that our magic tactics changed, but we really began outsmarting the enemy too."

"That's just because none of you know anything about the fundamentals of battle. It's always easier to break the enemy general's spirit than it is to fight chivalrously. While the number of soldiers may change, the general only has one spirit."

"Above all it's that magic circle. Because of that, our morale just keeps on going up."

"Ah, that thing. Ha ha, I certainly am quite proud of that one."

"To be able to alter the continent's leyline without the enemy noticing... You really are amazing, Mr. Palinchron."

"That's the secret magic of the Regacy Clan. I made some modifications to it when I was a kid, and I've been sitting on it ever since. All hell's gonna break loose over there if it goes off."

"You did that as a kid? Just when— Ah, I'm sorry. You did say it was secret."

"Nah, it's fine."

It seemed like my officer thought he was getting carried away and asking too much again, as he quickly took a step back and hung his head. The magic circle I had laid out over the continent wasn't *just* a family secret anymore, it was a

national secret of the Southern League as well. Knowing about it required a high rank and a lot of paperwork.

My officer, now cooled down from the excitement of battle, kept his mouth shut. That, however, was a little unfortunate, as I felt like having a little chat about inconsequential things.

“Hey, though I can’t talk about the magic circle, would you be willing to listen to me talk about my childhood?”

“That’s...rare. You’re usually so secretive, Mr. Palinchron.”

“I just feel like talking a bit is all.”

It was all in the past now, and before me was a stranger who would die soon anyway. It was the perfect scenario for a good final monologue.

“You can tell me as much as you like. Personally, I’m really curious too.” He nodded, wanting to be at least slightly useful to me. I thanked him quietly and then began to murmur as I reminisced on the past.

“As a child, I was... This may be surprising, but I was an incredibly respectable child. I grew up totally comfortably being schooled in the Regacy Clan’s uselessly high-class education.”

“So you’re saying you’re no longer a respectable person?”

“Ha ha, so it would seem. In any case, you can think of that child as having absolutely no resemblance to my current self whatsoever. I was a boy who treated everyone equally and was kind to everyone. I liked playing fair and square, never tolerated cowardly behavior, and absolutely hated to lose.”

“Cut the lies, Mr. Palinchron...” he interrupted as I began the story of my past.

I understood his feelings, but I would’ve liked for him to have believed me a bit more. I had no choice but to use other upstanding knights to back me up as I continued.

“If you think it’s a lie, feel free to ask any of the knights of the Allied Nations. It’s quite a famous story, you know? I used to be called stuff like ‘child prodigy.’ I was quite popular and had a ton of friends.”

“So, how long have you been like *this*, then?”

“How long? That was...” I smiled bitterly at the unexpectedly rude question as I recalled those bygone days.

It was back when I was running around the countryside near my family’s villa with...a lot of my friends. Among those people were Rayle Thenks and Glenn Walker from Laoravia. The group even included Hine Hellvilleshine from Whoseyards. It was a relationship between children born to the aristocratic ruling clans, but there could be no denying that we were true friends in our younger years. And then, five years after my niece was born, my ties to those friends were severed.

“The Regacy family has a mission that none of the other ruling clans have: to inherit the power of a certain apostle one thousand years in the future. It must’ve been the day of that ritual that I changed.”

“One thousand years in the future? As I am also a follower of Levahn, I think I know what you’re talking about. Do you mean the story of Apostle Sith, who guided Saint Tiara? Or Apostle Diplacura, who drove the Queen of the North mad?”

I’d thought I might need to give a detailed explanation of the legend, but he was quite quick-witted, not just as a soldier but as a Levahnnite too.

“No, there was actually a third apostle, one who was useless and did nothing but stare off into space. Of course, they wouldn’t be remembered in the legend. But they were there, absolutely. And that third person’s name was Regacy. Apostle Regacy.”

“Huh...that’s the same as your family name, Mr. Palinchron.”

“My niece Sheer inherited that apostle’s power about ten years ago.” Just like that, I’d told someone the Regacy family’s deepest secret.

“Huh? Do you mean *that* Miss Sheer? No, there’s no way...” He didn’t seem to believe it. Had he met Sheer Regacy before? If so, he must have known about her strangely low stats.

“Hey, hey, she’ll get angry! Despite everything, she’s really amazing. Even though her stats are low, she’s one of those with ‘numbers behind her numbers,’” I told him.

“Huh, well...I’ve heard something about that, I suppose. Those’d be nice to have. Numbers behind numbers...”

I was trying to tell an important story, but it seemed he was only half listening. It was a totally normal scene in my everyday life. “Well, like you said, Sheer is a nobody. A nobody among nobodies. Naturally, she doesn’t even possess any of the apostle’s power. To be frank, I stole it from her.”

“Whoa...so it’s *that* kind of story, huh?”

This was apparently the only thing he actually believed. I probably should have felt bad about how he was treating me, but I continued on with my story regardless.

“No, it’s actually a very good story. At the time, I was a real hot-blooded, foolish man. I couldn’t leave my niece, who was to be the vessel for the reincarnation, alone. So day by day I saw the Sheer I knew disappearing, until one day I let my emotions get the best of me. Feeling just like the hero from a fairytale, I took all that power from her. Thanks to that, she remained weak and pure, and it turned me into a shady guy who likes messed-up magic. So, are you impressed?”

“Is that...true? You’re not leaving anything out like you usually do?”

Once again, my habits come back to bite me. Apparently, everyone thought I only ever explained something if it would benefit me.

“Ah, well...isn’t that what I’m always saying? It’s up to the listener to decide.” Proof that I wasn’t lying would be difficult to come by. Even if it was the unwavering truth, if not even a single person believed it, then it became a lie. As I always spun lies into truth in my hands, I had no choice but to educate my subordinate with one of my usual phrases.

“All right, all right. So that’s what it comes down to, then? You do always say that. I understand.”

“Ha ha ha! This is how I hone my subordinates’ eye for the truth.” In the end, I wrapped my old story up with a joke.

A cheery mood enveloped us, despite the fortress whose rampart we stood upon still reeking of blood. It really did feel good. I had expelled something from

the depths of my soul, and my body actually felt lighter.

At the end of that refreshing feeling, I asked my next question, spitting out the most important words. “Hey, if I told you there was an apostle inside me right now, would you believe me?”

That was the proof of the existence of Apostle Regacy. That was the reason Palinchron Regacy existed and fought.

“That I believe. You’ve given us enough hope. There’s no one in the fortress who doubts your real abilities anymore. Everyone respects you, just like an apostle who saves the world,” he replied firmly, glancing at my meek expression. There wasn’t a single lie in that statement; he said it all in earnest.

“Is that so?”

He believed me even before I had presented any proof. Ironically, *really* ironically, I did appear to be an apostle.

With a short reply I wrapped up the conversation. “Circling back, with Apostle Regacy’s power, I was able to lay out the continent-wide magic circle. Since the apostle existed a thousand years ago, the result’s going to be something else. There’s no doubt the Northern League will lose. It’s all going smoothly.”

“Thousand-year-old magic?! For us, it’s a world we only know about because it’s been passed down by the Church of Levahn, but to you, Mr. Palinchron, it’s something tangible! As one might expect...”

When it came to a fight, I suppose I was trusted more than anyone else. I’d contributed that much in terms of victory and magic to the Southern League. This time.

“No, that’s incorrect. The origin of everything in this world came from a thousand years ago. Wherever and whoever you are, a hand from a thousand years ago is reaching out. The Dungeon of the frontier, the Border War of Varences, all of these are the legacy of those from a thousand years ago.”

Conversely, there was no way to escape those thousand-year bonds. Everyone would continue to be swept away by fate and birth. I said all this as if I were trying to convince myself. My officer listened to me with a serious expression, but he did not try to trace my words back to their true meaning. He

just seemed to understand that, historically, the world is connected to the past.

He looked at the sky that was beginning to lighten and tried to entice me off the wall. “Mr. Palinchron, shall we head back? The other generals were calling for you. It seems they have no interest in proceeding with discussions without the distinguished Mr. Palinchron there.”

That must have been his original purpose in coming to find me. I guess he hadn’t been able to tell me since I’d suddenly started talking about the old days. I apologized before being selfish once more.

“Yes, I understand. However, do you think you could go down first? I want to look at the sky a little longer. I’ll be down shortly.”

“Of course. We’ll wait for you.”

The competent officer left the scene without defying his superior. After watching him leave, I returned my sights to the eastern sky. Then I thought of all that lay ahead. Words naturally leaked from my lips.

“The hero arrives...slays the monster...”

Across the sky, across the plains, across the sea...he was there. The so-called hero’s name was Aikawa Kanami. Or perhaps, we’ll just call him *Kanami*.

Yesterday, a messenger had come with news of the results of the Brawl. As I had planned, the Thief of Earth’s Essence had been vanquished. Then, the newly formed Thief of Wood’s Essence had begun stirring within my schemes. If things continued this way, the deciding battle would take place where I’d originally planned.

“Come fight me, come to my magic circle, my World Restoration Array!”

All of my preparations were complete. I had devised a plan to intercept them. No matter when they attacked, it wouldn’t matter.

“The positioning is good. The timing is good. I’ve been blessed with good fortune. All that’s left is the fight. I’m no match for him in a direct confrontation, but I have plenty of millennium-old debts with which to torture his heart. Frankly, rather than just playing with my boy Kanami...”

I would win. I was sure of it. Victory wasn’t essential to my goal, but I had

everything lined up perfectly. If I was unlucky, it could also be a total shutdown. That is how much “birth” and “destiny” I had. That was the level I was at, but the opposition was on a cursed level.

And yet, despite knowing all of that, even a hero’s heart could break, no doubt about it.

“Well, I bet you’ll be happy with this...because I sure am having fun with it.”

When the battle was over, that lingering attachment would be fulfilled. In any case, even just imagining the clash lifted my spirits significantly. I was excited and smiled.

“Ah, it’s such fun being alive...”

It sure was fun, even if I didn’t know why. That’s often what a sense of enjoyment is like. And enjoyment is an important part of one’s life. That is why I fought—for my own enjoyment.

Feeling that was more than enough reason to live, I looked out at the horizon. The sky was still clear, although some clouds had started to gather as I spoke. The white sun was shining brilliantly in the center of the sky. I squinted against the dazzling light, looking for something beyond it—nostalgic, expectant, and impatient to no end.

A thousand-year-old legend. I dreamed of a battle between “heroes” and “monsters.”

Chapter 2: The Guardian of the Fortieth Floor

Unlike the eastern continent, which was a frontier, most of the mainland of Varence was governed by human hands. There were more than a dozen large countries, and anywhere you went, you'd find a city.

Among them were the five countries that had given birth to the Allied Nations: Whoseyards, Vart, Laoravia, Eltralieu, and Greeard, which together covered a large area. And among that, our ship was arriving in Vart proper.

We weren't anchoring directly in the port. In order to stay concealed, we were dropping anchor off the cliffs on the eastern side, far away from human habitation. The reason being that we were wanted by the Allied Nations. If we didn't do our best to choose as unpopular a place as possible, our pursuers were likely to find us. Of course, we wouldn't be able to keep this huge ship hidden forever. The idea was simply that it might be able to buy us a few days' grace before we were able to capture Palinchron.

As we dropped anchor, we split into our usual parties for Dungeon diving. While large groups were likely to draw attention, our ship was valuable, so we had to leave a contingent behind to protect it.

In the pale dawn of early morning, my friends began gathering on the deck, but Dia didn't appear topside, so I decided to head down and wake her up, stopping outside the door.

"Dia, wake up! We've arrived! It's the mainland!" I knocked intermittently, trying to wake her up, but there was no reply from within.

Having no choice, I activated Dimension at its lowest level and could see that she was sleeping like the dead on the bed inside. The too-quiet sleep made me worry. Since she was still fully clothed, I opened the door and approached her bed, shaking her shoulder gently so as not to scare her, trying to rouse her. But even that got no response. She was sleeping too deeply.

It was a little strange that even with this kind of external touching she wasn't

waking up. Instead, she was muttering in her sleep, “I... No...no... I’m sorry, Sieg...”

I’d heard this kind of incoherent speech in the past. It was the same thing Dia had been muttering as I’d carried her out of the dungeon after the fight with Tida on the fifth floor. A Dia who had endlessly called out my name and apologized.

I gathered she was probably having a nightmare, so I slapped her cheeks, trying to force her awake.

“Mmh, nnh, ah, nnh...” She began to stir, grimacing as she opened her eyes. I noticed that the blue irises beneath her eyelashes seemed to be radiating magic.

“Wake up, Dia. It’s already morning.”

“Morning? Is that you, Sieg?”

“You’re still half asleep. Sieg is my old alias; now I’m going by Kanami.”

As I corrected my name, Dia’s eyes finally opened completely. “Ka...nami? That’s right. You’re Kanami now...” She rubbed her eyes and sat up. As she lowered her hands from her face, she—now fully awake—finally grasped her surroundings.

“Good morning, Dia.”

“Good morning, Kanami. But...what are you doing here?”

We were at point-blank range as our eyes connected, and her cheeks flushed. I would have thought that Dia, who usually called herself a man, wouldn’t be too concerned about these things, but I guess not.

“Oh, you were late waking up, so I came to get you.”

“Aaah, I see. Um, I’m sorry for oversleeping. You haven’t decided who’s staying behind yet, have you?”

“Not yet. We’re waiting for you.”

Dia crawled out of the bed as she asked about the situation on deck. Then, after she’d done the bare minimum to make herself presentable, we rushed out

of the room. I told her she could slow down a bit, but it seemed she hated that time had been wasted because of her. Less than a minute later, she was on deck to apologize.

“I’m sorry, everyone! I overslept!”

“Nah, it’s no problem. Honestly, we don’t have much to talk about regarding splitting up anyway,” Lastiara replied lightly, her mouth full of food.

That reply made me tilt my head in puzzlement. “Don’t have much to talk about? You mean you’ve already decided?”

“Well, those of us who want to go with you, Kanami, are me, Maria, and Dia. And then we need to take Ms. Wyss as our guide, making five, right?”

“Yes. Will that be enough?”

As I looked around everyone nodded. I had expected Sera to insist on going with Lastiara, but it seemed the latter had already persuaded her. Snow was in full send-off mode, waving a flag of her own making that read, “See you later.”

“And your request, Kanami, is that you and Reaper, who can also use Dimension magic, move separately, right?” Lastiara asked.

Personally, I really wanted to bring Snow out later, but it would take me at least a few days to convince her, so I decided to give up on that idea for now. We were still at the “wait and see” stage, so there was no reason to rush.

“That’s right. It’s easy for me to communicate with Reaper, so it would be best if we were separated. However, I think it would be better if we had fewer people. Honestly, if we were found, it wouldn’t be bad if it was just Ms. Wyss and me.”

“Absolutely not. You’d start fighting things willy-nilly and end up getting the tables turned on you.”

“No, no way. Even if it did come to a battle, if I’m in perfect condition, there’s no way I could lose one-on-one. And anyway, wasn’t Palinchron originally a knight focused on support magic?”

“That’s true. When he was one of the Seven Celestial Knights, his combat capabilities were always ranked near the bottom, to the point where I never

saw him beat Sera during mock combat.”

“The only thing I have to watch out for is the Thief of Darkness’s Essence—Tida’s magic. But the seed of that magic is broken. As long as the black liquid doesn’t stick to me, I’m safe.”

I had already fought and defeated Tida once. As I was now, I’d also be able to freeze all of the dark liquid. I was quite proud of my competitive advantage. But there was one person who vehemently denied it.

“No. You can never be safe from the knight Palinchron.” It was Ms. Wyss, who had been sitting in a corner of the deck and watching everything quietly.

After the last two days of rest, she was back in good physical condition and showing a spirit worthy of one being over level thirty. Moved by her strength, I waited quietly for her to continue.

“To start with, he’s absolutely not going to fight you head on. Before you know it, he’s finished scheming; then he’s finished attacking before you know it, and he’s cast a mental spell before you can turn your head too. That’s the kind of man he is.”

The words were strangely persuasive. I certainly couldn’t imagine Palinchron being the type to go head-to-head. I assumed that if we did, the battle would soon be over thanks to Lorwen’s swordsmanship, but it would be best not to be so naive.

“I understand. I’ll try to fight him while everyone surrounds him.”

“Yes, that’s the correct way. Well then, shall we depart? The five of us.” Ms. Wyss signaled the five members Lastiara had brought up earlier with her eyes.

The line of friends agreed with terrifying smiles.

“I prefer one-on-one fights but...this time, I’m with Ms. Wyss. We’ll pen him in and beat him to a pulp!” cried Lastiara.

“Hee hee hee, I like it! I knew I would pay back that knight someday...hee hee, hee hee hee!” said Maria.

“Me too,” Dia added. “My scar from that bastard’s cut still aches. I had to escape in Laoravia, but this time I won’t run away. I’m going to absolutely

pulverize him.”

They were all full of murderous intent. I was afraid that the moment we met Palinchron, their magic would be released without question.

“Um, well, shall we go? We can’t anchor close to shore where the ship can be easily seen, so we’ll have to jump from here to the cliff face. Ms. Wyss, can you manage it?”

“Yes, I’m low on magic, but that kind of light exercise should be okay.”

I pointed to the cliff off to the side of the ship to double-check. It would be an absurd request for a normal person, but Ms. Wyss nodded without hesitation. I’d figured her stats would make it doable, but since she’d referred to it as “light exercise,” I guess I had no reason to worry.

“Reaper, Ms. Sera, Snow, take care while we’re away.”

I bid those staying behind farewell and lifted Dia, who had low physical capabilities, onto my back. Lastiara took care of Maria. Then Lastiara, Ms. Wyss, and I took a running leap off the deck. With our stats enhanced by yesterday’s level-up, we were able to jump to the top of the cliff, succeeding thanks to our inhuman strength.

I quickly let Dia down off my back, turned back to the boat, and waved. Reaper and Sera waved back, and Snow frantically waved her flag. After confirming that everything was okay, we slipped into the cover of trees at the top of the cliff.

The forest didn’t even have an animal trail to follow, so we moved along, clearing the way with our swords. It wasn’t a proper path, but it was better than the dungeon. Even Dia and Maria, who were physically weak, were following along without a problem.

After getting through about half the forest, we emerged into a clear space. It was a prairie painted in ocher and shades of green, wide open, with nothing to obstruct the blowing wind. The scene reminded me of a field map in a classic RPG.

This was the mainland, the continent of Varences. In truth, it didn’t look much different from the frontier of the Allied Nations.

I opened the map and, after checking our direction, strained my eyes to look out over the prairie. I could just make out the shape of a city on the horizon. It was a port town on the eastern side of Vart proper called Cork.

We disguised ourselves slightly before heading for the city. Even though we had crossed the sea, we were still fugitives, so we tried to hide our individual characteristics as much as possible.

As we drew nearer, the perimeter of the city came into view. Even from far away, its defenses were impressive. It was surrounded by a five-meter-tall stone wall, and armed guards were stationed at checkpoints. Vart seemed to be on high alert, perhaps because of its proximity to the front lines of the war with the north.

It was likely that if we headed directly to a checkpoint, we'd immediately be taken into custody. If they ran a background check, they'd discover our criminal charges from the Allied Nations and we'd be arrested. Luckily, we had Ms. Wyss with us now. She simply said, "Leave it to me," and strode to the front of our group.

Walking openly through the middle of the meadow, we came to the front of one checkpoint, and Ms. Wyss began to speak casually with the soldiers guarding it. I could tell they knew each other without having to use Dimension to eavesdrop. Thus, without much screening, our party was allowed into the city, and the five of us entered Cork together.

Inside the walls, paths and houses made of stone were everywhere. I thought the townscape looked a bit like the Allied Nations. If there was a difference, it was that there appeared to be fewer adventurers and explorers. On the other hand, I saw many people who looked like they were in the military, again probably because of the proximity to the front. Also, as in a port town, there might have been more traders around.

It was a lively and bustling city in its own way—a nice town, no doubt about it. I, however, felt a bit disappointed.

"It really is quite strict, huh? Hearing 'mainland,' I expected it to be a bit more lively, but I guess that's not the case."

Selfishly, I had been expecting to be as impressed as when I'd left the

countryside for the city, but I was let down by the fact that the change was not actually that dramatic.

“It’s because the Allied Nations aren’t really in the countryside. They share the same culture too, so naturally, they’re similar,” Ms. Wyss explained.

She knew the area well and therefore led the way as our guide. Meanwhile, Lastiara, who always wanted to be the leader, was completely useless, staring wide-eyed at everything like a child. She couldn’t stay calm, as expected of a three-year-old who had grown up sheltered.

While the usually loud girl was struck quiet, I took the opportunity to talk with Ms. Wyss.

“Although it may seem similar, the atmosphere is a bit different,” I noted.

“That’s because this is on the very front lines of the Border War. All the people living here are aware that the conflict could reach them at any moment. The sense of tension must be different from that in a frontier area where there are no enemies.”

My Responsiveness skill made me alert to a sting in the air that pricked my skin. If I looked closely, I could see little shadows on people’s faces. It was a negative expression that would have depressed me if I stared at it for too long.

As if to break through the gloomy atmosphere of the city, the high-strung Lastiara suddenly shouted, “Well then! Why don’t we head to a tavern or guild first to gather information! Those are the basics of adventuring, after all! The start of every heroic tale! The first town! New characters! I’m so excited!”

Even as I was grateful for her inborn cheerfulness, I had to quickly dispatch her dreams. “No, we’re not doing that this time. I know there’re lots of things you want to do in a new town, but we can’t.”

I understood her feelings. As a game enthusiast, I wanted to visit all of the town’s facilities right away. But that wasn’t necessary with the power of Dimension. And anyway...

“It’s because I’m here. I’m sorry,” Ms. Wyss scratched at her cheek as she apologized. With her present, we could accomplish our goals without having to gather information.

“I know, right? Hmm, at this rate the second chapter of my story, ‘Defeat Palinchron Regacy,’ will be over in just a few pages. Damn...”

Leaving Lastiara to her unimportant concerns, Ms. Wyss and I moved on.

“Now, everyone, I will show you the villa I use as a base,” Ms. Wyss said, turning her gaze to the center of the city.

I wondered if the villa was in that direction, and out of habit I tried to check with Dimension. At that moment, I saw something that could not be overlooked in the magic I had spread out. It was a boy and a girl quarreling a little ways away. It was awfully eye-catching because it looked completely out of the ordinary. The boy on one side had short, dull-blond hair. I had saved his life once, and we had killed each other once. There was no mistaking him. For some reason, his arms were shackled, but it was the knight Liner Hellvilleshine.

“Wait. Liner’s over there in that back alley. It looks like he’s quarreling with some kid.”

Liner was shouting at a girl who was small in stature, about a head shorter than Liner himself. Her long chestnut hair was tied into pigtails that swung as she waved her fists in the air. Seeing her vividly changing facial expressions as she talked, I had the impression that she was a flower in the sun, as bright as a sunflower. Her small body radiated vitality nearly ten times stronger than ours did.

“A small kid? Maybe it’s Sheer? If that’s the case it’ll be settled quickly.”

“That kid is Sheer Regacy?”

She was a little different than I had imagined. Since she was a relative of Palinchron, I’d arbitrarily expected her to be a shady-looking kid, but she was the complete opposite. However, this unexpectedly early meeting was good luck for us. According to our earlier conversation, she would be the one who knew Palinchron’s whereabouts.

Ms. Wyss and I approached them, a smile on my face.

“It’s our lucky day to have run into her before we arrived at the villa. Let’s go ask her for a favor. I’m a little doubtful we can talk peacefully, though, with that Liner guy there...”

“They’re both good kids, so if we speak carefully it should be fine.”

“Ms. Wyss, please mediate for us. If possible, I’d like to get on good terms with Liner.”

After getting to know him better, I’d even like to pull him into our party. Although I’d heard he was a member of someone else’s party, it’s hard to find members as good as Liner. I thought that as long as we could respect each other and clear up any misunderstandings, we could get along well.

Liner had a strictness about him that other people didn’t. Not only would he be of help in the battle with Palinchron, but there would also be times when I’d need the assistance of House Hellvilleshine on the long road to the hundredth level of the dungeon. My choice of Liner over his sister, Franrühle, was entirely my own preference. I was simply fed up with the company of the opposite sex.

I could hear hushed voices behind me as my plan to befriend Liner flowed back through Dia, Maria, and Lastiara.

“Huh, Liner? The guy who barged into the championship battle at the Brawl? Shouldn’t we surround him and beat him to a pulp like we will with Palinchron?”

“Right? As payback for his surprise attack, this time the surprise attack will be from us.”

“Yeah. I approve. I’ll be smirking from the back lines.”

I was fed up with my friends, who made attacking the first choice as a matter of course.

“You... You guys...” I immediately decided to separate from them. With the girls around, there was no way I’d be able to be persuasive. “You three wait here. Your presence will complicate what could be an otherwise peaceful conversation, so Ms. Wyss and I will go alone. I want to talk things over with Liner as much as possible. I’m serious about that.”

“Huh?” Lastiara was the first to express reluctance at my instructions.

“No ‘huhs.’ That’s a leader’s order.” I didn’t know if I had the authority to do that, but I decided to say it anyway. But Maria, who was standing next to her,

was worried and murmuring, so I couldn't just give her a blanket order.

"Kanami...are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I'm just going to go ask about Palinchron's whereabouts for a bit, so don't worry about it. If anything happens, I'll shoot magic into the sky and let you know. I promise I won't do anything reckless by myself," I assured her. This was a city, not the Dungeon. Nothing too wild was going to happen here. Maria knew it too, and nodded her head reluctantly.

"I understand. I am sure that I do not have the confidence to maintain my composure in front of Liner. It would be better for us to split up."

Dia then agreed, "Well, if Kanami says so, then I guess that's all right. I don't think I could keep quiet either, Maria. I'll be killing time somewhere else."

Of course, Lastiara kept throwing a tantrum until the end. "No, no, no, no! It would be more fun to attack him!"

"Look, Lastiara, let's wait like good girls," Maria urged her.

"Hmmmmm, well, if Mar-Mar says so..."

Maria fussed over her a bit and finally managed to quiet her down. When everyone was satisfied, I called out to Ms. Wyss, "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"No, it was fun to watch. You have a really friendly party." She was at ease observing our group.

I wondered if it was my imagination that her eyes were especially kind toward Lastiara.

Well, right now the focus is on Liner and Sheer Regacy, I thought, quickly pulling myself together and walking in their direction. I left my other three party members behind and headed for the outskirts of the city, not the center. Since I had *Dimension* active, it was quick work to make my way to the back alley where Liner was. There, I was able to directly hear the argument happening.

"That's why I'm going to help! If Wyss doesn't receive regular treatments from Dr. Ide, she'll die! I'm sure she's even crying all alone in the dungeon right now! I'm the leader of this party, so I have to take responsibility and save her!"

"No way! It's impossible for you to go by yourself, Sheer! You'll just end up

dying in a ditch somewhere before even reaching the Allied Nations!”

Apparently, they couldn’t agree on how to handle the fact that one of their party members hadn’t returned from the dungeon. The Ms. Wyss in question said, “I’m gonna surprise them” and circled around behind the pair. In order to assist her prank, I approached them alone head on.

“Tch! Who’s there?!” Liner noticed my approach when I reached the point where I wasn’t totally visible but not completely hidden either.

Feeling that this reaction demonstrated his growth in power, I called out to him candidly. “Hey, Liner. It’s been awhile.”

“Huh? What? Sieg?!” He took a step back in surprise. It seemed my appearance here was really unexpected.

“Umm, well, it sounds like you’re having some trouble?” I had pretty much gathered what was going on, but figured it was best to act natural.

“So what? It doesn’t concern you. Though, if you wanna get back at me for last time, I’m ready to fight.”

Of course Liner was unwilling to listen and was on the warpath. Even so, I approached him without hostility. It might be the arrogance of the powerful, but it would be easy for me to defeat him now. Even a quick look at his stats told me there wasn’t any danger.

His tension grew as I approached him casually. Just as he was about to make his move, Ms. Wyss called out from behind him.

“I won’t forgive any disrespect toward my savior, Liner.”

He whipped around in response to the voice. “What?! How did you—” His mouth popped open as he stared blankly at the girl’s face, his bewilderment growing as he encountered a second unexpected person. He turned back and forth between Ms. Wyss and me, unable to ignore either of us.

In the middle of it all, Sheer Regacy was the only one experiencing true joy at her friend’s return. “Ahhhhhh! Wyyyyysssssssss!!!”

“I’m sorry for worrying you, chief. But I’m back now.”

The party leader launched herself at Ms. Wyss to tackle her, and Ms. Wyss

caught her in her arms. It was a heartwarming reunion. However, I couldn't let my guard down around the girl I'd heard was Palinchron Regacy's niece. Before anything else I used *Analyze* on her stats.

【STATUS】

NAME: Sheer Regacy

HP: 23/23

MP: 17/17

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 3

STR 0.45

VIT 0.88

DEX 0.23

AGI 0.34

INT 1.02

MAG 0.92

APT 0.46

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: None

There was not a single thing of note. As Lastiara had said on the boat, the girl was totally normal. She looked like an ordinary person, not a Dungeon diver.

While I stared at Sheer Regacy, Liner, who had taken a few moments to grasp the situation, drew a breath and muttered, "Ah, I see how it is. By 'savior,' you mean you met Ms. Wyss in the dungeon. And then you brought her here..."

Finally believing that I held no ill will toward him, the energy drained from his body. Hearing his mumblings, Sheer, who had still been hugging Ms. Wyss, came running over to us. She took both my hands in hers and began to shake them vigorously as she thanked me.

"Ah! So that's what happened! Thank you so much for saving my sister Wyss, kind stranger!" She then turned to Liner nearby and said firmly, "Hey, Liney, you

better thank him too!”

“Ugh... I... Thanks... You helped...” Having judged that there was a legitimate reason to thank me, he reluctantly bowed his head to me, his longtime enemy. He had the same disciplined attitude that I’d liked about him before.

As I was reaffirming that fact, Sheer began introducing herself. “I’m Sheer Regacy! I’m just starting out as a Dungeon diver!”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Aikawa Kanami; I’m a diver as well.”

“Whoa, we’re the same! Well, since you seem older than me, I’ll call you Mr. Aikawa, okay? You can just call me Sheer. But...Aikawa Kanami is kind of a strange name, isn’t it? Aikawa is a very rare name. Hmm, rare? Aikawa... Aikawa Kanami? Hm, *that*...”

I had no idea what “that” meant, but I bowed my head in assent anyway. Then, after the girl in front of me had stared hard at my face for a moment, she broke into a radiant smile.

“So you’re *that* Aikawa Kanami! Wow, you’re completely different than I expected! You seem very kind! If there’s anything I can do for you please let me know! I want to thank you properly, after all.”

Perhaps she had heard some of the rumors about me that had been going around the Allied Nations of the frontier. However, she quickly saw the real me, not just the rumored hero. I couldn’t help but squint in front of such an honest, pure heart. It was a radiance that reminded me of the Dia I once knew. I could sense the pure ingredient that was missing from my current party and felt like crying. I was ashamed of myself for thinking, in a corner of my mind, that I had planned on taking her hostage during the fight with Palinchron. She was so good that I wanted to get her to switch sides.

I hid my true intention of putting her life in danger, in case anyone was listening in, and tried to fulfill my original goal. “Well, Sheer, there *is* something I would like to ask, if that’s okay?”

“Ask me anything! I’ll answer anything for the man who is such a lifesaver!”

“I came here because I have urgent business with Palinchron Regacy. Do you happen to know where he is?”

“Huh, my uncle? Of course I know. He’s just a bit north of here. I heard he’s commanding the army on the front lines!”

“Really...” I didn’t think it was a lie. When he was in Laoravia, he’d blurted out that he was going to be summoned as a general. It seemed he really was in the middle of the war on the mainland.

“I’m not totally sure, but I think he’s one of the advisers for the Southern League! Uncle became admirable so quickly, I was shocked!”

“Do you know where he’s at right now?”

“I do! I got a letter from him that said where he was! My party is actually on our way there! I’m so glad we didn’t have to leave Wyss behind!”

“You’re also going to where Palinchron is?” Surprised that we were both headed to the same place, I turned my attention to Liner rather than Sheer.

“Yes, that is the plan. That’s what I was talking about,” he admitted readily. Then, having nothing to hide, he exposed his true objective. “I want to ask Palinchron more about Ms. Wyss’s birth.”

“I see.” Perhaps they already knew that Ms. Wyss had been made out of Mr. Hine’s body. There could be no doubt that Palinchron knew the most about Hine’s final moments.

Ms. Wyss’s appearance seemed to have changed Liner’s priorities. I also now knew why he hadn’t attacked in a frenzy on sight.

“I’m going to get some allowance from my uncle!” Sheer announced.

“I see...” I also realized that she knew nothing about anything. She simply saw her uncle as a family member.

It’ll be best if we keep our business as far from her as possible, I thought.

Besides the whole Liner thing, I wouldn’t be able to work with Sheer alone. Even just having her around would blunt my judgment. No, it was already growing duller. I needed to get the relevant information and then get away from her as quickly as possible.

“So, Sheer. I’d like you to tell me where he is right away. I have business with your uncle.”

“Got it! Umm, his location is...ummm...definitely...uh...” She suddenly groaned loudly.

Unable to watch from the sidelines, Liner butted in. “Sieg, there’s no way someone like her could remember something so detailed, so you should just drop it. If you want to know, come to the villa we’re using as a base. The letter is stored there, so you can take a look at it and figure it out yourself.”

It seemed that Liner didn’t know the precise location either, which was why he was recommending I look at the letter. That certainly had a higher degree of credibility to it. I had no reason to refuse.

“Okay. In that case, I’ll intrude on your base for a bit.”

“I-I’m sorry, Mr. Aikawa! I’m just a real idiot!” Sheer cried.

“No, it’s no problem. It’s my request, after all; don’t worry about it.”

“Wow! You’re really nice!” She grabbed onto my arm from right next to me. It seemed like she was being spurred on by deep emotions, but her restless actions made me anxious.

Sheer was small, like a baby squirrel. But beyond her young body, her mind seemed even younger. I could feel an imbalance similar to that of a Jewelculus, but “doll body” wasn’t written anywhere in her stats.

As I tried to keep far away from the suddenly affectionate Sheer, the four of us began making our way to the villa. We passed through a large public square and a market before entering the heart of the city. All the while, Liner kept me under careful observation. Sheer was pressed up close against Ms. Wyss as they walked ahead of us, so it was inevitable that he and I would end up walking next to each other.

Well, this will be a good chance to repair our relationship, I thought as I searched for something to talk about.

First and foremost, I noticed that inside the sleeves of his overcoat, his hands were handcuffed. They were wooden cuffs, so it looked like he would be able to break them with the slightest bit of effort, but it was possible that they were special items imbued with magic. I observed them with *Dimension*. They probably couldn’t be removed by brute strength.

My curiosity piqued, I asked him about them. “Say, Liner, what’s with the handcuffs?”

“Um, don’t worry about it! Lots of things happened, okay?!” He hid both his hands from me. His expression told me that he wasn’t wearing them of his own volition, so I decided to take a chance and show him I was willing to cooperate.

“If you want them off, I can help.”

“No, it’s no problem. It’s not like I’m worried about it.”

“You’re not? Even though you can’t use your hands?”

His main objective was to get revenge. It was strange that he wasn’t concerned about the inability to use his hands, seeing as he would likely be fighting either Palinchron or me in the near future.

As I continued to stare at him intently, he was unable to stand it anymore and shouted, “Jeez! Fine! I’ll tell you! One of our party members is into bondage, so I let myself be handcuffed, okay? You’re not the one who put them on, so you can’t take them off! It’d probably be impossible even for you!”

“Huh? One of your friends put them on... Why?”

“That’s what I wanna know! I said I wanted to become stronger, and all of a sudden this happened! There was no one else in the party who could stop him, so I’ve been stuck like this all day!” After a bit of light prodding, he began complaining as though a dam had burst. With the way he was going on, I could see how hard he’d been working this whole time to keep it in.

His cries must have been heard by Sheer and Ms. Wyss up ahead too, but both simply stated, “If that’s what Dr. Ide said, then it must be true,” seeming to have no intention of removing the handcuffs.

If I was correct, Ide was one of the Guardians of the Dungeon. “It certainly seems like a troublesome party...”

“Don’t look at me with such pity! Damn...your party is so nice, huh! Surrounded by princesses and ladies! From the outside they all look so nice!”

“What? Ah, um, yeah. But actually, that’s not quite right...”

“Well, here *I* am in bondage! *Bondage!* He enjoys bullying the newbie! He’s

absolutely a sadist!”

I was filled with a sense of kinship for Liner, who looked like he would start spitting blood at any moment. I was convinced that he was someone who would be able to share in my hardships after all.

“That does sound tough. But my party isn’t all fun and games either. Listen, we almost go up in flames at practically every opportunity. Honestly, my companions’ magic abilities are so freaky that I get shaky just looking at them.”

“Go up in flames? But aren’t you friends? Don’t you work together?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be, isn’t it? But I’m spied on every day, my friends tell me they’re going to stab me one of these days, and I just can’t relax even a little bit...”

“Uh, well, compared to that, this doesn’t seem so bad...” Seeing me trembling with psychological trauma, Liner’s vigor faltered. I could probably become friends with him now that I’d pulled on his heartstrings.

“So! Liner, I was thinking that you should come and join my party, because I’d like for you to become my confidant.”

“Y-You’ve cornered me, Sieg. But there’s no way anyone would want to join your party after hearing what you just said.”

“I’ll take care of it!”

“No! After all, I came here to kill you! There’s no way I could join you!”

“Coming to kill me is acceptable! You’ll fit right in!”

“No! Isn’t it totally unhinged for you to find that acceptable?!”

“Just for a bit! Just for a bit is fine, so why not try joining us? Only as a trial!”

I continued to press him as we walked. My persistent solicitations finally forced him to let down his guard with an exasperated look. It was close to the expression he’d had on when I met him in the dungeon for the first time.

“Damn, jeez, don’t get bent out of shape...” There was no animosity left. Perhaps my strategy of all attack, no defense had worked.

“I’m more at peace than I have been in a long time.” Thanks to Liner’s superb

capabilities and status, I wasn't at all nervous when talking to him. My life wasn't in danger either. Just those little things made me happy.

Seeing the relief on my face, he heaved a huge sigh. "Sheesh. Siegfried Vizzita really isn't a bad guy, huh? That was my first impression of you, after all."

We weren't talking about resentment nor were we fighting, but through our banter about trivial matters, we were beginning to understand each other's personalities. Not all of our misunderstandings had been cleared up, but I was certain that this was a good first step. As I suspected, reaching out amicably had been the right choice.

Just as the emotional distance between us was shrinking, we reached the base.

"We're here! This is our villa!" There was one old mansion standing in the center of town. Sheer was standing in front of the gate, bragging and waving her arms about.

A quick look revealed that the place couldn't be considered a well-maintained home by any standard. The garden was overgrown with withered grass, and the exterior of the house was oddly weathered. The area from the gate to the front door was clear, though, so the home had to have been cleaned at least once.

My feelings must have been clear on my face, because Liner jumped in to explain. "We've been using an abandoned Regacy family villa for our own purposes. So don't expect too much from the inside."

"Liney, you're so rude! It's such a splendid house!" Sheer led us through the gate with a pouty expression, and we opened the large doors to the villa and went inside.

I took a look around as I stepped into the entryway. Truthfully, the inside of the building could only be described as simple and old-fashioned. There were no furnishings and no servants in sight. My impression of the interior was no different than that of the outside. The most noticeable parts looked clean, but looking closely, I could see that there was a lot of dust in the corners.

"We're home! I'll just go grab the letter real quick! While I'm at it, I'll call for Dr. Ide too, so wait there!" Upon entering, Sheer cheerfully ran off to the back

of the mansion first and foremost to fulfill our request.

I was glad to see that, but the three of us who were left at the front door had nothing to do. We all exchanged glances.

“Let’s head to the drawing room for now,” Liner proposed. “Ms. Wyss will probably feel better there too. Come on, Sieg.”

It seemed he was tentatively treating me as a guest for the time being. I wondered if leaving a guest standing in the entryway went against his way of doing things. He led us in the opposite direction from where Sheer had run off. We proceeded down a corridor with a cobweb-covered ceiling and after passing through several doors, arrived at a simple room with a large table in the middle. This room, like the garden and entrance, had been kept minimally clean.

“Sorry, Sieg. Please bear with us,” said Liner.

“Nah, it’s okay. I can relax here better than by the entrance.”

“Yeah, I’m just glad I can sit down,” Ms. Wyss added.

She and I sat in the simple chairs for a rest, while Liner leaned back against the wall and stared out the window. For a moment, the drawing room was wrapped in silence.

But just waiting in silence is a waste of time, I thought, so I tried to come up with something to talk to Liner about. *For instance, it would probably be worthwhile to learn about each other’s families.*

Just as I was about to speak to him, the door of the drawing room, which had been shut, was opened with a resounding crash. Two children dressed in strange clothes entered and began making a racket.

“Welcome back, you two! We passed Sheer earlier and she told us you were back!”

“Welcome back...”

Although they were kids, they were a bit taller than Liner. If he were in middle school, then these two would be in late middle school. They were identical. Like twins, they had the same face, wore similar clothes, and had similar voices. The only difference was the colors they wore. The one who greeted us loudly had

red hair, while the quiet one had black hair. The colors of their frilly outfits were also differentiated by red versus black.



I wasn't certain, but I suspected they were girls. It would be rude to check with *Dimension*, so I couldn't be certain but...

"Oy! You two sure seem full of energy. I thought you said you were too sick to move this morning!" Liner said in response to the appearance of these two children, with a bit of irritation. A vein bulging in his temple, he turned away from the pair, who were trying to cling to him.

"Huh? Sick? Oh, well, that already cleared up!"

"Liar! You weren't sick at all!"

"Aha ha, it wasn't a lie! It's not every day these two are in good spirits! Right, Wyss?" the red-clothed girl said meaningfully with a cheery expression.

Wyss replied just as cheerfully, "It's true; they really were feeling poorly. Please forgive them." With her intervention, Liner had no choice but to calm his anger and fell silent.

The black-clothed girl spoke up with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Wyss. We completely abandoned you. You had to give up so much..."

"I don't mind. You were only doing what I told you to. You have nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, okay. All right...but how did you survive that? You were already at your limit when we escaped."

That was probably when I'd met Ms. Wyss in the Dungeon. From the conversation, I gathered that these two were also members of her party.

"It's true I was at my limit. Fortunately, I was rescued by the hero of Laoravia," Wyss replied with a mischievous look on her face.

The two girls turned to look at me. "Huh. So our guest here is a hero? Wyss, is that really true?" the girl in red asked excitedly.

I quickly answered before Ms. Wyss could, since she'd brought me unwillingly into the conversation. Denying the hero title, I introduced myself to the two girls. "Please don't call me a hero, Ms. Wyss. Um, I'm the Dungeon diver Aikawa Kanami. I'm not a hero or anything, just normal, so it's nice to meet you."

They paid no mind to my denial. “No, we can do that too, so we know more or less how strong you are. Thanks for saving my sister, Mr. Hero. Hmmm, I’ve never seen a hero in person before. It’s nice to meet you too. The red one is Rouge and the black one is Noir. We try to make ourselves as easy to distinguish as possible, so please use color to tell us apart.”

“Oh, thank you for saving our sister...Mr. Hero.”

Seeing the two of them bowing their heads as they called me “hero,” I glared at Ms. Wyss. “Please correct them somehow.”

“I’m just telling the truth. Even I’ve heard of your activities in Laoravia.” Wyss smiled meanly at me. She seemed to have no intention of correcting them.

Rouge immediately lobbed a question my way once our greetings were complete. “Hey, hey. Heroes are strong, right? Who’s stronger, you or Wyss?”

It was an innocent question. Noir next to her also seemed interested, as she nodded along. Their close relationship was like that of real sisters.

“Hm, well, I’ve never seen Ms. Wyss fight, so I don’t know...”

“Boy, don’t be modest. Even if I pushed this body to its limits, I wouldn’t have a one in a million chance of winning,” Ms. Wyss interjected.

I had tried to give a vague answer, but her denial was immediate. Hearing that, the two girls seemed excited, surprised that their own sister had admitted defeat, and began to clamor even more.

“What?! You’re even stronger than the insanely strong Wyss?”

“To be even stronger than Wyss... So that’s a *hero*...”

They clasped hands and said practically the same thing one after the other. Their appearance made it feel like there was a mirror creating an optical illusion over there. They really seemed like twins.

“They’re not twins. Their materials are just really similar.” Ms. Wyss answered the question floating through my mind, and I wondered if it was easy to guess because of my expression. From the word “material,” I gathered that they, too, were Jewelculi.

“Oh, so that’s how it is.”

“I removed them from a certain laboratory. Like me, they have a very short lifespan.”

Materials, Jewelculus, laboratory, short lifespans... A horrible image rose up based on that collection of coldhearted words. I could guess that the research on Jewelculi going on in this country was inhumane.

Wyss could see that I was becoming incensed and shook her head. “Please don’t make that face. Lastiara is a special case; Jewelculi are naturally like this. Even so, we consider ourselves lucky to have met Dr. Ide.” She was assuring me that this was just the way things were. From her expression, I could tell that she had witnessed the deaths of several of her relatives.

The air in the room became heavy with the gloomy topic, and the conversation was about to die down. Then two new visitors enter the drawing room. The first was Sheer, holding the letter in both hands as she ran in.

Upon her entrance into the room, she shouted, “I’ve got it!” as she ran up right next to me and handed it over.

“Thank you, Sheer.”

Then there was the second figure: a strangely tall man. His limbs were as slender as wire, and he had pure-white hair that reached his chest, with distinctively narrow eyes and pale lips. He wore a white lab coat like a researcher, and atop his nose were perched glasses that looked like they’d come from another dimension.

He began looking for his patient immediately as he entered the room. “Where is Mistress Wyss? I’ll treat you right away!”

“I’m right here, Dr. Ide.”

Ms. Wyss raised her hand in a practiced manner, and the man went over to her without a moment’s hesitation. Then, from those thin arms, began to flow a green magic that looked like a firefly’s light, which enveloped Ms. Wyss. It was probably wood-type restoration magic.

“You are on the verge of death, aren’t you? You are being too reckless. I will stabilize you with magic for the time being, then please rest right away. I will also cast a sleep spell. This is compulsory.”

“Doctor...no matter how much you persist, we are always on the verge of death, so don’t worry so much about it. This...is not reckless...”

Unable to finish her thought, she fell asleep in the chair. I watched the countless letters that lined her stats section disappear from my menu-sight. In just a few seconds, she’d recovered from symptoms that even Lastiara and Dia could not heal. I was convinced of the man’s true identity based on his skill.

He watched as Ms. Wyss entered the lull, then muttered bitterly, “Of course I’m going to be worried. I will definitely save all of you Jewelculi. You’re a necessary part of my personal Eden, after all...”

Without letting my guard down even slightly, I used *Analyze* on the man who radiated such obviously aberrant magical power.

【QUADRAGESIMAL GUARDIAN】 Thief of Wood’s Essence

As I expected, this Thief of Wood’s Essence was the Dungeon Guardian Ms. Wyss’s party had unleashed.

“Well, Mistress Wyss will be fine for the time being. Now, about our guest—”

I made eye contact with the Thief of Wood’s Essence. I figured that until a few moments ago, he’d only had eyes for the young woman. The moment he caught sight of me, he stiffened in surprise.

“Wha?!” His eyes opened wide in shock.

Then my magic abilities filled me with a will to fight. I had been caught off guard thinking that he was a gentle guardian from the way he’d been caring for Ms. Wyss, but I hurriedly reached for my inventory and grasped my sword. Well, I grabbed it, but...I didn’t think about drawing it just yet...because as the Thief of Wood’s Essence was staring at me, he was trembling. He was supposed to be a monster with powers beyond human capability, and yet he was as frightened as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Are... Are you Aikawa Kanami? No, that would be a little strange. Then you’re the Thief of Water’s Essence?” He used my name, then let the words “Thief of Water’s Essence” escape.

I wasn't sure what it was about me that had him so frightened. I hadn't used any magic, nor had I taken out my sword. So I decided to introduce myself, trying my best not to agitate him.

"I'm Aikawa Kanami. It's nice to meet you."

Hearing that, his eyes opened wide again. "N-Nice to meet you? Is it possible you do not know who I—Ide—am?" He had given his name and spread both arms wide to gesture to himself. But I didn't remember him. There was no way I'd be able to forget someone like this, with his distinctive appearance and magic abilities.

"Correct. This is the first time we've met," I replied truthfully.

Sensing the sincerity in my words, Ide curiously began to mumble and mutter, leaving me and my friends behind.

"What on earth is happening? In other words, did Master Kanami fail not only in the magic circle and the Dungeon but also his resurrection? No one's long-cherished wish came true? Is that why the Guardians' rules are so lenient? Then...what happened to the world after that?!"

It was clear that he was in crisis. He continued arguing with himself until he was blue in the face, pulling at his hair the whole time. I moved closer and extended a hand, hoping to help him calm down, but he looked up sharply and took a step away from me, reacting like a frightened cat.

Then, Ide drew his previous discussion with himself to a close in an incredibly quiet voice. "No, either way, it has nothing to do with me. It has absolutely nothing to do with me anymore." His wild eyes calmed, and he looked straight at me. I knew his crisis was over.

I returned his steady gaze and asked, "Who did you mistake me for? Have you actually met me before?" I had a lot of things I wanted to ask him, and the most important question wasn't about the Dungeon or the Guardians. It was about my own body.

He didn't respond, but simply continued talking to himself. "Yes, yes, of course. Everything is over. Therefore, let us forget that you instigated your own kingship. It is over. It is no longer relevant."

Instigated my own kingship?

Even though Ide was saying it wasn't relevant, there was animosity in his eyes. I knew those kinds of eyes. They were the same as when I'd reconnected with Liner while my memories were being suppressed by Palinchron. At the time, I could feel the animosity hidden behind Liner's eyes. But since I couldn't remember anything, I'd been incredibly bewildered. I was assailed by that same bewilderment now.

"There is no reason to give up just yet, though. I am willing to fight once again. This time, I will settle my thousand-year score. I will... I will!"

He made that oath, completely ignoring me. I made sure not to miss a single word of it, assuming it was related to his lingering attachment and, consequently, a way to bring about his death.

"I will create another kingdom and await Queen Lorde's rule. She will definitely be able to escape the Dungeon in the near future. And this time, Queen Lorde will triumph. With our own hands we will build a paradise on this continent. Lead the world to peace! Yes, that is the queen's wish and my own!"

His lingering attachment was way too majestic compared to that of the other three Guardians. After he finished his oath of world peace, the tremors throughout his body faded.

"As you have heard, my desire remains unchanged from before. Please listen. What is the current Master Kanami's desire?"

Driven by his vigor, I answered, "I'm aiming for the deepest level of the Dungeon."

Hearing that, the Thief of Wood's Essence showed a bit of suspicion. Since I was observing vigilantly, I could tell that he was searching for some sort of falsehood in my words. I wouldn't be able to get any information out of him if he was so wary, so I had no choice but to ask him about himself rather than about me.

"More importantly, one moment," I continued. "To be honest, I don't understand most of what you're saying, so I'd like to ask you more about yourself." I humbly asked him for an explanation, and seeing that, his fighting

spirit withered away. It seemed my reaction was unexpected.

“You really have changed, huh, Master Kanami? There’s no need to stand on ceremony and be so formal with me. It makes my skin crawl.” He laughed a bit, the tension releasing from his shoulders.

Seeing that, I also let myself relax. “Got it. Thank you, Ide. Like you, I also prefer it this way.”

“Yes, it’s easier for me too. So, about myself... Hm, but exactly how much is okay to tell the present you?”

At least calling him “Ide” in a casual manner had lightened the mood in the room a bit.

It would have been worthwhile to have come here alone if I could keep him speaking so cheerfully like this. *Ideally, I’d like to approach him as a friend, like I did with Lorwen*, I thought.

Ide laughed as he began to speak. “As you are now, you’re barely a single finger twitching on a hand. However, if I were to tell you everything, there is no way you could avoid making the same mistakes. No, I don’t have any interest in tricking you twice. A second time would...”

My faint hope was quickly betrayed.

“Master Liner, fight Master Kanami; try to get him cornered.”

No one could’ve expected those words to come out of his mouth. The people who were supposed to be Liner’s friends were just as shocked, their mouths hanging open.

“Wha... What? What are you saying, Dr. Ide?” Liner asked, bewildered, unable to wrap his head around what he was hearing.

“I must have confirmation. Exactly who is this current Kanami? If he is the same as before, then...”

“No, what I mean is, I don’t get what you’re saying at all. You and Sieg don’t know each other, do you? Why do you want to fight him?” Liner stood up, unable to remain patient any longer.

“When a person is cornered, their true personality comes out. I told you that I

was gathering subjects for the king, did I not? So you can consider this an interview. I want to put him to the test, to see if I can really take him at his word.”

“No. Then why did you choose fighting as the way to determine that?! I don’t get it!” Liner understood Ide’s goal, but he couldn’t make sense of why he’d chosen this particular method. He shook his head, knowing that it was out of the question.

His other friends had different reactions. The red and black Jewelculi standing behind him understood Ide right away. “Um, what you’re saying, Dr. Ide, is that this guy could become Rouge’s friend too? So you want to test out his power now? And you want to feel out whether this is his true character or a lie?” Rouge’s red magic was, even at this moment, building up a force that was beginning to overflow.

“That’s not quite right, but close enough. Kanami is meant to be the one capable of acting as the standin king until Queen Lorde’s return. We must interview him thoroughly.”

Rouge’s and Noir’s cheeks grew flushed at Ide’s words. They seemed excited, and their willingness to fight began to show.

Even Noir, who had been quiet up until then, spoke excitedly. “Oooh, ooh! He certainly is good-looking, this hero! Let’s tear off the mask over his heart; I wanna see his true face! Even more than that, I think I really, really want him to be our friend! Ha ha, ha ha ha!”

Amid all that, Liner and Sheer continued to oppose the plan.

“I don’t agree with this. This isn’t the time.”

“I-I’m also against it! Please find a more peaceful way!”

In response, Ide snapped his fingers and began to incant a spell. “Sleep. Yes, shall we put you to sleep just like our leader, Mistress Wyss?”

As he said that, Sheer fell over like a puppet with her strings cut. Her breathing evened out, and she looked like she would start leaning on Ms. Wyss at any moment as she drifted off.

“Now, Master Liner, I can only use support magic, and that only works well on true humans. It’s likely that Rouge’s and Noir’s powers won’t be enough. Can you really make them fight to their limits?”

Liner gritted his teeth at Ide’s words. Then he looked down and, after a moment’s thought, muttered angrily, “Damn...I’ll do it. I’ll do it.” His wind magic joined the black and red magics already filling the room.

I’d remained quiet, hoping Liner would put a stop to this, but I realized that battle was now inevitable. “Liner, I’d like you to stop if you can...” I decided to seek confirmation from him, as my words had gotten through to him the most. *If he rejects this, I’ll have to genuinely prepare for battle.*

Unfortunately, he shook his head apologetically. “I’m sorry, Sieg...”

At those words, both of us showed the same expression. I stood up from my chair and took out Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, from my inventory.

Liner unsheathed a sword as well. He was still handcuffed, but utilizing the buoyancy of the magic wind, he skillfully removed the blade from the sheath on his back. “Truthfully, I’m also interested in what Dr. Ide called ‘Sieg’s true character.’”

He continued to talk as his sword, Rukh Bringer, which he’d received from Lorwen Arrace during the Brawl, floated in the air beside him. While pointing the tip of his sword at me, he flashed a corpse-like grin.

“If it becomes dangerous, I don’t mind if you kill me. That should be easy for *you*, right? Without aid, everyone here, if left completely alone, will die. Even if they die, they won’t complain.” He began closing the gap as he told me to kill them if it became too much trouble.

There was no way I could just say, “Sure, okay,” and kill them. As I put the letter I’d received from Sheer into my inventory, I began to calculate an escape route using *Dimension*. I’d gotten the information I needed on Palinchron, so remaining here longer was unnecessary. The atmosphere in the drawing room was only getting more tense, and it felt like a single sound would break the tension.

“Well then, if you please.” Ide gave the signal to start fighting. At the same moment, everyone’s magic burst forth.

“Resonant spell...”

“Resonant spell...”

First, Rouge’s and Noir’s voices echoed, overlapping. Their spells began mixing like paints on a palette, transforming into a completely new type of magic. I kept my distance from them and began interfering.

“Spellcast: *Wintermension*!” I added my Ice magic to my expanding *Dimension*, obstructing their spellcasting.

“*Sittert Wynd*!” A gentle breeze began blowing against my obstruction magic. Liner’s wind magic began to twine around *Wintermension*, hindering it instead. The result was that my counterspell failed, and Rouge and Noir’s resonant spell succeeded.

“*Gravity Greed*!”

“*Gravity Greed*!”

Resonant spell: *Gravity Greed*. I’d never heard of this magic before. It was also the first time I’d seen what quality it was made from. Given that, it was impossible for me to predict what effect it might have.

The moment their magic filled the drawing room completely, the colors in my vision were inverted. And then the space shifted—with a jerk—from top to bottom.

The power was like an elevator ascending suddenly, and the furniture in the room creaked. I felt a weight on my back, as if ten adult men were sitting on me, causing me to fall to my knees. I intuited that this magic manipulated gravity...or something similar.

The effects of *Gravity Greed* weren’t over yet. The sudden increase in gravity, so to speak, created another situation. Much like Flame Aegis required a direct hit from Flame Arrow, it seemed this resonant magic also had an on-hit effect.

An unusual amount of power swelled from Noir, the black Jewelculus, and burst out suddenly. A thunderous roar that seemed loud enough to tear my

eardrums followed. I couldn't see it with my eyes, but I sensed with *Dimension* that a mass of transparent magical power, which was contorting both the floor and ceiling of the drawing room, was coming toward me.

"Quartzcast: *Quartz!*" Since gravity was holding me down, I decided to defend against it rather than try to evade it. Sending my magic through Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, I forcibly changed its shape from sword to shield. It would reduce my options for attacking, but I had no other choice. It was faster to change the shape of the quartz sword than alchemize wood or metal.

The shield transformation was completed not a moment too soon, and it stopped the brunt of the spell. However, the pressure from the terrifying magic pushed against my body even through the shield. My feet were easily lifted off the floor, and I was slammed against the wall behind me. The deteriorating wooden wall broke apart like candy coating, and the force continued to push me, sending me flying out into the villa's garden.

"Guh!!!" I let out a groan as I landed on my back. Even without checking my stats, I knew I'd lost HP. However, this had brought me outside the building. I could single-mindedly make my escape from here.

"Wynd!"

Before I could flee, the ominous magic sword Rukh Bringer began dancing in midair. I suspected Liner could control it from a distance with his Wind magic.

The sword of wind began attacking gracefully. I repelled it using the shield form of my sword, but as I was kept busy by the magic blade, the Guardian Ide and the Jewelculi Rouge and Noir came out of the building.

I still can't see Liner...

The moment I thought that, he fell from the sky, using his *Magic Energy Windbladeification* skill to produce swords from both legs.

I just barely avoided the blades by twisting my body at the last second. Liner called down the sword from the sky as he was landing and caught it in his manacled hands. I had Ide, Rouge, and Noir directly in front of me now, and Liner was behind me. They had me completely surrounded.

Not noticing Liner's surprise attack was strange, I thought, as I strengthened *Dimension*. The gentle wind blowing around him was interfering with it. It seemed his magic could open up a hole in the range of my magical perception.

“This is a little challenging...” The four-on-one battle was making me sweat. On top of that, I hadn't even begun participating in the fight. The green magic coming from him was merely wrapping around the two girls in front of me.

Without breaking my vigilant perception, I took a look at the girls' conditions.

【CONDITION】

Physical Enhancement 1.45

Magical Enhancement 2.02

As far as I could tell, it was normal enhancement magic. Judging from the Recovery magic I'd seen earlier, he was likely not the type to have direct combat magic. Using the brief lull, I also checked the menus of all three of them.

【STATUS】

NAME: Eleven S

HP: 88/88

MP: 312/345

CLASS: Mage

Level 20

STR 2.47

VIT 2.22

DEX 3.19

AGI 2.12

INT 4.24

MAG 24.77

APT 2.11

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Astral Magic 2.03, Elemental Magic 1.02,

Bloodknack 1.01

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Doll Body 1.01, Martial Arts 1.12

【STATUS】

NAME: Proto S

HP: 86/86

MP: 352/385

CLASS: Mage

Level 16

STR 2.23

VIT 2.04

DEX 3.45

AGI 2.01

INT 4.20

MAG 26.23

APT 2.70

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Astral Magic 2.72, Elemental Magic 1.12,
Bloodknack 1.01

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Doll Body .35

【STATUS】

NAME: Liner Hellvilleshine

HP: 229/229

MP: 77/144

CLASS: Knight

Level 18

STR 8.14

VIT 5.72

DEX 6.21

AGI 9.56

INT 7.89

MAG 7.44

APT 1.89

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Wind Magic 1.82

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.98, Holy Magic 1.07, Optimal Moves 1.01

The girls' names and skills indicated they had been created to be mages with special attributes. There were plenty of ways to escape, but I couldn't see into the heart of the Guardian who was still standing there. I wasn't sure if it was safe to turn my back on him. After careful consideration, I decided to go with an all-out magic attack.

"Icespell: *Midgard Freeze!*" I created a snake of ice that began ascending from underfoot.

In response, Rouge and Noir cast an even larger spell.

"Resonant Spell: *Gravity Demon!*"

"Resonant Spell: *Gravity Demon!*"

As they incanted together, an invisible *something* about the size of a human was born in the garden. The transparent thing began running toward me, gouging out the dirt in the garden as if it were a large beast trampling the earth. The flowers and grass were blown away, and the trees shattered.

I released the ice snake I had prepared not at the thing running toward me but directly up into the sky. It whirled high into the air before bursting into fireworks of ice.

Rouge and Noir were bewildered by the waste of such a large-scale spell. I ignored their confusion and dealt with the invisible thing using just my physical abilities. When I'd gotten out of the building, the weight holding me down had disappeared, and there was plenty more space out here as well. I didn't feel the need to go out of my way to compete with the real mages using my magical abilities.

I jumped to the side to avoid the invisible whatever-it-was. Unfortunately, it changed its direction halfway through and tried to grab me as I ran away. Apparently, it had guiding magic on it, making it follow me like a beast chasing

prey. Furthermore, Liner had predicted my escape route and was now blocking my path.

The two girls could tell how strong my physical abilities were and increased their magic.

“Resonant spell: *Vibral Greed!*”

“Resonant spell: *Vibral Greed!*”

Magic bubbles that seemed similar to Dimension magic’s *Form* began splashing up from the area at their feet. Palm-sized bubbles began floating up, filling the garden to capacity. I observed them with *Dimension*.

The *thing* from earlier had knocked over a tree, and lots of leaves were whirling around the garden. A bubble stuck to one of the leaves, which immediately fell sharply to the ground. With that information, I was able to guess what Rouge’s and Noir’s magic did. From a brief glance, they seemed to have control over gravity. On the other hand, it could have been magical interference with the resistance, buoyancy, attraction, or repulsion of matter.

Thinking on that point, I immediately shook off my scientific approach, which was based on the common sense of my original world. I’d only make a fool of myself if I contemplated magic so seriously. Thanks to the insane magic of my friends Maria and Dia, I knew that all too well. If one wasn’t careful, they could change something’s mass or rewrite the laws of the world itself.

Right now it was better to think of it vaguely as “being pulled down by magic” by mages who were very powerful. In other words, if I touched the magic of the invisible *thing* that was coming at me, there was a high possibility I’d be bound to the ground. I should also try to avoid touching it with my sword.

I continued to avoid the mysterious thing as I moved around the garden. Since I also had to avoid the countless bubbles floating around, it looked like I was doing gymnastics. Naturally, I continued to search for an escape route as I jumped around. But Liner was ready to attack me at each key point with his magic sword, so I couldn’t establish a safe route out. Since he was a wind knight, he moved around so violently that it was difficult to take him down with a counterattack.

It was a tricky situation. If Rouge's and Noir's magic continued to build up, I would probably get hit eventually. However, I still chose to play the long game. The girls were completely frustrated by their inability to catch me, and they increased the number of invisible things and magic bubbles. Proportionally, the garden was even more destroyed. The ground was dug up, and the terrain, which had been full of greenery, was transformed into a miserable brown field.

"Ah, jeez, you're so quick! But just a bit more, just a bit more and I'll catch you!"

"There's nowhere else to run! It's checkmate!"

Rouge and Noir had a firm belief in their victory and seemed ready to add magic that was sure to finish me off.

As they said, I was indeed close to my limits. However, the one who declared "checkmate" would actually be me. If Ms. Wyss was awake, she would surely have noticed that. But I was the only Dimension magic user here right now. My victory was assured.

Invisible things were bearing down on me from all four sides. According to the bubbles all around me, I had nowhere left to go. Rouge and Noir were striking victorious poses. Then voices echoed...

"Resonant Spell: *Flame Aegis!*"

"Resonant Spell: *Flame Aegis!*"

Like stars twinkling in the daylight, flames of various shapes and sizes covered the sky.

"Flame Arrow: *Petalrain!*"

The magic rained down like meteors from the midday starry sky. As the arrows of flame fell like laser beams into the garden, all of the bubbles that had been filling the air scattered, and the invisible things attacked at the same time. The besiegement of magic that Rouge and Noir had spent so much time crafting collapsed in a second under the bombardment. Then Lastiara fell from the sky, gripping Dia and Maria on either side of her body. It seemed like they had moved around by jumping from rooftop to rooftop.

“Kanami! Are you okay?” Lastiara checked in from beside me as she let the other two go. As they found their footing, their faces warped with rage.

“How *dare* you two!”

“Mr. Kanami, do you mind if I kill these people? Please let me. Pleaaase!”

I was glad to have reinforcements, but they brought their own sort of trouble. Honestly, the rain of flames had been too much. It was obviously a waste of magic to shoot at the ground. I tried to appease them to keep them from going completely out of control.

“No, you don’t have to go that far! I’m fine! This is just a game! They don’t intend to kill me!”

“A game? It didn’t look like that...” Maria observed her surroundings without dampening her thirst for blood.

Liner averted his eyes from her, and Rouge’s and Noir’s mouths gaped open in surprise. Only Ide observed the scene coolly and offered a greeting.

“It seems our number of guests has increased. Nice to meet you. My name is Ide.” He looked at the four of us, as though appraising us. “Heh heh heh, incredible! Our guests are so full of talent and grace! I’m reminded of my former friends. Master Liner! Please fight all of our guests!” He happily instructed Liner to continue the battle.

“Please wait! Dr. Ide, it’s not a good idea to mess with these people!” Liner shook his head as his face paled.

I wonder if he remembers the Brawl, I thought. Lastiara and the others didn’t seem interested in dealing kindly with him.

“Ide! These three aren’t joking! Let’s stop this!” I said, piggybacking on Liner’s words and suggesting a ceasefire. If it didn’t work, this would be ground zero for the Trial of the Fortieth Floor.

I still didn’t understand anything about Ide’s existence. I hoped I’d still be able to come to an understanding with him and wanted to avoid taking him down. Unfortunately, my desperate plea didn’t get through to him.

“Do not worry, Master Kanami. With my magic, I can revive them completely

as long as they don't die. There is nothing superior to my recovery magic. Please fight to your heart's content. Please show me the depths of your heart! Show me your true intentions from that day!" Ide didn't seem to be backing off.

That statement sent Maria's flames swelling. "Mr. Kanami...even though he said that?!" If she had permission, she would blow up the building in a moment.

Dia was finishing a spell without saying a single word. She had a track record for clearing out Mr. Rayle's mansions, which caused cold sweat to run down my forehead. I regretted having called my friends in so quickly.

Leaving me to think about how to persuade my two allies, Rouge and Noir begin to cast again.

"I'll get right to it!"

"I was a little surprised, but there's no way we would've lost with magic if it hadn't been a surprise attack! Yeah, there's no way we can lose!"

"Resonant spell: *Gravity Demon!*"

"Resonant spell: *Gravity Demon!*"

Once again the embodiment of all-crushing magic appeared and began tearing up the ground as it charged in our direction. In response, the two mages on my team also began to cast.

"Blestspell: *Aster!*"

"Flamespell: *Flame!*"

Dia's light diminished the momentum of the oncoming attack, which was cut in half by Maria's flaming blade. In an instant, Rouge's and Noir's long-range magic was extinguished.

"Huh?"

"What?"

It seemed they'd been very confident in their own abilities. With their magic extinguished, they seemed unable to comprehend the scene in front of them. Then Lastiara attacked, taking advantage of their inattention. She probably wasn't going to go out of her way to kill them, but she would break an arm or

two with impunity.

Knowing this from watching the semifinals of the Brawl, Liner rushed to intervene. “Please wait! Goddess!”

“Bro, you’re in the way!” Lastiara easily avoided his magic sword. In a head-to-head battle without any support, he was still not as good as us. Unable to deal with Lastiara’s onslaught, he was kicked aside.

That back-and-forth earned them a bit of time. Half crazed, Rouge and Noir on the backline began casting their next set of spells.

“Well...last time was some sort of fluke! *Gravity Demon!*”

“We *can’t* lose! *Gravity Demon!*”

A large mass of magic began moving toward us. Naturally we cast magic in return.

“Dia, please press the attack. *Flame Gradient!*”

“Okay. *Flame Arrow!*”

Maria’s fire made a pathway for Dia’s arrows to follow. Perhaps she was holding back, because *Flame Arrow* looked like fire rather than a laser beam this time.

The magic from both sides collided instantaneously. While Rouge and Noir were dripping with sweat as they unleashed their spells, Maria and Dia were cool and calm as they cast. Even so, our magic was far superior. *Flame Arrow* brushed away the mass of the enemy’s power and landed at the casters’ feet, blowing Rouge and Noir away as it exploded. It looked like Maria and Dia had remained collected, and I could tell they were taking it easy after my earlier words.

Rouge and Noir, who had been knocked down, were astonished as they realized the difference in their power levels.

“As long as Kanami says it’s a game, I won’t put a stop to it. But if you get up, I don’t care if you die this time,” Dia warned them sullenly.

Rouge and Noir lost the will to fight at those words.

“Y-You’re too strong! Stronger even than our sister Wyss!”

“That’s impossible! Nope, nope, nope! I’m sorry!”

Liner was clearly relieved as he stopped his attacks against Lastiara. Ide was the only one left on the battlefield who hadn’t given up.

“It’s not the end just yet...” With that, Ide, who’d been motionless up until then, took a step forward. He gently helped the two who had fallen to their feet while releasing an unusual magical power befitting a guardian. “This isn’t good training, but I suppose it can’t be helped. I will participate as well. Let’s strengthen the effects of our magic. *Growth! Sense Breath! Branchwood Shell!*”

In one breath, he cast three spells, and a deep-green magic enveloped and began to sink into the two girls. With just that, the area surrounding Rouge and Noir warped. It was normal enhancement magic, but the strength of it was strange. I could clearly see that magic beyond the realm of normal understanding was being used.

Rouge and Noir, who had been empowered, were more shocked than anyone else. “H-Huh?! What’s this?! Enhancement magic can do *this*? So that’s the ultimate strength of a mage who specializes in support?!”

“Wow! With this, I can fight again!”

Rouge and Noir spread out their hands, regaining their will to do battle.

I was just as surprised as they were. I used my menu-sight to look at them and saw that both had been enhanced to unpredictable levels.

【CONDITION】

Physical Enhancement 24.77 Magical Enhancement 30.98 Magic Barrier 3.28

They were on a completely different scale now. The value of the enhancement magic on them increased tenfold.

“Next, I’ll begin the true show of my abilities as the Thief of Wood’s Essence! *Full Cure Field! Strass Field! Remove Field!*” Ide spread both his hands out and

completely filled the yard with his magic. Small particles like fireflies danced in the air, and the battlefield was dyed in green.

Then life began to bud from the torn-up ground. The buds grew rapidly, transforming into beautiful grass. The dilapidated garden was morphing into a lush prairie. It was beginning to look like the fortieth floor that I'd seen in the Dungeon.

So, the Guardian has finally unleashed his true power, I thought.

Ide's powerful magic quickly encircled everyone on the battlefield.

Shit.

If this kept up, I'd have to fight for real. The battle could be so fierce that the clash of magics would level the city of Cork completely.

"Wait, Ide...huh?!" As I tried to stop the conflict, I suddenly felt a great deal of discomfort. The green light was also permeating our bodies.

Is Ide healing us, as well? I wondered. The Field magic cast by him was working on us too. The dazzling magic lights were aiding us. The magic was gentle, with no malice.

The three spells he had cast were *Full Cure Field*, *Strass Field*, and *Remove Field*. If I remembered correctly, those were not particularly uncommon wide-range, restoration, and support spells. As far as I could tell with *Dimension*, there was no discrepancy between the name of the spells and their effects. However the gentleness of the restoration magic was...too intense. It resembled an obsession, as if it intended to cure everything in this world. Its density wasn't normal.

Under the influence of that magic, my body started to mutate. No, it wasn't right to call it a mutation. At any rate, the magic I was receiving now was one that *cured* mutations. There was no doubt about that. To be precise, my physical abnormality was being forcibly cured and I was about to become *normalized*. It's just that the "normal" I was becoming through this restoration seemed to be nothing more than a mutation itself.

Which meant the restoration magic of the Thief of Wood's Essence...would dissolve the magic of everyone here.

The magic that was dissolving wasn't the Dimension Magic I had deployed. Rather, that was actually being sharpened. It was something else that was being dissolved. It was as if a thread were unraveling from the frayed end of a scarf. I felt as though something important was gushing out like blood, and I couldn't get it back.

"What *is* this?!" All the locked doors within me were being dissolved by *Normalization*. I was flooded with memories as those restraints were broken. Memories blinked through my mind like flashbacks, with uncountable memories passing by.

Pitch-black sky...a huge castle towering over its surroundings...crowds of people struggling to breathe...a girl and a boy wearing masks, trying to protect the people...fighting with invisible creatures...swarms of ugly monsters...a giant tree that seemed to pierce the heavens walking...a dark cloud covering the continent, transforming into a giant and causing the people to despair...then two people fighting to their limits...underneath a monster that brings death to all it touches... Before that monster...stood two people...

A flash of pain ground through my head. It felt as if something had been rammed right through my skull. I wasn't able to concentrate on the memories because of the pain.

Ow. Ow, ow, ow. It hurt too much. My head hurt so much I couldn't even open my eyes. There was something that hurt even more than that, though. It wasn't a pain in my body, but a pain in my soul. My heart was screaming in denial at the stream of memories. The pain was so intense that it felt as if my bone marrow were being forcibly removed from my body, and I nearly screamed out—but before I could, another scream came from behind me.

"Ah, aah... Aaaaaahhh! AAAAAAAH!!!"

Enduring the pain, I turned to look behind me. It was Dia who had screamed.

"Dia! What's wrong?!" Maria yelled, grabbing her by the shoulders.

But Dia only continued screaming, staring at the sky. I gathered she was in a similar situation to mine. Maybe even worse off.

Shit... Shit, shit, shit. This is really bad.

I had to get over there quickly and help her, but my body wouldn't move. Instead, an unbelievable feeling began welling up inside me.

Dia is repulsive, detestable; I don't want to help her, I thought shamefully. "What... What is this?!" The feeling that had started as a dribble surged. Feeling the strangeness within myself, I looked at my own status.

【CONDITION】 Confusion 7.88

But nothing was different.

My ??? skill protected my confusion, and it remained at 7.88. But that was it. *Normalization*. That's why my ??? skill showed no sign of activating.

Looking for help, I turned toward Lastiara. She was knowledgeable about magic, so she could probably explain what was going on. But the girl in front of me was holding her head in her hands.

"Ooh, why?! Whywhywhy WHY?!" Lastiara was shaking. Her face was red and her breathing rough. She just kept asking herself why.

I checked on her stats, but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. She was not acting normal, though. Just like that one night, her face was red and she wasn't able to calm herself. She was so agitated, it looked like she would run away at any moment.

"Guhuuugh!" I clenched at my chest so tightly I drew blood. No one had any abnormal conditions. Instead, everyone was *Normalized*. And yet my emotions were shaking wildly. No, it was more than a shake. Emotions I didn't recognize raged unceasingly like muddy floodwaters.

Dia is repulsive.

Lastiara is impossible.

I must keep Maria away.

Hatred and the urge to kill. Distrust and suspicion. Avoidance and disappointment. Emotions that I didn't remember and had no context for began to overflow one after another.

This was definitely a mental attack by the enemy. I had to find a cure immediately, I knew that. But I was so busy suppressing my emotions to keep my ??? skill from activating that I couldn't formulate a good plan.

Faced with such a formidable enemy, Lastiara, Dia, and I were forced to our knees, unable to move even a single step. It was a decisive opening, but no attack came. Our opponents were just as bewildered by the situation as we were.

Rouge was frightened by our screaming. "What is this? Everyone just suddenly became all battered up... Dr. Ide, I didn't know you had such powerful attack magic."

It seemed she had no intention of hitting a defenseless opponent. She withdrew her magic and turned to Ide behind her. Noir was turning this way and that, with no idea what was going on.

Then, yelling in anger, Liner drew near to Ide. "Hey, Dr. Ide! Just what do you think you're doing? What did you do to them?!"

"Oh! I am also surprised. I just deployed my fields of recovery magic and created a situation where we could fight to the fullest without getting hurt. As you know, I do not have any offensive magic..."

Even though he was the one creating this situation, Ide himself seemed completely perplexed. After making all those declarations and rousing everyone, he grew flustered at the sudden collapse of his enemies.

At once, the magic of the Thief of Wood's Essence disappeared from the garden, and the confusion of what to do next began.

"Apostle Sieg is suffering! And the goddess's behavior is also strange!" Liner cried, continuing his interrogation in our stead, as we still were unable to move.

Liner had him by the collar, but Ide put his hand to his chin and began to think out loud. "The spells I cast were the foundations of the foundations. *Cure Wounds* and *Cure Abnormalities*. Of course, they were spells of my own design, so they were supremely effective. I have elevated them to a magic that breaks all bonds, so to speak, and restores things to the way they should be. Perhaps that is the reason..."

“‘As they should be?’ You’re saying this is *how they should be*?!” Liner shouted as he pointed at the three of us. We looked like we were about to throw up all over the ground.

Ide nodded silently in response.

“Um, so then...it’s okay to defeat them like this?” Rouge, who wasn’t keeping up at all, began preparing her magic. It would be easy as pie to defeat us, as we were completely open now.

Maria, however, as the only one of us who hadn’t sustained any damage, stood in her way. Ide, with no intention of giving up, clothed himself in his intense magic and glared at her.

“I can’t allow any more. One more step and you’ll burn,” she warned him.

“Tch, so the fire mage remains.”

Maria probably didn’t know exactly what was going on, but she seemed to grasp the gist of it. She was the only one who could fight, and she had to protect her friends. I could tell she had sworn that to herself. But Maria fighting alone without a forward guard wouldn’t go well. Actually, it would go real bad.

Thankfully, as our opponents were arguing among one another, Lastiara began walking toward us despite her disorientation. I could tell that she looked the least injured out of the three of us.

“L-Lastiara, can you use any holy magic to...” I pleaded, or tried to, but my words wouldn’t come out. Inexplicably, I found myself afraid to ask anything of her.

“Kanami...” In contrast, her gaze was hot. She stared at me and didn’t look away. Her breathing was still ragged, her face bright red, and her eyes wet with tears.

Somehow shaking off the unidentifiable feelings, I gave her directions. “Please, Lastiara! Do something with your Holy magic!”

“Y-Yeah. *Strass Field*!” She hung her head but still cast the spell. A gentle light began shining from her body and wrapped around the two of us, even reaching Dia farther away. It was a gentle, warm light.

The power I felt seemed to dissolve all malice and ill will. But...

“AaaaAAAAAH! Shut up, shut up, shut UP!” Behind us, Dia’s frenzy wasn’t abating. Neither was mine. The eruption of unidentified emotions hadn’t subsided, and the pain in my head continued. It hurt as if my brain were being ground beneath a millstone. I looked closely and saw that Lastiara was still breathing as hard as ever.

“What?! Why isn’t it better?!” In fact, it seemed to be getting worse. The erosion of reason to emotion was palpable.

Repulsive, truly repulsive. Awful, awful, awful! I can’t believe anything anymore!

And what that unidentified emotion hated most was Dia, who, for some reason, was screaming. Ignoring Lastiara next to me, ignoring Maria, who was protecting me, ignoring Liner and the other enemies, ignoring even my greatest enemy the Guardian, I only had eyes for her. And she was staring right back at me. My image was reflected in her luminous blue eyes.

My body started to move toward Dia of its own accord.

“Aah, aaaah, Sieg! No, Kanami!” Repeating my name, she began to walk toward me. The space between us was closing. In response, the unidentifiable emotions began gushing up faster.

“Di... Dia! Wait! If you get any closer...” *We’ll kill one another.*

I knew intuitively that we would be forced to kill one another regardless of our will. But Dia did not stop. On the contrary, she was preparing a large amount of magical power and constructing a spell I had never seen before. An unfamiliar magic circle formed from her prosthetic hand, and a dusty golden light erupted from it. It focused in the blink of an eye and destroyed the prosthetic hand, transforming it into a pure white arm.

Seeing the limb replaced by magic reminded me of the Guardian Tida from so long ago. The unidentifiable magic circle encompassed her right eye and back, as well as her right arm. Only one of her beautiful blue eyes was glowing. Particles of magical power erupted from her back like feathers.

So this is Dia’s real form—my true rival, I thought to myself as I looked at her.

If she drew any closer like this, I would kill the enemy known as Dia. That wicked feeling was the only thing filling my thoughts. I would kill her, regardless of my will. *That's right; will doesn't mean anything.*

“Screw thisssaaaaaah!!!” I stabbed the sword I was holding through my thigh, preventing myself from moving.

Dia, my enemy? No fucking way! She was the first friend I made after coming to this world! I remember that! If I think about it, it feels like yesterday! I'm not Normalized now! If Dia isn't my friend, then I can't call anyone my friend!

“Dia and Lastiara aren't my enemies! I won't be deceived anymore!” I declared to everyone. Everyone including myself. My will was being twisted and manipulated. That was the most unforgivable thing. As I remembered that, I gathered my spirit and repelled the unidentifiable feeling.

“Sieg!” Dia's will of fire began shining again in her eyes as she saw me hurt myself. The light that had been coming from her eye vanished, and she clutched at her magic arm with her flesh-and-blood left. Smoke rose from her left palm in a puff of smoke, as if she'd grabbed a piece of hot metal. Still, she did not relax her strength, and she crushed her white arm in her grip.

“Aaah! Sieg is my friend! Holy spell *In Faith!*” Using all of the magic in her body, Dia changed the spell she was preparing, hitting her own body with a huge amount of Holy magic, then collapsed to the ground unconscious.

I was saved. I could tell that the horrible emotions swirling in my body had quelled when she lost consciousness. I was glad we had managed to avoid killing one another.

I looked quickly from Dia to our enemies. Ide was standing there incanting another new spell, completely disinterested in our suffering.

“I'm not very good at... Well, that I can't tell you. Cursecast: *Analyze!*”

This was my first time seeing the spell, but its casting was familiar. A bitter expression surfaced on Ide's face as he *Analyzed* me.

“I see. So it's like that, huh?” He seemed surprised and astonished by the results, but after a moment's hesitation, looked as if he had made up his mind to do something.

For me, this change didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that the magic had almost made me fight Dia to the death. "You have some nerve playing with everyone's hearts like they're toys, Ide!" I yelled.

He stared at me coolly as I pulled the sword out of my leg. The truth was that I wanted the sword in my hand so that I could attack immediately. But my body wasn't listening to me, and the pounding in my head was making my vision blurry. On top of all that, a strangely large amount of blood was flowing from the wound in my thigh. Even taking a single step forward would be difficult.

Ide shook his head at my weariness. "Incorrect. There has been a misunderstanding, Master Kanami. Please believe me. I just wanted to make everyone into how they should be. This is the true Master Kanami. And I have certainly seen the depths of your heart with my own eyes."

Leaving it at that, he removed all of the magic from the garden. The enhancements to Rouge and Noir disappeared, and *Analyze* ended. Ide seemed to have come to terms with everything on his own. He no longer looked as if he wanted to fight, but rather like he felt sorry for us.

"If you were imperfect, Master Kanami, I thought you might work with us, but it seems like you are *too* imperfect. It is impossible to use you as a substitute king. The only one who could be is the girl with the prosthetic eyes..." He glanced at Maria, who continued to stand in front of us, exerting her magic to protect us. "No, let us not repeat the same mistake again." Ide quickly averted his eyes from her. Then, turning on his heel, he made to leave. "My review is complete. Let's go, everyone."

Maria didn't make a move as he turned away. While she was facing forward, her flame-consciousness was looking at us. She seemed to calmly be putting the safety of her friends first.

I couldn't move. My vision was gradually dimming, and my head was spinning. I'd lost too much blood. I was losing consciousness, tormented by pain—both physical and mental—and could no longer hear the conversations happening in the garden. It took all of my strength to use my sword as a crutch to keep from falling over.

Leaving me there, Ide instructed Rouge and Noir to bring Sheer and Ms. Wyss

out from the mansion.

“Hey! Can we really leave them like that?” a disgruntled Liner asked Ide, interrupting his instructions.

“It’s fine, Master Liner. You could say they’re experiencing the pain of medical treatment. It will pass quickly.”

“That’s the pain of *medical treatment*?!”

“Yes, our guests are temporarily having all their magic—or external factors—canceled and facing their true selves. What I did to them was just a normal spell to cure conditions.”

Ide’s party left us there and departed the estate. It seemed certain that the threat was gone for now. As the tension began to dissipate, I could feel my consciousness fading further, sinking into a dark sea. I no longer recognized whose voice was whose.

“It’s most important that we get to where Palinchron Regacy is. We must hurry!”

Dimly, I could hear the conversation happening among Ide’s party. But only in bits and pieces.

“Well then, farewell, everyone. And you, Alty. I’m glad to see you’re with your person this time.”

“Huh?! You... You know about Alty?”

“She was a substitute monarch along with Master Kanami. Ultimately, I ended up not having a use for her, but...”

After confirming with *Dimension* that Ide and the others were leaving the grounds, I let go of consciousness. I had passed my limits a long time ago, and my vision suddenly went black.

“Thank...”

I had no idea whose gentle voice I heard at the end. Who said it? What did they mean? I had no way of knowing as I was swallowed up by the darkness.

Chapter 3: The Thousand-Year Debt

“My friend! Keep it up, keep it up! You’re doing great!”

Ah...I can hear Dia’s voice...

But it sounded different. It wasn’t her usual masculine speech, but rather a gentle voice that matched her feminine body. I understood immediately from hearing that voice that I was dreaming.

I was remembering the castle again. But it was a little different than last time. If I looked out one of the windows from the great hall, I could see heavy rain coming down outside. The windows weren’t fitted with glass, so the raindrops were blowing in. I could hear the delightful pitter-patter as they dripped down onto the huge magic circle painted onto the floor.

As if to escape the rain coming in through the windows, countless books had been moved to the center of the room and piled in a heap. Inside this mountain of books, a group of people were happily talking with one another.

I was looking down on this scene from above. According to my previous dream, this was the castle where I had arrived after searching, searching, searching for a way to save my sister, and where three people lived: Apostle Sith, Saint Tiara, and the masked man. I knew that because I had been living in this other world for a long time.

It seemed the three of them were in the process of creating some magic in the main hall. They were weaving their own magic atop the circle, repeating the trial-and-error process of deconstruction and reconstruction, writing down their magic formulas one after another in the books.

The castle was filled with an astonishing amount of magical power, even for me, someone who had reached Level 20, the highest level possible. A young girl, Tiara, was manipulating it as though playing with clay. The man watching over the scene was perceptive. His eyes, which were visible through the gaps in his mask, were so piercing that they appeared luminescent. He was analyzing

Tiara's magic, and his hands were moving without hesitation as he wrote the formula down. At the same time, I would clearly see that he was imprinting the formula onto his own brain as well. I knew the masked man as if he were myself.

The masked man was called Kanami the Founder...so obviously I would know him.

"Hey, Teach, like this?" It was the same as before. As usual, Tiara addressed the man as "Teacher."

The man laughed slightly and counseled the girl on her magic. "Yes, you've gotten better at it, Tiara. But that's not the end of it. The transformation efficiency is low, and the formula for Status is full of holes."

"Hey, you can't compare it to your own! The formula of your Status is too abnormal; it would be impossible for me..."

"But you want to adapt this to the whole population at some point, right? You can't afford weakness here."

"That's right... If just anyone is able to do this, they won't be able to call it 'magic' or 'magic poison' anymore. I have to try my best." Tiara motivated herself and began working the spell from the beginning.

The man was deeply impressed by that. "You're amazing, Tiara. I'm trying my hardest for my sister, but you're working so hard for someone you don't even know..."

"Well, I guess. But that's because you showed me how to get this far! Because you told me we would make magic that would make everyone happy!"

"Yet it wasn't magic that I created, but curses. After reflecting on my previous failure, I will be careful not to make the price too high. But whether it will succeed remains to be seen..."

"It will definitely succeed. It's guaranteed that you'll be able to do magic that makes everyone happy this time. Magic that will change the darkness of the world to light. Holy magic that is kind and gentle."

"That would be nice..."

Tiara continued forming her magic as they talked genially. Small bubbles of light began forming, slowly illuminating the main hall. I knew this magic. It was Holy magic. But its degree of perfection was unusually low; the method was full of holes. Still, I understood that it was definitely a prototype for Holy magic. It was clumsy right now, but with favorable evolution, it would definitely become the version I knew.

The two mages were creating magic under the watchful eyes of Apostle Sith. This was probably the beginning of magic. The foundation that the Founder was said to have created.

“Boo, it’s hard!” Tiara puffed her cheeks up when her magic failed to work right.

“I don’t even understand what the words mean in the first place! ‘Magic Transformation’ is ‘level up’ and ‘Transformation Result’ is ‘status’? Why did you call them that?”

The man began to tremble under the truly pure gaze that Tiara was leveling at him. “Huh? Oh, no, that’s... Those are common words in this world, so...” He seemed confused as he answered.

Someone else interrupted him. It wasn’t Apostle Sith—a fourth person who hadn’t shown up in the last dream had appeared. “No, that’s just my brother’s hobby. You could call it a sickness. What, are you telling Tiara lies?” A girl with a voice like a bell had entered the room. She had black hair and black eyes, and wore a white cloth like she was in a hospital. For a moment I mistook her for Maria. However, I quickly realized my mistake. Her hair was longer, and her skin was pale from sickness. She looked like someone else.

Ah, of course...

“Huh? Teach is sick too?!” Tiara yelled, shocked by the black haired girl’s words.

“Yes, it’s a very very serious disease. It’s an incurable illness that’s only gotten worse since we came here.”

“What?! Teach, is that true?!” Tiara stopped casting and ran up to the man.

“I’m not sick! I’m perfectly healthy. Hitaki, you’re the one telling lies!”

The man said that name.

He said it.

I could feel many hopes crumbling and many speculations being validated. The girl who looked exactly like my sister laughed. She joked around with her brother, who looked just like me.

“How unfortunate. It’s not a lie. He even still wears a mask because he’s trying to look cool. He’s what you’d call a chuunibyou, right?”

“I wear it because it’s necessary! I’m not wearing it because I like it!”

“Didn’t you start wearing it because you wanted to become allies with the Northern Alliance? It’s only us here; surely you don’t need it?”

“No, now it’s just a habit. Plus, you never know when someone might show up, so I decided to keep it on.”

“See, he can’t relax unless he’s wearing it. That’s a *sickness*.”

I missed... How many years has it been since I’ve had this kind of genuine sibling interaction?

This very scene was what I had desperately wished for. That was why I saw it in my dream. I didn’t want to accept that. I could taste bitterness and peace at the same time, and my mind was distorted by the whole dreamworld.

“Uh-huh. You seem much better. It seems like your level up went well.” In the midst of my bitterness, Apostle Sith laughed.

“It did go well. For now. But it’s not perfect yet. It wasn’t enough for a full recovery.” In contrast to Apostle Sith’s words, the man wasn’t laughing at all. He shook his head.

“Ha ha, that’s true. I understand.”

“Sith, let’s go to the Northern Alliance. We must gather more allies.” The man made a decision and touched his black mask.

“The mad king—no, Queen Lorde is there. It’s dangerous.”

“I know it’s dangerous. But I have to go sometime. For my goals and for yours.”

“Well, all right, then.” Despite not exchanging many words, Apostle Sith and the man seemed to understand each other.

“Shall we go? From the Southern Alliance to the Northern Alliance, ground zero for a new battle.”

“Yes, let’s. It’ll be all right. It will go well all the way to the end.” Apostle Sith laughed darkly and looked toward the north.

The man smiled uneasily at Tiara and Hitaki, and then set out for the Northern Alliance.

This was how the dream progressed. The adventure of the four moved from south to north. However, in the middle of it, the dream became incredibly unclear. My face grew contorted as I watched the increasingly distorted world. I had already realized that this dream was the restoration of memories from my past. I had to believe it all because they were my own. These memories were Aikawa Kanami’s, from a thousand years ago.

Like a stone thrown into the depths of a still lake, memories that had been submerged were rising to the surface. What had caused this? Was it meeting the Guardian? Or my *Thought Streams* ability? Or could it have been my stat increase from the last level up? Or Ide’s restoration magic? Honestly, it was probably all of them. All of those things together were like a key to unlocking my memories, which were all being released at once.

But it seemed like this was all I was getting today. The ambiguity of the dream had reached its peak, and the only thing I could see now was static.

I guess I have to get closer to this masked man in order to see any more memories clearly.

I felt like someone was telling me that I couldn’t know the rest of this story unless I leveled up even more and returned to the real me. But contrary to the urge to level up further, I didn’t need to see any more of this dream. I already had a vague understanding of what was waiting at the end of that journey.

The man must have been in despair when their journey ended. He parted with Apostle Sith, and they became sworn enemies. Saint Tiara betrayed him, and there was no one left to trust. In the end, his sister Hitaki...

It was clear, and that was why I didn't want to see the end of the dream.

I don't want to see any more.



“Haaah...” I took a deep breath and sat up, throwing off the sheet covering my body. My heart wouldn't stop pounding. I was covered in sweat and felt sick. “That dream...”

I opened my eyes. Unlike last time, I remembered it clearly.

“No. That wasn't a dream. It was too clear. That was a memory!” My face twisted as I realized the truth. Then I began to consider the memory.

Of course, I knew this wasn't the best time for that. First, I had to figure out exactly where I was. I needed to find out what had happened after the fight with Ide. But that was impossible. My high Intelligence stat wouldn't leave that memory alone. And once it started going, I couldn't stop my *Thought Streams* either.

Sparing only the smallest amount of power for *Dimension*, I turned all my energy to *Thought Streams*.

“Of course... Of course... Is that it?” I would finally have to admit it. I couldn't just take my time and stay this way forever. “I've been in this world for over a thousand years? I wasn't just summoned here a few weeks ago; it was much, much longer...” I had no choice but to accept that possibility. “So that day, when I appeared in the Dungeon... It was because I was summoned to the present from a thousand years ago like the other Guardians? Then...am I a kind of monster?”

As I reached that conclusion, I looked, trembling, at my palms. It was hard to believe that they were really my hands. The skills that I'd had from the very beginning—Dimension magic, Ice magic, and swordplay—my high values in aptitude and other stats, how I'd appeared suddenly in the dungeon... I could draw the conclusion from that information that I, too, might well be a Guardian. If I was, that would explain the skills I had upon arriving in this world. Was I the Thief of Dimension's Essence? No, Ice magic was an innate skill and Dimension magic was an acquired skill, so I would be the Thief of Ice's Essence or maybe

even the Thief of Water's Essence. The magic I had invented all tended to follow a snow or winter theme too. And Ide *had* called me the Thief of Water's Essence.

Not long ago, Lorwen had said he'd been given a level of power that matched the thirtieth floor when he was summoned. He'd blurted out that it was only about thirty percent of his original power. So...since I had been summoned to the first floor, had I been given Level 1 abilities to match that?

"No, it's not just that."

There was a reason Aikawa Kanami was so overpowered. It was the combination of *Analyze*, *Menu Sight*, and having an inventory. Most likely, it was "Aikawa Kanami" who had developed those. There could be no doubt that he'd made them after I saw him so gleeful in the dream, creating "level ups" and "status." That meant the Dungeon was also his creation.

"So...Lorwen's reaction to the name 'Kanami'..."

The person who had come up when I was talking to Lorwen earlier—the kindly "someone" who'd created the labyrinth... There was a high possibility it was me. I didn't have definite proof, but based on Lorwen's behavior, it was very likely. It hurt that I hadn't pursued the minor questions, since my memory had been manipulated and I'd thought I was with my sister at the time. I'd never be able to get the details from him now.

"But if that's the case, why don't I have those memories?" I couldn't stop my train of thought. Like a dam had broken, I continued asking and answering my own questions. "No, now that I think about it, Alty's memories seemed vague too. Even Lorwen said, 'I've finally remembered.' Are the memories of creatures that drop items in the Dungeon dulled?"

Assuming that was the case, it was a bit unnatural that I was the only one who couldn't remember a single thing that had happened a thousand years ago. If I had created the Dungeon, prepared the Guardians, and sent myself here from the past, why couldn't I remember a single thing about it? I couldn't come up with a reason. I didn't understand my goal. I couldn't find a solid, logical hypothesis. So was the dream just a regular one after all?

It was entirely possible that all of this was merely unfounded speculation.

Maybe the scenes from my dream were all nonsense, the Guardians who'd recognized me were mistaken, and the Aikawa Kanami-esque feeling I'd had in the labyrinth was just my imagination. That was a possibility too.

"Ah, damnit!"

The pieces of the puzzle weren't fitting together. I couldn't be sure of any of them. I saw only contradictions. I could guess, but I could never be certain. I realized I simply didn't have enough information yet.

"What's the point of showing me this?!" I yelled, digging my hands into the sheet hard enough to almost tear it.

I pulled my ungainly body out of bed. My feet felt unsteady on the floor. Since my mind was unstable, my body was as well. I was afraid that I might not be myself anymore, but then I was reminded of Ms. Wyss's advice. She had told me on the boat that when someone has nightmares and becomes anxious, they should rely on others.

I finally regained my composure enough to begin gathering information about my surroundings so I could meet back up with my friends. First, I looked around. I was in a small, dilapidated room that couldn't be called "neat" in any sense of the word. I figured I was in one of the rooms of the Regacy Family villa, based on the dust collecting in the corners. Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, was leaning against the bed. Someone had kindly collected it after the battle.

As I put the sword back into my inventory, I spread out a full-scale cast of *Dimension*. Just then, the door to the room swung open.

"Oh! You're awake, Mr. Kanami! Great!" Maria stood in the doorway, holding a wooden bucket filled with water as well as a wet towel. I could tell she was coming to take care of me. Seeing one of my companions put me at ease, so I began asking her questions.

"Maria, where..."

"We haven't moved. I carried everyone who fainted inside the house."

As I'd thought, we were still at the villa. I slowly urged her to continue. "And the others?"

“They’re more or less fine. I borrowed three rooms, so they’re each in a bed.”

I couldn’t see Lastiara and Dia because they were asleep in different rooms. I breathed a sigh of relief knowing that everyone was safe.

“Oh, good. After that, Liner, Ide, and the others?”

“The Guardian lost interest in me and left. Besides that, Mr. Kanami, what about the effects of the Guardian’s magic?” Maria, worried, rested a hand against my forehead to check for a fever.

“I’m not feeling the effects anymore. It seems it was just temporary like he said it would be.” Although my body and mind were exhausted, I didn’t have a headache now. The strange feelings toward my companions had disappeared as well.

“I’m glad. I’m *really* glad.” Maria was so relieved that there were tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. She turned those watery eyes toward the door, wishing for the recovery of our other two friends. “If only Lastiara and Dia would wake up...”

“Yeah, if they’re okay, then...”

They could recover from anything. With that in mind, I decided to leave the room with Maria right away. She led me down the dusty hallway to the rooms where the other two were resting. I wanted to see their faces immediately.

No matter what memories await me, as long as I have my friends, I can overcome them, I thought. I was sure Lastiara and Dia must have had the same concerns I did. I wanted to share the situation with everyone and resolve it together.

As I began walking faster, *Dimension* sensed some strange magic.

“Huh?!”

In a second, the hallway was filled with twinkling lights, which threw me into confusion, and Maria whispered a single name.

“Huh, this light...could it be Dia?”

The too-bright light was leaking from behind one of the doors in the hallway. My body moved before I could think. I flung the door open as if I meant to jump

directly into the light. A strange and mysterious sight greeted me. The interior of the room looked just like mine, but there were innumerable magic particles that looked like feathers tumbling through the air. Atop the bed in the corner sat a girl who looked like an angel. Her wings spread out, filling the entire room, and her golden hair and blue eyes shone with light.

I called out my companion's name, despite initially mistaking her for an angel. "Dia? Are you okay?"

She turned her glowing eyes toward me and then immediately began shaking her head violently. "K-Kanami! Don't come in here!"

"What happened?! Is this from the Guardian's magic?!"

"No, Kanami! This is from before that!"

"Before...that?"

Maria stopped me as my *Thought Streams* comprehended the meaning of those words. "Mr. Kanami, please wait! She's acting too strangely!"

If I take a single step closer, something will end, I realized, and stopped. Dia and I stared at each other.

"Sieg..." Even though we needed to have an important conversation, Dia got my name wrong.

"No, Dia. I'm Kanami now."

"I'm sorry. To me, Sieg will always be Sieg. Sieg was my friend, companion, and someone I admired." She shook her head slightly, frustrated. "Ha. Ha ha. It seems it's impossible now, Sieg. In the end, I just can't face the person called Kanami. *We* did a horrible thing to *Kanami*, and I'm too ashamed to face him..."

I again remembered Ms. Wyss's advice. When it feels like you are losing yourself, the ones who will help you are...

I drew closer to Dia, whose face continued to contort with emotion, and yelled with all my strength, "What are you saying?! You haven't done a terrible thing to me even once!"

"I remember. What *we* did a thousand years ago. There's no way you'll forgive me. No, it's okay if you don't. But I must atone for it! This time, it's best

if I do it alone and don't get anyone else involved!" Dia got down off the opposite side of the bed, as if trying to escape me. That movement made me feel an indescribably heavy anxiety. It was the first time she had ever tried to avoid me.

"Wait! Don't go, Dia. Acting rashly is one of your bad habits. It's all okay; just don't move. You don't have to go anywhere!" If this continued, something irreversible would occur; I could feel it.

Dia began to laugh as she staggered. I knew that smile. It was the same one Tida, Alty, and Lorwen had shown me. A smile with the specter of death.

"But I'll never forget. Sieg accepted a young boy named Dia... You saw that I wasn't just Sith or an apostle. I'll never forget that. No matter what, I'll see that his dream comes true on my own. I'll make it come true!" Dia covered her face with her arm.

If this keeps going, Dia will disappear.

A chill washed over me, and I reached out to her without thinking. I tried to keep still and not let my arm do what it wanted to. But I couldn't reach her. If Dia extended her hand too, we'd be within touching distance, but she was one arm short of being able to do that. She'd lost a hand to squeeze back with because of me. My outstretched hand hung in the air, and at the same time, the air between us gave a single thrumming shake.

It was the sound of a heartbeat. A cry as if a new life were being born. Dia's magic thrummed faster. Magic began to flow in a rhythm similar to blood circulating. Something was changing places with her.

Once all of the magic had turned into something else, Dia slowly lowered her hand, revealing her face. It was the same androgynous, pretty face as always. But there was definitely something different. A devilish grin twisted her face, and her mouth began to move.

"It's been a long time, friend. I'm glad you're well." Even though we'd just been talking, she'd said, "long time."



It was such a sudden change that I could only think she'd been possessed by an evil spirit. Her facial expressions were wrong. The way she spoke was wrong. The way she moved was wrong. More than anything else, her eyes were wrong. Normally blue, they were now glowing a faint black. I could tell they were shining, but the light was incredibly dark. Looking at those eyes, I felt anxious, as if I were peering into the bottom of the ocean.

The warning bells of *Responsiveness* were louder than I'd ever experienced before, and I instinctively understood—this wasn't Dia. This was *someone else*.

That someone moved their eyes with a glare. First, they looked at my face, then at their own body. After making an expression as if they were seeing their body for the first time, they dexterously spun their magic power. An arm of glittering light sprouted from the end of their right elbow. That shining arm pulsed and animated like that of a living creature. If I looked closely, I could see geometric patterns floating on it. By observing it with *Dimension*, I realized that a high-density magic circle had taken the shape of an arm.

The unknown person moved their white arm, satisfied, and opened and closed their hand multiple times. Then, laughing sweetly, they addressed me. "Ha ha. I should thank you, friend. You took care of little Diablo so well up to this point. Thanks to you, there was enough magic power to manifest me in the present day."

They spoke as if we were old friends. I could certainly say that Dia and I were acquaintances, but this manner of speech wasn't appropriate for our relationship.

"What a terrible expression. Didn't you want to meet me?" With a laugh, the shining fingers pointed at my twisted expression. The figure continued on in a singsong voice, leaving me dumbfounded. "This was inevitable, you know. Everything was fixed from the moment you called yourself 'Kanami' to Diablo Sith, friend. After all, Apostle Sith and Kanami the Founder made a contract. Therefore, even if their bodies decayed, their souls would be drawn to each other again and again. No matter what happens, we are made in such a way that we will meet again. That is the 'logic' of this world."

It was clear that the being in front of me wasn't Dia. Unlike Snow's

transformation during the brawl, this would be better described as a substitution.

“Who exactly are you?” I asked.

“Who? So that’s how it is, huh? Ha, aha ha, aha ha ha ha ha! I guess that means Kanami was a failure after all! No wonder everything’s a mess! You interfered with Tiara and cooperated with me because you had no idea what you were doing!”

“No, it had nothing to do with you! Get out of Dia this instant!”

“Not so fast. Now that everything has started over, I’m going to be the one to win this time. I’m not going to let anyone beat me again.” They stepped forward slightly, filled with fighting spirit, showing me they were ready for combat.

My body reflexively stiffened at the hostility. I had experienced this frightening sense of intimidation many times before. Tida, Alty, Lorwen, all of them had terrifying powers. But this enemy’s will was something totally different.

It made sense. Fulfilling the Guardians’ lingering attachments had nothing to do with them winning the fights. But this enemy’s will to do battle had no relation to lingering attachments; they only wanted to win. I could sense a steadfast determination to achieve victory by any means necessary.

Remaining vigilant, I carefully checked my opponent’s stats.

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 293/293

MP: 1,202/1,202

CLASS: Swordfighter

LEVEL 20

STR 10.01

VIT 8.31

DEX 4.80

AGI 4.94

INT 16.67

MAG 70.34

APT 5.00

Their name was Diablo Sith. Their menu looked the same, including Protection, and their stats were unchanged from the last level up. If I acted quickly, I could probably capture them. But I couldn't. I was perplexed by the fearless smile and unwavering bloodlust.

If I'm careless, they'll kill me in a heartbeat. I could feel something *unquantifiable* in her that made me think that. I removed a sword from my inventory as I carefully changed *Dimension* to *Wintermension*, and the blue eyes followed my movements closely. She was carefully observing not only my physical actions, but my magical ones as well.

"Hmmm, is that your full power, friend? This will be interesting. Aha! At this rate, I'll soon be able to see the face of my dear friend Hitaki after so long! I'm excited!"

"After so long? Don't say such shit! There's nobody in this world who knows Hitaki!" I yelled, swinging my sword to the side in anger.

The blue eyes watched that anger too. Then, after two brief nods, her face brightened. "Ah, I see! Ha ha, I think I've just about got it!"

That was my line too. *Responsiveness* and *Thought Streams* had hit upon the identity of my enemy. It was difficult to deny it any longer.

"So that's why Kanami, who is supposed to be the Founder, is so weak! Ha ha, it's just what you deserve for betraying me! After that battle, there were, what, three of us left? Tiara, Regacy, and Alty? Well, I don't know how anyone beat Kanami, but great! That's a major comeback! I'm going to present them with a hundred savior's medals! They can live happily ever after! Aha, aha ha ha ha!"

My enemy's name was Sith.

Before me was Apostle Sith. There could be no doubt that they were the Apostle I'd heard about in legends passed down for a thousand years. Just as Saint Tiara had planned on using Lastiara's body to resurrect herself, Apostle Sith from a thousand years ago had planned to use Dia's body to be reborn. My

face contorted even more as I arrived at that answer.

“Well, I know *real* well how hard it’s been for you, friend,” she continued. “You’re confused, in pain, you still don’t know what’s going on, and it all sounds very, very difficult. So that’s why I’m inviting you to join me once again, Aikawa Kanami! Let me call you Kanami one more time! We can still start over! We’re creatures who can understand each other!” Sith said with a radiant smile, like a flower blooming, as she stretched her white arm out toward me. Combined with Dia’s well-defined face, the invitation was alluring, as dazzling as a halo and as magnificent as an act of myth.

I had seen this scene before in a dream. That time, I had taken the proffered hand. As Sith had said, this was “once again.” I knew I was repeating history. I couldn’t think of words to reply with, as my understanding of the facts that were being uncovered one after another couldn’t keep up.

To my bewilderment, Sith leaned forward readily, without hesitation. The aura of magical power around her body made me feel she was many times larger than she actually was. It felt like I was a tiny insect and a ruthless human was reaching out to swat me.

Little by little, Sith and I drew closer to each other. I strengthened the hand holding my sword and knew instinctively that I would have to fight before that white hand reached me.

Then, just as she came within striking distance of my sword...

“Gah?!” Sith’s arm of light bent. It wavered like a candle in the wind, unable to hold the shape of an arm. Sith noticed the anomaly and stopped walking. She cast a hard look at her melting arm. “Little Diablo, huh? What a nostalgic skill.”

She knew the origin of the strange effect. She began speaking to the empty air, as if trying to comfort someone.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m little Diablo’s friend. I’ll listen to your desires as best I can, I promise. Yes, I wanted to invite my friend to join me, but if darling, cute, little Diablo doesn’t like that, I’ll stop.”

Sith lowered the raised arm and took a step back. But the deformation didn’t stop. Seeing that, she sighed deeply and made a vow, bringing the arm up to

her chest.

“That’s right. He’s Siegfried Vizzita. If he’s not Aikawa Kanami then he’s not worth allying with. Little Diablo, is that okay?”

Sith spoke the words solemnly, with no excitement or laughter lacing them. The warping of her arm diminished, as if the wind blowing the candle had stopped, and it became steady again. However, it was paler than it had been before.

“Oh my, even that doesn’t make her feel better. It seems she doesn’t like me very much. Oh, that’s so sad. It’s really sad that we can’t understand each other.”

Sith laughed as she stroked her arm, clearly speaking to someone I couldn’t see. If I could trust her words, that someone was Dia. Right now, Dia and Sith were sharing the same body. Her monologue was enough for me to make that guess.

“Well...” Having finished the conversation with herself, Sith lost all of the fire that had been smoldering in her body and made to move away from me. “Right, then, friend. Last time, I was a perfect Apostle, so I wasn’t able to participate. But this time, I have little Diablo inside me. I can try to be human while being an apostle. I don’t even need an understudy anymore.”

Sith turned her body ninety degrees and bid me farewell with just one eye on me. I could tell she’d lost all interest in me. I, however, felt the opposite. Before she could turn away completely I called out to her.

“Wait! Tell me where you’re going!”

“Well, first off, to where Palinchron Regacy is. We’re going to go ahead and finish him off. Little Diablo agrees with me on this.” Sith easily told me her plans, although the moment Palinchron’s name came out, her expression became grave. Her hatred for the man was clear. “I don’t know why, since Apostle Regacy doesn’t seem to have much drive, but I don’t know what he’s thinking in his heart of hearts. Make no mistake, that man is the greatest enemy to world peace! An enemy that absolutely must be defeated!!!”

“Wait. I know that he’s disturbing the peace, but an apostle? You’re saying

that Palinchron Regacy is an apostle just like you are?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The proof’s there in his name: Regacy. But I don’t want you to be mistaken; I am the only legitimate apostle. No, I’m the only righteous one. I think that’s the best way to say it,” she answered.

I could tell from her attitude that what existed between us wasn’t an adversarial relationship, yet I could also tell that it wasn’t a cooperative one either.

Sith kept turning her body away and refused to face me. She began talking to herself again, ignoring me. “That’s right. Just like we turned Deiplachra into a houseplant, we’ll seal Regacy away too. Then I’ll be the only apostle. I’ll do it perfectly this time! There will be world peace!!!” Her face twisted into a vicious expression that Dia would never make.

Her personality slowly changed. Because of my abilities and skills, I was able to begin lifting the veil on the existence of Sith. First off, she was quite self-righteous and didn’t listen to others. Her emotions had violent ups and downs, and she was talkative. She would go into her own little world when she thought something was correct, making it difficult to negotiate with her. I had no choice but to make an honest request of her, without using any tricks.

“I understand what you want to do, but if you want to achieve world peace, you can do it on your own. I have no intention of interfering with your plan to seal away Palinchron. But please leave Dia’s body behind. I just want her back...Apostle Sith.” I made my voice low and spoke with strength and weight behind my words, doing my best to show my determination to make good on this promise.

Sith, on the other hand, gave me a faint smile and shook her head slightly. “That’s impossible, Founder Kanami. I can’t move without this body, so little Diablo is coming with me.”

She had responded just as I’d expected. I looked down briefly before pointing the sword in my hand at my enemy. I followed that up with directions to my companion standing behind me.

“Well, in that case, let’s go! Maria, please!”

“Yes! Got it!” Maria had already been ready for a fight.

“Dia! I might break a few limbs—I’m sorry!”

I didn’t know if she could hear us, but it was probably better to make the excuse early that it would be difficult to go easy on her in the coming battle. However, even exposed to our sharp fighting spirit, Sith still had a smile on her face.

“Hmm, I’ll have to put you down in front of little Diablo. I don’t suppose you could just back off like a good little boy?”

“I wouldn’t have asked Dia to join me if I was just gonna give up here!!!” I shouted and stamped the floor. In the span of a breath, I shortened the distance between us, and with that momentum, I grabbed at her with the hand that wasn’t holding my sword.

Sith parried the move like a natural and backed away. The exchange took only a moment, but it was clearly strange. If the being in front of me had the same stats as Dia, there was no way she would have been able to dodge that grab. My speed and dexterity were overwhelmingly higher. But it was to be expected.

Unsurprised, I swung the sword in my right hand, aiming to inflict a serious wound on her leg to restrain her. Sith effortlessly caught the blow, and the sword was repelled with a sound like it was hitting a hollow cylinder.

It wasn’t a sword that had stopped my attack, nor was it magic. It was a white, shining arm—*her* right arm. The strength of it surprised me. Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, was a weapon that could easily cut through the crystal in the depths of the Dungeon. And yet she rebuffed it without a thought.

Sith smiled meaningfully and distanced herself from me. From the direction of her retreat, I could tell she planned to escape out the window. But that escape route was too easy to guess.

“*Flame Arrow!*” Reading Sith’s movements, Maria spread magic across the area before she could get there. It was an elementary fire attack, but it wasn’t simple. The high-level spell turned the flaming bullets into a mass of lava. The size of it was large enough to vaporize even large monsters in an instant. I didn’t

care how many months of healing it took as long as Dia didn't die. You could feel the relentlessness in the magic.

Sith was unable to avoid a direct hit. Just before it struck, though, she moved the wings of light on her back and wrapped them around herself like an eggshell. A vicious fireball engulfed her and burned the entire wall of the villa. The force of it threw her through the opening in the wall.

Maria and I, convinced that this was not enough to defeat her, began our pursuit. We passed through the hole in the wall and out into the garden, which was still the prairie it had been transformed into by Ide's magic. Flames were beginning to burn it, leaping through the grass.

Sith was there, a ball of flames from having eaten the direct attack. But she easily shook off the fire with a huge flap of her wings. The form that appeared from the flames didn't have a single burn on it. Without leaving a moment for her to catch her breath, Maria and I attacked from both sides.

"Ice Flamberge!"

"Flame Flamberge!"

It was a pincer move between flame and frost.

"Divine Circle!" Sith responded with magic of her own. Two circles of light appeared in the air, fending off both our swords. The reverberations down our blades felt like we'd hit a mountain. The full force of our attacks was repelled, and Maria and I bounced backward.

Sith made an unpleasant expression and called out to the two of us. "Mm, very good teamwork. I thought you two had a worse relationship." She'd arbitrarily assumed Maria and I were on bad terms, even though that wasn't the case.

Our formation, with me as the vanguard and Maria as the rear guard, was probably one of the best in the party, if only in terms of destructive power as a pair.

After that statement, she looked down at her own body and appeared very dissatisfied. "Actually, the bigger problem here is me. My *Concentration* is strangely scattered, and it's hard to move. Why am I concentrating so much on

my Strength? I'm not someone who fights with weapons." She nimbly snapped her fingers. "Oh well, I'll just fix that."

Her body suddenly began to glow, and the flow of magic in and out of it started up again. The look on her face reminded me of a game from my home world.

Reflexively, I used *Analyze*.

【STATUS】

NAME: Diablo Sith

HP: 142/142

MP: 1,489/1,672

CLASS: Apostle

LEVEL 20

STR 0.21

VIT 0.41

DEX 0.24

AGI 0.44

INT 1.00

MAG 112.67

APT 5.00

As she said, new stats had appeared. Her physical abilities had dropped to a level that made me wonder if she'd even been able to live a normal, everyday life. However, instead of throwing everything else out, her magic abilities, which had already been powerful, were further enhanced. Her magic now surpassed 100.00. It was no longer a mystery what could happen. Magic from the myths that Lastiara had told me about was possible—the person from those myths was here, after all.

"My, it's been such a long time since I've had a real fight. But my dear friend's status is lower than it used to be. Ha ha, I'm kind of happy about that. I was always my friend's rival when it came to leveling up!" Faint, white, magic-like mist erupted from her body. The overwhelming density of her power was no less than that of a Guardian.

I didn't think I could hold a candle to her, let alone win, in a battle of magic. I kicked up dirt as I shortened the distance between us before she could use long-range magic.

"Maria! Please keep supporting me! About the same as what you did earlier is fine!" I called.

"Are you sure? Everything will burn!"

"It's an emergency so we have no choice! They said they weren't using the villa either, so it should be okay!"

"Then I'll give it my all! *Flame Arrow!*"

The fire magic flew toward Sith's back, slipping between her arms to look for an opening.

"*Divine Shield!*"

Unfortunately, it couldn't find a weak spot. The magic wings repelled my sword, and a new shield, born of magic, deflected Maria's fire. Undeterred, I continued to swing my blade. There was no longer any room for holding back, and Lorwen's *Swordplay* was unleashed to its full extent. My sword and the wings clashed at high speed, flickering as they met. It didn't matter how fast I was; between the wings so large they covered her whole body, the flexible white arm, and the large amount of protective film created by her Holy magic, their defenses were so complete that my blade couldn't penetrate them. There was simply no gap for a physical sword to pass through.

"Damn it!" Even as I swore I was trying to come up with a plan using *Thought Streams*. There were still many avenues of attack. If I continued to select the most appropriate means from among them, a hole in that iron defense should open up at some point.

"Ha ha, you're desperate, friend. Is little Diablo that important to you?" Sith was cool and collected as she asked me that, even as she continued formulating spells.

"Of course!"

"Huh...really?"

“What are you trying to say?!” I was frustrated by her relaxed attitude and decided to try making a new spell to break through the iron wall immediately.

“Well, then, why didn’t you take better care of her?”

“Gah!!!” Sith’s icy words instantly stopped my magic formulation.

“If you had cared more about little Diablo, friend, then I’m sure my advent here would have happened much later. You see, I can’t come back without a weak spot in her heart.”

I trembled at those words. I knew too much about my own behavior to ignore them.

“It’s easy to see what caused the weakness. Little Diablo cared so much about Sieg, and yet you so easily threw that away, friend. If you’d really cared for Diablo, you would’ve at least kept the name.” Sith confronted me with my mistake so easily. Her expression, which had been joyful up until that point, grew dark, and she looked down at me. She blamed me for preferring the name Kanami to “Sieg.”

“I won’t return little Diablo to that kind of ‘friend.’ Because I know her better than anybody else. I will take much, *much* better care of her than a friend who couldn’t even pretend to understand her.”

My sword faltered because of my trembling. In that brief lapse, Sith strengthened her magic.

“Farewell, Sieg. *Symposium Feather!*”

I couldn’t decide who those parting words belonged to. But either way, I couldn’t stop the magic. The wings of light flapped, unleashing a huge number of white feathers. I felt dizzy at the sheer number of them filling my field of view. An instant later, they exploded like fireworks, the impact of each feather so great that it pushed me back.

Sith sped past me at high speed. Her beautiful, androgynous face was contorted into an expression of sadness. I turned to chase after that expression, but by then she had already spread her wings and taken off into the sky. She was so high above me that even my sword couldn’t reach. The only thing that remained were the white feathers gently fluttering down.

“Damn it!”

I’d been careless. Taking Sith’s words to heart, I’d been the weak spot. I’d failed. Truthfully, Dia probably had put up with a lot, but there wasn’t a single person in our party who *hadn’t*. There was no such thing as a solution that satisfied everyone. So everyone had to compromise a little and find a way to make everyone else a little happier. Even Dia was trying to make that happen. But Sith had made all her efforts meaningless. She’d revealed Dia’s secret dissatisfaction without a care.

I couldn’t allow it. I couldn’t let her get away with this.

“I’m sorry, Maria! This is my fault! I’m going after Dia right now!” I put my sword into my inventory and looked in the direction Sith had flown. In a moment, she would be outside of *Dimension’s* range.

I needed to move before that happened. I made to run out of the garden when...

A wind blew, flowing gently through the garden, putting out the fires dotting the grass. Then, a girl appeared from the middle of the wind and called out to us.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to leave it like that. I won’t let you go, boy.” It was none other than Wyss Hylipröpe, who I’d thought had left the villa earlier. She looked out beyond the garden as she stood blocking my way.

“Wha— Ms. Wyss? Why are you here?” Her appearance was a complete surprise. She was so full of vitality that I could have mistaken her for another person entirely. Had Ide’s treatments brought her closer to her full potential? Her skin, which had been morbidly white, had turned pinkish. And her body wasn’t the only thing that was altered. Her equipment had changed drastically as well. Two swords hung at her waist, and she wore a number of magical tools, including bracelets. She had also changed her clothes, wearing something that didn’t inhibit her movement yet had solid defensive power. They weren’t for daily life, but for combat.

“When we heard that you had come back here, I turned around and came back,” she answered with a hint of wariness.

It was good timing that she had come back when she did. Apostle Sith had said earlier that she was heading for where Palinchron was located. Having someone who knew the locale would allow us to shorten our trip there.

But contrary to what I was thinking, Ms. Wyss began to speak at a leisurely pace. “Boy...you asked earlier if I was hiding something important, right? It’s time to talk about that now. Please listen to what I have to say.”

“Talk...now?! Sorry, but I don’t have the time to listen to that right now. I need to go save Dia right away!” I shook my head, refusing her proposal. I didn’t have a second to waste. It was possible that the longer this conversation went on, the closer Dia’s personality came to being completely overwritten.

“That’s why I can’t let you leave. If you go, you won’t be able to return.” Ms. Wyss unsheathed one of the swords at her waist, further blocking my path. I could tell she was serious.

“You don’t know that I won’t return or whatever! I *have* to go save Dia! So get out of my way! If I don’t then Dia will—” I retorted, frustrated with the sudden new obstacle.

“Yes, I know. That is why I’m telling you this. Because of Dr. Ide’s magic, the apostle has finally been swallowed up by her memories. Even now, that’s no longer the girl called Dia, but the apostle called Sith. Despite that, are you still going to save her, boy?”

“I still don’t understand! But Dia is there! I can’t give up until I’ve tried everything I can!” Raising my voice, I responded immediately to Ms. Wyss’s advice.

Her mouth opened slightly at my words before returning to its serious expression. “Is that so? Then that is fine as far as the apostle is concerned. But the more serious problem is you, boy. Do you really understand what I mean when I say that you won’t be able to return? It’s your turn to be swallowed up. If you continue to talk to the apostle, you will surely meet the same fate as her. One after another, the memories of a thousand years ago will come back to life, and your body will be taken over by the former founder.” The warning was not that I would be unable to return physically, but that my mind would be gone. I already knew that, though. I’d just seen that dream. Perhaps from now on,

every time I dreamed, I would gain a new memory. That meant my thoughts and feelings would be filled with those of a thousand years ago.

When we'd fought Ide's group, I'd been caught up in unbelievable emotions. It was as if I had been no longer myself. As if I had been eroded by the thousand-year-old existence of Kanami the Founder. Ms. Wyss had been so worried about me that she'd come back here alone.

"I understand what you're saying to me, Ms. Wyss. But it's okay. Because I'll show you that I can overcome it without fail!" Truthfully, I was anxious. But I put on a brave front because Dia was my number one priority at the moment.

Ms. Wyss, perhaps sensing I was faking it, shook her head. "No, it's not okay. If you continue forward, then something you absolutely can't recover from will occur. Palinchron is waiting for you if you chase after the holy Apostle now. He's knowledgeable about what happened a thousand years ago. He is absolutely preparing something to destroy you with." So Palinchron had made it into this conversation as well. I guess Ms. Wyss didn't underestimate him in the slightest, as she warned me off him with a strange look on her face.

"I guess that's...true. There were times when Palinchron seemed to know my past self. I'm sure he knows a *lot* of things I don't. But I swore that I would never lose to him again. I won't bend the knee to him twice! Please let me through!" Overcoming the Allied Nations' Brawl meant that I had learned not to go down the wrong path. My journey up to this point had also given me the power to finally beat him.

"I see. Then, just one thing. Please just listen to this one thing I have to say. There is one truth that Palinchron will reveal when he fights you," she responded, a hard expression on her face, spurred by my insistence.

Just one thing. I nodded, figuring it would be faster to listen to her than to fight. Ms. Wyss took a deep breath and, after a moment, slowly began to speak.

"I don't think that the boy in front of me now is Aikawa Kanami. Much like Lastiara was the vessel for Saint Tiara, and Diablo Sith was the vessel for Apostle Sith, you are a Jewelculus prepared for the resurrection of Kanami the Founder. Can you still fight despite that?"

It was a truth that undermined everything.

“I’m... I’m a Jewelculus? I’m not the Founder from a thousand years ago?” The truth was different from what I had guessed. I was Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago. I’d lost my memories upon being summoned to this time. Then, whenever I leveled up, I was remembering my past life. Or that’s what I had thought up until this point. However, Ms. Wyss said that the reality was even worse than that.

“Correct. Boy, you’re not the real Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago; you’re a Jewelculus that he prepared. I’ll tell you why.” For the sake of my shocked self, Ms. Wyss began telling the story of how she had come upon that truth. “My first reason is my gender. I’m sure that many different people were mixed together to create your Jewelculus body, boy; therefore, when your blood was used to supplement my creation, many things went wrong. If your body was really that of Kanami the founder, it would have been impossible for me to end up female.” She gestured to her chest as proof of her female body as she spoke. “Furthermore, being a Jewelculus would explain why you started at Level 1 and yet still had so many skills at such a low level. Initialization of levels is a typical characteristic for Jewelculi. The same can be said for your bizarre Aptitude stat.”

I couldn’t stand the matter-of-fact manner in which she was explaining all this, and I had to interrupt with a question. “So then what about my memories? The ones I now have of being Aikawa Kanami?”

I had sixteen years’ worth of memories. The ones I had from living in an alternate world. And there were the other memories I had seen in my dreams. I genuinely believed they were my own.

“It is highly probable that the memories were prepared as well. It’s likely they were attuned and imprinted in your blood so that you wouldn’t think becoming Aikawa Kanami was strange. It would have been easy for the Founder to have done such a thing.”

She told me so easily that my memories were fake. I could feel my heart breaking at those cruel words.

“You are not Aikawa Kanami. You’re a nameless boy. You’re the same as that Lastiara Whoseyards girl— Well, no, you’re even younger. You’re a Jewelculus

who was just born a few weeks ago in the Dungeon,” she continued.

My heart started beating faster. I couldn’t stop trembling. I objected, trying to resist the truth.

“But...I’m different from other Jewelculi... I’m totally different...”

“Of course, you’re not a *normal* Jewelculus. You’re the only one of your kind in this world. One created by a legend from a thousand years ago. It’s only natural that you would surpass Jewelculi from this time period.”

I still wasn’t convinced. Even *Thought Streams*, which were working independently of my brain, suggested that there was something missing from this argument.

I am Aikawa Kanami. I have a sister to save and a place to return to. I am not alone in the world.

Ms. Wyss proceeded to shatter that hope too. “The strongest proof that I have is something I can see with my own eyes. At the end of your skills section, boy, next to a skill that I can’t see very well, is the phrase *Doll Body*.”

I understood what she was saying in an instant.

“At the end... It’s not ‘outworlder’ that’s...” I immediately looked at my own menu.

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 4.89, Ice Magic 2.58+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimension Magic 5.25+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thought Streams 1.48, Smithing 0.69, Sewing 0.68

???:???

???:???

There was the ??? skill that always caused me so much trouble. And right next to it was another ??? skill that was supposed to say “outworlder.”

“No, I possess the *Analyze* skill like you do, boy, and the skill I can see there is

Doll Body. That's why I'm telling you you're a Jewelculus."

"B-But..." *But Lastiara had said...* I couldn't even get the words out of my mouth. I wasn't the one who had confirmed it. There was a margin for error. And there was a corner of my mind that didn't fully trust Lastiara either because of Ide's magic from earlier.

"It's no wonder you were mistaken. The person who created you, boy, Kanami the Founder, was quite the master. He must have cleverly *Adjusted* you so you wouldn't doubt yourself."

Adjust? I remembered something just then. The effect of the ??? skill must be *Adjust*. So I wouldn't die, wouldn't break. And so I would always move forward. *In other words, so that I would be tempted to become stronger to become the perfect vessel for Kanami the Founder?*

"You aren't you, boy. I am sure that Palinchron intended to make this truth known in a more gut-wrenching way during your battle. That is why I dared to tell you first. To make the wound as shallow as possible, and not to go into irreversible territory."

My brain began working reflexively to consider the truth Ms. Wyss was telling me. She continued speaking.

"You can still turn back if you don't get involved with those from a thousand years ago. You can live as a simple boy without despair, and without being invaded by Kanami the Founder. That is why you can't go on!" She threw out her arms, making herself as big as possible to block my path. Her face was strained. Looking at her expression, it didn't seem likely that she was lying.

"I'm not...*me*? So then, I don't have a sister?" I wasn't a person from my old world, I was a person born *here*. At the same time, that would mean my battles to date had been a farce. The path I had walked had likely been that of Aikawa Kanami, but I *wasn't* Aikawa Kanami.

My head began feeling heavy. My neck drooped, unable to support it, and I felt dizzy. The more I thought about it all, the dizzier I became. If I didn't do something, I wouldn't be me anymore. But if I admitted that, the ??? skill would definitely activate. I needed to think of a counterargument quickly before that could happen. Something that could drive off this reality.

Something...somehow...

“Mr. Kanami!”

Before I could fall off that lethal edge, a voice pierced my skull. Thanks to that, the thoughts that had been spinning like a whirlpool stopped. The origin of that yell was Maria. She’d been watching silently up until now, but she began to talk, approaching as if it was her turn to speak from here on.

“Honestly, I can’t say that I understood all of what you just said. However, please let me say one thing. Nothing changes either way, and I don’t mind either way.” That gentle voice told me that no matter who I was, her feelings were the same and that I was free to go on or turn back. Maria came up next to me and held my left hand tightly. “It’s okay. I can do something about Dia. So please relax... Decide on your own time.”

At that moment, my face flushed so hot it felt like it was burning. I was ashamed of my lack of growth. Most of all, I was ashamed that I had almost squandered the lessons I had learned. “Thank you, Maria. And I’m sorry. I was a bit of a mess.”

“No...lots of things happened all at once. Besides, I know well that you’re that kind of person, Mr. Kanami. It’s normal.”

Seeing me regain my footing, Maria smiled. I knew that I couldn’t show any more shame in front of her. I immediately looked up and repeated my words to Ms. Wyss.

“Ms. Wyss...I’m going to go anyway. I’ll be okay because I have my friends.”

I wouldn’t grow for my own sake, but for the sake of my friends. Truthfully, the despair I’d felt at the end of the Day of Blessed Birth was nothing compared to this. Being captured by Palinchron couldn’t compare either. But I had friends, and they were supporting me. That was the only reason I still had hope. Most wouldn’t be bothered by the fact that I was a Jewelculus. It didn’t mean I would die soon or that I’d be unable to save Hitaki or Dia.

“You shouldn’t take this lightly, boy. Your memories are all mixed together. A person can’t endure the feeling of two souls sharing one body. Two sets of memories are stirring in your head, but they’ll never fully merge. You’ll be filled

with unbearable anxiety, you'll have trouble breathing, and you'll lose your mind. That can easily break a person."

Ms. Wyss explained in detail what I had already experienced.

"Well, when that happens I'll get help from everyone, just like Maria helped me now!"

I had already learned the solution from the girl before me. Whenever I worried that I would stop being myself, I could turn to someone else. It was that easy. With that in mind, I continued my show of courage. "I also don't think that the mixing of the memories is necessarily a bad thing. In my memory, Kanami the Founder was very protective of his sister and friends. I don't think his spirit will get in the way of helping Dia and Hitaki."

"There it is. I am saying that very premise has been crumbling from the start. You were never siblings with Hitaki, and yet you want to save her? Isn't that strange? You're trying to save a total stranger who's not even a blood relative."

"I never thought I wanted to save her just because we're related. Whatever the reason may be, I know Hitaki is a kindhearted girl. I can't allow someone like that to die meaninglessly. That's why I want to help her, and there's nothing wrong with that."

It was a bit of an unreasonable response, but I declared it with complete confidence anyway. *Frankly, if I had to choose which one makes more sense, it would definitely be Ms. Wyss's argument*, I thought. But the point here wasn't to prove who was right, so I was fine with it.

"But those feelings belong to Kanami the Founder! They're not *yours*! The memories you hold of Aikawa Hitaki are fake! You're wrong! Can you say the same things if you know the path you're treading is the wrong one?!"

"I can. They might have started out fake, but they've become real now. Who I am as a person means I don't want to see a child suffering from unreasonable misfortune. I never want to abandon them. It would be wrong to turn back just because I have the same way of thinking as Kanami the Founder."

"Are you really going to insist on that?"

"If I choose to do it again, not because someone forced me to, but because I

willed it, then it's no longer someone else's wish, but mine. I really want to help Dia, and I also want to help Hitaki. The only thing I'm sure of is that I'm not lying. I'm not choosing the wrong path!"

I had learned the meaning of the phrase "choosing the right path" from a good friend a little while ago. Lorwen Arrace, the Thief of Earth's Essence, had been so crushed by the weight of his family's wishes that he had lost sight of his own modest aspirations. To put it bluntly, influence from one's life's circumstances was absolutely unavoidable. So the important thing was to choose the path you really wanted to take from the many options presented by your circumstances. And right now, I sincerely wanted to save Dia and Hitaki from unreasonable suffering. That was something that would never change, like Maria had said earlier.

Perhaps I finally got through to her, because Ms. Wyss's face softened, and she said with a heavy sigh, "Very well, then. If you can say that much, you might be able to withstand the challenge it will be to face Palinchron and the Apostle." She sighed again, returned the sword she was holding to its sheath, and yielded the path to me. From her gestures and words, I was sure that she had intentionally hit me with that tough story, and I was grateful to her in more ways than one.

At that point, I was able to regroup and regain my composure. If I'd just pushed on without thinking, I would surely have regretted it. "Thank you, Ms. Wyss."

"It's no problem. You got what I was trying to tell you somehow. So, it's real? It certainly seems like it's real. If you feel that strongly about it, then you just have to keep going down the same path." She looked at her own palms as she ruminated on my words.

"Ms. Wyss, you're feeling the same way I am right now, aren't you?" Now that I'd recovered, I grew worried about the girl in front of me. I felt I should ask her everything she had just asked me.

"Yes, I suppose so. Like you and the Apostle, I lost sight of myself recently. I was almost crushed by the memories from the life of the Knight Hine..." She was finally speaking about the story she'd avoided telling on the boat. "It was so

scary. Multiple memories and egos. My unstable mind is about to fall apart... My spliced-together body is about to fall apart... Everything about me is becoming brittle and fragile... I was so anxious about whether I would be able to live properly!"

The authenticity of her voice conveyed some of the horror of the experience. Although I had assured her that I was fine just now, I might not be able to say the same thing once I actually tasted the real deal.

"But Sir Hine was also the one to put my heart at ease. Of course, the voice of my friend Sheer was important too, but Sir Hine was the one who protected my spirit by releasing this body." After her speech, Ms. Wyss brought both hands up to her chest and closed her eyes like she was praying.

"Mr. Hine..." With a bit of nostalgia, I murmured the knight's name. From her choice of words, I could tell she had her own personality. And I could also tell that Hine was no longer there. The knight I knew acted exactly as I would have expected him to.

"Since then, the Sir Hine in my memories has become someone I look up to. Therefore, because I feel strongly about his memories, I hold the same desires he did: 'I will live for my friends.' I think that is truly a wonderful way to live. This short life will have some worth!"

It seemed that her purpose, which we had talked about earlier on the boat, was to follow in Mr. Hine's footsteps. She stood in front of me, in the exact same position I was in, and spit out words she'd been unable to say before.

"Of course, I doubted the whole time whether those were really *my* feelings. Was it truly my wish or some fake desire planted within me? But when you told me that they had *become* your real feelings, I realized that's my answer too!" Ms. Wyss nodded emphatically once, then looked at me with a twinkle in her eye. Her will was stronger than before. Her spirit had gained new strength from my support. "I'm more confident now. After all, this wasn't *interference*, it was an *inheritance*. Now I know that I can go forward too; I won't be lost any longer. I will help you save them. Sir Hine wanted to save those who were lost because of their 'birth' or 'destiny.' Now *I* will save them with my own two hands!"

I was able to catch a glimpse of Ms. Wyss's sincere heart. Her wish to save

people was very similar to my desire to help those I had mentioned earlier. I realized that not only were our circumstances similar, but our goals were too, and I drew closer to her, feeling relieved.

“The Apostle has gone to Palinchron. I will guide you there before it’s too late for Dia, who’s at the mercy of birth and destiny. After all, I did promise.” Ms. Wyss smiled at me, offering her help to track down and rescue Dia. Then, she took out a large map from her breast pocket and pointed to a fortress called Gräd. “This is where Palinchron is. It’s not far from here. If we go straight there it should only take about half a day. Let’s get moving.”

It was the same as the information I’d gotten from the letter Sheer had given me. Palinchron, who served as general on the front lines, was stationed near the center of the continent of Varences. I wanted to run off and head there immediately, but Maria stopped me.

“Please wait! Lastiara is still inside!” She turned to look toward the villa where our friend slept.

“You’re right.” It wasn’t me who answered, but Ms. Wyss. “We can move her via *Connection* back to your boat to rest. And of course you as well Maria, I’m sure you’re tired from taking care of everyone. Please leave the pursuit to us. If it’s you and I, boy, we can take turns resting and using Dimension magic as we head to the fort. We’ll certainly be able to catch up with one lone flying Apostle.”

Ms. Wyss walked unhurriedly into the villa. Certainly, no matter how monstrous the apostle appeared, her physical strength wasn’t infinite. Considering her magical power and the amount of time Sith had to spend sleeping, we would definitely be able to catch up.

Finally able to think calmly, Maria and I followed Ms. Wyss back inside. I used *Connection* to move Lastiara into a bed on the boat and left Maria on the boat as well, asking her to explain everything to the rest of our party members.

“Let’s go, Ms. Wyss. Palinchron is waiting.”

“Yes, let’s. Together.”

I felt a slight sense of déjà vu when I looked at Ms. Wyss’s face in profile as

she answered. Once, in a similar situation, two people had lined up to rescue a girl who was at the mercy of her birth and destiny. I felt as if the knight who had protected my back then was here now too.

My heart felt lighter. I was no longer plagued by doubt and anxiety.

Chapter 4: The Battle with Palinchron Regacy

Even though we'd been trying to slip out of Cork, we still caused a scene. It was the natural consequence of having such a grand magic battle, and the villa was surrounded by the military police. Of course, we didn't have time to explain the circumstances of the fight, so Ms. Wyss and I simply overpowered them to get out. After that, we got on a pair of warhorses that Ms. Wyss had prepared earlier and headed northwest over the plains. This was my first time on horseback, but I just copied what she was doing and was able to stay on just fine. It was essentially the same thing I'd done in the Dungeon, when I'd copied Lorwen's *Swordplay*.

Although the horse wasn't a problem, moving straight across the plains proved to be no easy feat. Furthermore, as we were approaching the front lines, we could see that troops on the move would be an obstacle as well. Because of that, we used *Dimension*, as we had in the Dungeon and during our sea voyage. That way we wouldn't get lost or run into any interference en route.

There were three towns on the way to the fort, but we passed them all without a second glance. If we needed to take a break, we could go back to the boat rather than resting in a town. There wasn't a single reason to enter any of them. We traveled like this day and night until finally, the next morning, we reached our destination about half a league from Fort Gräd.

This was the front line of the front lines. There weren't just soldiers from the Southern Alliance, we occasionally saw scouts for the Northern Alliance as well. There were soldiers moving in units and camps set up here and there around the area. I was lurking in a grove to avoid being spotted by the scouts and stretching out a thin, wide net of *Dimension* with Ms. Wyss next to me. We were gathering information about the enemy from a spot well away from the fort.

Scouting with magic was similar to what I imagine it would feel like to be a

bird in the air. My perception extended to the fort half a league away and spread out, and then the information entered my brain. Fort Gräd was about one square kilometer in size. I could tell it consisted of a tall tower and clusters of stone roofs. The outer wall made a triangle, close to twice the height of Cork's wall. Out of all the buildings I'd seen in this world, this was truly a spectacular defensive structure. Of course, it was inferior to the cathedral in Whoseyards, but in terms of sheer severity and impenetrable power, the fort won out. The entire area around it was plains, and aside from the forest we were presently lurking in, nothing else stood out.

I widened *Dimension* further to observe the inside of the fort. Heavily armored soldiers were milling around, and there was a disturbance in the middle. For a moment I thought they had realized we were nearby, but then I saw the real cause of the commotion. It was obvious, looking at the meters of empty space that had cleared out in all four directions around the courtyard. Soldiers had gathered together, talking.

Three odd spellcasters were standing facing one another. Two were the Guardian Ide and Apostle Sith. The last was my sworn enemy, Palinchron Regacy.

"I found them!" I cried.

We'd caught up with Sith. Even though I was relieved, I could feel my heart beating faster. There was that damned man. And the friend I needed to save. Tension and excitement stiffened my body.

It didn't look like the situation would be bad for us, as I could see evidence of a fight in the courtyard. The arrival of Ide and Sith had left the fort restless. I could also tell that Palinchron seemed bewildered by the arrival of the two visitors. It would be best to call on my allies standing by on the *Living Legend* and launch a surprise attack.

As I decided on that course of action, Ms. Wyss, standing next to me and also using *Dimension*, spoke up. "They're there. But before that, boy, what are you going to do about your memories?"

I supposed it was meant to calm me down a bit. I would get one last confirmation.

“I haven’t experienced another rapid resurgence of memories like before. I think I’ll be fine as long as I don’t level up rapidly or come into contact with any unique magic.” No memories had resurfaced to cause problems on the journey there. It seemed like my memories were returning bit by bit, unlike Ms. Wyss, who had to face all of them at once.

“The gaps must make you frustrated in their own right. Palinchron is an expert at exploiting any weaknesses in a person’s heart. There’s no way he wouldn’t use his unique magic. He probably has something even bigger in store than I had for you yesterday.”

“It’s okay. No matter what happens, I absolutely won’t lose...”

“Very well, then. I believe you. I think the real meaning behind your feelings will be the key to defeating Palinchron Regacy,” she responded meaningfully.

Enticed by this conversation, I looked down at my palms. I’d sort through the story of me being a Jewelculus one last time. In front of Ms. Wyss, I couldn’t deny that theory. But I couldn’t swallow it unquestioningly either. Her argument yesterday had been logical, but I couldn’t pretend it hadn’t made me uncomfortable. Yet there was the fact that Dia and Palinchron should be my priority right now, not myself. As I settled on that order of precedence, I began casting a spell.

“*Connection!*” A magic door appeared between the trees, and through it I could see the deck of the *Living Legend*.

Lastiara came through first. “It’s connected! Thanks for not leaving me behind!” She took my hand, clearly relieved that I hadn’t jumped into action alone.

“Lastiara... Well, you did tell me not to do something as stupid as rushing in alone.”

“Yeah, I did.”

She had woken up from Ide’s magic-induced stupor a few hours earlier and seemed completely back to her normal self. Of course, I had asked her if the memory of another person had surfaced in her mind. She had replied in a few words that there were just a few memories of Saint Tiara. She had been saying

ever since she woke up that she was fine because she hadn't seen memories as intense as mine and Dia's. I believed her. I had doubted her a bit because of the memories from a thousand years ago, but it was okay. I had decided during the Brawl in Laoravia that I would trust Lastiara. Even supposing she did tell a lie, it would be because she didn't want to worry me. I just didn't want to doubt the bond between us. Both of us would prioritize saving Dia above anything else. We had both chosen the same path together, so there was no way it could be the wrong one.

"Lastiara, I found Palinchron in that fort. Now we can go there whenever we want."

"And Dia's there too?"

"Yeah. I think we should go sooner rather than later."

She nodded vigorously, agreeing with my decision. Then the rest of our friends came through the doorway one after the other. Ms. Sera and Reaper were muttering, wearing expressions I didn't normally see on them.

"Mistress Dia, we will absolutely save you."

"Big sis Dia..."

They'd heard the whole story from Maria while they were waiting on the boat. They were ready to fight, having heard that Dia's consciousness had been swallowed up by the personality of the Apostle.

Next, Snow appeared, shaking. "W-We're finally here... I'll do it..." In spite of her nerves, she didn't plan on running away before the decisive battle. Even though Palinchron was meant to be our only opponent and now there was an Apostle and Guardian to fight too. Still, the fact that she was showing a willingness to do battle demonstrated that she was courageous in her own way.

"Everyone's ready, Mr. Kanami," Maria said, coming through last with a serious expression.

The party to save Dia was assembled. We would decide on our strategy for fighting Palinchron here in the woods.

"We don't have a lot of time, everyone, so I'll keep this brief. Our main

objective isn't taking Palinchron out, it's recovering Dia. Please don't forget that. If we have time to take care of him, we'll do it at the end, together."

I didn't want any of them running in looking for revenge while Dia was being held prisoner. Everyone nodded in response. Feeling relieved, I split the party up in our usual manner.

"First, Maria and I will focus on Dia. Sith will probably say something, but we'll see to it that she's unconscious so we can get her back on the ship. There won't be any leniency this time."

It would likely be critical to call out to Dia during our fight with Apostle Sith, so I personally chose members whose voices would be able to reach her the easiest. The others agreed without complaint. Even Lastiara, who had known Dia longer, agreed that Maria was more cut out for that job.

"While that's going on, I want the other four to keep Palinchron and Ide busy."

Ms. Sera and Snow raised their hands.

"In that case, I will focus on my misbehaving coworker. I'm used to dealing with him."

"I will also focus on Palinchron. If I don't...I don't think I'll be able to move forward."

We'd spent a lot of time thinking of ways to counter the Thief of Darkness's Essence while on the boat, and if it was just about wasting his time, then the two of them should be okay. I nodded. Then Lastiara and Reaper raised their hands.

"That Guardian is there too, right? I'll take care of him. I need to wipe out my disgrace from yesterday."

"Okay, then I'll help out wherever it looks like someone needs help. Maybe I'll keep watch to make sure none of them run away. I definitely won't let the Apostle escape!"

Lastiara was burning for revenge, and Reaper had volunteered her assistance as well.

Lastly, Ms. Wyss spoke up apologetically. “I... If it’s okay, I’d like to work independently.”

“Of course, I understand. Your priority is helping your friends. Please take them somewhere safe after you retrieve them. It will be dangerous if they get involved.”

“If Liner wasn’t in the dungeon, there would be many things I could do...”

When I’d looked at the fort earlier, I’d kept an eye out for the party led by Sheer Regacy and had found that except for Ide, the others were all resting inside. However, one party member, Liner, was in the dungeon.

“Liner might have challenged Palinchron to a one-on-one fight...” I guessed.

“You’re probably right. If you attack the leader of the army, of course you’re going to be locked up.”

After rescuing Liner, Ms. Wyss would transport all of her companions far away via *Connection* so that they wouldn’t get involved in the battle. Originally, she’d said she wouldn’t have anything to do with the fight against Palinchron, but this was a special circumstance.

“After we assault the fort, please sneak in quietly, Ms. Wyss.”

“Yes, I will.” She moved to the back of our party. Then, as a group, we began making our way through the woods and toward Fort Gräd. On the way, we formed a more concrete plan for our surprise attack. There was no doubt that it would be more difficult to fight with this large number of people than as a Dungeon party of four. Besides just splitting up the teams, we had to decide on signals for unexpected circumstances too.

Our half-a-league journey passed in that manner, and soon we arrived at the edge of the woods we’d been lurking in. At the same time, the outer wall of the fort appeared, about a hundred meters ahead of us.

“Time to put our plan into action. Let’s go, everyone,” I said quietly before leading the group out onto the plains. This was how the saving of Dia and suppression of Palinchron began. I’d really come a long way from the Allied Nations. I’d overcome the Brawl, crossed the sea, and come all the way to the center of the mainland. At last, it was time to see the fruits of my long journey.

I've lost to Palinchron once already. Have I truly grown since then?

I'd get my answer soon enough.



The plan for the surprise attack on the fort was simple. It would be a blitzkrieg that took advantage of the increase in physical abilities that came about from leveling up. My party left the forest and began running across the plains. Ms. Sera had transformed into her wolf shape, and Maria and Reaper were riding on her back, leaving the rest of us to run up unassisted. Then, when we'd all reached inhuman speeds, we took a running leap like we were animals. However, we weren't able to clear the wall with just this one jump, so we all kicked off it once and changed direction to head straight up. A terrible inertia affected our bodies, but we shook it off and made it up.

Ignoring the shocked soldiers atop the wall, we began our invasion quickly, taking another leap off it and down into the interior of the fort. I was leading the charge. Kicking off the roofs of the fort's inner buildings, I accelerated like a stone skipping across the water. Wind ripped past my ears, and the resistance of the air seared my entire body, but I didn't slow down. Speed would be essential to this fight. It was our turn to get back at Palinchron and the Guardians for what they'd done to us so many times.

Spurred on by that feeling, I jumped the last short distance into the center courtyard. It didn't take more than ten seconds for me to reach it. I was pleased I was making good time, and I looked toward Sith. She, perhaps sensing our intrusion, was just turning around, her ears twitching. But she was too slow. I'd started sprinting at full speed, turning my body into a human cannonball, and landed in the courtyard. Sith moved, forming her glowing wings as quickly as she could, but before she could take off, I kicked at them. My flying kick, aided by the inertia generated by my inhumanly strong legs, produced a terrifyingly destructive force. Countless magical feathers flew from the glowing wings, and a crack opened in the ground beneath her feet.

The sensation that reverberated up my leg made it feel like I had kicked a diamond. An attack and a defense of equal power had clashed. Sith and I tangled together and rolled around, tearing up the dirt in the courtyard. In the

middle of it all, I reached my hands toward her throat. Sith, realizing what was happening, began casting a spell.

“D-Divine Shield!!!”

A defensive wall of light formed between us and, after a moment, brought my hands to a stop. Losing the first piece in a battle meant it would end in failure. I had failed, but that was just as I’d planned.

“Blizzardmension!” I touched the shield of light directly to interfere with it. I attempted to change its magical construction to bring down the wall, but naturally, *Countermagic* couldn’t succeed that easily.

Sith poured her obscene amount of magic into the shield, repelling my interference. It was a truly terrifying concentration of power, but it was clear Sith was running low on wiggle room. I could see a thin sheen of sweat dripping down her forehead as we tangled and rolled.

She must be desperate, knowing if this defensive wall disappears, she’ll have to engage in physical combat with me, I thought.

While we were throwing spells at each other, we’d stopped rolling around the garden, but neither Sith nor I let up even a bit. I was on top of her, and we were stuck in the magical equivalent of locking swords. Sith began speaking as our purple and white magics vied for victory.

“You’re quite quick, friend! Aren’t you a bit too fast? You surprised me a little!”

I didn’t feel like playing along with her. “Maria, help!”

A little behind me, Maria alighted from Ms. Sera’s back and immediately began casting her fire magic. *“Flame!”*

That fire was intended to burn both Apostle Sith and myself. Flustered, Sith began constructing another defense from her Holy magic.

“Tch?! Inviolable Field!”

The icy wind and flame attacks made her face tense. This was the most amount of interference and the strongest fire attack that our party could come up with, but it still didn’t seem like it would be able to break through Sith’s wall

of magic. And yet, that was also just as I'd planned.

Next, I shouted out the name of the friend I needed to save. "Dia, can you hear me?! I came to save you! Reply if you can hear me!!!"

Maria also pleaded, with a roaring flame, "Dia, you're pathetic! Can't you even hold back an Apostle with your spirit?"

"Hey! Damn! Isn't that going a little too far?!" Sith shut her eyes to her own deeds and criticized our battle tactics. But I felt the white magic in front of me weaken a little. I could feel Dia struggling inside Sith. Just as Sith herself had said, Dia was still alive inside that small body.

If we continue this two-on-one...no, three-on-one fight, we can win.

I felt I could at least make them think that. Thanks to our surprise attack, our current situation wasn't terrible. I decided I'd continue calling out to Dia while battering Sith with magic. Unlike the Guardian, I could see the decrease in Sith's MP in her stats. As Ms. Wyss had said, Sith, who'd flown straight to the fort alone, had consumed a huge amount of MP on the way. Watching her visibly decreasing MP, it was clear she would run out way before Maria or I did. This would probably be over in another thirty seconds.

Our surprise attack had worked. But there were other things going on that I needed to worry about too. Widening *Dimension* slightly to take in the whole fort, I turned my attention to the other fights going on.

First, I could sense Palinchron scratching his head a little ways away. He was just about to come toward us when Ms. Sera, having discarded her beast form, now wearing only a piece of cloth, blocked his way. Snow was also glaring daggers at him.

"Oh, seriously? Having everyone here will make this such a pain," Palinchron said in his usual aloof, jokey manner. Something about him seemed to have changed dramatically despite it only having been a short while since I'd seen him last. Unlike when I was at Epic Seeker, his clothes were formal and dignified.

Maybe that outfit is reserved for generals, I thought. Although his demeanor hadn't changed, I could sense that his gravitas had increased. Using that

gravitas, he stopped the soldiers waiting in the corner of the courtyard from capturing the intruders.

“Don’t move, men! These two are dangerous in their own right. You’ll easily die if you get involved,” he instructed them.

Hearing that, the soldiers stopped immediately. Even though I couldn’t stand him, his leadership abilities were second to none. The last time I’d seen him had been in the stronghold of Epic Seeker in Laoravia. I hadn’t seen him since I’d questioned him about my memories in the office there. Just like then, I was driven to get answers.

But it was my job to take care of Sith, so I had to leave Palinchron to my friends. I watched through *Dimension* as Ms. Sera and Snow drew their weapons.

“I’m here to stop your foolishness, Palinchron.”

“Hm, it’s been a while.” Unlike my attack-first method, they were merely here to prevent him from interfering, so they just greeted him. With their blockade in place, Palinchron wouldn’t be able to join up with Sith or Ide.

“Huh, I thought I’d finally managed to bring the Apostle and the Guardian into the discussion, but my friend just had to bring all of his people and interrupt us. This is so exhausting.” Palinchron heaved a dramatic sigh as he looked the six of us over. He seemed fed up with the fact that none of us would be a straightforward enemy.



From a bit of a distance, the Guardian Ide called out to Palinchron, “I was surprised as well. But it has become a mixed bag. I think it’s a bit one-sided with you in that form, Palinchron Regacy. Wouldn’t it be better to become a Half-Monster first?”

“Don’t say such selfish things. There’s no way I could do that in front of all these people. I have my own plans, after all.”

Ide began making his way toward Palinchron, but Lastiara wouldn’t allow that to happen. She stepped in front of him, drawing her sword with a belligerent smile on her face. “I can’t let you do that, Mr. Lanky Guardian.”

“Ha? Ha ha! So it’s this lineup. Is it possible you see me as an enemy as well?” Ide stopped, considering his situation.

“Of course. Did you already forget what you did to us?”

“It seems you didn’t hear me when I said that was the healing magic at work. I must insist that I am a neutral party.” Clearly sensing that he would get drawn into the fight if he got closer to Palinchron, Ide chose to back away instead. I could see he didn’t have any intention of aiding our target.

As proof of his willingness not to fight, he raised both his hands. Even in this world that meant surrender. “I’ll be going. I’ve heard what I needed to, after all.”

Lastiara continued to watch him vigilantly but she didn’t chase after him. He was at the bottom of our list anyway. She knew to let him go if he said he was leaving.

“Wait, please, Mr. Ide. If you leave now, my burden will only increase. Won’t you please stand there a bit longer?” It was not our side that voiced displeasure at the Guardian’s parting words, but Palinchron himself.

“I am sorry. Connections with the Apostles are none of my business,” Ide responded easily. Then, retreating to the edge of the courtyard, he looked at us one last time for confirmation. “It *is* all right if I leave, yes?”

Lastiara glanced at me quickly. Unfortunately, my hands were full dealing with Sith’s magic. Without looking away, I cast a small nod over my shoulder,

entrusting it all to Lastiara.

Seeing that, she spoke as my proxy, clamping down her fighting spirit and desire to kill. “Yes, if you leave without causing trouble, we won’t chase you.”

Ide relaxed and promptly left the courtyard. He didn’t fly or climb up the wall, but just walked normally into a building and left. From the look of it, he really *didn’t* think that any of this was his business.

I didn’t think the Guardian could read my thoughts, but it did change the battle from a three-on-six to a two-on-six fight. The odds began to tilt in our favor, and Sith, who was lying under me, also made a request.

“You know, I would like to run away too, so...”

“Don’t be stupid. You know you’ll have to leave Dia behind first.”

“Well, since I can’t do that, we’re in our current situation. Adding this sparkly Jewelculus into the mix makes it extra hard.”

Sith’s complaints confirmed that our fight was going our way. Checking on her status, I could see that her MP was on the verge of being depleted. Although Maria’s and my MP was also rapidly being consumed, there was no doubt that Sith would run out first. In just about fifteen seconds, her MP would reach zero and we’d be able to overcome her. After we captured her, everyone would surround Palinchron. That was the best-case scenario. But surely Palinchron knew that too.

His loathsome face came alive. “Tch, then I have no choice. Apostle! Invoke the World Restoration Array we prepared!”

The World Restoration Array. With our faces so close together, I could see Sith’s face grow pale at those words. Her voice trembled as she spoke.

“What? Wait! Here?!”

Despite how much I disliked her, this was the first time I’d seen her this upset. That was enough to tell me just how dangerous Palinchron’s decision was.

“Wait, Palinchron Regacy! If you do that, my little Diablo will be in danger! I thought you were going to help me!!!”

“It’s going badly! This should make it easier for you to escape too! Maybe.”

“You... You son of a bitch!”

While Sith panicked, Palinchron remained calm as he kept his distance and began to cast a spell. Ms. Sera and Snow, who’d been instructed only to stall, were unsure whether to attack in the face of Palinchron’s increasingly anxious comments. I was unsure too. I knew that he was a bigger threat than Sith, and with Ide’s departure, we had a bit more leeway in how we handled the matter.

Maybe it would be better to change the order of things—take out Palinchron first and then handle Sith... But no, that wouldn’t work.

Palinchron was a master at exploiting the weaknesses in people’s minds. You could say that his specialty was drawing others’ attention in the middle of a fight. It was possible he was bluffing in order to help Sith.

Put on the spot, I issued an order to my companions. “Sith is less of a problem than expected! Maria and I will handle her, so Lastiara and Reaper, please deal with Palinchron! Disrupt his spellcasting as much as you can! As if your life depends on it!”

After Ide retreated, Lastiara had come running toward me, at a loss for what to do. But I put a stop to that and asked her to attack Palinchron.

“Got it! I’ll go kill him now!” She turned on her heel and faced our enemy.

Reaper was right behind her, but she seemed to be keeping an eye on what was happening over here through *Dimension* too. As she’d declared before we attacked, she really did plan on watching everyone. And so Palinchron was confronted by four people at the same time, all of whom would be in the top rankings of a list of the most formidable opponents on the continent: Snow, Ms. Sera, Lastiara, and Reaper. Against the four strong enemies who were approaching, his action was to continue preparing his spell. Or rather, he stopped trying to keep his distance, put his hands on the ground, and began to focus solely on casting.

Palinchron was now completely defenseless before his enemies. Ms. Sera, who was closest to him, made the first attack. She had strict orders not to touch his body directly, so she attacked with the sword she’d strapped to her body while in wolf form. The assassin’s blade flashed toward Palinchron, but he stayed as he was, defenseless. Consequently, Ms. Sera lessened the force of her

strike, and the flash of the blade ended in only a shallow gash from his right shoulder to the left side of his abdomen. But still Palinchron focused solely on building the spell.

“You bastard!” Ms. Sera shouted at him, her expression looking as though she’d bitten into something bitter. It was a kind of defense that spoke to how well Palinchron knew Ms. Sera’s personality. Even though she’d said she’d never lost to Palinchron in their practice matches, I knew that in a real battle, she’d never be able to win. Her too-kind personality hindered her ability to fight. She was so unsuited to killing that she couldn’t even attack when her opponent didn’t move.

With a look of renewed commitment to kill him this time, Ms. Sera swung her sword again. Yet Palinchron’s composure didn’t waver. He didn’t even draw his own sword from its spot on his waist. He merely held out the arm that wasn’t touching the ground to catch her blade. The sound of Ms. Sera’s sword meeting the bone in Palinchron’s arm echoed out. It tore through the muscle but didn’t sever the arm entirely. Palinchron, with just one hand, had fully blocked Ms. Sera’s attack twice.

He must have immediately been able to tell that her attack, hesitant as it was, wouldn’t be able to cut off his arm. He might have also calculated that it would be fine because his body was half-Guardian too. However, the decisiveness with which he chose this strategy, without hesitation, even though he had been in a human body until recently, was extraordinary. Ms. Sera recoiled as he continued to build his spell, his expression unchanging.

“Damn it!” Twice she’d been blocked by an enemy who hadn’t given her a second glance. It must have been humiliating.

“Move aside, Ms. Sera!” Snow was the second to arrive, and she launched her attack. Ms. Sera, who knew Snow’s personality well enough to understand that she would attack without restraint, stepped aside. Of course, bitterness still stained her face as she did so.

Snow attacked with all her strength and no trace of hesitation. She struck him with her fist, which she’d wrapped in cloth to in order to protect herself from his skills. Even though her opponent was defenseless, she still attacked at full

power. Knowing this, Palinchron swung his torn up arm toward Snow and stopped her fist. His arm twisted easily, like it was made of clay. The bones shattered under the dragonewt's strength, and whatever force that wasn't absorbed by Palinchron's arm struck his head. His body rose. Like a kicked ball, he bounced three times across the courtyard and landed almost ten meters away.

"Gah!" The shriek didn't sound like his voice. But despite that horrible blow, he continued to construct his spell. He crawled on the ground without making a sound. The screech from earlier hadn't come from him, but from the soldiers watching from the sidelines.

"Sir!"

"General, I can't watch!"

A few of them ran forward, ignoring their superior's order. They stood in front of Snow, who was about to pursue Palinchron, and encircled her to buy more time.

"Fools!" Palinchron, who hadn't reacted in any way no matter the onslaught he'd been subjected to, cursed quietly. But he quickly regained his composure and resumed his expressionless chanting again.

The blood flowing from his body permeated the courtyard. Having absorbed that blood, the ground began to glow faintly. Actually, it was the leyline that was glowing, not the courtyard itself. It wasn't as grand as the Pathway Proper in the Dungeon, but a leyline ran through this fort as well. That's what was reacting to his magic.

The next two to arrive, Lastiara and Reaper, slashed at him, trying to prevent him from completing his spell. Undeterred, he clucked his tongue and drew his sword with his free arm. Reaper disappeared in the darkness, and Lastiara slashed from the front to take advantage of her partner's action. It was a combination that no ordinary human could have reacted to, but brilliantly, Palinchron bent down to avoid Reaper's attack from behind and blocked Lastiara's blow with his sword. It was a form of defense that went beyond the numerical values in his menu.

The two attackers were just as surprised as I was. Nevertheless, he was

unable to withstand the raw power of Lastiara's strike, and he lost his stance. The two would not let the opportunity slip by. In response, Palinchron put his free hand into his own chest wound and spread it open. Then, he skillfully scooped up the blood with his free hand and scattered it over the two women coming toward him. They moved to avoid it reflexively. They had heard about my previous fight with Tida, and their first priority was to avoid touching the blood. I wondered if they thought it would have the same effect as Tida's black liquid. Avoiding it was a testament to their impressive reflexes, but consequently they missed the opening to attack. They quickly pulled themselves together and prepared for another attack.

The more Palinchron moved, the more blood scattered everywhere. Having to avoid all of the flying drops left Lastiara and Reaper at a loss for how to continue attacking. Even with the advantage the blood provided, it was strange that Palinchron was able to survive the onslaught. I could only assume that factors other than swordplay were involved. Observing him with *Dimension*, I could see that there were times he deflected the swords coming at him without even looking at them. Perhaps he was fully using the experience of his body to predict his attackers movements. There were a number of defensive moves that would've been impossible had he not been able to read their personalities. His ability to read people made me shudder.

All that took only a few seconds. The trading of blows, which must have felt like hours to Palinchron, suddenly ended. It was interrupted, but only for a moment. It wasn't that Lastiara and Reaper had let up on their attacks, it was because they had opened a space for another companion to join them. The air in the courtyard stilled for a moment, and a shadow flew overhead. Snow's flying kick hit Palinchron right in the back. He took the full force of that kick, since he'd been fully concentrating on the two opponents in front of him, and went flying across the courtyard like a ball again.

Ms. Sera was fighting the soldiers over where Snow had been before. Apparently, Snow had come over alone to encircle Palinchron, leaving Ms. Sera to deal with the soldiers, even though she wasn't as coolheaded as she should have been.

Palinchron sent up a cloud of dust as he went rolling across the courtyard and

came to a stop near me, extremely battered. His fine clothes, the mark of a general, were covered in mud, and reddish-black blood was flowing ceaselessly from the wound on his body. His broken arm was bent in an unnatural direction, and his scratched-up face was pale. Broken bones might have pierced his internal organs, because there was blood leaking from his mouth as well. I didn't need to look at his HP to tell that he was on the brink of death. We'd completely overwhelmed him.

It was clear that Palinchron hadn't been prepared for the attack by Snow and the others. We'd grown so much stronger. Our levels had gone up from our constant dives into the Dungeon, and we'd grown emotionally as well. This was the real-world result of all our hard work.

Yes, I can see...

That didn't stop me from getting a bad feeling about it. Even though he was right next to me, just about to die...he still hadn't stopped building the spell he'd begun earlier. He was continuing to quietly hum the aria for his World Restoration Array. If I used my sword, I could reach him. I could stop the aria. But if I did that, Sith would be able to escape.

I hesitated for just a moment. Having Palinchron this close and on the brink of death was a rare chance. But in front of me was Sith, with a bitter and agonized look on her face. I couldn't miss this perfect chance to capture her. It was just a few seconds. Just a few more seconds until her MP reached zero. If I moved now, everything would be ruined.

I let Palinchron go on with his aria.

My choice made him laugh. "Ha ha ha! I guess I finish first, my friend." As he said that, a shaking like an earthquake assaulted the fort. The leyline began glowing purple, and an aurora began erupting from the ground to the sky like a curtain. The light changed the courtyard completely, as if we were inside an amethyst. Everyone in the courtyard braced themselves at this fantastical change.

With the World Restoration Array active, there's no telling what will happen next, I thought.

The light continued to shine, but nothing else happened. It didn't have any

effect on my friends. The only one it affected was...me. The purple light burned into my retinas and seeped into my mind. I could hear a voice.

“This is the magic from a thousand years ago. I’ll give you some back.”

I thought it was the Thief of Darkness’s Essence’s magic, so I was going to reject it immediately. But I couldn’t prevent it from invading my body. It was too warm, and I couldn’t feel an ounce of malice in it. The magic permeated my mind as easily as if it were my own. It was like Ide’s magic from yesterday. That light would restore me again. It was soothing me, smoothing over the broken pieces. I was returning to the form that I should be. I was growing closer to the form of Kanami the Founder that I had seen in my dream. Just like before, a strange feeling began welling up inside me, but this was one of the scenarios I had been expecting.

“This is not—” Just as I’d declared to Ms. Wyss, I fought against that unidentifiable emotion.

“Mr. Kanami! Hang on!” Maria noticed my strange situation quickly and appealed to my desire to capture Sith. This was not the first time I’d been swept away by such emotions. And this time, I was determined to show everyone that I was in control.

Right next to me, Palinchron continued speaking in his disinterested tone despite the blood spilling out of him.

“Hey...do you remember, my friend? Before we parted ways in Laoravia I said to you, ‘I can make your and Maria’s wishes come true. But will you still look for a lie?’ At that time you were certainly happy. But still, you shook your head. ‘The lies must be exposed,’ you said, and ‘lies won’t save anyone.’ And just as you promised, you escaped from that prison and came here...”

A chill ran down my spine at his strangely calm voice.

“I understand *perfectly*. In short, *kind* lies aren’t effective on you. Things like *happiness* and *tranquility* are meaningless. That’s how it is, huh? Then, well...this time will be the complete opposite. I’ll show you *unhappiness* and *anxiety*.”

My whole body felt like it was frozen. Of course, I still hadn’t touched a drop

of his blood, meaning that this wasn't the power of the Thief of Darkness's Essence.

"Mr. Kanami?!" Maria yelled, sensing my strangeness since we were holding down Sith together. Palinchron, just out of reach, continued to laugh, and I fell into the hallucination that my heart was being gripped tightly.

"Ha ha, this is what was waiting on the deepest level. Are you bracing yourself for it? This is the thousand-year-old truth." He smiled sickeningly, and I couldn't tell if he was teasing me or actually worried. With those words, the aurora in the garden grew stronger. The light from the leyline reached for the heavens and completely filled my vision. It wasn't just my eyes that were dazzled—even *Dimension* was blinded. All of my senses were swallowed by the light as if they'd been painted over. I stared. It was like the world around me had been completely changed.

The thousand-year truth that Palinchron had mentioned...



It was raining again. There stood the large castle that was now familiar to me. Rain was falling hard outside the window. Raindrops continued to pound the walls of the castle, creating a noisy din. In the main hall was a group of four boys and girls. It was the same setup as in my previous dream, but there was one thing that was glaringly different from the memory I'd seen before. Last time, the mood had been jovial, but this time it was totally different.

Looking closely, Tiara's body had grown almost a size larger. Even though the other three hadn't aged, she had gotten a little taller. It was difficult to tell whether time had passed in between this memory and the previous one.

Surprisingly, the man wasn't wearing his mask. And, as I'd expected, he looked exactly like me. That man, who could only be Aikawa Kanami, was sitting on the stone floor. He was holding a girl's body. It must have been Aikawa Hitaki. She looked strange in his arms, covered in icicles and frozen like an ice sculpture. But more than that, there was something odd about her limbs. Her skin wasn't flesh-colored, but pure black. Dark, hard-looking scales were growing in rows. Her limbs only had three digits instead of five and were much longer than a human's. The only familiar part was her head, but even that was

difficult to describe as truly human. She had been transformed into a monster.

A quartz sword was sticking out of her chest. The man was crying over her skewered body as he held her. He gripped her tighter and yelled, “AaaaaAAAH! How dare... How dare you trick me, Sith!” His heart and soul was in that wail, like he was ripping his own throat out.

“I guess the vessel for the Thief of Water’s Essence didn’t hold up. Sad, but it can’t be helped. Stop crying, dear friend. There’s always the replacement,” Sith responded to his torment.

“Replacement? Did you say *replacement*?”

The man gently set Hitaki’s body on the ground and stood up like a ghost. The exact copy of my face made an expression I’d never seen on myself before. *Is this the end of what happened a thousand years ago?* I wondered. I understood the situation. The man must’ve continued fighting. He believed the Apostle’s words and kept fighting, kept fighting, kept fighting. But he was never rewarded. His beloved little sister wasn’t cured of her sickness. The price of her medical treatment was turning into a monster and ultimately dying. And so he was crying. He could see that conclusion. That is to say, regardless of whether I was a Jewelculus or *Aikawa Kanami*, Aikawa Hitaki was already dead and no longer in this world. I could feel an emptiness inside me, as if my heart had dropped out of my chest.

Unlike me, the man in the castle was angry. As he was shouting, he drew a sword out of thin air. “There’s no replacement for Hitaki! She’s my only family! She was my only family! And you killed her! It’s all your fault! Everything is! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, Sith!”

I was certain that the power he was using was what I called my Inventory. So, *that was one of the magics that he was developing a thousand years ago*, I thought as I continued to watch and analyze the events unfolding before me.

“Wait, friend. Calm down. It was all for the sake of the world...”

“*What* was for the sake of the world? I don’t care about that! Hitaki was the only thing I cared about! My everything!”

“You can’t lose sight of the greater cause, friend! If we don’t do this, then

every living thing will die! Someone had to try to save the world! Hitaki was the most suitable for it! Yes, she was the cornerstone for the world's salvation!"

"What a great story! Really marvelous! Amazing! But it has nothing to do with us. Nothing to do with us, Sith!" The man swung his sword to the side and continued yelling, though his throat must've been raw by that point. He interrupted Sith and took a step forward, his face contorted. "Didn't you say you'd cure her illness? We trusted you! *Hitaki* trusted you!"

"Theoretically, that would've happened! I'd planned on curing her too! But stuff doesn't always work out. I wouldn't have known that if I hadn't tried!" Sith yelled back, unable to endure the anger directed her way. She probably thought the man was going to kill her right then and there. Frightened, she tried to persuade him. "Please understand me, friend! Please! That's right, if we try to meet each other halfway, we can come to an understanding..."

Her pleas didn't reach him, and he interrupted her mid speech. "Oh yeah, I *understand* you all right. I know that you're the kind of person who will do whatever it takes to achieve your goals. I know you all too well! You *used* us! You had the nerve to experiment on Hitaki! I'll never forgive you!" He pointed his sword at Sith. The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Sith, realizing that reconciliation was impossible, began casting a spell as she stepped backward. "Why... Why won't you understand me? Nobody... Why?" she muttered, tears beginning to run down her face.

I couldn't tell if the man had heard her words. He drew closer, sword in hand. Sensing his intent to kill her, Sith finished her spell and unfurled wings of light. As the flash of it blinded the man, she turned and ran toward the window.

"Running away?!" the man chased after her. But a hand stretched out from behind to stop him. It was Tiara's hand. She was different from the last time; she'd lost her naivety and seemed more like Lastiara.

Desperately, she grabbed at the man's sleeve, her lovely face pained. "Wait, teacher! If you do this you'll lose sight of yourself too! If your *Transformation* continues, your body will end up the same as Hitaki's!"

Controlling himself, the man stopped. In that brief moment, Sith flew out of

the window and into the sky. The man clicked his tongue and whirled around to yell at Lastiara, the cause of his enemy's escape. "What was that for?! Shut *up*, Tiara! You don't know anything! None of this is your business!"

With a start Tiara's whole body began to shake. Tears began to well up at the corners of her eyes, but she spoke without stepping away. "It *is* my business! I helped you create magic! I worked hard! I'm your number one disciple!" She held on to the man's arm hard, attempting to convey the depths of her emotions.

But that didn't reach him either. He just laughed cruelly at her. "That's right, we made it together. Ha ha ha ha! What's a *level up*? What's a *status*? They're all terrible *jokes*! Because of you lot, I created magic and this is what it got me! This is the result! I'm really an idiot! It all happened just as you thought it would, right in the palms of your hands! After all, spells are spells! And a curse is a curse!" The man shook off Tiara's grip.

Undeterred, she continued to plead with him. "But the *Transformation* technique you came up with was able to help a lot of people! You're a hero! No, you became the world's *savior*! That's not a curse! I believe that you're someone holy!"

"Ha ha, the savior? Holy? Yes, that's right, I *am* the savior. All of it was just like the Apostle wanted. Now I can gather all of the magic floating around in the sky in one place! That's *great*! Now I can save the world! Ha ha ha! So?! So?! What happens now?! Yes, good, great! That's really *great* for you guys! It's not *great* for me! The world is saved and what do I get?! I came all this way because I heard that Hitaki's sickness could be cured! I killed myself, I killed others, I did things I didn't want to do, and I made it this far! And this is my reward?! I saved people I didn't want to save, and couldn't save the ones I wanted to! This is *bullshit*!"

A stream of insults came pouring out of the mouth that looked exactly like mine. A trickle of tears made its way down Tiara's face as the abusive words rained down on her.

"Teach...please...pull yourself together... You're a much nicer person than this..."

“A nice person?! Ha ha, I’m not even a person anymore! That’s right! Now I’m the one with the highest level in the world! I’m the one who came up with this magical technique!”

His face was contorted with sorrow, and tears stained his cheeks. The outburst of emotions caused a spewing of uncontrollable magic from him. Tiara moved away to avoid getting caught up in the torrent. The magic was an ominous purplish black. It eroded everything it touched, shifting and collapsing the dimension of its existence.

It was abnormal magic. I knew a similar magic—it was like the magic of the Guardians. That same phenomenon happened when a Guardian unleashed their full power. It was the embryo of a magic power that could even erode the world. The walls became stained with the purple-black color and shifted on a diagonal. It wasn’t that the walls were broken, but it became possible to see the other side of them. The same went for the floor. The fault line of the earth was exposed beneath, as if it had been cut with a knife. I could see why magic power was called “demon blight” in this era. As the name implied, the sight could only make me think of a demonic poison invading the world. If I were to give this man a name, it would be Thief of Dimension’s Essence. It couldn’t be anything else.

“Sith...will you really get away with it?” The man began to walk, but behind him a shadow swayed along. Tiara might have gotten caught up in his torrent of magic, but she wasn’t giving up yet.

“Please wait, teach...”

“Wait? For what?” His expression was severe. He was probably frustrated with Tiara’s persistent attempts to hold him back.

“I’ll show you that I can change everything from now on. I will uncover all of the *Logic*, and create a new principle of magic. I will do what we set out to do! I will create magic that will make everyone happy. So wait just a bit longer. Even Hitaki will—”

“Shut *UP*! I don’t *need* magic that can make everyone happy anymore! All of that was a lie! Did you really fucking believe that hypocrisy? I said I would make magic that made Hitaki happy! It was all for her!!!” The man replied with more

cruel words, pulling away from Tiara, who was dogging his steps. "It's too late! For everything!" he finally shouted his response to all that had happened.

"Don't go! Besides you, there's..." Tiara called after the man.

As an objective viewer, I could understand her feelings. He was her whole world. But I could also understand the man. Hitaki was *his* whole world. Therefore, no matter how much Tiara cried, it wouldn't stop him. She didn't try to follow him again. She must have known there was no way that she, the disciple, could beat her teacher. With even a brief glance, I could tell he had twice the magic she did.

But she still didn't give up. She yelled after him as he left, "Wait! I will go wherever my teacher goes! Not because of any contract, but because I want to! With my power, I will share souls with you! I swear it too!" It was a poor contract that only mimicked what the Apostle had said. But they were words without magic power. A verbal promise. Tiara declared that to her own soul. There was no magic in it. No magic was flowing. Neither the world nor *Logic* budged. But it was still a contract.

Unable to bear the overly pure words, the man gritted his teeth and shouted back, "Tch! You're my enemy, Tiara! Being a pawn of Whoseyards means you're a pawn of the Apostle! I never want to see your face again! I'll have to kill you if I do!"

The words were too fragile and dirty compared to Tiara's, but she didn't waver. She stared at his retreating form and continued to swear her oath.

"I won't leave you alone, teach! Absolutely not! Just like you saved me from myself, I'll save you! No matter how long it takes, even if it takes a thousand years, I will reach you!"

"What are you..." He was unable to object. Unable to find the words, he simply yelled like a kid. "Just...shut up! Shutupshutupshutupshutup!" He then picked up Hitaki's body and fled from the main hall. He rushed through the ornate entryway, opened the front door, and left. Pelted by the downpour, he glared at the sky in the direction Sith had flown.

"I'll get my revenge! Against the countries that deceived me, against the Apostle that took Hitaki, against all of the Essence Thieves! No, against this very

world! I'll kill you! I'll bury you!!!”

The man strode off into the dark forest surrounding the castle. He was alone, wandering a strange world without friends or family.

“You think you can escape, Sith?! Now my *Dimension* can cover the whole continent!” He cradled Hitaki’s body carefully in his arms as he broadened his magic. “I didn’t want to save the world! I just wanted to save Hitaki!” His voice grew hoarse, and I had a hard time catching his words. After he entered the forest, the playback of the memory started distorting. Like a video being fast-forwarded, the world began to accelerate. The memory became fuzzy, as if to say that everything from then on wasn’t important. The story after that was simple. It was just the story of a madman’s revenge. He deceived the Essence Thieves and killed them. He thoughtlessly gathered up blight, used it to level up, and became a monster.

What a ridiculous and irredeemable story, I thought.

Then it came to an end. The man had gathered enough magic that he was stronger than everyone else. But the reward for that was becoming a monster, just like his sister. His skin festered grotesquely, his number of arms increased, and scales grew all over them. His exposed flesh was dark red, like viscera, and blood vessels pulsated atop them. It looked like a bird and a fish had been mashed together. His repulsive body seemed ready to fall apart at any moment.

On a certain battlefield at the center of a certain magic circle, the man held the body of his dead sister. Beneath a black sky, he murmured, “This is the World Restoration Array. It will bring everything to an end...”

He wasn’t the only one there. There were people who stood facing the man who had become a monster. It was like a painting of a myth. This sight was enough to make me believe that the Saints would defeat the monster, just like in the legend I’d heard from Lastiara. At the group’s head was one woman. Standing in front of the man was an adult Tiara.

Then my vision went dark. That was the end. The thousand-year story must’ve ended there. The battle and anything after that point didn’t matter. It was irrelevant. Because this memory, at the end of the day, had just one thing to say. Just one. *Aikawa Hitaki is dead.* That’s all there was to it. That fact was gut-

wrenching to me, and I couldn't do anything to stop the feeling. It was as though I was at the bottom of the sea, engulfed by the loneliness of being left completely behind.



I finished watching the conclusion of that story. Before I knew it, I was back. From a thousand years ago to a thousand years later. I returned to the courtyard of Fort Gräd, in the northern part of the country of Vart, on the continent of Varences. The aurora of the leyline that had filled the courtyard was dissipating, leaving only a faint glow. It felt like years had passed. But from what I gathered of my surroundings, barely any time at all had gone by.

Sith was still beneath me—I was still pinning her down. Palinchron was still trying desperately to raise his bloody body. It had probably all happened in less than a second of real time. But in that short time, all of my emotions had been inverted. The memory was real enough to convince me that it had actually happened. Above all, I now knew of a possibility that was more frightening than losing myself. It was the possibility of the collapse of an assumption that took precedence over everything else for me.

Aikawa Hitaki had become a monster. There had been a sword piercing her chest. The hand holding Sith began to shake. Despite reason, my body began to weaken. Then, as if in pursuit, I could hear Palinchron's voice.

"It was just like you saw, Kanami. Aikawa Hitaki died a long time ago. Magic changed her too much and she became a monster, and her brother killed her."

His words oozed like mud into my ears and crept into my brain. There wasn't any magic, or a spell, just his words. But I couldn't resist them.

"And then, Aikawa Kanami died too. His revenge turned him into a monster, and when he died, he took the whole continent with him using the World Restoration Array he'd created."

So the man had ultimately been killed...by the girl named Tiara, his friend, pupil, and companion. After all, she was the hero who had saved the continent. She was the Saint whose story would be passed down for a thousand years. It was only natural that she would fight Aikawa Kanami, who was trying to destroy everything.

“The Kanami here is, strictly speaking, *not* Aikawa Kanami. You’re just a vessel that he prepared for his resurrection. You’re a Jewelculus.”

Aikawa Hitaki was dead, and so was Aikawa Kanami? So then, who was I? No, I already knew that thanks to Ms. Wyss.

I’m a Jewelculus. Just a vessel. I’m not anybody. I don’t have a name.

In all honesty, I was fine with that. It didn’t matter that much. The problem was the death of that girl.

“You’re nobody! You don’t have a sister. You don’t have anything to protect. You don’t have a reason to live, and no reason for having lived. The brave front doesn’t suit you, so just stop already. The only thing that kept you going is already dead. All of the battles you’ve fought up till now, all of it has been meaningless!” he cackled.

That’s right. Aikawa Hitaki had been the core of my existence. I could say she was my reason for living. Even if I had only been *Adjusted* that way, the existence of my sister was the only purpose I had for living in this world. I didn’t care if anything else was still concealed. I didn’t care if I stopped existing. Losing my reason for living was completely unbearable.

I was unraveling. I couldn’t stop my mind from teetering. Even if the memories of Hitaki weren’t my own, there was no doubt that she was special to me. After all, I had so many memories of her. I could remember so many times that we’d laughed together. All of the days that we’d lived together as family, helping one another. The feeling of love that I couldn’t put into words. I’d even thought that I wouldn’t mind dying for her.

But I’d lost all of that now. The truth that had overturned my whole foundation broke my heart. Even though I was surrounded by flames, I was terribly cold. My hands were shaking uncontrollably, and my whole body was drained of strength.

“Tch, all right!” Sith took that opportunity to break free from my grasp.

“Mr. Kanami! Please pull yourself together!” I could hear Maria’s voice next to me. Even as she was scolding me, she didn’t lessen her fire magic. She was manipulating the flames to make sure that she absolutely wouldn’t let Sith

escape.

She was right. I had to move. But I couldn't get my body to work properly. It was like I'd completely lost the contents of my soul. I could only feel like I was a piece of empty pottery. To lose not only my name, but my entire purpose at the same time was to lose the meaning of my life.

"Palinchron! What did you do to him?!"

I could hear Lastiara's voice. I could see her face change as she assaulted Palinchron with her sword. *Dimension* sent information about the situation into my brain like a machine.

Palinchron played with the magic circle in his free hand while flicking away the oncoming sword. "All right, I managed to take care of Kanami. Now I can get rid of this other hand!" The leyline began to emit light for the second time. This time, however, it was black, and it completely permeated Lastiara's body.

"Hey...what?!"

"I changed the rate of magical absorption. Consider it a practical application for the World Restoration Array. It's not fully functional yet but it'll do the trick. Jewelculi can't fight within this barrier."

Lastiara's expression immediately changed. Her face became ghastly pale, and all the magic seeped from her body. She put her hand to her mouth and fell to her knees, looking like Ms. Wyss had when she was dying in the Dungeon.

"This... This is nothing! Kanami! I must save..."

Lastiara was calling my name. When I recognized that, I felt a little bit of strength return to my body. It was barely enough to move my hands, but it was something.

"Well, I can't allow that." Palinchron strengthened the light coming from the magic circle.

"Guh!" Just that made Lastiara cry out and lose mobility.

My friend is in danger! That thought was enough for me to regain the strength in my legs. Losing Hitaki meant I had lost the driving force in my life, but it wasn't enough to end me. It couldn't be. Hitaki wasn't the only person I

cared about. I swore in front of Ms. Wyss that I would save Dia and my friends!

I stood up, despite my lightheadedness.

“Ugh, seriously? You can still move, Kanami? This is why magic gem users are such a pain— Ah! Now it’s Snow!” Seeing me starting to move, Palinchron tried to approach me but was stopped by Snow. He began to play with the magic circle again, avoiding her swinging fist just in time.

“Kanami! Kanami is... You... Palinchron!!!” Snow flew into a rage at my sudden change. Just as Lastiara had, she was getting mad on my behalf.

“But, Snow, you’re so easy to deal with. All I have to do is redose you with those traumatic memories. Fortunately, I’ve got the real deal right here.” Palinchron’s limp left arm turned into a dark liquid. That was something the Guardian of the twentieth floor could do too. He was releasing the Thief of Darkness’s Essence so that only Snow could see it.

Snow let out a small yelp as she saw it coming toward her. “Eek!”

“What do you say, Snow? You’re going to do it again, aren’t you? Your friends are dying before your eyes. Have you forgotten how the guild’s heroes were slaughtered by the Thief of Darkness’s Essence so long ago?”

I didn’t know the content of what he was showing her, but I could tell Palinchron was talking about the root of Snow’s fear of the Guardian. She began trembling under the coercion and threats of trauma. I couldn’t watch.

With two of my friends in danger, I was finally able to start walking. I didn’t have to think about anything else, just about saving my friends. To do that, I had to bring Palinchron down. Of course, I had to recapture Sith and save Dia too. Even though the initial surprise attack had fallen apart, my plan hadn’t changed.

Reaper swooped in to stop Palinchron’s attack on Snow. Her black scythe met Palinchron’s black arm. I could leave holding him off to my friends and recapture Sith. She had escaped from me but not the battlefield. She was being held here by Maria’s fire magic, unable to flee like she wanted to because her MP was totally gone. There was still hope.

“Sith!” In order to show my friends that I was okay, I shouted loudly at her

and tried to join the fight.

But Reaper was distracted by something other than my voice. As she fought Palinchron, she looked down, face pale, and muttered, “This magic circle... Could it be?” She looked at the leyline around her with fear.

“That’s right, Reaper. This is the World Restoration Array that swallowed you up a thousand years ago. I’m sorry, but I’ve already covered the entirety of this battleground, the mainland, with the magic of your enemy.” Palinchron reached out toward her. He clenched his fist, and Reaper’s expression suddenly changed.

“AaaaaAAAHH!” She gasped as if she couldn’t breathe, then dropped her scythe. I had seen that happen before. When I’d first met her, she’d worn the same expression when I’d cut off the flow of magic to her. Perhaps this magic circle had the same effect. It depleted her magic.

“Snow! Go help Reaper!” I ordered quickly.

“Ah...Kanami...Reaper...” But Snow, who I was relying on, had fallen to her knees and couldn’t move. Under the Thief of Darkness’s power, it seemed she’d completely given up on everything. I could tell she had even more trauma than I’d thought, and the reckoning of it was driving her mad.

Perhaps I was too naive to think that I could continue a strategy that had already broken down once. The time I had just lost was only a few seconds, but they were lethal. Ms. Sera was now the only one who could fight Palinchron properly. He, too, must have realized that. After neutralizing Reaper, he immediately turned his attention to her and began to move.

“Now then, Sera Radiant! You’re the most annoying. Not only do I have no chance of taking advantage of you, you’re also used to beating me. I haven’t forgotten that I lost every single mock battle we’ve had.”

Ms. Sera had just finished scattering the soldiers who’d been blocking her way and set off toward him. Thankfully, her movements were calm. She was going to help the suffering Snow and Reaper, not to deal with him as an enemy.

“So I’ll just have to brute force it. I’m going to focus the entire strength of the World Restoration Array on you.” Palinchron held his hand out toward her. The

light from the leyline filling the courtyard converged and began to illuminate only Ms. Sera. It was so beautiful and such a pure white that it was almost impossible not to be captivated by it. However, it stirred up anxiety in anyone looking at it.

If I touch it, I'll never recover, I thought, without knowing why. I stopped heading for Sith and turned quickly to move toward Palinchron instead. I had no choice but to change course. At this rate, we wouldn't just lose completely, we'd be totally destroyed. That was how much anxiety I was feeling from the light.

In the meantime, Palinchron continued speaking with Ms. Sera. "I understand you were being careful not to touch me, but you're still naive. This whole battlefield is already in my hands, you know? I don't just have the power of the Thief of Darkness's Essence. Originally, I was a knight who fought with magic."

Ms. Sera's run suddenly slowed. "What is this? My power! It's fading!"

Right in front of my eyes, I could see her magic growing weaker. No, not just the magic—I could see her very existence growing weaker. The power of Palinchron's magic circle was filled with an evil that seemed to make people disappear from reality. Soon, Ms. Sera was unable to stand, and she fell to the ground, catching herself on her hands.

As I ran, I *Analyzed* her and understood what the problem was. Her *Status* wasn't stable. I could see the numbers by her skills decreasing. It was like the leyline was sucking the levels—no, the *life* out of her. Continued exposure to the light would be extremely bad.

Realizing that, I swung my sword with all my might at Palinchron. "Palinchron! Stop!"

"Ha ha! So you've already recovered, boy? But you've got no vigor!" He blocked my sword easily.

My *Swordplay* and physical strength was overwhelming, but he was still able to defend himself with ease. As he'd said, it was a powerful blow, but it lacked vigor, probably because my mind and body were in such disarray right now. I knew the importance of having a unified body and mind thanks to my fight with Lorwen, but my mind just couldn't keep up. I could feel that *Responsiveness*

wasn't working correctly. I was unsure if I was even using my *Swordplay* skill correctly.

"Keep up the good work, boy! But what are you fighting for? Your beloved sister doesn't exist, remember? What happens after you defeat me? Losing even yourself, who and what will you fight for? Is that really what you want? Huh? Huh, huh, huh, HUH?!"

The more I heard, the more unstable my mind became. Naturally, my sword faltered. My *Thought Streams* skill was working against me. I thought deeply about each and every word. I was confident that I could resist any kind of magic that tried to interfere with my mind, but this kind of attack couldn't be defended against. It was neither a spell nor magic. He wasn't playing tricks or deceiving me. He was just telling the truth. That was all there was to it, so the *Swordplay* and *Responsiveness* I'd inherited from Lorwen were totally useless.

Slowly, the idea of defeat crept into my mind...

"At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling! Swallow the stars! *Midgard Blaze!*" A forbidding flame flared in the field of light. That voice and the flames warmed my frozen body and soul.

"Mr. Kanami! Just hurry up and wipe that grin off his face! The more you worry now, the more it will merely amuse that man! Is that what you want?"

Even as Maria was manipulating the flames to prevent Sith's escape, she'd sent different flames over in my direction. Clearly the intensity of the flames was rapidly decreasing. Of course, she'd been adapting the intensity carefully up until now. I knew the reason for it from the aria I'd just heard her use. Just like before, Maria had strengthened the flames at the cost of her own precious memories.

"You can grieve slowly over the painful things later! First we need to save Dia! Right, Mr. Kanami?!" Maria yelled, rebuking me when it looked like I was going to give up. Her flames burned brightly in time with her voice. A serpent of fire appeared at her feet. It wasn't just one or two like last time, but an eight-headed snake that was born into the world. "No matter what you know or what you've lost, Mr. Kanami will always be there! No matter what anybody says, my feelings for you won't change, and your feelings won't change either! Nothing

will change! So please fight like you always have!”

Finally, the thoughts that had been splintered by Palinchron were stabilizing. Because of me, Maria had paid the price of using an aria. Even worse, I’d made her repeat the same things she’d told me yesterday, all because I was so pathetic.

“Aaaaaaahh! AaaaaaAAAAHHHH!” Angry with myself, my sword became a bit keener as I let out a reckless roar. Of course, I still couldn’t use *Responsiveness*, so it wasn’t the same clean *Swordplay* I’d used during my fight with Lorwen. My swings were violent and crude. But it was enough power to overwhelm Palinchron.

Seeing that, Maria weakened the flames that she had paid the price for. The flaming serpent that had been headed my way returned to her feet and commenced attacking Sith. “You too, Dia! It doesn’t make a difference who you are! Take a good look! Don’t get hung up on the name ‘Sieg’! Just take a good look at that man there!”

The serpent wrapped around Sith’s barrier like it was trying to choke her. Imprisoned by flames, Sith’s face contorted. Then those twinkling eyes looked at Maria. As though she no longer had eyes for me, Sith’s lips curved in a half-moon as she smiled at Maria.

“Ha, Ha ha ha! I see! My greatest enemy in this age isn’t another Apostle or the Founder. It’s Maria! Only little Maria is complete! Palinchron!” She shouted Palinchron’s name loudly.

Hearing her yell, he distanced himself and shouted back. “I can’t do that! If I add a rule that harms the little fiery half-Guardian lady, it’ll hurt me too!”

“Ugh, you’re useless! Well, guess I have no choice, so...” Determination crept over her face as her appeal for help was rejected. Apparently, the magic circle couldn’t be used against Maria. If that was the case, then I should deal with Palinchron while she stayed on Sith.

Palinchron had probably known it would go this way. As we continued to clash, he looked bitter and agonized, unable to hide his impatience. “Damn, you’re noticeably weaker, but not as much as before! I mean, even though you’ve come this far, you can’t break through! Damn it! There’s only one girl

left, I said!”

He began to lose his ability to handle my sword strikes and was trying to come up with other moves. Not wanting to give myself time to think, I further increased the strength of my attacks. “Palinchron! It’s over! Let it end here!”

“One more move, one more move isn’t gonna be enough! I need to buy a little more time! I need to get the World Restoration Array to full power! Damn it!”

Then, finally, I was able to sweep, curve, and flick, sending his sword flying straight up into the air. I was amazed that Palinchron had managed to withstand so much despite the huge difference in our Statuses. I admired his experience and *Observant* skill. But this was the end.

My sword had almost caught him when, from an unexpected direction, an attack from a third party came flying in.

“What?!”

It was an iron arrow. I was able to dodge it thanks to *Dimension*, but my all-out attack became superficial in turn, tearing the skin of Palinchron’s chest rather than cutting all the way through him.

Palinchron, wounded and lacking a sword, tried to flee backward, but I forcibly thrust out my own sword and tried to chase him down. My blade pierced his side, but that was as far as it went. A further hindrance intervened from my right, allowing Palinchron a moment’s reprieve to escape.

“Mr. Palinchron! I’ve got this one!” a man who looked too young to be in the military shouted as he attacked me with a wild swing of his sword. His spirit was admirable, but his movements were fatally slow. It wasn’t even a fight. I immediately tried to break the stranger’s consciousness with a counterattack, but another flying arrow interrupted me.

“Damn it, again?”

“General, go! You’re needed on the battlefield!” shouted another man with what looked like a crossbow on his arm. It was decorated with gems, indicating that it was a magic tool, and it was aimed right at my vitals.

“Hey...you guys are helping me?!”

I wasn't the only one surprised—Palinchron was as well. Clutching his side where he had been stabbed, he retreated, stunned by the unexpected development.

It wasn't just the reckless young soldiers who moved. All of the soldiers in the courtyard sprang into action to assist Palinchron.

“General! You're a disagreeable fiend but you're necessary to us!”

“The decisive battle is near! You can't die now!”

“The plan won't succeed without you!”

“Please escape quickly! We'll handle these guys!”

Despite seeing the battle that had just taken place, all of the soldiers were determined to show their willingness to die in order to stall the fight. It reminded me of the Epic Seeker guild. Just like I had lots of connections to people in Laoravia, Palinchron was connected to many people on the mainland.

Understanding the situation well, curses easily poured out of my mouth.
“You're in the way!”

Soldiers attacked me recklessly from all four sides, forming a wall preventing me from chasing after Palinchron. Of course, I could easily tell they were way out of their depth. None of their attacks even came close to reaching me as I dodged their arrows, deflected their swords, and disrupted their magic with *Wintermension*. But they were still trained soldiers and had a higher level than the average Diver. What was most bothersome was the fact that they were willingly putting their lives on the line. It was taking an obscene amount of time to knock each one out with the hilt of my sword, which meant my chance to stop Palinchron was getting slimmer and slimmer.

“This way, General! Outside the fort!” One of the soldiers was lending a shoulder to Palinchron. His uniform was slightly different from the others, so I guessed he was of higher rank.

“You... No, not that way. You guys bought me some time. The first aid building is fine. If I can get there, then the rest...”

“Yes, sir! First we must treat your wounds!” The soldier agreed readily with the order and brought Palinchron directly into one of the fort’s buildings. My impatience grew as I fought the wall of soldiers. If he escaped now, there was no telling what he’d prepare for me in the future.

But it wasn’t just Palinchron—the situation with Sith was getting out of control too.

“Gah! UuaaAAAH! Ah ha! Ah ha ha ha ha! You weren’t paying attention, Maria!” Sith was groaning and laughing.

“You! That’s Dia’s body! Stop!” Maria’s voice resonated with anger. Sith slipped out of the circle of flaming snakes and took to the sky, a radiant smile on her face. The bottom of her right leg had turned to charcoal. I understood what the determined look on her face meant. She was planning to escape even if it cost her her life. I also understood that Maria had held back out of consideration for Dia’s body.

“Heh heh heh! You were so nice to little Diablo! But I don’t think I want to fight Maria again! So bye-bye!” Sith turned her back to us with a parting smirk.

“Wait!!!” Maria cried out and sent the flaming snakes toward Sith. But they didn’t reach her. Sith soared high into the sky, disappearing into the clouds. Maria kicked the ground hard enough to crack it and turned to me to apologize. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kanami! Sith escaped! I wasn’t good enough!”

“No, I should be the one apologizing! It was my fault she escaped!” I shouted back as I continued to deal with the guards. We’d both thought we’d prepared enough for such formidable opponents, but reality was harsh. Perhaps it was because we were both inexperienced, having never even had blood on our hands, but our shortcomings were exposed at this critical moment. If I had been prepared to kill the soldiers, I would not have let Palinchron escape.

“It’s not over yet, Maria! We can still corner Palinchron!” *Dimension* still had sight of him as he fled deeper into the fort with the help of the soldier. Unlike Sith, who had fled to the skies, there was still a chance to get him.

“Understood! But...”

The soldiers had surrounded us. There were over twenty of them, all ready to

lay down their lives in the courtyard. Not a single one was weak.

One of them, who seemed to be their leader, spoke up. “We won’t let you pass!”

There were many among them who had ranged weapons and magic. If I turned my back on them, they were sure to start firing. It was a difficult position to be in, surrounded by soldiers used to fighting armies rather than one-on-one battles. Each and every one of them would exert strength beyond their normal means in an effort to keep us pinned down.

Just as we were growing teeth-grindingly frustrated with our predicament, one of our own made a comeback.

“*Dragoon Ardor!*” Now that Palinchron had left the area, Snow had recovered from her state of crisis. Even in her confusion, she released a strong gust of wind that buffeted a number of soldiers, throwing them back into the wall and breaking the formation.

“Ms. Snow! *Flame!*” Maria was able to release some improvised fire magic into that opening. She concentrated on the soldiers, distracted by Snow’s gale, and wrapped them in flames, depriving them of oxygen until they passed out.

The encirclement broke completely. All that remained was for Snow and me to defeat the soldiers who were still standing. In disarray, they were weakened, so it only took a matter of seconds to knock them out cold. When the dust settled, Snow rushed over to me.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Kanami. My body was shaking so hard I couldn’t move...” she said apologetically, pressing both pointer fingers together in front of her.

“No, Snow, you really saved us.”

She seemed concerned about her reaction to Palinchron, but I had no right to judge her for that. I could only pat her head as I thanked her.

Maria, who had the right to judge us both, made a frustrated noise. “Moving on, there’re reinforcements coming! Shall we split up? And...”

We had to keep moving on. I focused on *Dimension* but Sith, my main target, was already out of range. I could only sense Palinchron inside the fort. This

situation triggered *Thought Streams*, and the wheels in my brain began spinning as fast as they could.

“First we need to use all our strength to take out Palinchron. This magic circle—no, the *World Restoration Array*—is dangerous. If we don’t do something it’ll engulf the whole continent. I think it will be like what happened a thousand years ago,” I decided, looking at the leyline glowing faintly beneath my feet.

“A thousand years ago? This is what killed ninety percent of the population?” Maria asked.

The day before yesterday, on the ship, we’d talked about the war on the continent. I’d asked Lastiara for a detailed history of the battle a thousand years ago. Maria was confirming that this was the same magic of mass murder that had come up during that conversation. There was no mistaking it; this was the same World Restoration Array. I knew that with a certainty that only I could understand, based on the memory I had just seen. The magic circle that Kanami the Founder had activated at the end of that memory and the magic circle that was being activated now had exactly the same radiance.

“Yes, but it’s not yet at full power. The previous phenomenon was just its preparation.” I looked around at my fallen companions. The Jewelculus Lastiara and Reaper, who’d been born from magic, were out cold. Ms. Sera, who’d faced a concentrated attack from the magic circle, was totally out as well. Looking closely, I could see that the soldiers inside the magic circle seemed to be in the same condition. Their levels were slowly decreasing, along with the stats in their menus. This magic circle was dangerous. The worst thing was that the light from the leyline was slowly growing stronger.

“Let’s get everyone back to the ship first. It’s dangerous for them to stay here any longer. *Connection!*” Using magic, I got Ms. Sera away from the effects of the magic circle, then I pushed Reaper through the door as well. As I was heading over to send Lastiara to safety, she interrupted me.

“W-Wait! Kanami, take me with you!” Lastiara pleaded, even though she was stumbling around and looking majorly worse for wear. Upon closer inspection, some of her skin was even peeling off. I shook my head without a second thought.

“Absolutely not. You’re in no state to fight. Besides, Palinchron is a bad matchup for you, and you know that best, right?” I was painfully aware of this from the earlier battle. A bad matchup against Palinchron was bad all around. He’d been involved in the birth of the Jewelculus Lastiara, and from the battle earlier, he seemed to know all of her weaknesses.

“I’m okay! I won’t show any of my worthlessness anymore! I’ll fight to the bitter end, even if it kills me!”

“I can’t take someone with me who says they’re gonna die! You can’t do anything while inside this magic circle. That’s why I can’t take you along. That’s nonnegotiable!” I insisted.

“Please! If we split up here, I’ll regret it! I’ll absolutely regret it!” Lastiara wasn’t listening at all; she just kept shouting. It wasn’t like her. Even though she could be belligerent, she’d always listen to my explanations and come around eventually. But this Lastiara was like a child throwing a tantrum.

“We just started and now it’s gonna end! That’s how I feel! That’s why...” From those bare emotions, it was clear she didn’t want to follow me just to fight. A different emotion was robbing her of her composure.

Actually, even since the fight with Ide she’s been...

“So... I haven’t... I haven’t been able to tell you anything!”

“I understand, Lastiara.” Without the haughtiness, it would be the same emotion I’d lost. Or some faint emotion that was very similar. She was in a big hurry because she felt like she was going to lose that emotion too. Before I realized it, her hand was reaching toward my cheek. I pushed it away with my own and let it fall away.

“I haven’t been able to tell you anything either. So I’ll come back. I’ll come back, so please just wait...” I persuaded her in a very cowardly way. Her body jerked back as our hands touched. She hesitated to reply, a puzzled look on her face.

“Ms. Lastiara...” Maria called out to the wavering girl.

“Oh, sorry, Mar-Mar. I was speaking so selfishly,” she responded meekly as she looked at Maria’s face. Lastiara’s body might have been adult-sized, but her

actions looked like those of a kid.

Maria pulled Lastiara's head to her chest, comforting her as if she were, indeed, a child. "No, I understand exactly how you're feeling. So please leave the rest to me..."

"Okay..." Lastiara grew quiet. She nodded slightly once and stepped away from us, handing back the sword she'd borrowed from me and then moving slowly on her own through *Connection*.

Now, only Maria, Snow, and I were left in the courtyard. I quickly looked at our menus to confirm a suspicion I had. Perhaps the current effect of the World Restoration Array was to absorb levels and statuses. I could confirm the exact results by observing our statuses. Based on what I saw, I gave an order to Snow, who'd been looking anxious for quite some time.

"Snow, please look after those on the ship."

"Huh? You want me to go back?"

I felt bad about sending her back after she'd been so courageous, but out of the three of us left, she was the one being affected by the World Restoration Array. I already knew what Palinchron had meant earlier when he'd mentioned magic gem holders. Having Snow, who didn't possess a gemstone, fight was too dangerous.

"You're also a bad matchup for Palinchron. Please wait on the ship."

"I...see. I'm fine being a caretaker..." Snow looked relieved but also a little frustrated. She was clearly feeling some self-loathing over her failure to make the most of the opportunity to finally be part of the team.

"It's okay, Snow. Your fear isn't a bad thing. If we weren't in such a hurry, it would be a merit. I think, out of all of us, you're best suited to being a leader. So, please..." The words just slipped out; I hadn't been meaning to say that. I cut myself off from what I was going to say next, just telling her the most important part. "While I'm not around, protect everyone on the ship. Please..."

"Um, yeah, okay. I understand. I will absolutely protect them. I promise."

"Yeah, it's a promise," I echoed.

Snow nodded obediently. She herself probably knew that she was useless against Palinchron, or rather, against the Thief of Darkness's Essence. Unlike Lastiara, she withdrew without complaint. Maria and I were the only ones left in the courtyard after that.

"Mr. Kanami, we must hurry. Where is our enemy?" Without wasting any more words, we began our pursuit.

"Dimension. Palinchron hasn't escaped outside; he's still in the fort."

There were many buildings inside the fort, but I was able to spot one that was most likely where the injured soldiers were cared for. In one of the rooms, Palinchron was being healed by medicine and magic. I felt a sense of unease at that. He'd been wounded all over in the previous fight. He shouldn't have been in a position to recover easily. If he didn't escape now with his remaining strength, Maria and I would be waiting for him. Despite that, Palinchron was being treated in a cramped infirmary without many escape routes. His recovery could all be an act to trap us, but I decided to push on anyway.

"Let's go, Maria. He's not far."

I started toward the infirmary. I hadn't noticed it because of the light streaming off the leyline, but the weather had changed markedly during our fight. The sky, which had been quite bright, was now covered in fluffy gray clouds.

We pursued Palinchron as if fleeing the sky that looked like it could release rain at any moment.



It was only a short distance from the courtyard to the building that housed the infirmary. The fort was not a complicated structure, and we could easily reach it by running straight through the corridors of the building. We ran into a few soldiers on the way, but the short battles in the confined space lost us barely any time. I knocked them all out as I passed them, even as each shouted, "You won't get through!"

After only a few minutes, we came to the room we were aiming for and quickly pushed open the old, wooden door and entered. Inside the infirmary,

the equipment was similar to the hospitals we had seen in the Allied Nations. The walls were lined with shelves filled with medical supplies, and standing upright were magical tools similar to IV drips. It was an infirmary that made use of the recovery magic unique to this world. There were a number of soldiers in the room, standing in front of Palinchron, forming a wall as he sat in a chair receiving treatment.

“You came!”

“Protect the general!”

“Yes, sir!”

The high-ranking soldier who had helped Palinchron escape earlier was standing at their head giving orders. I scowled at the sight of them. I could see the changes in the statuses of all the soldiers mustered to protect him. Their maximum HP, which could be called life itself, was decreasing, as if it were being ground away by sandpaper. The same was true of their levels. It seemed they weren't aware of the fact that their numerical values were gradually decreasing.

“Palinchron! Stop your magic!” I shouted on their behalf as their bodies were irreversibly damaged. Ignoring all of the people between us, I tried to stop the problem at its source.

“That's impossible. I've already triggered it. It won't stop even if I die. What does it matter, anyway? There's no reason to stop,” he responded ruthlessly.

“There are *only* reasons to stop it! If you don't, then everyone in this room will...”

Be consumed by the magic circle and die.

I tried to finish, but was interrupted by those very same soldiers who were being sent to their deaths.

“You! What are you saying? This magic circle is our greatest wish! This will leave the Northern Alliance powerless! This war will end in our victory!”

“We already know that you're a member of the Northern Alliance! I don't know where you got your intel from, but it's useless! We've worked on this for

years, and it's finally been activated! You're too late!"

"This will put an end to the long Border War at last!"

They believed that the magic circle was a good thing. They didn't think it was the same power that had once caused ninety percent of the deaths in a war. It was painful to witness.

"Palinchron...you situated yourself here with such a stupid explanation?!"

"Of course. Presently, I'm a general and strategist for the Southern Alliance. I can't be so easily exposed. But it's also been a long time since I got here, you know?" He answered as he stood from his chair. He pushed aside the soldiers standing in his way and came to the front. "That's enough. I'll handle the rest. My wounds have healed and I've bought myself enough time."

"But, General Palinchron!"

"It's fine. Thank you all. Don't worry. The battle will be over when the World Restoration Array takes full effect, that much is certain. It will end just as it says in Levahnite lore." He dismissed his subordinates' objections as they continued to try to protect him.

"Sir!"

At the word "end," they all saluted, their eyes shining with hope. The whole exchange was painful. Just as Palinchron said, if this continued, the Northern Alliance would be neutralized. But he hadn't said anything about the Southern Alliance.

"Stop, Palinchron. These people believe in you. And you're—"

Before I could finish my statement, something strange happened. The ground shook in one great tremor like an earthquake, and the luminous glow of the leyline stretching across the fortress intensified. In conjunction with the light, the effect of the World Restoration Array grew stronger, and its target area widened. Even the soldiers who were not skilled in magic began to notice something was wrong.

"This light... It's penetrating the buildings!"

"What the hell? General Regacy?" The soldier stared at the glowing particles

spilling from his body and looked to his superior for guidance.

“Wonderful! The real thing’s started. This is the light of the World Restoration Array,” Palinchron answered honestly.

The soldiers were unsettled by the unexpected emission of light from the leyline. Some were unable to bear the symptoms of the level-down and began to sway on their feet.

“This... My head is...”

“I can’t see... What’s happening?”

“Haa haa haa!”

One third of the soldiers fell to their knees as though they were anemic. It seemed like the lower one’s level and abilities, the quicker one’s limits were reached.

Feeling their deaths were near, I tried again to stop it, my voice wavering. “Palinchron, why would you do this? You’ll die if this continues. All of your friends will die...”

“Ha ha ha, that’s right...” He laughed in response.

I couldn’t tolerate his casual attitude any longer. “The magic circle was to fight me, so hasn’t it already served its purpose? Lastiara and the others aren’t here anymore! Even if the effect increases further, it won’t affect Maria or me! It will just harm your own allies! So stop!!!”

“It’s not meaningless. It’s an important ritual. It’s like...a good luck charm.” Palinchron smiled and shook his head. His words were joking, but his expression was serious. I realized discussion was not enough to stop him. He continued speaking directly to me, seemingly oblivious to the suffering of his soldiers. “There’s nothing left to hide. Originally, I promised to tell you things if you defeated the Guardian of the thirtieth floor. But as a reward for getting out of the Allied Nations and making it here, I’ll tell you all sorts of things about what I’m up to.”

He seemed to be narrating his thought process. From the look on his face it was clear he’d accomplished all he had planned to. He must’ve spent a long

time preparing the World Restoration Array. He had served his country, become a general, led his troops, and fought on the battlefield all for this moment, and now that it had come, there seemed to be no reason for him to hide anything anymore.

“It’s simple. I just want to fulfill the lingering attachment of the Apostle Regacy inside of me. ‘I want to play with Kanami the Founder one more time.’ That’s his last wish. A thousand years ago, he won only because others fought, so he was totally dissatisfied.”

Palinchron laughed. He’d mentioned an apostle. Sith had mentioned the same one, but Palinchron’s relationship to the apostle was clearly much deeper. Based on what Sith had said, it was likely that the apostle was in a similar situation to Dia and me. Of course, I didn’t trust a word Palinchron was saying, but the words that Ms. Wyss had used earlier echoed through my mind. Birth and destiny... I couldn’t help but think they applied to this guy too.

“Of course, the Apostle’s lingering attachment is something that could’ve only been granted a thousand years ago. So I decided to recreate the situation from back then. I threw the peace between the nations into disarray, I unleashed the World Restoration Array on the continent, and I prepared a hero and a monster.” He said it in the same tone he always used, but there wasn’t a single joke in his statement. I was finally seeing Palinchron’s true intentions, and it was too much.

“Palinchron, you’re trying to recreate what happened a thousand years ago?! That incident?!”

“Yes, *that*. I want to recreate that horrible battle once again. And you did so well coming here, Kanami. The hero of the Allied Nations. All that’s left is to fight a monster. Then the legend will play out again.”

I suddenly understood the goal of his mysterious plan. At the same time, one of the disoriented soldiers approached him.

“General Palinchron! What do you mean?! Is this not the legendary magic that will bring the war to an end?!”

“Ha ha, don’t worry about that. This is affecting the entire war zone. It will no doubt obliterate the Northern Alliance.”

I needed to check if it really was affecting the whole area as Palinchron said. For better or worse, I had *Dimension* at my disposal. Light filled the entire fort. Of course, that was just the beginning. With this place as the epicenter, all of the surrounding plains were emitting a faint white glow. The range of the light extended beyond the limits of *Dimension*, and the aurora shining far off on the horizon proved that what he said was true. The light was supposedly a type of magic, but it was frighteningly silent and nearly invisible. It had no particular attributes, merely basic and neutral. That mercilessly gentle light clung to everything living thing, dissolving them little by little. The structure of a creature's body came apart, and then it dissolved. The dissolved figures became particles of pure magical power that floated in the light like crystals of ice.

Presently, the armies of the Northern Alliance and the Southern Alliance were engaged in combat to the north of the fort. Even the battlefield with more than ten thousand troops on it was enveloped in the light and dissolving away. The blood-drenched field was overwritten with the pale light, devolving into agonized cries on both sides.

Of course, that wasn't all. The light indiscriminately illuminated and melted the towns and villages in the vicinity, as well as the innocent people who lived there. Light danced, and particles of the fantastic magic fell to the earth, dyeing it white with dust that couldn't be fully absorbed. A nauseating, snowy landscape spread over the land. There was no exception to the effects of the World Restoration Array. People, monsters, beasts, and insects were being decomposed. At this rate, with only one exception—those with the magic stones of an Essence Thief—over a million people and a billion creatures on the mainland would perish.

Then, the skin of one of the soldiers in the infirmary was converted completely into magic, making him look like an anatomical model. The soldiers, including the man himself, screamed. They finally realized that their skin would disappear like that, one after the other. Fear spread easily in the face of such a grotesque image.

I decided it was best to take control before everything devolved into chaos. "Everyone! Get outside of the magic circle now! You can still make it! In the meantime, I will—"

“Mr. Kanami!” Maria interrupted me from behind, where she’d been standing quietly up until now. I turned to ask her why she would stop me.

She was standing there, vigilantly glaring at Palinchron. “You can’t take your eyes off your enemy. This is one of Palinchron’s attacks. The battle has already begun.”

She was clearly telling me to abandon them ruthlessly. I supposed the soldiers were strangers to her. That told me there were more important things to worry about.

“Mr. Kanami, are you really going to try and save everyone and fail again? You can’t afford to do that, can you? If you want to help people, then you can do that after you defeat your own enemies! If the soldiers disappear like this, there won’t be any more obstacles. At that moment we will press the attack.” Maria came up next to me and grabbed my arm.

Truthfully, I couldn’t watch this devastation. I couldn’t bear to see it, and it made me want to save them all. I knew very well that that’s the kind of person I was. Maria knew that too, and that’s why she was stopping me with a strong grip on my arm.

“Tch, as I thought, the young lady is in the way.” Palinchron muttered, clicking his tongue with distaste. From his voice, I could tell that he was ready to start fighting the moment I devoted my attention to helping others.

Shit...

If Maria hadn’t been able to sense his plan, it would’ve left a huge opening for him. I calmed myself quickly, suppressing the emotions welling up in my chest, and stopped looking around at the infirmary and battlefield to focus my attention solely on Palinchron. I gathered all my focus to take down the criminal who had caused this situation. I couldn’t listen to the sounds of distress from the soldiers. No matter how many screams echoed through the fort, I could not be swayed by them. After all, it was already too late for them.

If I had really wanted to help these people, I should have done so before entering the infirmary. I shouldn’t have just been chasing Palinchron; I should’ve been telling people to evacuate. Or even earlier, I should’ve followed the path prepared by Palinchron and become the hero of Laoravia. As a hero, I

would've been able to save lots of people. I wouldn't have known about any of this. I wouldn't have lost myself. I would've been *happy*.

But I'd refused all of that and come here. Wanting to save people now was selfish. Too self-satisfying. However, even if I sorted all that out in my mind, the miserable hell continued behind Palinchron. I could hear innumerable muffled moans overlapping one another. In the light, the viscous, dissolving people were hard to miss. The eyes of the soldiers in the infirmary were tinged with despair from the fear that their bodies were melting and collapsing, although there was no pain. It was a nightmare in which they could not avoid the slow death and could only be frightened and bewildered.

The scene was a desecration of life. Above all, the light of hope that was supposed to end the war had turned into a light of despair. It broke the hearts of many soldiers. Gradually, they were left unable to even speak, and one by one they collapsed. Among them, there was one man with the highest level and abilities who remained standing. It was the high-ranking soldier who'd helped Palinchron into the infirmary. He approached the general, and from his mannerisms and expression, I could somehow tell that they must have been reasonably close.

"AaaAAHH! General! General Palinchron! Palinchron Legacy! It was...all a lie?! You weren't fighting for the Southern Alliance?!" His voice was too loud and too ghastly to ignore.

Palinchron clearly felt the same. "Yeah, it was a lie. I only fight for myself," he responded shortly.

The man pressed on. "You didn't feel at all patriotic?"

"Not a bit."

"Don't you have anything to say about this?"

"No, not really."

"Were you planning on sacrificing us all from the very beginning?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"You! You're not human!" He swung a fist at Palinchron, enraged by his

attitude. But his hand didn't connect. He lost all his strength before it could come close, and he fell to the floor, continuing to curse until he lost consciousness.

"Mr. Palinchron... Why..."

"It's just like you said, I'm not human. That's probably why."

With that, all of the soldiers around us were gone. Within ten seconds, the previously noisy infirmary had fallen into silence. The only thing that remained was the light spreading out beneath our feet from the World Restoration Array. Unfortunately, there was no longer any room for interruptions. The elimination of those who would aid Palinchron had been accomplished. It should have been reason to rejoice, but it was not.

"Now, boy, this should make things easier."

Yes, it certainly would. I no longer had any qualms about killing him. It would be easier to fight and easier to kill. As we'd planned earlier, Maria and I attacked simultaneously.

"Midgard Freeze!"

"Midgard Blaze!"

Ice and fire. Two giant snakes formed and headed straight for Palinchron.

"Dark Wall!" Palinchron couldn't avoid the attack because of the narrow room, and he couldn't stop it either. He created a wall of magical darkness, but it was swept away in an instant. The two serpents, having swallowed the enemy with their magic, broke through the walls of the infirmary and carried his body outside. At our level, it was impossible for the battle to end inside the room.

Maria and I followed behind the magic. We'd attacked with our strongest spells. They surged forward without lessening even slightly and slammed Palinchron against the outside wall of the fort. The ice and flame intertwined, then exploded. The aftermath spread in a circle on the outer wall of the fort, continuing to damage Palinchron's body. It was a combined technique from what were now two of the continent's finest magic users.

Palinchron's body was covered in burns, frostbite, and lacerations, and one of

his arms was shredded. He laughed at the sight of himself. “Ha ha ha ha! Ha ha HA HA HA! Seriously? Just one hit did this?!”

“Give up, Palinchron. I’m not the same as I used to be.” I could see the differences in our abilities by looking at his menu. It was true that he was being strengthened by the power of the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, but he was also on the verge of becoming a monster like the Guardian.

【STATUS】

NAME: Palinchron Regacy

HP: 37/512

MP: 245/392

CLASS: None

LEVEL 22

STR 15.21

VIT 19.45

DEX 12.12

AGI 18.22

INT 10.11

MAG 14.01

APT 4.89

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 369/370

MP: 198/920-400

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 20

STR 11.55

VIT 13.12

DEX 17.11

AGI 20.86

INT 17.12

MAG 46.44

Since I could see the numbers behind our magic in the menu, this was the result I had expected.

“Nope, not yet. I won’t give up yet. Now the real fun begins. As a half-monster!” Palinchron happily declared.

With a leisurely movement, he drew the sword at his waist and thrust it into his own throat. Black magic poured from the gaping wound. I could see that his magic was increasing along with the self-inflicted injury. The sticky substance began to envelop his whole body, turning it into a viscous liquid. The blood flowing from the lacerations changed from red to black, approaching the appearance of the guardian I had seen on that day long ago. The blackened blood wriggled and squirmed like a living creature, tangling around the shredded arm and severed elbow. Then he attached his arms as if gluing them together. Finally, the black liquid enveloped both eyes, leaving only pitch-black pupils without a shred of humanity in them.

When Palinchron’s transformation into a half-monster was complete, a single drop of water fell onto his black body as a light rain began falling from the cloudy sky. The light from the World Restoration Array was reflected diffusely in the raindrops falling from the sky, weaving through the world like a knitted pattern. Seeing this scene, he squinted his eyes, looking nostalgic.

“Rain. And the three of us. Ha ha, it’s not over yet. I felt this way on the Day of Blessed Birth too. That day, only I remained. Hey, boy, who do you think will be left this time?” He brought up our humiliating fight in casual conversation. This situation was indeed very similar to how the Day of Blessed Birth had ended. After Alty had disappeared, Maria and I had fought Palinchron and lost. My chest tightened at the memory. Hiding my trembling, I commenced battle once again.

“Palinchron!” I had Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan in my hand as I rushed straight toward him.

He began muttering happily. “Ha ha, come, Regacy, he’s gotten as close to the Kanami of the past as I can get him to be. And I’m as close to the Apostle as I

can be. Just a bit more. Just a bit...”

His arms turned into swords. He certainly wasn’t even a bit human anymore. He had the same abilities as Tida, the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, and responded to my sword in a flash. My crystal blade bounced off the black blades, but only to the distance of a sword’s length. I tried to swing again, not giving myself a moment to catch my breath.

“*Dark Fissure!*”

My attack was interrupted by the darkness magic. Uncountable black tentacles stretched out from Palinchron’s shadow. I distanced myself, knowing that touching them was a bad idea. Naturally, they made to follow me.

“*Flame Arrow!*” Maria, having prepared her attack from the back, shot each tentacle with a flaming arrow, and the two canceled each other out.

I stopped in my tracks. I had a strange feeling about Palinchron’s magic. His spellcasting was too quick. It also felt like the amount of magic was different from what was displayed in his menu.

Palinchron, noticing my suspicious gaze, responded happily, “You’re right, it’s not *my* power. It’s the power of my friends.”

He pointed off into the distance at a fallen soldier. The unconscious body was dissolving at an increasing rate. No longer in human form, it was mostly converted into particles of magical power. With *Dimension*, I could sense that the magic was flowing through the World Restoration Array and into him.

“That’s right. The World Restoration Array and I are connected. Basically, I have unlimited MP. Plus, I can do this, see?”

He lifted his hand toward the body of the distant soldier. The dissolution of the soldier’s body increased even more. Just when I thought that everything had been transformed into particles of magic power, the earth swelled up and cracked open. Magic of a different color overflowed from the depths of the earth and mingled with the converted soldier’s magic. The two types of power intertwined, condensed, and began to take shape.

The magic took the shape of a bird, first forming its internal organs, then bones, flesh, skin, and feathers. It was huge, at least five meters in length.

From my experience in the dungeon, I *Analyzed* the strange bird to learn more about it.

【MONSTER】 Wind Reaper: RANK 35

“A monster?!” I shouted.

“The World Restoration Array operates on the same basis as the Dungeon. It’s easy to do stuff like drops. Actually, it would be better to say that this was the original purpose of the spell.”

No matter how he explained it, I didn’t understand the nitty-gritty of how it worked. But the fact that it could summon Dungeon monsters was a big problem.

The Wind Reaper let out a shrill cry as it flapped its wings. After creating a roaring wind, it moved in to attack Maria behind me, which made it difficult to stay in my role as vanguard.

“*Ice Flamberge!*” I changed the length of my sword to deal with the bird’s sheer size. First I shredded the feathers on its back, then I lopped off its neck as it fell, before turning back to Palinchron again. He’d found another soldier on the ground and was raising his hand toward the body to summon another creature, mercilessly changing the bodies of his former companions into monsters without hesitation.

Five monsters appeared around us. I used *Analyze* to find out what they were. There was a two-headed dog made of wood called a Treeberus, a flying monitor lizard called a Lizard Fly, a huge eagle-headed man called a Peak Giant, a single-eyed, four-winged bat called a Moonless Faux, and lastly an empty, moving suit of armor called an Unconquerable. Each was around Rank 30. They each let out a roar and then made their way toward us. For some reason, they totally ignored me and went straight for Maria.

“Huh? Hey!” I drew the Crystal Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory and turned both swords on the monsters, stretching the blades out toward the enemies passing on either side of me.

Out of the five, I managed to dispatch two: the dog and the giant. But the other three made it past me. With no other choice, I cast another *Ice Flamberge* and extended my swords toward their defenseless backs. Unfortunately, only the tips hit them, and that wasn't enough to bring down Rank 30 foes.

"Maria!"

"Got it! *Flame Flamberge*!"

A sword of fire extended from her hands, slicing through our enemies. Her movements were slow and uncoordinated, but her attack power and piercing strength were high. From a distance that was out of the monster's reach, she burned them straight to ash. But there was no time for relief—even as we'd been taking care of them, Palinchron had placed his hands on the ground again and was summoning even more from far away.

"Come, boy. Let's keep going. I've got plenty of ingredients. This time I'll double it. And then double the next one, and the one after that. How long do you think you can keep your little lady safe?"

Ten monsters came out of one of the buildings. These were probably the soldiers that had been in the infirmary. Of course, it wouldn't end there. There had been over a hundred soldiers in the fort. They had probably all been transformed and were heading our way. Through *Dimension*, I could tell that there were even more being born outside of the fort. Monsters were being summoned from all across the continent's battlefield. Palinchron had, without prejudice, used the soldiers of both the Northern Alliance and Southern Alliance as sacrifices, and now they were all rushing this way, roaring.

I readjusted my swords to better protect Maria, but flames pushed at my back.

"Mr. Kanami! Ignore these small fry and take out Palinchron! I'm fine!" She must have decided that the situation would only get worse if we went on the defensive. Still, I hesitated to leave her unattended since she had such low physical capabilities. I hesitated, and Palinchron's voice wedged its way in.

"I'm telling you, boy, if you come for me I'll drop all my defenses and go right after Maria. After all, aiming for the back line is the basis of all team fights," he announced with a faint smile. I didn't think he was bluffing. That man had

accomplished the World Restoration Array without regard for anyone else's pain.

"Mr. Kanami! Please go! Or if you're going to keep hesitating, I can burn your ears off for you! Which do you want?"

Maria looked at me as Palinchron brandished each word. The burning heat snapped at my skin. I didn't think that was a bluff either. She had a lot of accomplishments to her name as well.

"Maria, hang on for just a little bit!" I called to her, appreciating her courageousness, and then took off running toward Palinchron.

"I'm not just gonna hang on!" she cried. "I'm going to attack too! *Flame Arrow!*"

That was a heartening response, and her fiery arrows flew out not only at the surrounding monsters but at Palinchron too. I ignored everything else and closed in on him. The monsters passed me by without a second glance, and I gathered that Palinchron was carrying out his threat. I slashed at him with both swords as he dodged the flaming arrows. Dual wielding wasn't one of my strengths, but that didn't affect the overwhelming superiority of *Swordplay*. With a single swing, I sent one of his arms flying.

Unfortunately, even the loss of a limb wasn't enough to erase Palinchron's smile as he continued. "Hey, hey, are you sure about ignoring your little lady? Since I was the general here, I know that right near the fort were twenty thousand of the Southern Alliance's soldiers, and about fifteen thousand soldiers from the North. That'll be over thirty thousand monsters coming for her."

I really wanted to respond, but I knew it wouldn't help anything. And anyway, if I did reply, I knew my ears would get burned. I stabbed the arm I had cut off with my sword and summoned my Ice magic. "Freeze! *Ice!*" The arm of black liquid froze over and shattered into pieces. If it was the same as Tida's body, it wouldn't be able to reform now.

"Huh," Palinchron let slip at my precise attack.

Convinced it was effective, I continued attacking. In contrast, he continued

trying to escape, but no matter how much he retreated, our difference in speed was obvious. I quickly caught up and slashed, froze, and shattered pieces of his body. I could see the black form being whittled away. His liquid body was certainly a threat, but that was when I was at a low level with no MP to spare. If I fought carefully and continuously froze him, that alone would be enough for me to completely eliminate him. If the battle continued this way, my victory was assured...or so I thought.

Palinchron made a huge leap backward, pouncing on the dead body of a monster. The corpse was that of the Wind Reaver I'd taken out earlier. This wasn't the Dungeon, so even if a monster died, it wouldn't turn into light and disappear. For a moment, I thought he was going to use it as a shield, but that naive thought was quickly contradicted.

"Wait...what?!"

The moment Palinchron touched the corpse, it turned into liquid, which he used to reinforce his own damaged body.

"Yes, this is one of Tida's skills, you know?" he said, as if my confusion was a personal affront. He immediately ran toward another fallen monster to replenish himself.

"Damn it! That is such an annoying ability!" I recalled Alty describing Tida as "near immortal," and it certainly seemed to be true. The fact that he could restore his body using monsters meant that he basically had infinite HP.

"Mr. Kanami! I'm doing my best to burn the monsters so there'll be no bodies left! Don't worry about it!" Maria interjected, seeing the back and forth between us.

"That's..."

It was certainly a way for us to eventually corner him, but only *eventually*—there was no telling how long it would take. Right now I was just fighting him with my swords, using very little MP. I was pretty confident that even if he consumed all thirty thousand monsters headed our way, I would be able to defeat him...someday. But that wasn't the case for Maria. She had to fight exclusively with fire, since she had no other means of attack. No matter how skilled she was at handling her gifts, her fuel consumption was larger than mine.

Not bothering to hide my impatience, I quickly moved to slice off Palinchron's legs, but his keen gaze read me all too easily. As if waiting for my sword to take aim, his black blade intercepted it.

"Damn! *Dimension: Calculash!*"

Sensing the threat to my companion, I switched to techniques that required a lot of MP. Even though my initial attack had been repelled, I forcefully swung my swords again. As a result, my twin blades succeeded in cutting off one of his legs. However, he immediately liquefied his arm and turned it into a replacement leg. Despite expending so much MP to cut off a leg, the end result was merely the loss of the other arm.

"Damn it!" The characteristics and physical abilities of the Thief of Darkness's Essence only added to his seasoned discernment. This was such a pain. At this point, even the resonant magic spell *Dimension A Wraith*, which I'd used to defeat the Thief of Earth's Essence, wouldn't be effective.

What should I do? What would be the best way to attack?

While my thoughts spun impatiently, Palinchron made his next move. "All the living things have melted away. Ha ha, the World Restoration Array is completely filled with magic power. Now I can summon things from anywhere. Sorry, but let's go all out, shall we? I think I'll summon over ten thousand monsters here."

True to his word, monsters began filling the inside of the fort, regardless of where the soldiers' bodies lay. I no longer had any sort of hand, let alone the upper one. I swung my sword at Palinchron to keep him from concentrating, but perhaps used to sacrificing his own body in order to continue his spellcasting, he simply offered up additional parts of himself like a skink would its tail as he avoided me, then quickly ran for another monster to replenish himself.

"Damn it! This is so..."

Outside the fort, enemies were being summoned indiscriminately, and over a hundred were now lined up outside. Furthermore, over ten thousand of them were coming this way from farther off. Even Maria wouldn't be able to deal with that many.

I didn't have time to hesitate. In just a few moments, all of the monsters would pour in like an avalanche. I prepared myself to spend a lot of MP on large-area freezing spells. I couldn't handle this many unless I used *Wintermension: Niflheim*, which I'd also used against Lorwen in the past.

The image of freezing over the entire battlefield with ice came into my mind. This time, unlike in Laoravia, it wasn't an enclosed space, so it wouldn't be easy to succeed. Even with my stat increase, it would definitely eat into my maximum HP.

"Maria, that's enough! Leave the rest to my Ice magic!"

"No! You don't have to do that, Mr. Kanami!"

I saw her shake her head, an intense look on her face. I could tell from that expression that she was thinking the same thing I was. It was clear she intended to burn through her own MP despite knowing her limits. However, squeezing out that MP would affect her maximum HP too.

That's something I should be doing, not her, I thought. "If someone has to do it, it should be me! It's better if I'm the one to whittle down my life!"

"Don't say stupid things! It's not good for *either* of us to be doing it!" She scolded me for being so impertinent in my line of thinking. "Were you maybe thinking, 'Well, I'm a Jewelculus, so it would be better if I was the one to take the hit'? Do you value yourself so little?!"

"That's not..."

That wasn't what I'd meant. But it was certainly a comment that could have been taken that way. I was at a loss for words because she could see what I was thinking in the unconscious part of my mind.

"I'm much more suited to mowing down these losers! If everyone around here's been turned into monsters, then it's my time to shine! Save some of your freezing magic for that smirking jerk, okay?! I've got this!"

Maria sprang back into action without waiting for my reply. She raised her hands to the heavens and began spouting flames from her whole body. They consumed the monsters closest to her first, but the fire didn't stop there. It rose up into a spiral, growing in size as it pierced the sky. The tower of flames turned

all the rain into vapor and dissipated the clouds as it soared into the sky. Maria called that towering, thick, pillar of flame...

“Burn bright, blazesword!!!”

...a sword.

At that declaration, the flames changed shape. Now an inverted cross shape, the fire continued to blaze. It certainly did look like something that could be called a sword. But really it was too big and too long to be one at all. Reaching higher than the clouds, it was big enough to easily engulf an entire city. Then, unbelievably, it grew even larger. Like someone was feeding wood to a campfire, it grew bigger and bigger, making all of the rainwater evaporate from the fort.

Of course, the heat around Maria, the source of the blaze, was strange.

“Maria!!!”

“Burn! Yes, you’re burning too much! Will this draw out the power of the Thief of Fire’s Essence?” Palinchron groaned, drawing his darkness magic in to protect his body.

I just stood there without using any magic. Maria’s incredible control over her powers was protecting me. I didn’t feel anything other than the heat of a midsummer’s day. But the sight before my eyes was anything but that. As if in a blast furnace, the flames leaking from Maria melted the entire outer wall of the fortress in front of her. Naturally, the buildings in the rear also melted down like spun sugar. The prairie appeared, but it was soon replaced by a wasteland where all the plants were on fire.

The inferno grew so large that it covered the sky and the earth. Its heat continued to rise endlessly, and the color of the sword’s core changed from red to white. The color was similar to that of the flame used by Alty, the Thief of Fire’s Essence. I wondered if Maria, who had been Alty’s junior in flame magic, was now catching up to the Guardian’s skill level. This was her true strength. I finally understood why she’d stuck with supporting us on our Dungeon dives. The white flames shone as brightly as the light from the World Restoration Array, scattering the evil omen that could only destroy the continent.

“Blazesword, slice the horizon! Die, Palinchron Regacyyyyyyy!” Maria swung the huge flaming sword downward. The giant blaze that blotted out the sky and seemed capable of cutting the very world in two slowly descended.

“I thought you said you were dealing with the small fry?! *Dark Wall! Dark Cross! Dark Field!* World Restoration Array, feed me magic!” Palinchron, who’d said he would abandon his defenses, had clearly retracted his previous statement and was trying to protect himself with magic. He enveloped his body in a black liquid and curled up in the fetal position.

“Freeze!” I used all my strength to generate cold air to protect myself. Even though Maria was keeping the heat off me, the aftermath of this attack would be a matter of life and death.

Just as Palinchron and I finished our defensive measures, Maria’s hand swung down. The sword of fire fell to the ground, engulfing everything. The world became a monochrome of red, as if I’d fallen into a burning ocean. The flames surged across the ground like a tsunami, mercilessly consuming not only our enemies in the fort, but also the monsters that had sprung up on the plains and those on the battlefields far, far away. In an instant they were carbonized, and then even their charred remains were burned away. It was a fire that left nothing behind.

In the midst of this red-hot hell, Maria looked skyward and shouted, “Burn it all awaaaayyyy! *Flame Flamberge!*”

She accelerated the combustion, as if it hadn’t been strong enough yet. This time she didn’t swing her arms vertically, but stretched them out wide to either side. With a thunderous roar, her flame sword expanded outward to match her movements. It spread, burning everything on the continent. Everything melted and vanished the moment it came into contact with the white-hot core of the sword. The sword swung around Maria, and the monsters that had been summoned were devoured by the tyrannical flames.

It was only a matter of seconds. In just a few seconds, all the grass, trees, and rocks on the battlefield disappeared, all the mountains that had risen in the distance changed shape, and most of the ground became lava—everything had been transformed into a wasteland of red. I could see it all thanks to *Dimension*.

The more than ten thousand monsters that had been deployed across several surrounding kilometers of land were now dead.

A chill ran down my spine at the strength of my friend's magic. Even in this temperature I could feel it. But Maria still wasn't satisfied. With the momentum from annihilating the monsters, she once again raised her flaming sword to the heavens, and her eyes came to rest on...

"PALINCHRON! REGACYYYYYY!!!"

Palinchron, who'd managed to survive the rotation of the flame sword thanks to his black liquid form. Faced with Maria's bloodlust, he poured more magic into his defensive shield, making it thicker. And then he called out to someone from a long time ago.

"Tida! I could use a hand with these guys!"

Thump.

The world quickened. The shadows of black liquid deepened. In the midst of the fire that burned even light, a jet-black darkness sprang from both of Palinchron's hands. It became a shield, dark as a moonless night, that seemed to absorb light like a bottomless swamp.

Maria swung her sword down once again. "Alty! Lend me your strength to burn that man to a crisp!"

There was another *thump*. A second quickening. The flame sword grew hotter and changed color again. Its core went from white to silver, and then nearly transparent. The color could almost be called pure white. It became a sword of sunlight, strong enough to push back the darkness.

Sword and shield collided. Innumerable particles of magic scattered across the world. As if the world didn't like contradictions, a film of magic particles tried to cover the collision. Even *Dimension* was blinded by the light. The struggle lasted only for an instant. For just that brief moment, all information from the physical world was cut off. I was engulfed by a shock wave that was neither black nor white, and was unable to perceive anything. Heat, sound, and everything else became nothing for a moment. Beyond the silence, there was the illusion that the world had come to a standstill—everything would come to

an end in the next moment.



The collision of the full strength of the Thief of Fire’s Essence and the Thief of Darkness’s Essence... The results were spectacular. All that remained was a wasteland, where all life had withered away. Instead of green grasslands, red flames were spreading, but they were being extinguished by the rain falling from the sky, so even that last color was disappearing. The light of the World Restoration Array was still dimly visible, but it was weak. Perhaps that was because life, the object it was drawing from, had disappeared from the land. It wasn’t shining as brightly as it did at first. In just a few moments the battlefield had been completely redrawn. Three people remained in its ruins.



I was uninjured. Maria had taken care the whole time to make sure I wouldn't be exposed to any of the flames. Sweat was pouring from her body, and she was on her hands and knees on the ground.

"Damn... It didn't...take him out..."

Both of our gazes were fixed on Palinchron, who was gasping for air a little ways away. He'd managed to remain standing. Maria seemed bitter that she'd been unable to defeat her sworn enemy. Looking at her menu, I could see that she'd used up all her MP and had eaten into her max HP as well. Surely one day I would use up all my power in a desperate play too. It was the price for losing control and using magic beyond one's limits. It seemed it was becoming difficult for her to stay conscious.

Still, Maria continued to appeal to me, holding on to her fading consciousness. "Mr. Kanami...I'll leave the rest to you. Please fight without getting caught up in his words. You're not alone. You're the most important thing to us. You're needed. Please don't forget that..."

Even her last thought before losing consciousness was about me. She probably understood the fragility of my heart more than I did and left those words behind in an attempt to compensate for my weakness, even if only a little.

"Please fight Palinchron...and win..." With that, she fainted. All of my friends who had started the battle with me were gone. I didn't have a single companion by my side.

Alone, I stood facing Palinchron, whose voice rang out across the empty battlefield.

"You surprised me. You really did. I didn't expect to be pushed around and defeated by a whole war's worth of magical power. All my hard work and this decade-long Border War are going to be a joke after that..."

Although Maria had passed out, Palinchron, in contrast, seemed cool and collected. Even though they had both used the power of an Essence Thief, the difference in power granted by the World Restoration Array seemed to be significant. Of course, he wasn't fine. The flames had reduced the volume of the

black liquid by whittling away his body. It was still bubbling and boiling, with white steam rising from it. Most of the flesh that had remained human was nearly completely charred, and there was no sign that his injuries would be healed.

In any case, his HP was now...

【STATUS】

NAME: Palinchron Regacy

HP: 0/512

MP: 392/392

CLASS: None

Zero. As far as I could hear through *Dimension*, his heart wasn't beating at all. Maria's fire magic had successfully defeated the magic of the Thief of Darkness's Essence, there was no doubt about it. But frustratingly, even though she'd won the fight, Palinchron had won the battle of survival. If this had been a one-on-one match, he would have finished Maria off while she was unconscious.

The zero-HP Palinchron moved. He squelched sickeningly toward me, looked around at the wasteland, and then spoke. "Oh well. As long as the continent's not cut off, I can still recover. It's pretty good that I was able to get rid of the little lady with only thirty thousand casualties. It would be great if I could recover her gem, but that's not gonna happen."

"*Connection!*" I cast my spell to get Maria back to the ship as quickly as possible, throwing her through the doorway and immediately eliminating the door. That would prevent Palinchron from taking Alty's magic gem, and Snow would look after the unconscious Maria.

That meant I was now completely alone. Palinchron watched me send her away and then assumed a fighting stance.

"So, boy, shall we begin again? I'm quite strong one-on-one. And now you're incredibly weak one-on-one. Ha ha, it took so much work to get to this point." He gouged his black liquid arm into his own chest. It was more than a self-

inflicted wound; it was suicide. He spoke to me, clutching his own heart in his hand. “There is no one left by your side, you know? Without anyone to put on a brave face for, there’s no reason to put on a show anymore. It’s just you, boy. How much more can you show off on your own? How far can you go without a reason to fight? Ha ha ha, it’s tough as hell, isn’t it?”

Palinchron knew me better than I knew myself. Palinchron, who had known me when I was Dungeon diving on my own, knew me as well as any of my companions did, if not better. He knew I had no experience in defeating a Guardian alone. Upon crushing his heart, he was no longer a half-monster and instead became a full monster.

“Now the real thing begins—being the Thief of Darkness’s Essence.”

His shape began to look the way Tida’s had. All that remained was for his face to become a featureless mask and the Vigesimal Guardian would return.

【ST■AN】
Na■nk: Pali■Essence■gacy
HP: ■/5■2
MP: ----/39-
CLアス: Guardian

His menu was becoming distorted. It was like the text was being corrupted, making it impossible to *Analyze*. Then, it was rewritten.

【VIGESIMAL GUARDIAN】 Thief of Darkness’s Essence

Analyze confirmed that Palinchron was a monster now. And that was how my chance rematch with the Thief of Darkness’s Essence began.

“It’s finally just the two of us! Now you’ll play with *me*, boy!”

His disfigured black limbs began to transform. His legs curved like those of a beast, and his arms sharpened into extra long swords. His deformed body bent over, flexing his beetle-like legs, thighs bulging. It was a preliminary move I had

seen before during my fight with Tida, which meant I knew what the next move would be.

Palinchron pounced like an animal. His rapid acceleration couldn't be replicated with human legs. It was a move that was only possible because of his new body. His two deadly blades attacked from both sides, and he aimed his sword-arms like a pair of scissors at my neck.

I dodged by turning my body away quickly, then returned with a quick slash, intent on cutting his torso in two. It certainly connected with his body, but I felt no further result. His physical form was cut, but the wound was quickly glued over with black liquid. It was like trying to cut a waterfall.

I'd reconfirmed that, as expected, physical attacks did nothing against the Guardian. The inertia from Palinchron's initial rush led him to pass right next to me. He stopped quickly, kicking up dust, launching another rapid attack at my back without giving me a chance to catch my breath. I was about to do another counterattack when I realized something was different from our previous fight. Only one side of each arm was sharp. Although his speed was that of a beast, his structure was still that of a knight. Distracted by how quickly he could switch between brutal, beastly attacks and the refined attacks of a knight, I lost my chance for a counterattack.

Of course, his attack didn't stop. Without hesitation, he attacked repeatedly from each direction, and I continued my defense. The most troubling part of this strategy was that it completely ignored any defense, and unlike with Tida, it involved skills. The combination of the two made it impossible for me to launch an assault of my own. However, at this level, I still couldn't be touched. The black liquid couldn't stick to me. While continuing to defend myself, I calmly began casting a freezing spell that would be effective against the Thief of Darkness's Essence. However, as if to challenge my calmness, a voice interrupted me.

"Hey, boy. Can I ask you something?" The frighteningly relaxed voice rang out amid our intense battle. It was a horrible voice that twisted around my eardrums.

"Well, I'm not going to answer!"

I flat-out rejected him, but Palinchron ignored me and continued speaking.

“But I told you my goals earlier, so it’s only fair that you tell me yours too. Please tell me. What is it you want right now, boy?”

Why bother asking for permission if you’re just going to ask anyway? I thought. Irritated, I continued wielding my sword silently. But even that didn’t shut him up. Palinchron continued to agitate me when I didn’t respond, even though we were literally in the middle of a lethal sword fight.

“Hm? No response means you’re fighting without any goal in mind. Without a reason? Is that your way of life?”

I still hadn’t dealt with the issue of me being a Jewelculus, and Palinchron accurately exploited that gap. I spoke my purpose as if to confirm it for myself.

“I’m going to save Hitaki! I’m going to save my friends! That’s it!”

“There it is.” Palinchron snatched at my response like a snapping animal. We crossed words as our swords met, shooting up sparks. “Is that really what you want to do, boy? Surely you know, don’t you? That it was the wish of Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago, not your own? You’re just imitating him. Isn’t that the wrong wish? Isn’t that something you should never allow to happen?” He continued happily, his hands and mouth moving at full speed, attacking me mercilessly. “Hey, how did it feel? I told you to never get your wish confused! So how did you feel that the one you took back wasn’t even yours, and neither was the oath you made?” He laughed.

If I don’t say something, it’ll swallow me whole. I won’t be able to cast my magic if I don’t, I thought before yelling out exactly what I’d told Ms. Wyss. “You’re wrong! I’m still not making a mistake! Sure, I mistook someone else’s desires for my own before! But now I’m at peace with that! I truly feel that I want to help Hitaki! That’s become my real desire!”

“Your real desire? Ha ha ha, is that so?! To me it just looks like you can’t do anything unless you believe that, so you’ve become obsessed with the idea!” He was quick to retort. Even though I’d said the same words to him as to Ms. Wyss, Palinchron wasn’t as kind. He relentlessly poked and prodded at my most vulnerable points.

“I’m not obsessed with it! The heart that wants to help her is definitely my own! The Hitaki I knew looked so pitiful! So I want to help her! There’s not a single lie in there!”

“Definitely your own?! Hmm, I see. So your purpose, boy, is to help a girl named Hitaki, whom you’ve never met, while believing in an idea that you’re not sure is really your own? How interesting.” He laughed again.

“What’s so funny?!”

“Well, surely you’ve seen it, right? Aikawa Hitaki died a thousand years ago. She’s dead. Frankly, there’s no way to help her, no matter how hard you try. You know that, right?”

“You were the one who showed it to me! I’m not so stupid that I’d believe such a memory completely!”

“Ah, yeah, that’s true. You’re right, of course. Memories are so hazy and unreliable, aren’t they? Then why don’t you ask yourself this: did a girl named Hitaki ever actually exist in the first place?”

“You’re asking if Hitaki really exists or not? But...” I wanted to immediately dismiss it as nonsense, but *Thought Streams* wouldn’t allow that. After all, I’d already been considering the possibility that Palinchron was now voicing in one of the corners of my mind.

He continued his thorough mental attack on me. “Aikawa Hitaki. Honestly, I never met her so I don’t think I believe it. From what I’ve heard, I can’t help but feel that she’s an imaginary sister, a fantasy you and Kanami the Founder made up. I have family too, but they were more troublesome people than real sisters. To be honest, there are times when I want to kill them. Isn’t it a bit crazy that there are siblings who feel something close to love for each other?”

“That’s just your family not getting along! When everyone gets along, it’s good! There’s no way she’s imaginary!”

“But boy! Your head’s been messed up by skills, I stole your memories, and a thousand years ago, you were someone else entirely! Even now, more and more bizarre memories are pouring in. Oh man, you’re in a bad way, boy. And yet you still believe that? Memories are fragile things. They change easily. But

you still insist that the sister who's only in your memories really existed? That's a pretty hard line to take, don't you think? Hey, boy, boyboyboy!" Rather than calling me "Kanami," he continued to treat me like a nameless child. It was clear he was trying to break my spirit.

Even though I knew what he was doing, my heart began beating faster. Instead of its usual steady thumping, it was making trembling thuds. My chest felt tight, as if I were being constricted, and pain began to radiate throughout my body. It felt like I was being torn apart. I was hot and afraid that my heart was going to explode at any moment.

Thought Streams began to act of its own accord again. After all, the existence of the Aikawa siblings had been hazy ever since I'd realized I was not really "me." I knew that. Therefore, I didn't need to confirm it. I didn't want to.

"But I have memories! The memories of living in our original world as siblings are in my head! I can remember! Maybe they're memories that were given to me, but I still believe them!"

"You say that a lot, even though they're not your memories! But that too! The memories inside that boy! That *original* world! That seems to be a really strange story as well! Is there really such a world? It's too much like a fairy tale! Another world?! You don't even hear that phrase in the theater these days! Who can vouch for this impossible *original* world?! A boy who's never even been there before?!"

There was a break in our sword fighting. I made the mistake of taking that moment to think. No one in this world, including me, had ever been to the "original world" in question. I was the only one who insisted on its existence like a stubborn child. Therefore, it was possible that there was only *this* world and the "original" one was nothing more than a dream. A world that had developed science instead of magic? It was an impossible thing according to the common sense of this world. I couldn't prove its existence. As a Jewelculus, I hadn't even been born there. I'd just felt like I'd lived there. My friends on the ship who'd listened to my story about that world might have actually been laughing at me on the inside. It was no wonder such a kind and convenient dreamlike concept could be called a delusion.

“I know what I’m talking about! There are no guarantees! There are no guarantees, so I’m going to go and find out! I’ve decided to see everything with my own eyes!”

“You’re going to see with your own eyes? Well, that’s just wonderful. So let’s say the original world exists, and that Hitaki existed there, and that you can successfully return there as well... What if Hitaki isn’t there? What would you do after you found out that the person you were supposed to save is dead in that world too and nowhere to be found, boy?”

“If she was nowhere to be found, then? What would I... But...”

“Yes, that’s right! If she was nowhere to be found! What if you search all over the world for proof of your life’s meaning and you can’t find it anywhere? You could even end up gaining nothing, having nothing left, with no meaning, and without even knowing your own name!”

“But...even so! I have friends! If I call for them, they’ll come! If I have my friends with me, I—”

“That’s not your number one wish, though, is it, boy? You said it yourself. Your wish is to save someone, not to have friends. You really, really want to save Hitaki. Or rather, you really, *really* want to be Aikawa Kanami. You just want someone to deny that you’re a Jewelculus. Yes, it’s only natural. Everyone wants to think of themselves as themselves. Even if you were told that was wrong now, there’s no way you’d be able to accept it...”

“Argh!”

He was right. I *really* wanted to be Aikawa Kanami.

None of my friends had realized that’s how I really felt. It was the biggest reason I didn’t prioritize the problem of being a Jewelculus and kept putting off dealing with it. It was the weakest part of my heart, the part I’d kept averting my gaze from.

When Palinchron pointed that out, I stopped swinging my sword and took a huge step back. I didn’t have any of my friends watching me, so I wasn’t able to put on a strong face and say something back. I just retreated and took a deep breath. I was suffocating. I had more than enough vitality, so why was I short of

breath? I couldn't get enough oxygen into my lungs. No matter how many deep breaths I took, I couldn't steady my breathing.

Palinchron noticed my retreat and how hard I was breathing, and couldn't miss the chance to call me out again. "So that's it. You certainly have grown stronger, boy. You've really grown up. But that growth was a mistake. The strength of your stats is fake. Your spirit remains the same—people don't change easily. You're not nearly as strong as the people around you think you are. Your spirit is still lonely, weak, and fragile."

"Sh-Shut up! Stop... Don't talk to me!" I couldn't let my sword stop. Just like Maria said, I had to keep fighting. The one thing I could say for sure was that I was better than Palinchron at *Swordplay*. I would think only of killing Palinchron with this blade.

But he continued to shake my resolve. "You really did well to get this far, boy. Your journey has been so difficult. But it's enough, now. I'll help you from here on out."

I couldn't listen to his words. It was a con man's way of speaking, leveling harsh words followed by kind ones. Knowing that, I had to keep attacking.

"You've fought well enough, boy. I have enjoyed this. You've fulfilled the desires of Apostle Regacy well, if not entirely. So I have to do something for you in return. That's right...shall I take you to see Aikawa Hitaki now?"

"Huh?" That had come out of nowhere. Even though I was using *Thought Streams*, his words were still completely unexpected. Above all, his response overturned every one of my assumptions. So I stopped, stunned, mouth open, unable to comprehend his words.

"Don't make that face. I'm telling you that I'm going to resurrect Aikawa Hitaki now," Palinchron clarified, seeing my turmoil. It was a proposal that would end my story in this other world.

"Wait...Palinchron, what are you..." my voice spilled out.

"I meant exactly what I said. With my current power, I can resurrect Aikawa Hitaki. And with that, your battle will be over."

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

“I can do it. I will succeed for your sake, boy. You will return to your original world with Aikawa Hitaki, who is more dear to you than life itself, and you will spend the rest of your days as Aikawa Kanami. That would be ultimate happiness for you, would it not? I will absolutely make it come true as an apology for everything that I’ve done.”

Palinchron was trying to help me, like he had helped his friends from the past. He was trying to help me, just like his friends of yesteryear. It was hard to believe that we had been trying to kill each other a few minutes earlier.

“You’re lying. There’s no way you can resurrect someone that easily. You have to go to the deepest level of the Dungeon to get that...”

“I can do it with the World Restoration Array. Surely you’ve realized, boy, that it can rebirth creatures from a thousand years ago. So naturally I can do that for even Aikawa Hitaki’s corpse. I can retrieve the blood that contains her soul.”

“Her corpse and blood...”

“I succeeded at the resurrection of Hine Hellvilleshine. I believe you met him?”

Mr. Hine’s resurrection—the image of the fair-skinned, white-haired Ms. Wyss appeared in my mind.

“Ms. Wyss is different! She said so herself! So is Lastiara!”

“Well, that *is* what she would say, isn’t it? But is that what you really thought when you were talking to her? Those memories, that personality, that manner of speech, that way of life, could you really say they aren’t those of Sir Hine? What did you think, boy?”

When I first spoke to Ms. Wyss, the first person I’d thought of was Mr. Hine, and I’d felt discomfort at how strongly she’d insisted that she wasn’t him.

Palinchron continued to speak assertively, as if he’d seen all that. “No matter what name they were using, there’s no doubt that it was Hine Hellvilleshine. I succeeded in resurrecting him. I have confidence I can create an even more perfect resurrection this time.”

He showed no signs of anxiety. Ms. Wyss was the reborn Mr. Hine, and now

Hitaki would be resurrected. He said it as if it was already a done deal.

“What’s the matter, boy? Don’t you want to save Aikawa Hitaki?” Palinchron was trying to use my desire against me as he offered me his hand. And yes, the only way to save Hitaki now was to resurrect her. To resurrect a girl who’d died so long ago and have her life be a happy one this time would require his help. That was more than enough of a reason for a temporary ceasefire. Of course, if my friends were here, they would stop me. I knew that. But the offer was too tempting. Just by joining hands with him, I’d be able to fulfill one of my greatest ambitions.

“And I’m sure Hitaki will think of you as her brother. Or something like that. You can become Aikawa Kanami. Everything will be resolved.” Palinchron laughed.

That’s all it would take to solve the problems that were currently tormenting me. It was truly an alluring, devilish temptation that almost made me loosen my grip on my sword. I wanted to cling to the black hand that was stretched in my direction.

“Absolutely not.” The wind blew again, bringing with it a frigid voice. The world where it was just Palinchron and me was shattered. Then, the owner of the voice appeared in the wasteland of heavy rain, like a reflection of my current state of mind. A soft wind blew through the world as if the haze covering it had been dispelled, and a pale, white-haired girl appeared, shedding her cloak of transparent wind. Behind her was a blond boy.

I knew their names. It was Wyss Hylipröpe and Liner Hellvilleshine. I stopped my hand at their appearance, since I never wanted to show them any sort of shameful acts.

“If you take that hand, boy, Palinchron wins. The fight isn’t over yet. Don’t yield to such a childish temptation.”

Ms. Wyss’s strict tone stopped me. She walked over to the two of us, leaving Liner behind. We were both surprised by the sudden third-party intervention, so neither of us responded or moved right away.

Ms. Wyss spoke to my stunned enemy. “Palinchron. As usual, you’re very good at seducing people. It seems you thought that once you got the boy alone,

he would no longer be able to notice your abnormal state. Too bad I was here.”

“Why *are* you here?” Palinchron asked, his voice trembling, which was a rare sight for someone who was always so calm and collected.

His expression showed that he hadn’t accounted for Ms. Wyss’s appearance. And it was no wonder—as a Jewelculus, she shouldn’t even have been there. Her skin was already starting to dissolve. The effects of the World Restoration Array seemed to be neutralized slightly by her wind magic, but it wasn’t enough. Gradually she was creeping closer to death. If she remained here, she would probably suffer the same fate as all of the soldiers. But even as particles of magic diffused from her body, she didn’t seem to be in any sort of a hurry.

“Get out of here! Your body’s being overwhelmed! Why did you come?!” Palinchron threw his hand out to his side, as if trying to drive her off.

I felt the same way. “Ms. Wyss! Your body is dissolving! Why are you still here?!” I thought she’d escaped to safety after rescuing her party members. Before infiltrating the fort I’d clearly told her to run away. She was able to use *Connection* to do so.

“I’m sorry; I planned on watching your battle from the beginning.”

I understood her behavior, but I was talking about the situation itself. The World Restoration Array was just too dangerous for a Jewelculus.

“But Ms. Maria’s flames made me break into a cold sweat. It would’ve been instant death if we hadn’t been able to fly with our wind magic,” she told us, laughing as if dying here was of no consequence.

“Hine’s brother! Take that idiot and get out of here! With your magic, you’ll still be able to make it! This time, your brother will lose everything!” Ignoring Ms. Wyss, Palinchron called out directly to Liner, but the boy made no move to escape, only smiling in response. His body was beginning to dissolve too. Since both were high-level knights, they wouldn’t fully dissolve right away, but that didn’t change the amount of danger they were in.

Even so, Liner remained still and didn’t say anything. Ms. Wyss answered instead. “We aren’t leaving. The boy taught me, and I too will fight for my chosen desire. I will continue to fight for my life authentically.” That sounded

like a snide remark about me, since I'd nearly been tempted by Palinchron. Ms. Wyss's face tightened as she appealed to me ruthlessly. "Listen, boy, Palinchron can't resurrect anyone."

Palinchron's jaw dropped. "Hey! What are you talking about?"

I ignored him, causing disappointment to flash across his face, and continued listening to Ms. Wyss.

"Look at me. He couldn't even resurrect his friend, even though it was such a fresh corpse."

"No, wait. Hey, wait! The resurrection was a success! I know Hine Hellvilleshine is inside you!"

"No, the only one in here is Wyss," she responded flatly, then continued as if to slam Palinchron even harder. "You failed to resurrect Hine."

"No, I did not! Hine was in control of your body at first! He was just too good of a man so he relinquished it to you!"

"You're probably right. Hine was terribly ashamed to be reincarnated into this world. He absolutely refused to sacrifice me in order to survive, since it would have been the same situation that tormented the girl he once had feelings for. There was no way he could ever accept that."

"I know that better than anyone! But it doesn't change the fact that Hine was resurrected! You inherited him more than anything else! Even if he disappeared, you inherited everything about him!"

"No, I am me. I am Wyss. There is no Hine here." She continued to speak her mind despite Palinchron's attempts to discuss it logically. It was *like* they were having a conversation, but they really weren't.

"How can he not be there? Speak clearly! You're half of—no, you're *mostly* made up of Hine! So I can just call you Hine and be done with it! That's what drove you insane in the first place! Boy! I'm not lying about this! I can resurrect the soul using blood! It's possible to transfer personalities and memories! Sure there will be mixing with the original owners of the body, but they can all be transferred completely!"

“So how can you even call that resurrection? Can someone truly be happy with that? Do you really think Aikawa Hitaki would be happy to return to this world through this outrageous method of reincarnation? Don’t you think it will just give birth to another miserable Jewelculus?! Boy!”

The two of them started to shout at each other, and I was stuck in the middle. It felt like an argument between age-old friends. I knew that Palinchron was right, but knew even better that I should choose Ms. Wyss’s side.

Perhaps sensing my feelings, Palinchron hurriedly tacked on, “Wyss! You don’t recognize yourself as Hine for the sake of others, right? You do it to help those of us who are in the same situation, don’t you? You want to show us that you are who you are, no matter what memories have been placed inside you, no matter what you remember! But your self-sacrifice, your chivalrous compassion, your misguided meddling...no matter how I look at it, you are Hine himself! Hine is alive in there!”

He no longer possessed any of his usual calm and cool demeanor. That was how unexpected Ms. Wyss’s appearance had been. Or...no, perhaps there was a different reason for this unusual panic.

“Boy!” he cried. “As you can see, I resurrected Hine! I can resurrect your sister the same way!”

“You told me yourself, right? That you absolutely wouldn’t lose to Palinchron?” Ms. Wyss’s words were harsh, reminding me that I had made my own decision and had to follow it through to the end.

I had said that. I’d said it many times. And I was about to break that promise right in front of her.

“Don’t be misled, boy. You don’t have to bear the burden of those selfish expectations. You don’t need to suffer anymore...” Palinchron threw the words at me, telling me I didn’t have to keep fighting.

Hearing their words, I knew what I had to do. Right now, my friends were watching me. I had to be strong for them. Or at the very least, I couldn’t let them see me fall to my knees in front of my sworn enemy.

“Palinchron, you’re a liar. You can’t resurrect anyone.”

“Ack! Are you sure about that?! If you admit that, you’ll never get your sister back!”

I brushed aside his proffered hand. “I’ll find Hitaki without you! Even if she’s dead, I’ll never rely on you! I won’t be pushed around by my enemy! And you *are* my enemy! My enemy!!!” It would be stupid to believe the words of a man who was my foe and trust my own wishes to him. Spurred on by this simple and clear idea, I regained my grip on my sword and pointed the tip at him, showing my will to continue our battle.

“Don’t be so tough, boy! That road will only be difficult!”

“I will win! I didn’t just swear it to Ms. Wyss! I swore it to everyone! Lastiara and Dia, and Maria, Snow, Reaper, and Ms. Sera too!”

Having moved away from the easy path that had been within my reach, I felt suffocated, as if I couldn’t breathe. Facing me, Palinchron looked as distressed as I felt. With the arrival of Ms. Wyss, the two of us could no longer take the easy way out. But that was how it should be. That’s what Ms. Wyss had taught me. She’d taught me not only not to make mistakes in choosing my path, but not to bend that path either. I would fight Palinchron and win.

I took a step forward. But it was none other than Ms. Wyss who stopped me again. “Please wait, boy. If you fight like this, Palinchron will just exploit the holes in your heart again. First let Liner adjust your contaminated spirit. I will buy you time.”

“Contaminated?!” I quickly looked at my menu to confirm.

CONDITIONS Confusion 7.87 Mind Taint 1.22 Cognitive Impairment 0.23

I was amazed by the numbers I saw, which convinced me of the weakness of my mind from earlier.

“This is Palinchron’s signature move. He manipulates other people’s minds while talking to them. It’s immoral sorcery.”

“But facing him on your own...”

“Please stop. For my own sake, I have to do this alone. Fighting him is critical to the life of Wyss Hylipröpe.” Her words brooked no argument. I could sense her determination to put her life on the line, and I looked at her menu.

【STATUS】

Name: Wyss Hylipröpe

HP 73/176

MP 82/265-11

CLASS: None

LEVEL 16

STR 8.22

VIT 8.46

DEX 7.98

AGI 9.45

INT 9.12

MAG 12.33

APT 3.25

In this short amount of time she'd gone from Level 31 to almost half that. Her remaining HP and MP weren't encouraging either. She was probably in worse physical condition now than when we'd first met. Without a doubt, her strength was no match for him.

Still, she maintained her smile, not giving way. “Yes, I may die here, today. But please let me go. This time, watch my back. Please watch me be cool...boy.”

“Ms. Wyss?” For a moment, the tone she'd used sounded like that of a respected knight. I had an incredible sense of déjà vu, even though she herself had said the man wasn't present anymore. Her readiness to die and wind magic inevitably reminded me of him. It was as if she was glad to be able to show her last moments now, which she'd been unable to do before.

Could it be that she was on her way to...

No, I wouldn't pry any further. It wouldn't make a difference, and I didn't care either way. Something Maria had said earlier floated back into my mind. Ms.

Wyss had an unshakable faith that seemed to have been born for exactly this moment. I couldn't hold her back. That was all I could do. I accepted her imminent death and checked in with Liner instead.

"Liner...are *you* okay with that?"

He'd been silent up until now, but responded, "Let her do what she wants, Sieg." He approached me as he spoke and began casting a holy magic restoration spell. The expression on his face was hard to read, but I could tell that he was accepting the end of Ms. Wyss.

"Palinchron, I won't let you go." Ms. Wyss took my place in front of him, just as she had stood in front of me yesterday at the villa.

"Get out of the way, Wyss! I'm fighting the boy! I've worked so hard to break him down! I'm not going to give him time to recover!"

"I'm sorry, but you're going to talk to me instead. Palinchron, there are things I want to teach you. Many things, really..."

"That! That way of speaking! Where did that..." He tried to draw attention to her obstinacy rather than on the interruption itself, but soon realized it was futile and accepted it the same way I had. With a sigh, he spit out, "Again, huh? This goddamn idiot."

I didn't think he was talking to anyone in particular, but both Ms. Wyss and I heard his mutterings thanks to our Dimension magic, and that was the signal to start the battle.

The pale girl and the pitch-black man rushed forward at the same time. Their faces were in stark contrast.

Chapter 5: The Boy Dissolved in the Darkness of the Twentieth Floor, But You Came and Shined a Light

I watched the battle unfold before me as Liner healed me.

“Burst! *Ix Wynd!*” The magic wind swept across the battlefield, and Wyss rushed forward on the tailwind. She was beyond being in bad shape, but even though she’d lost almost half her life, her movements were still sharp. Perhaps it was thanks to the wind magic, but her speed was a match even for me. She drew one of the swords from her waist and swung it with great force down at her enemy.

“I’m not going to let you do this! Get out of my way!” Palinchron was starting to look desperate. The black blade was able to intercept Ms. Wyss’s with ease, and with his counterattack he managed to stick her with black liquid. But it was clear he wasn’t concentrating on the fight.

“*Sehr Wynd!*” Wind like a cannonball was released, engulfing everything it touched.

Seeing it, Palinchron noticed something strange. Ms. Wyss’s magic was unusual. Her levels were dissolving, and her Jewelculus body was dissolving as well. The field was in his favor, and she normally shouldn’t even have been able to cast magic. But the spells she was casting weren’t becoming weaker. Rather, they were growing stronger.

Palinchron could sense the true source of that strangeness. “This magic! Are you taking it from the World Restoration Array?! How did you open it?! You idiot!”

When he pointed this out, I used *Dimension* to check the flow of magic. Ms. Wyss wasn’t using her own body’s magic, she was drawing power from the leyline and converting it. There was no mistaking it: she was using the World Restoration Array for her own purposes.

Palinchron’s eyes sharpened. Then, by concentrating on the movement of the

magic power, he guessed the means by which she had accessed the World Restoration Array. It was a method that left even him astonished.

“What?! You couldn’t get it inside your living body, so you put it into your dissolving form! That’s so messed up! Where did you even get your information on the World Restoration Array anywa— GHK!”

There was no time for indignation as her powerful wind magic buffeted him incessantly. Not only did she have an abundance of magical power, but she was using magic tools at the same time, so the speed at which she could construct spells was truly extraordinary.

Countless blades of wind slashed at Palinchron. In response, he released a barrage of darkness magic that spread out before my eyes. The battle was beautiful to watch. However, everyone present knew that this beautiful clash of magic wouldn’t last for long. Ms. Wyss’s body wouldn’t hold out much longer. No matter how abundant her magic was, there was always a limit. Her stats were visibly being whittled down, her body was dissolving, and her life was being cut short. But even so, she walked forward. Perhaps it was because of the hues of their magic, but she looked like a luminous figure cutting through a dark abyss.

“Palinchron, I’m here!” She continued forward as she called out to him.

“Don’t come any closer! I have nothing else to say to you!”

Ms. Wyss pitched forward and swung her sword down as if she were about to fall over. The tip of her blade almost reached Palinchron’s body. The final exchange of blows was instantaneous. Palinchron’s black blade and her sword met for only a few strokes, and the decision was made.

The blades pierced their marks simultaneously. Ms. Wyss’s sword was lodged into Palinchron’s chest, but at the same time, his blade was in her chest. Neither bled. Palinchron’s body was all black liquid, and Ms. Wyss had melded completely with the World Restoration Array and no longer existed physically. Neither of them could die as human beings anymore. Still, she understood the outcome and willingly let go of her blade. Her defeat and death had been decided from the beginning, and now it was time for the finale, the end of the story.

Ms. Wyss stroked Palinchron's cheek with her sword hand. "I am who I am. That is my answer. Please, shout out the same thing. Just as I am not Hine, you can shout out that you are not Regacy."

Palinchron averted his eyes from her brutally honest words. Then he withdrew his sword from her body and retreated, trying to escape.

Ms. Wyss watched him quietly. "At least, at the end, be yourself... Please..."

The two of them moved away from each other. Palinchron looked back, muttering as if he were cursing the way the world worked. "What nonsense! I'm doing what I always do! I'm Palinchron Regacy! Why, you...son of a bitch!" He grimaced and looked down at the magic and blood of Ms. Wyss, which coated his blade, trembling. I was reminded of the end of the Day of Blessed Birth. Then, too, Palinchron had trembled and looked upset at the sight of the blood on his blade.

Then the man who should have been the victor staggered, fell forward, and stopped moving. Ms. Wyss, who'd been watching him, smiled. Realizing the battle was over, Liner and I rushed toward her.

"Ms. Wyss!" I ran over and caught her in my arms.

"The rest is up to you two."

"Healing! Liner, use your holy magic!"

I immediately suggested prolonging her life, but Liner shook his head. He knew she couldn't be helped. I knew it too. Everyone here knew that she was beyond help. And so Ms. Wyss made her dying wish as her body turned into particles of magic, melting and mixing with the world.

"I don't have any more lingering attachments now, but I do have one last thing I must tell you, boy."

"Me?" She was leaving it to me and not to Liner, with whom she had a much deeper bond? No, maybe she'd already said her goodbyes to him. They'd been acting like that ever since they'd appeared here, after all.

"Are you ready, Kanami?" What she said next was terrifying. "All you have to do now is continue forward without fear. Please, now is the time to use all of

your skills.”

Use all of my skills. Presumably, that also included ???, which was something I couldn’t understand, since I’d been careful not to activate it during all of my battles up to this point.

I was confused, but Ms. Wyss kept speaking. “It’s okay. This body has completely merged with the World Restoration Array now, and I finally have *her* memories. I was wrong. You’re not a Jewelculus. There is more to the story after that ending a thousand years ago.” Ms. Wyss had been the first to say I *was* a Jewelculus. And yet now she was denying it. “Finally, all of the pieces fit together. Kanami...how admirable that you’ve endured so much. How admirable that you made it this far. At last, your wish is within reach...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Kanami...did you ever call out?”

“Call out? To who?!”

“You were just searching, but did you ever call out to *her*? All along you tried only to return to your original world, but you didn’t seek help from *her*, even though there was a good chance that she would have followed you into this world. If *she* has come to this world, then I’m sure *she* will respond to your voice. I understand now. I understand *because* I’m me.”

Listening to that, I realized she was talking about Aikawa Hitaki. Ms. Wyss was telling me not to *look* for Hitaki, but to call for her instead.

“All you have to do is call out. With that, you’ll be able to find your little sister. Palinchron isn’t necessary. You’re always connected to your family, not through *blood* or *contracts* but through *love*. I know that better than anyone else.”

She touched my cheek like she had done with Palinchron. That hand was as gentle as an older sibling’s. After that, she moved away from me.

“This is my exit, but I’ll be watching. From inside him.” Then, as if retreating from the stage and into the audience, she backed away, walked to Liner, and collapsed beside him. She was completely at her limit. Looking closely, I could see that her legs were disappearing, and her hands on the ground wouldn’t be far behind.

Liner helped Ms. Wyss's helpless body to sit up and spoke in a tiny voice. "So it's true... Ever since you split off from Sheer, you were—"

"No more, Liner. I'm asking you to do as you promised." She reached over and placed a finger to his lips.

Liner ignored the gesture and continued. "I'm telling you, I'm going to try to kill Palinchron again. I want it even more now. I can't just do what you want, can I?"

"I don't mind... Do what you want to. I just wanted to help those three with regrets to overcome their births and destinies. After that, it's up to them."

"I understand. Goodbye, Ms. Wyss." He said nothing more, only his farewell. I didn't know what he was thinking as he watched Ms. Wyss die, but I could tell from his expression that he was seething with emotions that would require more than a word or two to express. Despite that, he didn't say anything more.

Ms. Wyss looked up at the sky, perhaps relieved by the sight. She didn't have any limbs left, her torso was gone, the only thing that remained was her head. At the end of her gaze, light began filtering down. As Ms. Wyss had been fighting, the rain had stopped. Now the clouds were clearing, and the sun was peeking through the gaps.

"I'm so-rry, Li-ner... It wa-sn't en-ough..." With that, she dissolved completely into light, disappearing from the world.

I watched, dumbfounded, but Liner didn't. He yelled at the magic that had been Ms. Wyss, which was now swirling around the battlefield, and began an incantation. "Prithee, take heed! Wyss Hylipröpe thou shall not cross from this world! If there is a price, I shall pay it! The brilliance of that light! Inscribe the fleeting flicker of life!"

I knew that incantation. I'd first heard it from Lastiara, and I'd heard it many times after in the Dungeon. It wasn't self-styled or improvised, but neither was it particularly unusual. It was an incantation that everyone was accustomed to hearing, as it was recited every morning by the priests at church. It was the holy magic incantation for leveling up. That's what Liner was yelling into the sky.

I immediately looked at his menu, but his amount of experience wasn't

enough to level up yet. Anyone could see that this ritual didn't suit the scene. But now I knew the truth about leveling up. Originally, it was a spell that converted magic into stats. Its formal name was *Spellrite: Level Up*. So I knew that this ritual magic was actually perfectly suited to the situation. Ms. Wyss's magical powers that had melted into the World Restoration Array, the brilliance of the scattered light, her soul. And Liner was about to inherit all of it.

He continued to cry out as he absorbed the magic and turned it into his own flesh and blood. "Introspect! Yes! I will inherit the supreme light born to the Hellvilleshine family! Though not by blood, by soul I have reached it! I am the last light of the Hellvilleshines! Liner! I am Liner Hellvilleshine!"

The incarnation was complete, as was the level-up magic. The magic particles converged on Liner, a wind blew, and he leveled up. Looking at his menu, I could tell that he had shot up to Level 31, the same as Ms. Wyss had been, all in one go. But that wasn't important. He hadn't done it by saving up his experience and then converting it. Just as he'd shouted, he'd inherited those levels.

So this is what a true level up is, I thought, for some reason. It wasn't a curse, it was holy. I remembered the words of someone who had insisted that was the case. Certainly, I'd just seen the very brilliance that proved it to be true.

Then, Liner quivered with magic power like he was a different person, drew Rukh Bringer from his waist, and stood beside me. "I'm going to fight Palinchron, Sieg. I'll be next to you until it's done. So be strong and fight to the bitter end!"

"I will, Liner. I've always fought with the help of my friends. Fight beside me till the end!" The new friend that Ms. Wyss had brought me would keep me grounded. As long as he was with me, I wouldn't be able to show weakness. I wouldn't bend in my belief. No matter who I was, even if I'd lost my reason for living, I would fulfill my vow to beat Palinchron. I would absolutely fulfill it.



Liner and I pointed our swords at the enemy, who furrowed his brow and gritted his teeth at the sight.

“Ah, so the idiot’s gone. He’s become a power for the three of us. What a selfish guy...” From his expression, I could tell he’d been serious about wanting to keep Ms. Wyss alive. He resented more than anyone that she’d died to become sustenance for the rest of us. That’s what his expression said. “I haven’t felt this bad in a long time. Not in a *really* long time.”

I couldn’t tell if he was saying that to us or to the dead Ms. Wyss, or to the whole situation...no, to the *world*. But there was one thing I knew: this Palinchron was different from the one I’d seen so far.

“But I’m also being an idiot, because this bad feeling is exactly what I wanted...”

He laughed slightly, as if disgusted. Palinchron, who had been full of fake emotions, was finally revealing his true feelings. His resentment and bitterness, which had lost their way at some point, swelled up and were finally directed at us.

“Ha ha, it’s completely impossible to capture you, Kanami. There’s only one path left from here. Yes, only one. Thanks to that idiot, it’s finally easy to understand now!” The black liquid of his body swelled with his rising emotions, effortlessly changing shape. He increased his number of arms and turned them all into blades. His amplified murderous intent became a weapon in and of itself.

“There’s only one thing to do! I will kill the two of you and see the World Restoration Array through to completion! Again I will be the only one who remains alive, and then I can do it all over! I just have to make another hero and another monster! There are so many candidates! Aren’t there, boy?!”

His body became usually thick, and his legs became those of a beast. Finally, black wings sprouted from his back. He had fully abandoned his human form, just like Lorwen, who’d turned into a crystal spider. An amorphous black demon was born.

I knew he was saying this only because his emotions had gotten the better of

him. I knew from his words that he'd been trying to seduce me before, but planned to kill me now that things weren't going his way, and that he was then going to repeat this tragic production all over again.

The next candidates for the main role would likely be my friends. Lastiara, Maria, and the others all certainly fulfilled the requirements for "hero" and "monster." If I lost to him now, my friends would be in danger.

Therefore, I was no longer lost. It really had become easy to understand.

"Let's do this, Palinchron! I'll finish you off and kill you right here!"

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha! You'll be the one dying, boy!" Palinchron continued to laugh, although I couldn't tell whether it came from joy or despair. He continued to laugh for a while before muttering emotionally, "But before we fight, there is one last duty left. It seems that, in any case, I will be disappearing. Listen closely—this is my own preamble."

It was childish, and I could tell he was just trying to show off. He waved his right arm in time with his monologue, and the light from the World Restoration Array grew stronger. But it was dull and darker now, bearing almost no resemblance to the brilliant aurora from earlier. The world was being painted over in black light by Palinchron's—no, the Thief of Darkness's Essence's magic. Curtains of magical night fell.

"The sinner who stole darkness's essence dies twice! A single death is not enough to atone for his great sins!"

Palinchron was incanting, and the darkness that had seemed at its limits grew even deeper. The reddish-black wasteland was now dyed pitch-black. The earth, the sky, and everything else turned to an inky darkness that surpassed even the blackest night—except for one thing. The sun.

"Indeed, I am that sinner! The Thief of Darkness's Essence!"



The round, white sun was the only thing that remained in the dark. It looked like a hole had been pierced through the world, as if the three of us had fallen through that hole and were now standing at the bottom of the dark, dark earth. Palinchron's incantations had made this battlefield the bottom of the darkest abyss.

"I'm glad you have come here! This place, the World Restoration Array, is the twentieth floor of the Dungeon. The floor of Palinchron, the Thief of Darkness's Essence! Where we are now, at this point in time, is the bottom of the world! Therefore, it is neither hastily constructed nor borrowed without permission, whether it is the twentieth floor or the hundredth! I can claim as many floors as I want! Now, let us begin checking your answers to the Vigesimal Trial together!" he said, concluding his speech.

He had told me I'd reached the twentieth floor for the second time. The twentieth floor, wherein begins the Vigesimal Trial given by the Thief of Darkness's Essence. How far forward could I move in this blackness? How long could I keep my eyes on the light?

The battle to test that began. And I wasn't the only one being tested—there were three of us here. Without hesitation, we all rushed forward at the same time.



"This is the end! I'll complete the World Restoration Array, consequences be damned!" Palinchron shouted as he charged. The World Restoration Array began to tremble in time with the pulsing of his magic. In other words, the ground began to shake.

The sudden earthquake took the wind out of Liner's and my sails, and Palinchron continued to make the World Restoration Array pulse during that time. The black earth warped, losing its firmness under our feet and beginning to undulate.

"Gah! There's still power in that thing?!"

"Of course! And that's not all it can do! The World Restoration Array is pretty much wrapped around the center of the mainland! The people it converted

were far from merely the tens of thousands on the battlefield! There were plenty of towns and villages too, with many people living in them! Hundreds of thousands were consumed by the array! Ha ha ha! So there's plenty of magic left!"

Palinchron revealed the true source of the summoning to fan the flames. While we were stuck at a standstill because of the shaking beneath our feet, he drew even more magic from the ground. Then, the black liquid body that could only be called a "monster" swelled with even more magic than the Guardians I'd fought before. In the darkness, Palinchron's form madly drew in even more black light, becoming ever darker, like something out of a fairy tale.

"You're sacrificing innocent people!"

"It doesn't matter! The number of people who are sacrificed has nothing to do with me!"

Liner and I slashed at Palinchron together, having finally adjusted to the trembling ground. In response, he reached out his extra arms like tentacles to try to grab us. There were over twenty of them, and all of them were sharp and quick. I was able to fend them off with my sword, but they were going to overwhelm Liner's magical defense, so he'd had to back off.

"*Sehr Wynd!* Guh!" Liner had ended up damaging himself with the magic he released to fend off the tentacles.

"Liner!"

"Don't worry about me! Don't forget that we just happen to share a common enemy right now! Focus on Palinchron!" He put on a brave front, but it was impossible not to worry about him, now that he'd become my friend.

Above all else, I couldn't ignore his reaction because of how strange it was. His movements didn't match the high level and high stats I'd just observed. Clearly, he was in a bad state. Although he was wrapped in wind magic, we were still inside the World Restoration Array, meaning his magic couldn't completely protect him from level downs. I could see in his menu that even the high level granted to him by Wyss was already being eaten up. But I was holding the solution; I was convinced of that for some reason.

“Liner! Use this!” I tossed Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, to him.

“This is Mr. Lorwen’s?!” Liner whispered, looking at the blade that he’d grabbed out of the air. At the same instant, the worm-eaten appearance caused by the World Restoration Array disappeared. The protection granted by an Essence Thief stopped the level down, just as I’d expected. But more importantly, even though I had let go of the magic gem that had belonged to the Thief of Earth’s Essence, I wasn’t being leveled down.

Just as I thought. Even without Lorwen, I wasn’t affected by the World Restoration Array. With Maria gone, I’d thought the only magic gems here were those of Earth and Darkness. But that wasn’t true. There was a third one.

No, not a third, but maybe...

Hope emerged. I saw not only a chance to win, but a light in the darkness as well. Even Liner, with Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan in hand, had a smile etched on his face.

“Mr. Lorwen! Please tell me what happened next on that day!!!” The crystal sword sparkled. Liner allowed it to be wrapped in wind, and it became his original twin swords.

I gripped my Crystal Pectolazri Straight Sword tightly, and resolutely sliced off Palinchron’s tentacles. Liner joined me from behind, moving very differently than before.

“Thanks, Sieg! We need to press our attack!”

“Yes, together, Liner!”

We spoke as one, our three swords drawing a mutual path toward their target. In a moment, a huge number of Palinchron’s tentacles littered the ground. His attacks decreased, and I was finally able to close the distance between us.

“Palinchron!!!” My throat shouted the name of my longtime enemy of its own accord.

“Ha ha, so you can still worry about someone else, huh? Looking good, boy! After all, you’ve already overcome the Vigesimal Trial, haven’t you? Well, I

guess there was no reason to check! As a Guardian, I ought to end the battle here...but I don't have any intention of actually doing that!"

My sword was blocked by a black blade, and for a moment, our movements stilled. Taking advantage of that, Palinchron regenerated the tentacles that we'd cut off. The black liquid arms extended from his shoulders and back and began to strike at us again.

"Sure, it doesn't matter! What matters is those of us who are here! I don't care about the Dungeon! The World Restoration Array and the memories of a thousand years ago are all in the past! The Guardians and the Apostles are all outsiders! The ones who are here are the currently living Palinchron and the boy! I am fighting as myself! I will fight!!!" Palinchron's bladed arms repelled Liner's attack.

I'd already known it, but because of Ms. Wyss, it wasn't just Liner and I who'd grown stronger. Palinchron had also acquired a new power.

"Ha! Ha ha! Aha ha ha ha HA ha HA ha ha HA HA HA!!!" Palinchron swung his black swords around as he laughed and simultaneously launched an attack with his tentacles from all directions. No matter how many we cut down, the number never decreased. Furthermore, Palinchron began to abandon any sort of defense partway through the attack. His tentacles came at us, slashing at our arms, legs, and sometimes even our torsos. His abundant magical power repaired any wounds we inflicted, so his tentacles were able to keep chipping away at our physical strength.

"This disgusting—"

"You're in the way, Hine's little brother!" Palinchron combined multiple tentacles into one thick trunk-like appendage and used it like a whip to send Liner flying backward. At the same moment he succeeded in separating us, he swooped down on me like a moth to a flame, looking like he was about to go mad.

"*Ice Flamberge!*" I cloaked my sword in cold air, his weakness, and slashed at his tentacles. If he froze completely, it would be fatal even for the Thief of Darkness's Essence. But my shallow idea that he would surely change his tactics in response to this threat was way off. Even though I pierced his heart and froze

him, he continued forward.

“Ha ha! I’ve got you now!” He grabbed my arm while my guard was down.

“Let go of me, Palinchron!”

I tried to shake him off as quickly as I could, but he changed the shape of his arm, twining it around my arm like a mollusk. It didn’t seem like he would release me. Not only would he not let go, but I could tell he intended to invade me directly.

“This is where I win! I’ll unleash your special skill, boy!”

With those words, I could feel his magic creep into me. I utilized the magic in my entire body to try to expel it, but his power was heavy. It wasn’t just about him getting his magic inside me—Palinchron was using the World Restoration Array, paying the “price” and shaving off his own life for this last bit of darkness magic. Having thrown away his defenses and his very self, I could feel the hidden reserves of his strength.

“I’m going to gamble everything on this! On you! Spellcast: *Wailing Lamb’s Gloom!*”

Mental interference magic activated. My field of vision grew dark, and I experienced the illusion of having my innards stirred by a fire poker. The battlefield was dark to begin with, but this was something else. There was a thin black curtain over the information I was receiving through *Dimension* as well. It was the same effect I’d experienced under Tida’s *Darkness*. Of course, that wasn’t all. It was also causing a wide range of abnormalities to occur. It became hard to breathe like *Poison*, there was a sticking in my throat like *Silence*, and my body was numb like *Paralysis*. But although I was shaking like I was experiencing *Fear*, my body was hot like I was experiencing *Elation*.

“Ugh!”

“You might have recovered, but there’s still a deadly gap in your mind! If I can cause just one more outburst, I win!”

My vision flickered. My thoughts wavered. I could no longer understand language or comprehend how to perceive the world. The priorities in my mind shuffled, and I forgot which was the most important. Even the strength I’d

gathered...all of it was being swallowed up by the darkness.

Naturally, the ??? skill came creeping up on me. I quickly chased it away. If it triggered now, I could lose the important emotions in my heart. So even with the abnormalities, I was about to fight it off, but then Ms. Wyss's words came back to me.

I'm sure you'll find your sister. Use all your skills. All you have to do now is continue forward without fear.

It was as if she had anticipated this very situation. I couldn't think straight. Couldn't stop the torrent of emotions. So I...

"AaaAHHH! Ms. Wyss believed in me! So I will... I wiiilll..."

In response to her belief in me, I would believe in her. I prayed and shouted, thinking that to do so would be to mourn her. With a roar, I gathered my courage and unsealed the skill I'd avoided for so long. Not automatically this time, but by choice, I activated ???.

The following skill has activated: ???
Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.
+1.00 to Confusion

"Augh!" My mind stilled as if time had stopped. The lake of emotions that had been raging inside me finally calmed. My thoughts became clearer and my narrowing vision finally widened again. I knew that the ??? skill optimized my mind so that I wouldn't die. Evidently it would be better to say it *Adjusted* me.

However, Palinchron's magic immediately began to encroach on me again. "Ha ha, I knew that was coming. But my magic isn't done yet! Next, I'm going to drop you right over the edge!" He had obviously anticipated the activation of ??? and continued to press me with mental magic that he'd prepared for this scenario.

"Over the edge?" I responded to his word choice. I didn't feel like anything extreme had happened with the triggering of ???. My desire to fight had faded

a bit, but not enough to be fatal. I didn't feel anything proportionate to what Ms. Wyss's statement had led me to expect. Perhaps what she'd meant by "all my skills" was—

"Spellcast: *Wailing Lamb's Gloom!*" Palinchron continued burning up his life to flood me with another rush of mental impairment. My emotions began to run wild again, like a boulder thrown into a lake. The thoughts that had finally gotten back into order were scattered in disarray once more. When he'd grabbed my arm, I'd been rendered incapable of escaping from the continuous activation of the ??? skill. All kinds of abnormalities were eating away at me, and I couldn't think of anything at all. But strangely, I wasn't afraid. Since I was unable to think about anything, I could clearly feel the light within the darkness.

Ms. Wyss did mention "all my skills"...

I knew in my gut that this also included *Repayment*, the end point of the ??? skill.

Condition: Confusion 8.87

All the anomalies in my stats were converted to *Confusion*. Just a little more and it would reach 10.00. Even so, I was unafraid to continuously use the skill.

"Activate! If I'm going to take it, then I'm gonna take all of it!"

The following skill has activated: ???
Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.
+1.00 to Confusion

The following skill has activated: ???
Stabilizes your mental state in exchange for some of your emotion.
+1.00 to Confusion

Then the value of Confusion should be...

Condition: Confusion 10.87

Over ten. A line of text flashed in front of my eyes.

The following skill has activated: ???

Your Confusion has reached 10.00, surpassing ???’s limit. Commencing *Repayment*. The Confusion that you accumulated will be converted to your original emotions.

All of it was being repaid, with interest—all the bad memories and feelings that I’d accumulated. Hopelessness, loneliness, frustration, humiliation, stress, discomfort, fear, contamination. And love. And love returns. It was a collection of emotions that were more than lethal enough to decimate my mind.

“Guh, uhhhh, aaAAAHH!!!” I was forced to scream. Unlike previous times, I was prepared and had more than a little hope that I’d be able to bear it all a second time. But the *Repayment* of ??? broke my spirit like it was laughing at me.

The following skill has activated: ???

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

+1.00 to Confusion

The following skill has activated: ???

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

+1.00 to Confusion

The following skill has activated: ???

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

+1.00 to Confusion

Of course, ??? continued to activate to keep all of these emotions in check. If this went on, a *Repayment* loop would begin, and that was a one-way road to death by despair. The physical effects were instantaneous. I'd surpassed difficulty breathing into not breathing at all. Each and every one of the cells in my body fell into despair and tried to stop living. Chills and dizziness struck at the same time, and my legs began to shake. There wasn't a single wound, but the phantom pain made me twitch. It brought back memories of the pain I'd felt at the end of the Day of the Blessed Birth.

It hurts. It hurts so bad I wanna die. I know I have to be strong. I know I must become strong. But my heart is weak, and it feels like it's gonna break.

I was doing everything that I could. I was even using *Responsiveness* and *Thought Streams* since they were related to the mind. But there was still *something* missing from "all my skills" that Ms. Wyss had mentioned. I had to find that *something*.

But what is that something? What is it?!

My suffering continued.

It hurts. It hurtsithurtsithurts! It hurts so bad I feel like I'm going crazy! I feel like I could cut my throat at any moment!

Unable to bear it, I fell to my knees.

"Did... Did I do it? Yes! I won! I won by the skin of my teeth!"

I could hear Palinchron's voice. My consciousness was fading, so it seemed very far away. He was so close but his voice was so far. Only death felt close; the rest of the world seemed distant.

"All that's left is to finish him off—"

"You will not!" Liner interrupted as Palinchron pointed one of his black blades at me. They began to fight around my body. The black liquid danced around, and Liner tried to block it with his twin blades.

"Hine's brother! I told you you were in the way! Spellcast: *Wailing Lamb's Gloom!*"

"Gah, Mr. Lorwen—no, overwrite me! *Rukh Bringer!*"

His own magic blade, not the treasured blade I'd lent him, shone. The purple mist it emitted repelled Palinchron's black liquid. Unlike me, Liner didn't give in to the mental assault so easily. Palinchron attacked the mind, and Liner's was resilient. The battle between the two was fierce, but I couldn't intervene. My body was still spasming and cramping because of *Repayment*. Even the slightest movement caused me immense pain. All I could do was continue to watch.

"You just gonna space out there, Sieg?!" Liner yelled at me.

I wasn't allowed to be so careless. Unlike the others, he didn't care about my hardships. He urged me to stand, even if it meant dying.

"This isn't over yet! We've still got to get rid of that asshole! Are you going to let him see you in such a pathetic state?!"

I turned my eyes toward the sound of Liner's voice. Even though I'd only moved my eyes a few millimeters, the intense pain made it feel like they were being crushed and almost made me collapse entirely. But his scolding voice still reached me.

"Get up, Sieg! You're a man, aren't you?!"

It was as if someone had yelled directly into my ear. Even though they couldn't dispel the intense pain in my body, the words were enough to help me find the meaning of strength. *Stand up because you're a man*—perhaps that very simple and all-too-common reason was exactly what I needed. I'd been thinking too much about the small details and had almost forgotten the obvious.

I regained my strength and stood up unsteadily. "Y-Yeah, I get it. I get that much, at least, Liner!" I said unashamedly, fighting back my agony.

In the midst of the maddening pain, my mind began to turn again. Ms. Wyss had told me to use all of my skills. I had no doubt she had said that because of some conviction she held. At the moment of her death, she had certainly found *something* that I couldn't understand. Believing that, I'd released ??? and *Repayment*.

I think I've used all of my available skills at this point. So what's left? What should I do?

All that was here was Palinchron and Liner. And darkness and light. The only other thing left was—

Liner's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Sieg! If you don't have enough magic left, use the World Restoration Array! Like Ms. Wyss and Palinchron! You can do it! Wait, actually, wasn't this magic circle originally *for you?*!"

I could use the World Restoration Array? That meant I should use *Spellrite* like Palinchron had. Surely I would be able to interfere with the magic circle. If the memory from a thousand years ago was correct, *Spellrite* was mine to begin with.

I cast *Dimension* again. Then, copying Ms. Wyss, I shoved my magic into the World Restoration Array, intending to let myself dissolve. I immediately regretted it as a chill swept over my entire body. It was too wide and too dark. A world that could truly be called an abyss spread out beneath the World Restoration Array, which covered the ground. It was filled with an incalculable amount of logic, memory, and power. It was a space no human being could withstand. The vastness of it, which felt like it was greater than the universe, ate away at my mind. I moved beyond pain and began to freeze, moved beyond cold and began to lose my senses. It was impossible for me to comprehend it all in my current state. Even if I had been in perfect physical condition, I doubted I would be able to grasp any part of this space.

Just as I was about to give up on using the array, I felt a vibration that seemed like a voice. But there was no such thing as air here. Nothing should have been vibrating. Even so, I could feel that it was my voice. Since there was nothing else here, I could feel the voice clear as day. For some reason, my body was trying to answer on its own.

You were just searching, but did you ever call out to her?

I remembered another thing Ms. Wyss had said and almost stopped breathing. My heart beat faster at the answer I arrived at, at the name I came up with. In any case, there were plenty of excessive emotions for others, like feelings of love mixed in with all of the horrible things I was feeling. It wasn't just love for Lastiara, which had returned after I'd lost it to my ??? skill, but my feelings for my sister as well. It was inevitable that something burning would

rise from the back of my throat.

Then, as I was encompassed by those intense emotions, I called out a name from my past. “Hitaki?”

I called her name, and just like that, the reality of the World Restoration Array began to shake. It shook and trembled and then became a familiar voice, although I couldn’t make out the words.

Now I finally understood what Ms. Wyss had been saying. I shouted in order to reach every corner of the world.

“HITAKI!!!”

Instead of going to get her, I called out my sister’s name. I didn’t have any more room in my mind, and there wasn’t much strength remaining in my body. My senses were on the verge of collapse due to the intense pain, and my consciousness was on the verge of a complete breakdown. It wouldn’t have been strange for ??? to activate yet again. But even so, I continued to call out.

“Hitaki! I’m here! Say something if you can hear me! I’m here!!!” I strengthened my ties to the World Restoration Array and searched the whole wide world. Just like in the past, I searched, I searched, and I searched and continued to search.

And then I heard it.

“Bro...ther?”

I had done my best to listen closely. I concentrated all of my attention to hear where the voice was coming from, so I knew. I realized the truth. I knew where the voice was coming from. There was no mistake. It was coming from inside me.

The voice emanated from within me and reverberated through the World Restoration Array. It was so weak and thin that I thought perhaps it could only be heard within this strange reality.

“Hitaki! I’m here too! I’m HERE! HITAKIIIIIIII!!!”

The world warped in response to my cry. My consciousness was drawn away from the battle between Palinchron and Liner. I was separated from the

concept of time. I could find all of my answers within the World Restoration Array. This is where the memory with the answers was. The very same memory that I had inside me was etched into the earth. The continuation from the ending was here. I could see the continuation. I remembered—after a thousand years had passed. But this time it wasn't because of Ide's magic or Palinchron's trap. It was a memory I'd hauled to the surface with my own power. I finally had the memory that confirmed the truth that had been flickering inside my mind.

I knew why Hitaki was inside of me.



The memory journey began, a continuation of my previous recollections. Under a pitch-black sky, in a wasteland where all living things had perished, Kanami the Founder and Saint Tiara faced each other. My last memory ended here. In other words, I hadn't clearly seen Kanami the Founder die. Therefore, I wished to know. I wished to see what had happened after Kanami the Founder and Tiara squared off.

As if in response to that desire, the memory resumed, with the true ending of the battle from a thousand years ago. The distance between the two figures gradually lessened. Then, after a few arguments, the epic battle began. Like the earlier battle between Maria and Palinchron, it was a haphazard fight that caused the very ground to collapse. That was fine; the scope of the battle was what I expected it to be. It wasn't the details of the fight that were important, but the contents of the argument they were having.

"Teach! It's okay! Your sister is alive! You don't have to fight anymore! Look! Look at what I'm holding!" Tiara continued shouting the entire time, insisting that Hitaki was alive. Perhaps this was the truth that Palinchron had been hiding.

Her shouted assertions overturned everything he'd said previously. Of course, Kanami the Founder couldn't easily believe her. I couldn't really believe it either. He tried to get rid of her. However, as Tiara continued her attempts to persuade him, his anger gradually dissipated. He found a ray of hope and the will to fight leaked from his body. At the end of it all, Kanami the Founder fell to his knees and began to cry like a child.

So this was the truth. The outcome of the battle was simple: Tiara had convinced Kanami the Founder of the truth and the battle ended. The “hero” defeated the “monster” in the most kindhearted manner possible—with hope.

Tiara held that hope in her hands. It was a beautiful blue magic gem that looked like a sapphire. Without even using *Analyze*, I knew it was the gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence. I was probably the only one in the world who could tell that at a glance. Here, time within the memory sped up a little until it reached the point of proving that the gemstone really belonged to the Thief of Water’s Essence. Unlike previous memories, I wasn’t forced to watch this time. I could choose what I wanted to see.

Kanami the Founder, who’d been crying on the pitch-black battlefield, disappeared, and the memory moved on to the next era. The war on the continent was over, and as the number of characters who’d appeared in the story gradually decreased, I could tell that the world was entering its epilogue. Kanami the Founder returned then. He returned to that nostalgic castle, Tiara leading him by the hand. In the memory, it was the huge castle I’d grown used to. However, upon their return, the castle was overrun with dust. It was clear that no one had used it in a very long time. They returned there, and behind them was a strange child.

Tiara looked the same as she had before, but Kanami looked terrible. His body, which was mostly a monster, was bound hand and foot in numerous magical chains and locks, he was wrapped in a cloth covered in magic spells, and on top of that he had restraining spells placed on him. The only thing he could do was speak.

And then there was the third person, the strange child. At a glance, it looked like a normal child clad in rags, but that young face was similar to Palinchron’s and Sheer’s. So the child was likely Apostle Regacy. They stuck close to Kanami’s side, not wanting to be separated. I could tell Kanami was staring a bit at Tiara and could guess at the relationship between them.

The three of them stood talking in the main hall of the castle. Kanami was confirming the details of the hope that Tiara had given him. “So what you’re saying is that you succeeded in extracting the soul? And this magic gem is Hitaki?”

“Yes, that’s right. Hitaki isn’t dead yet. She’s still alive,” Tiara responded, showing the brilliant-blue gem to Kanami. “Well, really, the soul of the Thief of Water’s Essence is sleeping inside this gem. It may be due to the memory of being pierced through the heart by you, but both the body and soul are in a state of suspended animation. It’s a sleep that can’t be broken in a short amount of time.”

“Suspended animation... No, that’s fine. After all, I’ve been brought back from that state.”

I was amazed that Hitaki was only in a state of suspended animation even though she had been stabbed through the heart. But then I quickly reconsidered. Both of them had called her the Thief of Water’s Essence. In other words, she must be in a state similar to Palinchron and Lorwen. They had both turned into monsters after being pierced through the heart, and Hitaki had fallen into the same situation. But Tiara had succeeded in removing just the soul from that state. Although the situation was different now than a thousand years ago, that understanding should be generally accurate.

Kanami the Founder was clearly grateful for Tiara’s feat. A few tears slid down his cheeks as he was filled with emotion. “Thank you, Tiara. Truly, thank you. You didn’t give up on us, even at the end...”

“Heh, I don’t know the meaning of the word ‘defeat’!”

“Thank you...”

Kanami continued to offer his thanks, and Tiara scratched at her cheek. She quickly changed the topic, embarrassed.

“It’s fine! What’s important now is what happens next!”

“Yes, that’s right. The future is more important. I won’t fail a second time. Next time I will absolutely succeed at reviving Hitaki.”

Tiara and Kanami the Founder made up, and the next story began, that story being about the world a thousand years later—the world we were living in now. Their discussion proceeded with the conviction that it would lead from that point to a thousand years later, and at the end Kanami the Founder began to outline his plan.

“Okay, so that’s pretty much settled. Here’s the plan I’ve come up with, Tiara.”

Although Tiara provided the technical details, it was Kanami who took the lead. They were better suited to different things, after all. As if returning to the master-disciple relationship of the past, Tiara listened to Kanami’s modern ideas with a twinkle in her eye.

“First we draw out the magic gems of the other Essence Thieves. Then, using all of them, we’ll raise the level limit on Hitaki’s body.”

“Umm, so what you’re saying is, you’re going to make a receptacle—a vessel—for Hitaki’s magic so that the monsterification doesn’t progress? Okay, and then?”

“Then Hitaki’s body, having expanded to fill the vessel, will be brought to the deepest part of the Dungeon, where all the magic of the world will be poured into it. If we do that, the monster part will rise to the top and be sublimated into the higher dimension, curing Hitaki not only of her state of suspended animation, but her original illness as well...at least theoretically.”

“The...higher dimension? Gathering all the magic power... Isn’t that what Sith was planning?”

“It’s the only way. It’s a necessary component to overcome the *Logic* of ‘Hitaki dies.’ I know that the treatment Sith talked about would have been perfect had it been successful. That’s what I think now, anyway.”

Even though it was a thousand years later, I was struggling to make sense of everything.

Kanami the Founder was speaking theoretically, but it was the magic theory of another world. In that time period, the words “logic” and “deepest part” might have been common sense, but they weren’t ringing any bells for me.

“Or rather, weren’t all of the Essence Thieves consumed by the continent? No matter how hard we try, we won’t be able to gather more than three of them...”

“Correct. So I’m thinking of a collection system for gems that were consumed by the continent, which, coincidentally, is an easy way to open the path to the

deepest level of this world as well. Heh, the time to resume *that* plan has finally arrived!”

“Hm? What plan?”

“Have you forgotten? We talked about it a long time ago. *The Dungeon*.” Kanami smiled meaningfully. Even though his body had been corrupted into that of a monster, that smile was as pure as a child’s.

“Seems like you’re back to being yourself, Teach.” Tiara was delighted.

“Please help me, Tiara. I plan to use the method you came up with in the Dungeon to draw out the magic gems. If we can perfect this Dungeon, we’ll surely be able to revive Hitaki.”

“Hmm, but a lot of problems remain. Even if we gather magical energy from the world into Hitaki, her soul is still sleeping. And about her body...well...” Tiara trailed off. It looked like she was desperately trying to choose her words with care but couldn’t come up with the right ones. From her expression, I could guess at the condition of Hitaki’s body. It was likely worse than Kanami the Founder’s.

“It’s okay. I will move her body. I’ll bring it to the deepest level of this world.”

Those words made my skin crawl. If that was true, then I was...

“What do you mean by move?”

“I’ll put my soul gem into her body, and temporarily take over. Of course, Hitaki’s soul gem will be in there at the same time. It will be the birth of the Thief of Dimension and Water’s Essence—no, together it should be the Thief of the Space-Time Current’s Essence, right?”

“Huuuh? Teach, you plan to die?! No matter what you put into Hitaki’s body right now, it’ll turn into a monster, right? You won’t be able to do anything; you’ll just go crazy!”

“Before that, I will, of course, perform a level down. As planned, Hitaki’s body will now be consumed by the continent and returned to level 1. I’m talking about after that. I’ll calculate how many years the purification will take after this. In any case, after the level down purifies her body, I will put in the magic

gems of both the Thief of Water's Essence and the Thief of Dimension's Essence. Then, with both of the gems together, I will go through the proper process of gathering magic and leveling up."

"Hm, mm-hmm, that seems kind of difficult. What do you mean by the 'proper process'?"

"In the Dungeon, we will gather lots of magic gems from the Essence Thieves in the right order. If we do that, our magic power will grow naturally without us transforming into a monster. Then, when we're the highest level and reach the deepest level, my soul will be drawn out and Hitaki will come back. The cured Hitaki will be completed. Yes, that's how I'll do it. It's perfect."

"I'm sure you can do it, but...I feel like there are a lot of holes in your plan..."

"I know. This is just the general overview; from here, I'll start filling the holes."

Tiara began going over the issues she'd noticed with Kanami one by one. Just listening to them fill in the gaps was giving me a headache. The existence of these two had become a legend after a thousand years. The powers of magical construction they were talking about were crossing over into the divine realm.

After they'd finished their careful brainstorming session, Tiara frowned. "It's a little scary. Particularly the fact that I have to remove your magic gem!"

"Relax, Tiara. I have no intention of leaving you behind again. I'll save my own body on the deepest level. When we make it there, the three of us will be reunited. A happy ending, right?"

"But only if it works..."

"It will definitely work. There're a lot of problems, but with enough time it will be okay. Let's stay positive. I believe in you."

"Okay...you're right, Teach. Positive thinking."

There were many obstacles, and they might even fail again. But even so, they raised their faces and laughed. They were uneasy, but I felt hope radiating from them. Just their expressions made me feel that way. My face broke into a smile as if I was part of the conversation. No, there was no mistaking that I *was* part

of it. I wouldn't make any more mistakes. After hearing their conversation, many truths had been uncovered.

"Are you done talking?" the third person interrupted in a voice that sounded slightly depressed in comparison to the cheerful voices of the other two, unbecoming the face of a child.

Kanami the Founder, who was just about finished filling in the gaps in his plan, responded, "Yes, we're done. A thousand years from now, Hitaki's body should be leveled down to level 1. Then, I will put my own soul gem in, and gather magic in the form of collection drops in the Dungeon while aiming for the deepest level. I can't avoid being weak, but since Tiara will also be reborn in a thousand years, it will be okay."

Tiara supplemented that explanation. "My rebirth will be actualized by my Holy magic and Fresh Blood magic since I can't level down."

"The new skill is already prepared as well. Since it's a direct connection between two magic gems, it's quite strong. I haven't decided on a name yet, though."

"Heh, I wonder what kind of name would be best, since it's a skill for bringing Hitaki to the deepest level? I'm sure we'll think of something cool!"

With this indication that their plan was progressing well, they continued laughing as they talked. All that remained was to push onward to the happy ending. Their expressions again convinced me of this. But there was one person...

"Hm? What's the matter, Regacy?" Kanami asked, seeing that the child seemed to be dissatisfied.

In response, the child looked uneasy as he asked. "Big brother Kanami, is this really the end?"

"Yes, this is the end. It's all thanks to you that we were able to make it this far. Thank you, Regency."

"The end..." was all he said in return. The child seemed extremely dissatisfied, almost in inverse proportions to the satisfaction that Kanami and Tiara were expressing. Something wasn't enough. As it stood, something was insufficient.

But I wasn't sure what that *something* was. I could see that he was afflicted by a feeling of emptiness. I suspected I knew what lay behind that feeling.

The memory sped up again. If my guess was correct, this Apostle Regacy would betray them. If what Palinchron had said earlier was also correct, it would be a betrayal that benefited Regacy.

After the memory had fast-forwarded far enough, I saw a scene where Kanami the Founder was creating the Dungeon on the land where the war had ended. It was also where Tiara was trying to form a religion and create a country to act as a foundation for the next thousand years. Everything seemed to be going well. Kanami the Founder only made one miscalculation.

It was just before the Dungeon was set to be completed that Regacy stabbed Kanami in the back, laughing as Kanami screamed.

“Aha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Kanami!”

“Regacy?! You! Why?! Youuu!!!”

Just like that, the final battle began, but Kanami, caught by surprise, had no way to fight back. He was about to remove his soul gem, so he was unable to use most of his power. Regacy's ability must've been the cunning that came with age. He'd waited a long time, made sufficient preparations, and then betrayed Kanami at the most advantageous time.

Kanami was forced to execute an incomplete plan. The Dungeon was nearing completion, and only a few more rules needed to be added. All that was left, really, was to decide on the Rules for Memories and the Guardians, and then name the skills and the Dungeon.

However, that was never completed, and Kanami was swallowed up by the Dungeon after he and Regacy stabbed each other to death. In other words, the Rules of the Dungeon were missing just their core. An incomplete Dungeon with incomplete skills, incomplete memories, and an incomplete soul. That's what had made Lorwen say, “It ain't like...” back then.

This was the reason I'd lost my memories. Regacy had taken them from me so he could play with me again a thousand years later. It was all to create this precarious “do-over.” And now it *was* a thousand years later. But for me it'd

only been a few weeks. Finally, the eras were connected. I woke up in the dark corridor of the Dungeon I had created. Like I'd just wandered into this other world for the first time, it all began again.

【SUMMON】: Welcome back, Aikawa Kanami.

Having received that message, my trembling voice managed, "Wha... What is this?"

I was as frightened as if I'd been kidnapped, despite being in the Dungeon of my own making. I began to run, half crazed, not knowing what was going on. I watched myself run away. I didn't need to chase after the memory any further; I already knew what happened next. I'd seen everything I wanted to see. Me from a thousand years ago and me from now were connected. Therefore, *that* skill's goal was reached and activated. As Ms. Wyss had said, this was everything.

The following skill has activated: ???
Emotions restored by overcoming the past.
-1.00 to Confusion

It wasn't a way to escape anymore. I could use it at will. I'd found it, the real purpose of that skill. It was mine. I had the memories of how it had come to be. And now it was time to give it a real name.



I returned to the present after my journey through the memories. Because of the World Restoration Array and the Thief of Darkness's Essence, everything was still engulfed in the light of darkness. The battlefield that looked like a rehash of a thousand years ago. I was on my knees behind Palinchron and Liner, who were fighting.

That's right...me. I could finally say it clearly. I am Aikawa Kanami. But strictly speaking even that wasn't quite right. The body I was currently inhabiting belonged to that of Aikawa Hitaki, who'd undergone a purifying level down to

level 1. Furthermore, there were two soul gems inside this body. It was no longer clear whose body or personality it really was.

But I was me. Thanks to Ms. Wyss, I'd gotten my answer. I finally understood.

"Sieg! Have you come to your senses?" Liner called out to me, noticing my awakening. He was covered in wounds.

I stood up in response. I'd answered to the name Sieg instead of Kanami. In other words, I didn't mind that name. I was no longer fearful of Dia calling me that, and no longer minded it. I was Sieg and Kanami, and Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago, and Aikawa Kanami and even, in a certain sense, Hitaki. I could use whatever name I wanted. I knew it was wrong, but I was going to push through it anyway. That's what it meant to live as a human.

It wasn't just something restricted to being a Jewelculus. There must be times when everyone loses sight of themselves and doubts even their own name. Surely there were times when a person couldn't even recognize themselves in the mirror. It was just easier for Jewelculi to fall into that trap. I wasn't the only one who had suffered. Around the world, everyone was putting on a brave face to live. Ms. Wyss and Liner, even Palinchron, my enemy... Without exception, all of them—

"Ha, ha ha! Aha ha ha ha!" I laughed at that answer. I couldn't do anything else. I guess that's why Ms. Wyss was so cheerful in her final moments.

"Jeez, why? Why didn't I notice! I'm not a Jewelculus! I'm *me*! All of my battles up until now have meant something! Seriously! And now..."

The fog of anxiety that had covered my field of vision cleared, followed by the dark cloud of suspicion that had been clinging to my thoughts. The battlefield was so dark, but the world was so bright. I stepped firmly on the ground that seemed like the bottom of the world and took a deep breath in the darkness. I could breathe. That alone filled me with happiness. This was the first time I had ever thought that air tasted good. My heart beat faster, but I didn't have any terrifying visions of it bursting open. I could only think of it as proof that my life had been revitalized. I felt a surge of power from inside my body.

"Hitaki was there. Inside me! I'm sure of it!" I muttered to myself, clutching my trembling chest. I felt like I'd been reborn. Just as Ms. Wyss had said, all of

the pieces were there. I could see all of the things that I couldn't see before. I had searched and searched for Hitaki's whereabouts—and it was me the whole time.

“She was in here! I was protecting my most precious thing this whole time! I definitely heard her! Hitaki's voice was inside me!”

I wrapped my arms around myself. It was like there was only one heartbeat, but they were layered on top of each other. I could hear the beating of two souls.

“I have two gems in me! My own Thief of Dimension's Essence gem *and* Hitaki's Thief of Water's Essence gem! There are two!”

I opened my eyes and picked my sword up off the ground. Not even a single ounce of the physical exhaustion that had been eating away at me remained. I was overflowing with magic power, and I extended my consciousness out to the ??? skill that was crawling closer to me.

“Then this skill isn't one that steals my emotions!!!”

The true nature of this skill wasn't to get rid of my emotions. It was a skill I had created so I wouldn't have to rely on the mere strength of my level. It was a skill I had created so that no matter what, I wouldn't give up on saving Hitaki. The essence of it was *true growth*. In the past I must've known that I would reach a dead end if I only strengthened myself with magic power and magic gems. If I only got stronger in power, then I was no different than a monster. That was my past self's biggest mistake.

That was why I would focus on a different kind of power. In short, the strength of my spirit—the strength to fight against destiny—values that couldn't be expressed in numbers. Kanami the Founder had fully realized that he had a weak spirit. He'd understood that his soul bent easily to things like “birth” and “destiny.” He must've regretted that he'd been saved by the younger Tiara. He had always been convinced that there were feelings he could not accept due to his immaturity. Therefore, he had created a skill that would grant him a grace period until he could fully accept them. Therefore, this skill wasn't meant to be used to *throw away*, but to *overcome*. It also wasn't a skill to keep me from dying. The ??? was meant to keep *Hitaki* from dying. It was a

failure as a skill, incomplete, without even a name, but even so, it was indeed a skill that I had created in order to deliver Hitaki to the deepest level.

And now it's time to finally give it a name, I thought. It's because of names that magic and skills are truly effective. It's because of names that the mind is enlivened, thoughts become power, and words become power that can act on the world. Therefore, I just had to think as I pleased and give it the name that I wanted.

I am someone who aims for the deepest levels of the Dungeon. I swore to make it, for my sister. A thousand years ago and now, that was the only thing that hadn't changed. So if I were to give this skill a name...

"Now is the time to guide me! *Double Covenantor!*"

I named it after my oath to arrive at the deepest level. Now, finally named after a thousand years, the menu display of the spell changed as well.

The following skill has activated: Double Covenantor
Emotions restored by overcoming the past.

-1.00 to Confusion

One by one, the emotions that had been hidden away by the skill returned. Of course, that included the numerous bad emotions like despair, loneliness, impatience, humiliation, stress, discomfort, fear, and contamination. But they were at a degree where my present self could overcome all of them. The day I'd lost my memories and gotten lost in the Dungeon at Level 1, I hadn't been able to take much in. I'd been alone that day. I hadn't believed I was in a different world. I'd been scared and hadn't wanted to die.

But everything was okay now. I could now finally praise myself for being strong in the truest sense of the word. My brave front had turned into true bravery. All of the memories inside me were the real thing. Bad feelings had filled my heart, but I'd beaten them all down.

Then I moved. I moved forward to help Liner, who'd gotten completely battered while defending me. "Liner, you really saved me. Leave the rest to me!"

“A little late there, Sieg!” He had been fighting Palinchron alone the whole time I’d been unable to move. Even now his sword was locked with the black blades as he held Palinchron at bay. He didn’t have many wounds, but a lot of the black liquid was sticking to him. I understood that he’d believed I would rally and had withstood the enemy attacks for me.

To repay his trust, I slashed my sword at Palinchron. “I’m sorry! But it’s okay now! I will defeat Palinchron!”

I moved straight ahead without worrying about the black liquid sticking to me. As long as I had *Double Covenantor*, the mental magic wouldn’t be a threat. I joined the clash of swords to help Liner, who was being pushed back.

“Tch?! Ha, ha ha! Did you return on your own, boy? It used to take so much mental magic for you to get back on your feet!” Palinchron laughed in surprise and tried to push back with his black blade. It seemed he hadn’t expected me to recover from the *Repayment* of my ??? skill.

“Yes, I returned! And now I know everything! I know all the secrets you were keeping from me! What’s a Jewelculus? It’s not me! You’re just a big liar!!!”

“Tch! You’re right about that! So, you figured everything out? Ha ha, and I was so sure of myself! How was it? It was an interesting fiction, wasn’t it, brother?!” Seeing the expression on my face, he gracefully admitted that he’d lied. And I admired him for it.

“Yes, you tricked me! It was a really horrible lie!”

“I lied from the beginning to make sure Wyss believed it! I was sure I could fool her all the way to the end.”

“But that ends here too!!!” My mind and body were in perfect harmony, and I let my magic overflow out of me. It was as if the long sickness I’d felt had been a lie, and the magic burst forth from me like a fountain.

Next to me, Liner was also filled with magical energy. He seemed to sense the end of the battle was near as he heard my declaration and concentrated on Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, squeezing every last bit of magic out of himself and into the sword. “I’m going to give it all I’ve got, Mr. Lorwen!!!”

Upon hearing its name, the magic gem in his hand pulsed. The twin swords were enveloped in the crystal of the Thief of Earth's Essence. As the mass of the swords increased, the antagonistic clash between Liner's two blades and Palinchron's black one began to shift in our favor. The crystal, invulnerable to everything, was about to slice through the black blade. Naturally, Palinchron couldn't remain silent as he, in turn, tried to increase the mass of his black blade.

"I'll freeze it all! Hitaki!" As I called her name, my magic gems pulsed as well. The black liquid that was trying to strengthen Palinchron's blade was frozen by the cold air of the Thief of Water's Essence. Instead of increasing the mass of the blade, its strength was damaged by the freeze. Naturally, the black blade shattered, unable to withstand the sharpness of the twin crystal swords. At the same time, the crystal covering Liner's sword also shattered.

"Go, Sieg!!!" As he'd said, he'd used up all of his power. With that final blow, Liner reached his limit and fell to the ground along with the scattered crystals.

Beneath the power of the two magic gems, Palinchron lost his black blade. He had nothing more with which to defend himself. Even so, I took all possible precautions as I attacked with my full power.

"Freeze, Palinchron! *Ice Flamberge!!!*" The ice sword slashed his torso, immediately freezing the wounds. That cold air froze him to the very core, depriving him of freedom. There was absolutely no way to repair the damage. That cold air contained the "essence" of water. The "essence" that stops the world.

All of Palinchron's flowing liquid came to a stop. The ruthless magic, which could stop even the pulse of life, invaded his body. Then, when I swung my sword, his body was pretty much completely frozen. This wasn't normal. It wasn't *just* freezing. What I froze included more than just matter—space and time, and even magic. That was the true power of the Thief of Water's Essence, the ultimate freezing.

Palinchron backpedaled rapidly, having taken that entire violative blow with his body. Understanding the abnormality of his body, he began to laugh. "What is this? It's not something I can't recover from. My magic isn't flowing. I can't

use it at all. Such a cowardly thing to do.”

Being unable to use magic was fatal in this world. Magic ability formed one’s status and allowed the casting of spells. Taking that away, all that was left was his physical strength, which was lower than that of a child. I was confident in my victory.

Palinchron was also convinced of his defeat. “Damn... It’s all over. Legacy, Tida...look’s like I’ve lost, huh?” He checked in with the Apostle and Guardian contained within his body.

I was panting, out of breath from casting the strongest ice spell ever. The last clash hadn’t been a comfortable, overwhelming victory. If Liner hadn’t forced me, I wouldn’t have been able to slay Palinchron so perfectly. It was a good victory—it could’ve gone either way.

That was why Palinchron’s face was so contorted. “This... This last emotion...is what I really feel... Ha ha, it’s more frustrating than I thought it would be. Oh, it’s frustrating... So frustrating...”

This was the first time I’d seen Palinchron like that. As if to express his frustration, the black ground beneath his feet trembled.

“No, I don’t want to lose. No matter what it takes, I don’t want to lose.” Palinchron repeated that over and over.

I could sense the danger in his expression, and I gripped my sword tighter.

“Now that we’ve had a chance to play, have your lingering attachments been resolved? Are you satisfied with the fight? Isn’t it all about winning? Is the journey more important than the destination? Is it about having fun? Huh? No, it’s not. That’s not what fighting’s about! Why are you fighting?! Isn’t it because there’s something important that you can’t give up?”

No matter how much Palinchron muttered his spells, his magic was unresponsive. He couldn’t summon monsters, repair limbs, manipulate liquids, build magic, or do anything else. If he was unlucky, he could be defeated by a child in this state. And yet, instead of waning, his will to fight only burned stronger.

“I finally figured it out! Yeah, I just happened to lose sight of my wish a bit! It’s

all a misunderstanding! I've been a much, much greedier person than you guys! I don't just want to fight. I want to win! I don't just want to play with Kanami, I want to surpass him! That's right! My goal is to prove that I won't lose to anyone! That's what I wanted! I wasn't fighting for fun! I've been fighting to win!"

I felt chills, despite being bathed in his heated battle cry. I'd pushed forward on the path Ms. Wyss had shown me, and I'd won a complete victory, there was no doubt about it. There was no possible way for Palinchron to win. There was no doubt about that either. This was a unique opportunity to interrogate the enigmatic man. But instead I obeyed my sense of foreboding and ran forward to finish him off. However—

"I'll win! I'm not going to let you beat me!"

"Huh?!"

Both of us stopped dead at the completely unexpected turn of events. The magic gem of the Thief of Darkness's Essence spilled out of Palinchron's chest as he continued to curse. It just plopped out, without any fanfare. He'd dropped the source of his power. And then, Palinchron's black body burst open. Like mist, the part of the body that had been proof of his lack of humanity was scraped away, and his body reverted to that of a normal human being. I'd seen something similar before. It was like when Maria had plucked out her eyes and expelled Alty, the Thief of Fire's Essence, from her body. I knew this was the same. Both Palinchron and I had the same expression on our faces because of the abruptness of it. For a moment, time stopped for both of us.

"Huh? No, wait, why? Did Tida get out? Did our friendship break down? With such horrible timing?" He processed the situation first and gaped at the stone on the ground. But he quickly collected himself again. He seemed to realize something and comprehend the situation. "No, that's not right. Is it because of the timing of this? Is it because of this that finally... Is he trying to send me off as a grown up? Ha ha..." He gave something up, and at the same time his body relaxed with an air of satisfaction.

I was still staring at the magic stone. I would retrieve it immediately if I could be certain that this wasn't another one of his traps. If only this gem were gone,

there would no longer be any strength comparable to mine. This was the reason Palinchron was even able to fight me at all. It was, so to speak, the root of all evil.

“Hey, Palinchron, I’m gonna take Tida’s gem.” I probed cautiously at his apparent surrender.

He nodded after a beat. “Ah, yeah, that’s fine. You can have it if you want. It was yours to begin with, anyway, brother.”

With that, he backed a step away from the gem. He responded as if he’d only dropped a few cents on the ground, not a magic stone that could change the course of an entire country. I hesitated a little, unable to read his true intentions. I wasn’t convinced it wasn’t a trap. Palinchron had lost his monster powers and seemingly returned to being a normal human. His body was on the verge of death, still unable to use magic because of my ice. His limbs couldn’t even move properly. There was no doubt about it, he was a dead man, but he still hadn’t given up the game. There was still a light in his eyes, a light that convinced me he wouldn’t give up until the very end, no matter what.

“Come on, pick it up, brother.” He encouraged me to pick it up off the ground as he kept his distance.

I flinched away from him. I couldn’t let my guard down. The fight wasn’t over yet. Knowing Palinchron, he could still turn the tables on me. I trusted him in that regard, at least. Therefore I kept a sufficient amount of magic at the ready as I took a step forward, staying in a battle stance.

Then I ran for the magic gem. Matching me, Palinchron retreated backward like he’d been sent flying. I judged from his actions that the gem itself wasn’t a trap, and I picked it up with one hand while strengthening the grip on my sword with the other.

At the same time, Palinchron thrust his right hand into the ground.

“What?!”

I immediately went to slash at him, but before I could make contact, there was a bright flash of light. It was a geyser of magic. It was immediately obvious to me that Palinchron had failed in trying to use his own magic. The skin on his

right arm burst open due to his recklessness. Countless blood vessels burst, and red blood splattered everywhere. No matter how I looked at it, it was self-destruction. Even so, he still tried to connect to the earth by physically digging at it with his now useless arm. It was the same method Ms. Wyss and I used to create connections. He touched the World Restoration Array directly, appealing to it and interfering with it.

“Shit! I really can’t use my magic anymore! I’ve lost the power of both the Essence Thief and the Apostle! My body is melting away and I have no strength left to fight! But so what?! I’m still alive, and I won’t stop until I’m killed!”

Ultimately, Palinchron was still unable to use his magic. Not a drop of power passed through his right arm. But the World Restoration Array was pulsing. That was impossible. A single drop of magic was required to interfere with it. However, as if in response to Palinchron’s wish, the leyline began to glow again and tremble loudly. In the face of this miracle, I reconsidered the power of the man in front of me. I ran forward to give my enemy the end he deserved.

“I understand! I’m not afraid of the power of the Essence Thief or Apostle! I can’t forgive you because you’re you! I won’t be defeated by you!”

“Because I’m me?! Ha, ha ha, ha ha ha ha! That’s the way it’s gotta be! This is the final round! Brother! This Palinchron will do anything to win!!!” With that cry, the earth cracked like a cookie crumbling. The magnitude of the earthquake was far greater than the previous ones. The earth, which had already been deformed by the past quakes, became even more broken, and countless cracks spread. The collapse blocked my way.

“My final move is simple! If I can’t beat you, brother, then I’ll just throw Kanami the Founder at you! The hero will have to face the monster that is Kanami! This is the ultimate goal of the World Restoration Array!”

A sinister magical power rose from the cracked earth. It sucked in all the magic in the air and rapidly condensed it. Then it materialized in the same way as when a monster was summoned. However, it was being formed into the shape of a human. An unprecedented sense of dread filled my body. My survival instinct warned me that this wasn’t good. *Responsiveness* told me the same thing.

“I won’t let you!!!” I managed to run across the difficult terrain to swing my sword at Palinchron. But it bounced off with a high-pitched screech. A magical scale barrier was floating in the air, protecting him. Then flesh attached to those scales. Blood vessels and muscles formed, and a heart was born at the center of it. From its construction, I could tell that a person was being summoned.

Palinchron happily explained its identity. “He’s the monster that was abandoned on the deepest level! The husk of Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago! As you know, there’s no soul inside it! Therefore, he’s a true monster that operates only on the instincts ingrained in its body!”

It wasn’t a human, but the cast-off shell of a monster named Kanami the Founder. I knew it was really him. I’d just seen the conclusion of what had happened a thousand years ago.

“Shit!” I intuited all of that with my soul, not with theory. The soul gem of the Thief of Dimension’s Essence pulsed inside me. I even felt nostalgic. Every cell in me was screaming, *That’s definitely my body!*

Kanami the Founder. Someone beyond legendary, who had survived even when the world had turned against him. He was the Founder, a monster, a mere shadow of Aikawa Kanami.

The summoning finished. It wasn’t just his insides, the exterior of the monster had also been recreated perfectly. His cloak was covered in soot, like he was a ghost, and even now he wore a black mask that was weathered and looked ready to fall apart. Only a single, glittering, black eye shone from the holes in the mask. The body was in bad shape. He’d lost an eye, his right arm, and left leg, and the skin I could see was covered in sores. The missing parts of his body had been replaced by parts from other creatures. There were fish scales in place of skin, a bundle of flesh resembling a tentacle hung from his right arm, which was missing from the elbow down, and a black haze of magic erupted from his missing left leg. A bandage was wrapped under his cloak to hide his horribly disfigured body. Like Alty’s had been, it was a bandage with small letters scrawled on it. Honestly, compared to my memory of a thousand years ago, the creature before me looked a lot less like a monster. However, I was convinced that it was the Kanami of a thousand years ago, and I immediately looked at its menu.

【STATUS】

NAME: Aikawa Kanami

HP: 3/1,733

MP: 2/3,92

As soon as I looked at his name, the man’s mask crumbled to dust. Black hair, just like mine, spilled over his face. It was long and disheveled, and clearly hadn’t been taken care of for a long time. Beneath the black hair was a face identical to mine. His eyes were hollow, cheeks sunken, but it was definitely my face.

That face was twisted and his mouth hung open. “AAA! AAAAAAAAAH!!!” A vindictive voice that I could hardly believe was even human came out of that mouth. Even though the voice was unintelligible to humans, I could tell that it was a heavy, dispirited voice full of mourning.

My heart ached as if it were being torn apart just listening to it. Right now this monster was pathetic. It was too much. How could I think of this as someone else’s problem? This was me. It was my past and also my future—what awaited me after I accumulated magic power.

My face contorted as I was confronted with this reality. Meanwhile, Palinchron remained unfazed and moved on to his next action. He ran behind Kanami the Founder and shouted. “Tsk! Not enough magicbane. Oh well! Kanami the Founder! You probably can’t hear anything, but listen up! Feel it—your sister is right there! Your sister’s—Hitaki’s—body and magic gem!”

It was outrageous. But Kanami, who’d been as dumbfounded as a newborn baby, turned to look at me. A faint light flashed in his remaining eye.

There was no doubt about it, this Kanami had no soul. The magic gem of the Thief of Dimension’s Essence—in other words, his soul—was inside of me. That was why, even though I was inhabiting Hitaki’s body, I still *looked* like Aikawa Kanami. The monster in front of me had nothing inside of it. It probably didn’t even have consciousness, let alone reason. Even so, Kanami the Founder, or rather, Aikawa Kanami, moved. In search of something more important than his

own lost soul, he moved even though only his body was left.

“Aa■■AH! AaA■■■! HI-HIDA■! Aah! HI■KIHITAKIII!!!” He yelled out that important name. He didn’t spare a glance at Palinchron. He looked only at me as he extended his hand like a madman.

“You want me! No, is it Hitaki’s soul gem inside me that you want?!” Even though his own soul was right there, he was still only looking for his sister’s. Even though he had lost everything and was completely mindless, the creature called Kanami was still searching for his sister. It was terrifying. Since it only involved me, I felt both fear and sympathy. It was painful to watch the body move without a soul. That’s why I felt that I had to be the one to guide this monster to its final resting place.

“Ha ha! Kanami the Founder! Take back what’s most important to you with your own hands!” Palinchron cheered him on.

“Is that how much you want to beat me, Palinchron? Damn it! You’re the worst kind of persistent! Die!!!” I shouted back.

“Yes! I want to win by any means necessary! I’m sorry, but that’s just who I am!” He laughed. He didn’t seem at all offended. He actually looked happy that I was verbally abusing him. I figured it was pointless to be concerned about him, so I turned to face my new opponent and prepared for the fight by taking a closer look at his menu.

【STATUS】
NAME: Ai...:■ .:■ ■
HP: ...:3/1,7■3
MP: 2■.:1/3,■92
Level 46
STR 31.5■
VIT 3■.1.:
DEX 49...:.
AGI ■0.■ ■
INT 4■.12
MAG 12■044.23

APT ■.0.:

Kanami the Founder's stats wouldn't display correctly. It seemed like it wasn't only his body that was unstable. I felt a fragility that couldn't be described in words, as if he could disappear at any moment like a mirage. And beyond that, I felt a sense of danger. His level was high, but it was his skills that were truly terrifying. The fact that everything else was displaying normally except for his status made it even more frightening.

INNATE SKILLS: Dimension Magic 9.23

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Magic 1.02, Spellcraft 5.89, Spell Manipulation 4.33, Concentration 2.45, Bloodknack 1.01

Swordplay 1.22, Spearmanship 1.11, Archery 2.01, Thrown Weapons 1.99, Martial Arts 2.07, Assessment 1.12

Magical Combat 6.56, Weapon Combat 2.34, Observant 1.23, Inspiring Presence 1.14, Provocative Presence 1.00

Household Chores 2.45, Cooking 1.23, Confectionery 2.22, Sewing 1.34, Knitting 1.77

Swimming 1.04, Underwater Movement 0.77, Fishing 0.98, Gathering 1.33, Hunting 1.15

Alchemy 1.22, Smithing 3.02, Medicine Man 1.22, Music 1.66, Koto 1.12, Inciting Presence 1.00

Leadership 1.01, Optimal Moves 1.88, Swindling 2.34, Diplomacy 1.23, Con Artist 1.34

Brainwashing 1.45, Animal Handling 1.98, Business 2.01, Stewardship 2.12, Workmanship 1.22

Thievery 1.11, Life Support 1.67, Assassination 1.23

And there were still more. There were too many to count in the middle of a fight. The myriad skills, which must have been acquired in the battles of a

thousand years ago, were a clear indication of the threat that he posed. He was a formidable foe who couldn't be trifled with.

Kanami used one of the skills from his repertoire that had the highest numbers next to it.

“AAAAH! *Dimension: Torsion!!!*”

Even though I couldn't make out his words, I knew for certain what that spell meant. His magic was flawless, even though it came from such an unstable body. He used the magic that was ingrained in him, like it was natural. That's how it looked, at least. He was fighting on instinct, and I decided to give up on the idea of using words to persuade him. I had no other choice but to kill him, even if he was my past self.

“I can't lose here! Not even to myself! *Midgard Freeze!*”

A cloud of magic about the size of a palm poured from Kanami the Founder's arm, and I released my ice serpent. The difference in size was obvious. However, his magic was much denser than mine, and colorless. His personal magic was purple, but it had been turned lean and transparent through perfect construction of the spell.

The mass of magic bloomed, or so I assumed even though it was transparent, as it warped the space around it. The twisting of the space created an optical illusion that made it appear as if it were blooming. There was no doubt in my mind that the world was being shifted by Dimension magic. Unlike me, Kanami the Founder used his power freely.

The transparent flower and the ice serpent collided head on. My serpent was immediately twisted and shattered the moment they touched. It was like I was looking at a trompe l'oeil. The small flower wasn't swallowed up by the serpent and instead defeated the snake outright, remaining unharmed.

“GaH! AAH! Go! *Torsion!*”

With that yell, the number of transparent flowers increased. Fortunately, it wasn't a fast-moving spell, but even so, the flowers spreading around me posed a threat. They swayed through the air as they drew closer, and I did my best to keep my distance, thinking it would probably be a bad idea to touch them.

“De-AAH-De—*Dimension: Faultline!*”

The air twisted again. I leaped backward to distance myself from him, I knew that much, but I somehow ended up closer to him instead. With just a single word, he had opened up a fault line in the world. Like cutting a cake, the space in front of him was sliced open and removed, causing the laws of distance to collapse. Stuck within that anomaly, I was pulled toward him.

“What?!”

“Aah! AAH! HITAKIIII!” Kanami the Founder shaped a sword of magic from his arm. It wasn’t like the hastily made one I’d done with my Ice magic, but a legitimate, colorless spell-sword created by materializing pure magic.

It swung down at me, and I quickly caught it with my Crystal Pectolazri Straight Sword. There was tremendous power and speed behind his swing, and the impact made it feel like I’d just caught a mountain, throwing me out of my stance. Thanks to *Responsiveness* and *Swordplay*, I was able to avoid the blade itself, but I dropped the Thief of Darkness’s Essence’s magic gem in the process. Even with *Responsiveness* it was bad to be this close. I tried to move away, but it was impossible.

“AAH! *Di—Dimension: Faultline!*” The more I tried to retreat, the more fault lines he created.

“Damn it!” No matter how I moved, I was constantly being drawn into close combat. Having no other choice, I poured as much power as I could into *Responsiveness* so that I could predict my enemy’s movements and go on the defensive. Kanami the Founder had no rationality at this point. He was just following his heart’s desire, and the only thing I could do was rely on my *Swordplay* skill to avoid his attacks. However, his sword was too fast. The difference between our stats was hopeless. He swung his sword, easily surpassing what I considered the limits of human skill. The difference in the density of the magic packed into our bodies was too unequal. And even the *structures* of our bodies were too different.

It was simple, really. The limit I had thought of was just the *human* limit. However, we were way past the level of a human battle. My opponent now was a monster—one that had exceeded even the limits of being a monster.

“Aaaahh! AAAHHHH! Hi—taki, HITAKIHITAKIIIIII!!!” Space distorted again, and his arm shot toward me at a truly unbelievable speed. I immediately tried to block it, but it was suddenly stopped by the magic sword in Kanami’s other hand. He grabbed my shoulder gently so as not to harm Hitaki’s body. His colorless and transparent magic invaded my body through my shoulder. I tried to control my magic to expel his power, but it was unresponsive. I couldn’t get the upper hand. The quality and skill of my magic was overwhelmingly inferior to his.

“Gaah! AAHH! *Distance Mute!*”

He shouted out a new spell and the arm that had been gripping my shoulder easily slipped into my body. From its construction, I could tell it was Dimension magic of the highest order, that it could completely ignore material boundaries. I understood its purpose in the same instant. When he touched my body, he grabbed one of the magic gems inside me.

“Guuuhhh?!” I started screaming. It wasn’t grabbing my heart. It was like something much more delicate than that was being gripped unceremoniously, causing an unprecedented phantom to flood into me. It wasn’t bodily pain, but the pain in my heart caused me to break out in a cold sweat. Determined not to let Kanami have the gem, I tried to break his grasp. “I won’t give it to you! If you’re going to take one, take mine!”

“AAH! AAH! AAH! HITAKIHITAKIHITAKI! HITAKIIII!!!”

My voice wasn’t reaching him. Kanami created another dimensional gap in between us, and when I moved away this time, the distance grew. I shook his arm off aggressively, using spatial magic rather than raw strength. As a result, the magic gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence was pulled out of me.

“Ahh! Damn it! Hitaki!” My beloved sister was being pulled away. Just when I’d found a place for all my precious things, I was mercilessly losing them again. I felt as if Hitaki, who I’d finally felt so close to, had disappeared into the far reaches of time only a short distance away from my body.

Kanami ran away from me, clutching the magic stone he’d wrested from my chest. I couldn’t chase after him. Having lost one of my souls, my mind-body balance was deteriorating, and my body wasn’t moving in the way I wanted it

to.

“Wait! Please don’t take that...” I tried to call Kanami the Founder back. Because I was the same Aikawa Kanami, and I understood his desire to regain the loved ones he had lost a thousand years ago. But that was a mistake. It was wrong. By all rights, the magic gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence belonged to *this* body. And Kanami’s body needed the gem of the Thief of Dimension’s Essence.

However, Kanami, who moved without anything inside his body, was unable to make rational decisions. As instinct dictated, he plunged his arm into his chest and placed the magic gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence into his body. With his body and soul mismatched, the change was immediate. He had acquired Hitaki’s soul. The answer to that calculation began to erode reality.

“Aaah! Hi-ta-ki!” As he called out the name of his most precious person, Kanami the Founder’s body began to warp and change. It wasn’t just the space around him that distorted, but his flesh too.

The magic gem of the Thief of Water’s Essence began absorbing the magic inside his body. However, the blue stone was still sleeping. It was an unconscious absorption. The parts of Kanami that had become monstrous returned to being human. The poison eating away at him was being purified. Of course, that wasn’t the end of the changes. The priority of things in this world placed the soul gem higher than the physical body. Just like my current body, his was being pulled in by the soul gem.

That means the end result will be...

Kanami’s skin began to squirm, changing all the way down to the skeleton. The color and quality of his skin changed, as well as the length and characteristics of his hair. He was becoming a completely different person. The things that made him like Aikawa Kanami were disappearing. The aspects that made him masculine were also disappearing. When it was finished, one girl was reborn into the world.

“Hi...Hitaki?” There was her long, glossy, black hair, all the way to her sickly pale skin. The body shrank and gained a feminine roundness to it. But even besides all that, there was no way I’d ever be able to mistake that face for

anyone else’s. Kanami the Founder’s cast-off skin had become Aikawa Hitaki.

Hitaki, who’d been wrapped up in spelled cloth, lost consciousness and fell over. If the memories were correct, then her magic gem was sleeping. There was no way a single magic gem would be able to wake her up. That made me a little relieved. Having the magic gem taken had been rough, but the situation wasn’t horrible. The fact that the bottomless monster that had been Kanami the Founder had disappeared was good news. So now Palinchron was the only one remaining. I turned my eyes to him just as he was grabbing Tida’s magic gem, which I had dropped.

“Tch! Even if I’d poured all of the magicbane I’d gathered into that creature, it just settled down with a single magic gem! I wish it’d caused more damage while it was a monster! Guess it can’t be helped!”

I started to dash toward him to keep him from taking the gem. However, I was struck with a sudden weakness, as if my knees were about to break.

“Huh?!” I quickly checked my menu.

【STATUS】

Name: Aikawa ■mi

HP: 3■9/3■ ■

MP: .:.:0/■20

CLASS: Diver

LEVEL 2.:

STR 1■.55

VIT 1.:.1■

DEX 17.1■

AGI 20.■ ■

INT .:7.12

MAG 4■...:4

APT ■...:0

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 4...:9, I■e Magic .:.58+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimension Magic 5.26+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Thou■t Str■ms 1.■8, Knitting 1.07, Swindling 1.34, Magical Combat 0.73,

Smithing 0.69, Sewing 0.68
INHERENT SKILLS: Double Covenantor
???:???

The display of certain fields was corrupted. It hadn't been able to keep up with this unexpected situation. I also knew that my body was going into crisis mode. The loss of the Thief of Water's Essence's gem had caused it to go completely out of balance. I had lost the talents of an entire person, and my stats were going down. I ended up with...

【STATUS】
INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79
ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimension Magic
5.26+0.10, Responsiveness 3.56, Knitting 1.07, Swindling
1.34, Magical Combat 0.73, Smithing 0.69, Sewing 0.68
INHERENT SKILLS: Double Covenantor
???:???

Ice magic and Thought Streams were gone, and my Swordplay had decreased a bit. From my comparison and analysis, those three had been Hitaki's skills, not mine. As I was checking everything, my knees continued shaking and I couldn't get my body to relax properly. It was all because I'd been fighting such a fierce battle and had suddenly lost a lot of strength. Because of the change in my breaking point, the fatigue that had built up in my body was no longer manageable.

"Damn it! My body...isn't moving! Even though Hitaki is right there!" It felt as if my body were suddenly made of lead. It was hard to even continue holding my sword.

Palinchron's expression brightened as he caught sight of me. "A lot has happened, but it seems I've succeeded in breaking the ties between you and the Thief of Water's Essence! Even the ice in my body is melting! The sister's soul in the brother's body! The brother's soul in the sister's body! Now neither of you can show your true strengths!"

“You bastard! This was your plan all along!” It was likely this was the true reason Palinchron had prepared the World Restoration Array. By separating Hitaki and me, this body had become unbalanced and sealed away both of our powers. If Ms. Wyss hadn’t appeared, and my spirit had remained weak, it was entirely possible I would’ve given up my will to fight simply by seeing Hitaki asleep.

“As promised, I’ve allowed you to meet Aikawa Hitaki! After all, I’m a man who never breaks his promises! This is such a touching family reunion!” Palinchron laughed again, genuinely amused, and then changed Tida’s gem, that he’d picked up, into a sword. He slashed at me.

“What sort of reunion is this?! Our insides are all mixed up! You were just trying to trick me! Bastard!” I forced myself back into action by shouting, and I followed it up with a swing of my sword.

Our blades crossed. Both swords were lightweight, and since we were both in such bad condition, our strength was pretty evenly matched. We came nose to nose as our swords locked, yelling in each other’s faces.

“But isn’t it just as I promised?!”

“That sort of thing is called fraud!”

Palinchron was laughing. But unlike earlier, his eyes were serious. Maybe he didn’t have any strategies or tricks left. With no extra wiggle room, I could tell he was really giving it his all. Our cheating of each other was over. All that was left was to win. It had become a simple plan. I had thought such an easy plan would mean an easy victory for me, and yet now my body wasn’t strong enough for it. My physical and magical strength were both nearly gone. With the loss of Hitaki’s Swordplay stats, my intuition had gotten all messed up. Even if I tried to use *Wintermension*, I couldn’t control the cold well.

But my opponent was probably facing the same thing. He must have been exhausted from his days of running the battlefield as a general. He’d suffered repeated serious wounds in the various battles with me, and the only reason his dying body was still moving was his sheer willpower. The ejection of Tida’s gem had drastically reduced the overall levels of his abilities. The World Restoration Array trick he’d prepared was also out of power. All that was left was

Swordplay, which he wasn't very good at to begin with.

Our bodies twisted together, trying to wring out the very dregs of our power.

"We each have just one magic gem! We're even! So I won't lose in this final battle! Absolutely not!"

"No, I'll be the last one standing, Palinchron!"

"I will win, Kanami!"

We both felt that if we didn't keep shouting, we would just collapse right there. We swung our swords at each other, trying to keep up the momentum of the fight. But each swing unbalanced us. Even though we were able to fight thanks to pure willpower, our bodies couldn't keep up. We staggered around and repeatedly swung our swords clumsily. It looked bad, and neither of us could say that we looked cool while doing it. But we continued with all our remaining strength. We continued shouting at full force.

"Ha ha ha good! Now that all the fog has lifted, I can see it clearly! I want to win! I really want to win! I want to completely overwhelm you, brother! I want to crush you!"

"Then I will do everything in my power to thwart that wish! Why don't you just let me win?! Just disappear with your regrets! You're the kind of person who should be *more* unhappy!"

At the bottom of the world, where only the sun shone white, we fought like little kids quarreling. However, I thought that this kind of disgraceful fight was the real truth that people reached at the end of their struggles. In that pit, Palinchron and I continued to fight for what we could not give up.

"Ha ha, you won't let me win so easily, huh, brother? You're doing so well in that body! You should've exceeded your limits a long time ago!"

"It's no wonder! A thousand years ago Kanami the Founder moved beyond his limits for the sake of Hitaki! So of course I would move beyond my limits for the sake of that same Hitaki who's sleeping right there!"

"So you can go beyond your limits for your family?! That's your reason?! Sister complexes are scary!"

“Hitaki is more important than anything else! And this body that I’m in is hers too! I can’t let it be injured!” Our sword strikes sped up along with our words. Palinchron was burning up his life like he was trying to make a statement. And so was I. Hitaki was lying right there. In just a few moments, I would be able to hold her hand again. I had no reservations about burning through my life.

“I’ll overwhelm you! *Dimension: Calculash!*” I could see my max HP decrease in my menu, disappearing in place of the MP that I’d already burned down to zero. I didn’t care. Ignoring the screams of my soul, I continued to build up my magic. By feeding on my own life, I developed the strongest Dimension magic ever. I recognized everything within that realm. I had only one thing to think about as I gathered all the fragmented information. The only thing I could think about was defeating the enemy in front of me—Palinchron. *The only thing I could think about was defeating the enemy in front of me, Palinchron.*

Thinking only about that, I swung my sword with all my strength.

“This ends here, Palinchron!!!” The phosphorescent blue of the Crystal Pectolazri Straight Sword glittered in the darkness. I pushed forward relentlessly, and Palinchron had no choice but to retreat.

“Gah! Why do I have to lose?! Even though we’re the same! Neither of us has ties with a magic gem anymore!” Palinchron was not satisfied with his inferiority. I had known him for a long time. I knew the reason he was inferior as my enemy. The reason I was able to construct the best Dimension magic. It was because...

“We’re not the same! I’m different! You think just because I’m in a different body, I can’t use the true strength of the Thief of Dimension’s Essence? No way! I’m Hitaki’s brother! Is there anyone more in tune with her body than I am? We’re siblings! In every world, in every dimension, we have the strongest sibling bond ever!”

My clear-cut answer caused Palinchron’s smile to grow even brighter as he continued to laugh maniacally. Then, as if he would not be defeated for such a silly reason, he redoubled his efforts and his sword strikes became sharper. He was acting like an outnumbered hero as he poured even more power into his blade. “I laugh because you’re so stupid! Even if what you said is true, I won’t

lose! I won't give up until the end! I'm going to win! I'm absolutely going to win!"

As I expected, there was no way he would simply roll over and die. He went beyond all limits, ignored all logic, and clad himself in his eerie purple-black magic to launch a counterattack. But I knew it was coming. I had ended my last move based on the belief that he wouldn't let it end like that. I had laid all the groundwork. All that was left was to surpass my own limits and use my Dimension magic. It was a step beyond the *Dimension: Calculash* that I was currently using.

"Double Covenantor! Return all of my feelings about Hitaki!!!"

My *Double Covenantor* skill activated again. My demand was for restoration, not disposal. I understood now that the ??? skill hadn't just taken away negative emotions. The overly logical sorting of emotions was a testimony to the regrets Kanami had in the past. The skill was proof that he had willingly decided to diminish his feelings for Hitaki until he reached the deepest level, so as not to repeat the same mistakes and cause trouble for Tiara.

As I suspected, nostalgic feelings of love returned to me. Every time I used the ??? skill, I had shaved away some of my feelings for Hitaki. And now the love between brother and sister, which I'd thought was still full, was further increasing in volume. On my first day in the Dungeon, these feelings had so swept me away that I'd panicked. That was only natural. On that day, at that time, Hitaki's presence had been too far away. The thoughts that had run through me only turned to impatience and led to self-destruction.

But the situation was different now. Unlike that first day, she was right here now. I knew that I was where Hitaki had been kept. So there was no more reason to rush. No more reason to be fearful.

"I will reach Hitaki! I will connect that path! Dimension: Calculash—Realize!" The fact that the magic gem of the Thief of Dimension's Essence was the only one remaining in my body was what led me to choose Dimension magic. The magic power, separated from the freezing properties, led me to Dimension's Essence. My construction of the spell didn't change, it was my usual *Dimension: Calculash*, but my perception was different than before.

For a moment, one brief moment, the number of dimensions that I could perceive increased by only one, but it completely changed the meaning of the magic. An axis of time that could be called *Flow* was inserted into the three-dimensional space of length, width, and height. With that alone, the visible world was stretched out endlessly, and my sense of time was completely rewritten.

This power was close to what one might call “precognition,” but, strictly speaking, it was different. The true value of this magic lay elsewhere. As the Thief of Dimension’s Essence, I instinctively understood that. At the moment, I was still unable to manipulate all of Dimension’s Essence, and I could only feel the fourth dimension. Therefore, my power was limited to a pseudo-precognition—but it was more than enough to break parity in this competitive battle.

Dimension: Calculash—Realize could perfectly predict Palinchron’s next move. His sword traced the path that I had foreseen, and I moved my own in accordance with his. As a result, the two swords crossed each other beautifully, as if by predestination.

“Huh?!” Only Palinchron’s black sword was flung away, whirling off into the circle of white sun.

We followed its arc with our eyes, then looked up at the sky from a world darker than the depths of darkness and were slightly dazzled by the light shining down. As I squinted, the black sword pierced the distorted ground a fair distance away. In order for Palinchron to reach it, he would have to pass me. I readjusted my grip on my sword, determined not to let him by.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. It would be too difficult to get past me empty-handed, and the distance was too great. He heaved a sigh. “Oh, damn it.”

This was the moment he was truly defeated. Having let go of Tida’s magic gem, his body was being turned into particles of magic, just like with Ms. Wyss and the soldiers. But he still showed no sign of stopping the World Restoration Array. It seemed he was telling the truth when he said he could no longer stop it.

Palinchron knelt on the ground as he lost flesh and muscle. “Even though I came so far, I can’t even make it a draw... I’ve done everything a man called Palinchron can, okay? I’ve given it everything I have. But it still wasn’t enough...” he muttered, looking completely frustrated.

I listened to him, keeping my sword vigilantly pointed at him. It seemed like he wanted to keep fighting. “Palinchron, it’s over. Be satisfied with this.”

“Ha ha, no way. The only ones who could be satisfied with this are you idiots...” He shook his head as his legs began to dissolve. He quickly put his hands out to catch himself, but they had already disappeared.

He ended up lying on the ground like a caterpillar. But even so, it looked like he wouldn’t stop fighting. More precisely, it looked like he planned to crawl toward Tida’s sword, which was sticking out of the ground far away. He hadn’t lost his will to fight.

“Yes, that’s right... If I don’t win, there’s no way I can be satisfied. It’s not enough. It’s never enough.” Even though he wanted to fight, there was a harsh reality to face. No matter how frantically he crawled, his efforts were fruitless, and he barely moved. He was at his limit, completely.

“Palinchron, this is goodbye.” He could disappear at any moment, so I gave him my parting words. He turned his head toward me when he heard his name.

“Ha ha ha, you can’t say goodbye yet! Because I...I...can’t just...give up on our...game!”

Even now he was laughing, just like always. It was hateful, disgusting, and hostile. Even as his vocal cords were melting away, he forced his throat to make sounds, but they were muffled and inaudible. Still, I knew he wasn’t going to give up until the very end.

“Not yet... I can’t...give up... I can still...win... I can still...still... Aaaah... Aaaaahhhhhhh.” Palinchron disappeared slowly, his particles of magic dancing in the dark. No flesh remained on him. His body contorted as it turned into bones and innards. Then at last, his eyes, nose, and mouth disappeared, and even his throat.

“Aahiii caaanhhhn—”

Those unreasonably stubborn words were his last. He stopped moving at the same time his statement was cut off. The last parts of his body turned into white particles, floating off into the sky like a cremation. Not even a fragment of bone remained—he had been fully absorbed by the World Restoration Array.

It was over. The long battle was finally over. He'd been an incredibly strong opponent.

"It's over... I won... I won against Palinchron," I said, voice shaking.

I'd done it. In our past battle, it had been he who'd remained standing on the night after the Festival of the Blessed Birth. But this time it was me. I was the only one standing. My jaw relaxed and I began to tremble with joy.

"No, I can celebrate later. First I have to get Hitaki and Liner out of here. If I don't move quickly..."

I suppressed my excitement and looked around. The World Restoration Array still hadn't stopped. The cracks and crevasses in the earth were growing larger, and it seemed like walking would become near impossible soon. I spotted the two people I was looking for off in the distance. There was Liner, still gripping Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan and Rukh Bringer in his hands. And then there was Hitaki, still asleep. I moved to try and carry both of them, but I lost my balance and fell to the ground before I could take more than a step.

"Huh?"

I could feel bile rising in my throat. If I wasn't careful, I'd throw up. The absence of an enemy must've released all of the tension from my body. The debt I'd incurred up to this point was now coming back to haunt me. My whole body convulsed with fatigue. The most likely cause was the absence of one of my magic gems. I couldn't keep my balance. It wasn't just my sense of equilibrium—the balance of my mind, my body, and my soul were all messed up.

"Uugh...just a bit more... Only a little longer..."

It wasn't just the two of them I had to collect. If possible, I wanted to get Tida's gem, which had been turned into a sword and was now sticking out of the ground even farther away. I had to collect all the rewards of this battle.

Otherwise, the whole thing would be meaningless. And then there was Dia. I needed to go after Apostle Sith as soon as possible. So I needed to *move*!

If I don't...then everything that Maria, Ms. Wyss, Liner, and my friends put their lives on the line for...

Despite those thoughts, I couldn't move. Because of Palinchron's stubbornness, everything truly was empty. I tried to get up, but my body was still convulsing from overuse, and the shaking of the earth caused by the World Restoration Array also hindered me. The world was distorted and warped. It was like clay beneath the hands of God, and the scenery changed from valleys to mountains. This was no earthquake. It was a mythical calamity spreading out before my eyes.

I somehow managed to stand and began moving my legs frantically. However, the scenery in front of me was swaying from left to right like a metronome. I had no confidence in my ability to walk in a straight line. I also felt like I could lose consciousness at any moment. I had to get somewhere safe as soon as possible. But I wasn't able to stay standing and fell over again. My cheek hit the ground, jolting my brain.

On the battlefield, in the depths of darkness, I felt my consciousness slipping away into the black as well. My thoughts grew muddy. I clutched at the ground with both hands, desperately trying not to lose consciousness. I still had a lot of work to do. There were people I needed to help, things I needed to apologize for. I thought of the faces of my friends who were probably waiting for my return.

Lastiara, Dia, Maria, Snow, Reaper, Ms. Sera... One by one their faces floated up in my mind. I'd won, so I had to hurry back to them as soon as possible. I crawled along the ground like Palinchron had. I advanced forward, sliding along the black terrain. But soon I wasn't even able to crawl. That was the moment my body simply ran out of fuel. I couldn't even move my eyeballs. My eyelids sank closed. I was in total darkness. I couldn't even figure out what I was thinking about in my hazy consciousness. I felt like I was going around and around in circles and never moving forward.

I have to return to everyone... I want to tell them...I won... It really worked

out...so I need to go back soon... Yeah...so...on. I...have to...go back...

Cruelly, my consciousness continued to fade. The only thing I could do was sink slowly into the warm, muddied swamp. Down, down I drifted. And in doing so, I felt like I could hear someone's voice. But I didn't know whose it was, and I lost consciousness.

Chapter 6: Epilogue

The battle with Palinchron Regacy had finally ended, but the situation was still really bad. If things continued as they were, everyone would die, and there would be no victors at all. The runaway power of the World Restoration Array would ensure that. The fissures in the ground continued to deepen, and there wasn't really any flat ground left. If everything continued to collapse like this, I would end up being swallowed by the earth. I was the only one who could do anything about it. My body felt like it was being torn apart because I'd gone so far past my limits. It was all I could do not to lose consciousness. But even so, when I forced strength into my body to try and stand up, I heard that voice.

"Hm... Are you yourself now? If you were able to believe in yourself that easily, you wouldn't have any troubles. It's all the theory of the powerful. No, it's not about me anymore..."

I knew that strangely polite, deep voice. It was the voice of an adult who made people feel at ease. It was also the voice of a teacher teaching someone.

"But I really didn't expect things to go as planned." It was the voice of the Guardian Ide, who'd been trying to create a new country in the north. There was no mistaking it. "Yes, it really is wonderful. She is truly the supreme jewel of this world. A worthy substitute for my Queen Lorde. Now I have all the pieces in place! A lineup that's as good as it was a thousand years ago! Now, at last..."

He seemed unusually excited, but he quickly suppressed his emotions and grew quiet. He must've realized that there wasn't much time left on this final battlefield.

"I must hurry. At this rate, the king's weapon will be in danger. I must retrieve the magic gems quickly. After all, all magic gems are for the king. First, I'll remove Master Kanami's..."

I gritted my teeth, unable to bear his inexcusable words.

This man is trying to tarnish the fight that Sieg and my brother went through! I

couldn't forgive that. *As Liner Hellvilleshine, I must...*

"Please wait, Professor Ide!"

"Master Liner?"

I staggered to my feet using Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan, as a cane. Ide was standing a short distance away from me, and I could see him wrapping up a black-haired girl I didn't recognize in some strange plant. His eyes widened in surprise. I guess he hadn't expected me to be the last one standing.

"As a knight, I cannot overlook such behavior..." I warned him.

"Did you overhear what I was saying? It seems I got a little carried away and let my guard down..."

"You said you were going to take Sieg's magic gem. In his current state he'll die if you do that."

"I don't care. Kanami the Founder is my sworn enemy. It's precisely *because* I want to kill him that I won't show any mercy."

I was concerned about what, exactly, Kanami the Founder had done to make Dr. Ide react like this. But that wasn't important right now. What *was* important was that I now knew he and I were incompatible.

"Then Dr.—no, *Guardian* Ide, you're my enemy! If you want Sieg's magic gem, you'll have to go through me first!" I dropped the annoying honorifics and stood in front of Sieg, swords held out at either side.

"So Master Liner will become my enemy? If memory serves me correctly, you swore revenge on Palinchron Regacy, Siegfried Vizzita, and Lastiara Whoseyards..."

"I'm sorry, but that's changed. My brother asked me to look after their happiness."

"I'd heard your brother was already dead."

"Yes, he died. But my brother is in here." I tapped the hilt of my sword against my chest. "Inherited, passed down, and now..." If I quieted my mind, I could feel him nearby. "If I have my brother with me, I will lay down my life to protect Sieg. So I will fight. I finally understand my true duty..."

Just that was enough to bring forth more power in me. This power wasn't only my own, so the way to wield it wasn't something decided exclusively by my own will.

"Hine Hellvilleshine is inside you? Yes, I see. This is what makes humans terrifying. You ignore the logic of the world so easily."

Ide fixed his gaze on me and nodded immediately, as if that had satisfied him. Then an irritated expression flashed across his face. It was as though he were looking at an enemy who was trying to break some kind of taboo. But I felt the same way.

"Mr. Lorwen!" I called out to my sword. I needed the help of the second person I respected as well. Concentrated Swordplay knowledge began overflowing from the glowing crystal blade. I was weak. Palinchron had been a child genius, and according to Ms. Wyss, he'd had the divine protection of an Apostle too. Siegfried Vizzita was an outworlder, and his talents were near the same level as the original Founder. Lastiara Whoseyards was a god in human form, and she was as self-assured as the Saint before her. I was like garbage compared to the three of them. I was *worse* than garbage. Even though I was determined to protect them, I had nothing left in me. I definitely didn't have enough power.

But that wasn't reason enough to sit out. I would protect them because I wanted to. Just because. That's who I was. That was my path. If something was missing then I would bring it in from elsewhere. If I was inexperienced, I would keep training until I died. If I didn't have the right talents then I would find other ways to compensate. There are plenty of ways to be kind in this world. Right now I would rely on Mr. Lorwen. I made a promise to do so. I promised that I would learn the sword!

I took a step forward with Mr. Lorwen in my right hand and Rukh Bringer in my left.

"Lorwen? You mean Lorwen Arrace?" Ide had noticed my appearance was unusual and tried to root out the source of my power. He took a step back and pulled a twig out of his sleeve. He didn't use weapons, therefore he was usually the rearguard of the group. However, if he was forced to fight one-on-one, as

he was now, he would fight with twigs. I'd heard that before, but now that I was seeing them, it seemed really weak.

"Extended Growth, Sense Breath, Branchwood Shell!" Ide immediately cast his support magic, strengthening his body. He forced enough power into himself to move, despite not being suited to battle. Then he ran at me with his enhanced speed, swinging his arms at full strength to try and disarm my twin blades with his twigs.

It was a strange sight to see a twig throw off sparks as it met with my treasured swords. His technique was poor, but he was still more than enough for me to handle in my current state. No matter how much I borrowed from Mr. Lorwen, I remained on the verge of fainting. To be honest, I was at my limit just standing there. Ide, who could see how badly off I was, tried to rush past me. It seemed he was going to do his best to avoid battle and just retrieve what he wanted.

I couldn't allow that, so I cast a spell with Mr. Lorwen. *"Quartzcast: Quartz!"* I thrust my blade into the black ground, producing a quartz crystal. It crawled along the ground like a fungus and encased Sieg, who lay unconscious behind me.

Ide extended a vine from his sleeve, trying to touch Sieg, but was blocked by the quartz. "This is Master Lorwen's quartz?! No one's ever been able to break it!"

It seemed that Ide was familiar with it. He quickly gave up and jumped away without even trying to shatter it. He looked like he was deep in thought. I knew he was assessing the situation to find the best way to proceed. I didn't chase after him. Protecting Sieg was my first priority, not defeating Ide.

Done thinking, he shook his head calmly. "Well, then, it can't be helped. I'll just have to settle for only taking the king's weapon. Master Kanami is not essential to my plan anyway."

He made his way to the black-haired girl lying farther away and began a new spell, causing a giant tree to burst from the ground. The trunk split open and coiled around their bodies.

"Well, I'll see you again, Master Liner. If you're still alive, that is." With those

parting words, the two of them were swallowed by the tree, which then returned to the earth as if time had been rewound. Their presence disappeared from the battlefield.

Ide didn't really have combat abilities, which was why his retreat had been so quick. I heaved a sigh of relief that I'd been able to protect Sieg. "That ended up okay, but now..."

Looking around, there was nothing left of the flat wasteland. It was a black mountain range filled with endless peaks and valleys. Sieg's body was about to roll down into one of them. It felt like the World Restoration Array was about to swallow up everything left on the battlefield.

"Well, there's only one thing I can do now!"

I wasn't confident that I could walk across this apocalyptic world and escape to somewhere safe, so I squeezed out the last of my magic power. I could feel my life slowly burning away. This would probably be the last magic of the day, but it was all I could manage.

"I won't regret this a second time! *Quartzcast: Quartz!*" I took Sieg's hand and yelled.

Mr. Lorwen's magic gem glinted. I knew he'd expended all his power to save Sieg. But we were of the same mind now. The thing Palinchron and Sieg had called "friendship" blazed inside us. We wouldn't let him die. That was our only thought as we began crafting our spell. Gradually the soil surrounding Sieg and me was converted into crystal. It wriggled across the ground like a living creature as it covered our bodies. We were frozen like statues. The thick protective wall of magic grew and became round, like a crystal ball.

"Sieg won't die! He won't! He WON'T!" I swore out loud, just as my consciousness faded within the crystal.

In the past, my own weakness had killed my brother. Although I'd been vaguely aware of his suffering, I'd watched him die because of blind faith. I probably hadn't helped him, only weighed him down. It was a regret that wouldn't disappear until I died. Yes, that was okay. I would have regrets until I died. But I wouldn't repeat them. I would protect what my brother left behind. His heirloom wasn't just a token of a noble house. It wasn't his position as a

knight of Whoseyards, an expensive sword, or fancy clothes. It was the man I was holding hands with right now. He was the one I admired, the one my brother had admired. He was the one my brother had wanted to protect with his life. So then I, as the inheritor, must continue to protect him.

Even at the cost of my own garbage life! I was ashamed to shout that out loud, so that's why I shouted it internally. *I will protect you! I will!* Then Sieg and I, encased in crystal, were swallowed by the land of darkness. We fell continuously down, down into the depths of the continent. That was the true end of the battle of the World Restoration Array. A year later, the battle that would come to be called the Great Disaster in history books came to an end.

Chapter 7: SAVE POINT: The Dungeon's Solitary Island

I was waking up from a long dream. As my consciousness came back to me, I regained my freedom of thought. The first thing I thought of was...

"Hitaki! Liner!" I opened my eyes, sat up, and looked around, but the only thing I saw was a barren room. There was only a bed in the musty, stone chamber. There were certainly no humans, let alone any other living thing. It was a completely unfamiliar room. I didn't remember going to sleep in a place like this. I started sorting through my memories. My brain felt dull, like it was covered in cobwebs, but I managed to brush them aside enough to remember what had happened before I lost consciousness.

For sure, I'd been fighting Palinchron in the darkness. Then, I'd borrowed Liner's and Ms. Wyss's strength and taken complete revenge on him. I thought, briefly, that everything had been a dream, but I quickly shook my head, knowing it was true. There was no mistake—at the end of the battle we'd been reunited. I'd witnessed the resurrection of Hitaki, who was more precious to me than life itself. My sister, my ultimate goal, had indeed been there, albeit as part of Palinchron's scheme. I could feel it in my soul that she hadn't been some sort of impostor.

But what was important was what had happened after that. I'd used up all my power in the fight with Palinchron and fainted. Afterward, I should have been consumed by the World Restoration Array. I'd thought the two choices would have been die or be consumed, but it seems I'd somehow gone down a third path. I quickly regained my composure, and slowly took stock of my condition. I pushed aside the soft blanket that had been covering me and stood up. I'd slept well and no longer felt so bad. I just felt a little sluggish since I'd slept so much. I was able to cast spells with no problem either.

"Layered Dimension." What I wanted more than anything at the moment was information. I expanded my magical perception, trying to figure out the time,

place, and if there were any other people around. First, outside this stone room I could sense an old, worn hallway, and doors leading to an uncountable number of rooms. However, no one else was around. I couldn't find anyone. The hallway was long and filled with a lot of antiques, and at the end was a large, main hall.

"I'm...in a castle?"

I suddenly understood the building's construction—this could be nothing other than an old castle. However, there wasn't a single person around. It was a very strange sight. It was such a large castle and reasonably clean, despite being apparently uninhabited. It was a bit frightening. I filled the entire vast building with Dimension and still couldn't find anyone. I had no choice but to extend my senses beyond the castle. At that instant, I felt some kind of magic that made all of my hairs stand on end. It wasn't that Dimension picked up on it. It was simply that a huge mass of magical power was coming toward me at high speed, forcing me to take notice.

"Wha... What is this magic?!"

The mass of magical power was flying in the sky, moving through the air at ultrahigh speed and aiming straight at the window of this room. I quickly tried to take out my sword from my inventory, but Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan wasn't there, so I had to take the Crystal Pectolazri Straight Sword instead.

With a sound like a popping balloon, a girl came flying in through the window. Her sudden stop caused a blast of air to tear through the room, and then she stood in front of me. Her long hair, which was close to emerald green in color, fluttered in the air. It reminded me more of the light green of nature than the vibrant green of jewelry. Her hair was tied up into what one would call a ponytail, which exposed the slender shape of her neck.

Beneath the hair, the girl's face was cheerful. Her expression was bright and lively, like a flower in full bloom. She had a single mole under her eye, which gave her an alluring feminine charm. While she projected the air of a lively child, she also possessed the captivating charm of an adult woman. She was dressed in a garment with a high turtleneck that reached the bottom of her

chin. The shape of her ample breasts was clearly visible, making it difficult to keep my gaze from dropping too low.

However, what was important wasn't her beautiful body, but something else that kept my gaze locked. What stood out most about her were her wings, the same color as her hair, growing from the middle of her back. They were so large that I was convinced they were used for flying.

Those wings, large enough to completely envelop an adult, slowly folded inward. Then, the girl looked at me and smiled. "Good morning, Kanamin!" She gave me an extraordinarily casual greeting, but I didn't drop my guard, and used *Analyze* on her.

【QUINQUAGESIMAL GUARDIAN】 Thief of Wind's Essence.

The information I received was enough to make me nervous. This was such an unexpected development that I couldn't really comprehend it. Why was I here? Why was there no one else around but her? Why was this girl the Quinquagesimal Guardian? I had an endless number of questions, and I knew from experience that conversation was better than confrontation when it came to Guardians.

"Nice to meet you... I'm Aikawa Kanami." I relaxed my body and responded politely.

Her mouth dropped open, and her expression made her look like a cat with a new toy. "Oh, you really don't know who I am. It's just as Liner said." She casually moved closer to me.

Frightened, I held out the hand that wasn't holding the sword to stop her. "Please wait! Let me just take stock of the situation, please. You are the Thief of Wind's Essence. And you are also the Quinquagesimal Guardian, correct?"

"Ooh! You're so cool when you speak politely, Kanamin! I'm impressed!"

She replied with an excitement that I couldn't comprehend. Thinking she might be the same as Tida, who was incapable of holding a proper conversation, I adjusted my grip on my sword.

“Relax, relax. Yeah, I’m the Thief of Wind’s Essence, and you’re right that I guard the fiftieth floor. But it’s a little sad that you’re being so formal with me. C’mon, I’m a friend of you and your sister. You don’t need t’ talk like that,” she replied gently, perhaps sensing my wariness.

The Thief of Wind’s Essence was quite amicable. She actually answered my questions in an effort to get closer to me, emotionally as well as physically.

“Huh? No, but...”

She interrupted my stuttering. “Don’t worry about it.”

Just for a moment, for so brief a moment it was hard to even detect, the Thief of Wind’s Essence’s magic swelled. It was colossally huge, on par with Lorwen or Maria going full throttle. As it pressed down on me, I felt true, instinctive fear. But I wouldn’t give in, I was used to this much. I was no longer intimidated by daunting monsters.

Not to be outdone by the approaching Essence Thief, I walked forward too. “I understand. I’ll speak casually. So what name should I use for you?”

“My name is...um, I think it’s gonna be Lorde Titee? You can call me Kingette.”

“Nice to meet you, Lorde. I’d appreciate it if you’d call me Kanami.”

“You’ll be Kanamin for all eternity to me, so I can’t do that. If you don’t like calling me Kingette, then I don’t mind being called ‘big sis’ either.”

“I’m sorry, I only have one other family member, so it’s not possible for you to be my big sister.”

“Tch. It’s true you don’t have your memories, but you’re still on guard, huh.”

I relaxed a bit. She certainly wasn’t being hostile. “I think I understand a bit better what kind of person you are. So I’m just going to ask you, okay?” I posed the question lightly, as if dealing with Alty or Lorwen. If my expectations were correct, then... “You’re Queen Lorde. You were the ruler a thousand years ago, right?”

She was another character from a thousand years ago. And, judging by her name, she’d been a key player. Her face changed from an open smile to something more serious as she listened to me.

“Ha ha, you’re so right. Even without your memories, you sure know my true essence.”

She looked a little solemn, and her speech didn’t match her expression at all. However, she certainly had the dignity befitting of a king. Perhaps this was how she naturally spoke.

“Even though I don’t rule anyone anymore!” Her gloomy countenance cleared quickly, and the way she was speaking changed again, and she insisted she was no longer a queen.

“So then a lot happened, you got sucked into the World Restoration Array, and became a Guardian?”

“That’s right. But I’ve been away from the fiftieth floor for hundreds of years now.”

“Hundreds of years” and “been away”... Those words made me feel uneasy, but I didn’t let it show on my face as I continued. “In any case, is it correct to assume you hold no hostility toward me?”

“It’s no good to fight! Love and peace is my creed!”

“So then, I’m going to leave now, and you won’t stop me, right?”

“Huh, why?”

Lorde did seem amicable, but that didn’t mean all of my anxieties were eased. Honestly, I just didn’t want to get involved right now.

“Er, well, I thought it would be faster to find someone to ask than to hear it from you...”

“Huh? Huh?! You’re gonna make your big sis cry, y’know!”

“Uh...” I backed away from Lorde, who was approaching me with barely concealed tears in her eyes. That slight hesitation created an opening for her.

“I won’t let you get away!” she yelled, leaping at me.

I quickly changed *Layered Dimension* to *Dimension: Calculash* to try and intercept her. But I wasn’t fast enough. I understood what she was doing, but I couldn’t react quickly enough to do anything about it. Lorde proved that she’d

just been acting friendly to get close enough to make a grab for my arms.

“Huh?!” Even though I was still dull from sleep, I didn’t let my guard down. If she grabbed me, I’d hit her as hard as I could and then run away as fast as possible. But her speed was totally overwhelming and broke my determination. She simply moved faster than any reaction I could make. That fact made me tremble.

“Hm, huh? Kanamin, did you get weaker?” Lorde asked, standing at point-blank range and grasping my wrists tightly as she stared into my eyes. Apparently, she didn’t expect me to resist at all. Granted, I really *couldn’t* resist.

“Yes, I, ah, might have gotten weaker...” I replied, trying to put on a brave front. I tried to shake her hands off me, but it was like I was stuck in a vice. It was true I was weaker than Kanami the Founder and even myself when I’d had Hitaki’s magic gem in me, but it was unusual that I couldn’t move her hands at all.

“Well, it’s only natural since you don’t have your memories.” Lorde quickly dropped my hands. It seemed like she was pondering my weakness. I thought about using that opening to escape, but she didn’t take her eyes off me.

“I’ll show you around as I explain things to you. I won’t take no for an answer, and it seems like I’m stronger than you are right now,” she giggled. Then, smiling like a child, she skipped to the door.

Sweat dripped down my spine as she beckoned me forward. I had no choice but to silently follow her. I knew that ignoring her would only get me caught again. I followed her out of the room and into the long hallway I had sensed.

“Hey, Lorde, where are we going?” I asked as she bounced cheerfully ahead of me.

“That’s a secret! But we’ll get there soon.”

I wanted to run away, but that was impossible. She had that speed and the ability to fly; there was no way I’d be able to escape. Even so, I tried pouring my energy into *Dimension*, not to fly from my body, but to expand my range of perception.

“Oh, no, that’s forbidden. *Sittert Wynd*.” A gentle wind blew, easily forming a

counterspell.

I almost admired her brilliant and precise magical construction. This girl was not only fast and strong, she also excelled at magic. No, rather, I felt as if magic was her whole life.

Lorde looked back over her shoulder and smiled. “If you keep taking it easy, you’re going to have a hard time in the future. You have to walk on your own two feet and see things with your own eyes!”

I had no choice but to smile, as not only my movements but also my senses were blocked. I wasn’t trying to be egotistical, but my *Dimension* magic was near perfect. There probably wasn’t a single person on earth who could truly counteract *Dimension*. Even Mr. Hine, who’d been a mage as well, could only obstruct it. But Lorde did it perfectly like it was nothing. If she was my enemy, I’d have no chance of winning. Her sheer power was what made me realize that. All I could do was follow behind her and try not to dampen her good mood.

We walked down the long, snaking corridor, making many turns along the way. Dim light shone through the windows that were placed evenly along the hall. Unable to use *Dimension*, I looked through them with my eyes, but all I could see was the courtyard and the building next door. I was just barely able to comprehend that this huge castle was as complicated as any maze. On top of the endless hallways, I also had to climb a long flight of stairs.

“Okay! We’re here, Kanamin!” We’d finally arrived after a good few minutes of walking. It was an observation deck on the top floor of the castle. The scene that unfolded before my eyes was more than worth the hike up there. I was moved, but I also felt like I finally knew where I was. Looking down from the top of the castle, I got a full picture of where “here” was. The old structure was conical in shape, with a sprawling, forestlike garden inside it. It was so large it could encompass a whole forest. On top of that, a river flowed around the outside of it. Its size reminded me of the Huura River in Laoravia, and there was only one bridge over it. It was a huge bridge and would be the only way to attack the castle.

A castle town spread along the banks of the river, huge and crowded, seemingly stretching all the way to the horizon. I could tell with just a glance

that it was a thriving city. I was convinced this had to be some famous country. But the problem was more than that. Everything beyond it was completely strange. It was farther in. I turned my eyes to what surrounded the town. I could see a sky stained with darkness, and the horizon ended in a jagged, broken edge. I looked again and again, completely shocked. There was no doubt about it, this country didn't extend beyond the town. There were no plains or oceans, just nothingness. It made it feel like the town and castle were floating in the dark sky.

"What... What is this?!" This was clearly not a normal place. This wasn't one of the countries of the Dungeon Alliance, nor was it on the continent. All I wanted to know now was where I'd been taken after the battle.

"We're in the Dungeon," Lorde answered. It was a too simple and impossible answer. "This is a space you prepared for me, Kanamin. In terms of levels, you could call it the reverse side of floor sixty-six."

"The...reverse side? The Dungeon has a reverse side?"

"That is very 'you,' isn't it? You created it with Dimension magic from a realm of nothingness. The kingdom as it used to be. You said it would be easy to *Recollect* here."

Of course I didn't remember doing that. So then it must have been Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago. I was having trouble wrapping my head around the idea of this new realm.

"Welcome home, Kanamin! To our magic castle!" Lorde had a wide smile on her face as she welcomed me warmly.

I didn't have the mental capacity to respond to that. If what she said was true, then I would have to walk all the way from the Dungeon's sixty-sixth floor to get out. Since I'd gone all out in the battle with Palinchron, I'd had to abandon all of my *Connection* doorways. There were more than twenty unconquered levels between me and the first floor, and not only would I have to encounter Lorde, the Guardian of the fiftieth floor, but I'd also have to deal with the Sexagesimal Guardian on the sixtieth floor.

The length of the journey made my head spin. At the same time, I got a bad feeling about things. I didn't think either the smiling Lorde in front of me or this

Recollected kingdom were honest. I didn't think I'd be able to return to the world outside the Dungeon very easily at all. In these past few days, I'd learned that my hunches had been correct.

Here, I would experience one of the stories of a thousand years ago. It was the story of a girl called the Mad Qing and a girl called Mihata. I was caught up in their fate and lingering attachments and would learn how it all ended.

What does it mean to overcome the past?



Afterword

Finally, we've reached volume 8.

The battle with Palinchron Regacy can be considered a turning point, and I'm really emotional about it. Honestly, he was a character I created to be the final boss in this series, so I wrote this fight as a final battle. When I was writing this online, I really felt like I was ready to be done with it. There is that much passion in volume 8...but maybe it was a little too much. What do you think?

Incidentally, this is the volume with the most changes from the web version.

I personally find the book version easier to read and more complete than the web version. I think both have their merits, but to be frank, the earlier web version is embarrassing to look at. I really can't even look at the parts that became volume 8.

Well, I'm glad the books have reached this volume. It's so refreshing to feel as if I've cleaned up my mistakes. Now, since this is another last-minute page, I'll leave you here. Thank you to all the people who picked up this book! Thank you to all the people who have been involved in this book! Thank you so, so much! See you soon!



DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

8

By Tarisa Warinai Illustrated by Saki Ukai



"UH-HUH,
YOU SEEM MUCH
BETTER."

Apostle Sith

"HE EVEN STILL WEARS
A MASK BECAUSE HE'S
TRYING TO LOOK COOL."

Black-Haired Girl

"I WEAR IT BECAUSE
IT'S NECESSARY!"

Masked Man

One Thousand Years Ago

Bonus Short Stories

The Otherworld Heroines' Otherworld Massages, Part 4

After receiving Maria, Snow, and Lastiara's massages, I developed an utter phobia of massages. Even just hearing the word made my body freeze, and when I actually had to get one, I started trembling. Now it was at the same level of trauma as fire for me.

However, even with that, my test still wasn't over. Rather, as if the real work was just beginning, new massages were coming at me. I don't actually remember how it got to that point. As I recalled, Lastiara had mentioned that she wanted to give massages to her friends, to which Maria and Snow both replied that they had done it before, and it was around that point that I developed the trauma and broke out in a cold sweat, and after that my breathing gradually became shallow and I lost consciousness. Then, when I came to, I was in my room on the ship, facing Dia. Apparently, the girls had come to the conclusion that they could remedy my trauma by giving me the original and correct massage while I was passed out, so Dia, who was under the least mental pressure, had been selected to do it. Maria, Snow, and Lastiara nearly fainted at the mere mention of the word "massage," so it was more or less a process of elimination. I mean, why would they give a massage to relieve the trauma of a massage? The rough treatment revealed a lot about their personalities, and also showed me that this would be an inevitable part of the boat trip with them.

"So this is what it comes to... I knew it would..." I gave up and accepted my fate. No matter how much I tried to resist, I felt a certainty from *Responsiveness* that one day I would get a massage from each and every one of them. Feeling like I'd attained something close to enlightenment, I sat down on the bed. Dia, with a troubled look on her face, looked down at her arm.

"I told them I'd give you a massage, but with this arm...I can't do anything about it without using magic..."

Magic and massage. Just those two words in a single sentence made me let out a little shriek, and I began to shake uncontrollably.

“Kanami?! You don’t look very good! Are you okay?!” Dia rushed over to me in a panic.

“No, I’m fine. It’s okay, this is fine...” I replied, brushing away her concern. I’d be dealing with this trauma for the rest of my life, so I just put on a brave face.

“Um, well, you look pretty tired, so I’ll try to get it done quickly!” Dia forced herself to be cheerful at my unusual state and swiftly moved into action. Blushing, a little embarrassed, she climbed up onto the bed behind me, barefooted, and touched my shoulder with her arm, which elicited another shriek out of me and made me shake even harder.

“So, Kanami...what really happened during your last massage?” Her voice sounded sad as it came from behind me, her tone surpassing sympathy and veering into pity.

But whether or not I said something had happened, it was still a massage. An attack of fire and electricity. It was a destruction of the interior of my body using vibrations and liquid manipulation. And there had been even more...

“They all gave me massages... Yes, it was something torturous...”

“I...see. But don’t worry! I’m good at this stuff! Really good!” Dia replied cheerfully, considering my body.

Then, with careful hands, she began the massage. She put her hand on my left shoulder and began massaging slowly. Naturally, the tension in my body rose to the highest level and my entire body froze. Anxiety kept the cold sweat flowing, and I felt nauseous and dizzy. What kind of horror awaited me after this? I braced myself for a few minutes. Yet no matter how much time passed, Dia only continued giving me a normal shoulder massage. It felt normal and good, and I could relax, and it was even a normal amount of awkward to hear Dia’s quiet breathing behind me.

No! I couldn’t let my guard down yet. Because I was careless like that, I was always, always, always...

“Oh, this reminds me...I always used to rub my grandpa’s shoulders like this,”

Dia said with a hint of nostalgia right as I was about to go off the rails with doubt. Her kind words were strong enough to stop my cold sweat.

“Grandpa? Do you mean yours?”

“Hm? Oh, my foster parents...or rather, my guardians. I was really thankful to them for a lot of things, so I would give them massages like this. That was really a long time ago.”

It was easy to imagine the scene, and the image of a bond between a grandfather and grandchild gradually stopped my tremors. It made sense that she was so good at shoulder rubs because of her past experiences. Her hands weren't too strong or too weak, and she released all my tension and anxiety.

Then, just as all the trauma in my body was about to be healed, Dia spoke up again. “But I'm not satisfied with just one arm. I'd be worried if you thought this is the best I can do...”

Dia tried to massage me deeper. I was traumatized by this pattern I had of letting my guard down and then it coming back to bite me later, and I began to tremble again.

“Hm, okay! I'll try using Holy Magic!”

And now it was the approach that combined the greatest traumas of all, massage and magic. I let out another shriek.

Seeing my reaction, Dia whispered slowly to me, “It's okay, Kanami. Nothing's gonna be scary or painful. Please calm down...” She put one arm around my torso and hugged me gently, as if holding a frightened child. “Holy Magic is a gentle strength. Trust me, Kanami...” Her words were filled with strong emotions. I nodded at her unspoken compassion, even though I was frightened.

“Okay...”

“Thank you. *Full Cure*.”

It was the usual recovery magic. However, the construction was a little different, and I could sense it immediately with *Dimension*. It was not for healing wounds, but a gentle spell, as if it had been made to soothe the soul. I received a massage along with that magic. Not only on my shoulders, but other

parts of the body in turn. Dia massaged me, carefully and diligently, even though she only had one arm. When I realized what was happening, I also discovered the truth of massages.

Dia's was the real thing. The rest of us had been doing it wrong the whole time. My trauma wasn't caused by the massages. To be honest, it was caused by the personalities and magic of the three of us. That answer allowed me to finally overcome my trauma.

"It...stopped? I'm getting a massage but I've stopped shaking! Dia, it stopped!" I got off the bed and took her hand, as she'd continued to massage me.

"No, this is normal. I don't know why you were shaking in the first place."

"I overcame it! I did it! Thank you so much, Dia!" I thanked her wholeheartedly. I finally had a clear mind, and thanks to Dia, my body felt great too. I hadn't felt this light in a long time.

"I don't really understand but...ha ha, as long as you're feeling better. You really looked like you wanted to die before I started, Kanami." Dia was as happy about this as I was.

"I'm sorry for making you worry. But it's all okay! Or rather, the other massages were the ones that were weird. I'll absolutely say 'no' from here on out. I will reject all massages that seem kind of strange!" Thanks to Dia, I'd returned to being myself. I vowed to not make the same mistake again. Then a shadow appeared.

Reaper banged open the door and came into the room. "Hee hee hee! I got your challenge, big brother!"

"There you are, Reaper!" I wasn't sure if it was because of the revelation Dia had given me, but I was in an unfamiliar state of tension, and I responded to Reaper's intrusion in a way I wasn't used to.

"I heard about it from big sister Lastiara, and it sounded interesting, so next you'll get a massage from me!"

"You can try! But I'm not the same indecisive person I was before. I'm stronger now thanks to Dia. If something's weird, I'll tell you it's weird! And if

that happens, then that's it, it ends there!"

"Okay! But I'm not gonna go easy on you! Since I know that trauma can be healed as long as big sister Dia is here, I'll take you to the other side of paradise by any means necessary!"

"Bring it on, Reaper! There's no way, absolutely *no way*, I'll lose!" That was how my trials moved on to the next stage. My opponent was Reaper, the grim reaper who should never be underestimated.

In the midst of the atmosphere that had become thick with the possibility of battle, Dia muttered, "I wish I was the only one giving massages."

Before those words could really reach my ears, the massage battle with Reaper began. It was all to clear up my past mistakes and prove my growth.

To be continued in part five.

Let's Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 8

When Ms. Snow saved me, it was love at first sight. From that moment on my calm demeanor was completely uprooted and I could think only of her. Thanks to joining Lady Karamia's clique, I had more classmates I could easily spend time with. I immediately started asking them about Ms. Snow. With the single-minded desire to get as close to her as possible, I felt somewhat buoyant as I devoted myself to finding out more and more about her. And finally, I consulted with my few trusted friends. At the usual table in the usual cafeteria, I faced Liner and Annius.

"Huh? That Lady Snow Walker?" Liner asked, puzzled. "Yeah, I know her. She's from one of the top-class families in the entire academy, and she's a top-class troublemaker, too."

"Please, I want to know everything about her."

"Senpai, you've been asking about her a lot. Is this a rehearsal for overthrowing the upper ranks?" Liner asked.

"Sure. Well, I guess that can be part of it?" She'd completely taken over my heart, but it was important not to lose sight of my original plan. I wouldn't cut corners on my development and production of magical tools. But I wanted to pay back Ms. Snow's kindness on my way to the top too. Of course, I also understood that it would take more than ordinary strength to do so.

"Well, as you know, she's the only one exempt from the Elt-Order. Lady Filtee, the current number one, is another one of the sisters from the Walker house. Snow's from one of the most prestigious families in the world, but unlike Lady Filtee, who's a biological child, Ms. Snow is adopted. She has quite the complicated family history," Liner continued.

"So she's adopted... That's why they don't look alike."

"Yes, just like my family, the Hellvilleshines. Please listen to me, senpai: that's one of the reasons my sister has taken an interest in her and why she's been messing around with Lady Snow lately. But every time that happens, *I'm* the one who gets glared at by Lady Filtee."

Liner began complaining in the middle of the conversation. His reaction showed that he knew he'd become one of the few friends I could trust. However, I was more interested in Ms. Snow than him at the moment. I turned away and looked at Annius, posing the same question to her. After a moment of careful thought, she answered slowly.

"Honestly, Ms. Azure Fury is one of the elements of the academy that shouldn't be touched. I was curious about her too, so I looked her up a long time ago, and to my surprise...her entire history was erased by the academy. It's rumored that she was in a guild in Laoravia before coming here, but it's all been erased. I know you want to win by means other than a frontal attack, but you shouldn't go around looking into her, because it's dangerous."

Apparently, Ms. Snow had deeper reasons than just being called an exception. Liner wasn't helpful, but Annius's well-informed nature really helped me out.

"Thank you, Annius, but I have absolutely no intention of giving up on Ms. Snow."

"Hmm, I understand you really want to pay back your debts as quickly as possible but...in my opinion we should focus on picking off the single-digit ranks first, not the outliers in the pecking order. It's rumored that Lady Snow is the strongest not only in the academy, but also in the Allied Nations."

"Impossible. Because... Because I care so much... Just thinking about her makes my heart yearn so much it's painful. I can't be like this for the rest of my life!" Out of gratitude, I told my friends all of my feelings, hiding nothing. They were stunned.

"Uh, senpai?"

"Wh-What?!" I'd made up my mind after hearing their thoughts earlier; I needed to man up in this instance. "Annius, I'll take your advice and stop asking around about her. I'm going to meet up with her and ask her directly..."

With that, I got up and went in search of her. With the information I'd been given, I had a pretty good idea of where she would be. At this time of day, she should be on the rooftop where she'd saved me before. I walked quickly, my heart pounding...and I arrived. And I called out to her. To the beautiful girl who was in the same place, in the same tree, with her eyes closed. I talked to the

blue-haired girl I'd fallen in love with at first sight.

"Ms. Snow, I came to thank you for earlier..."

She opened her eyes slightly but remained where she was and responded languidly, "Oh...yeah. Earlier... You're welcome."

"Um, would you mind if I talked to you a little bit?"

"Me? But I'm Snow Walker..."

"I know. I want to talk to you," I stated firmly.

When I came to the academy, I'd heard a lot of gossip. Some of it included bad things about Ms. Snow. I'd heard that she had caused a death in a mock battle, that she'd covered it up with the power of her family, that she thought of the other students as nothing more than trash, and...many other things. But I still wanted to get close to her. I just couldn't leave this feeling as it was. Then, as I was about to take a step closer, I was blocked by a man.

"You. You're that first-year who's rumored to be sniffing around my fiancée lately." He was a handsome student with long, flowing, golden hair. His name came to mind even though I didn't know his face. I immediately knew this was the second-ranked "prince in chief," the "overlord," the ducal family's Elmirahd Siddark.

"Huh?! El, why are you..." She called him by a nickname as she jumped down from the tree. Ms. Snow hadn't been surprised by my appearance, but she didn't seem thrilled that this man was here.

"Hmph. I heard you caused a ruckus on the rooftop the other day. That you were trying to save a male student. I also heard that the student had the wrong idea and was acting rashly. I thought if that was true, then I, your fiancé, should be protecting you from that rash boy," Elmirahd replied.

"Oh, uh, yes...huh? So were you hiding there the whole time?"

"Yes. So I could show up at your moment of peril to protect you."

"I...see... That's...uh...thank you?"

They seemed to have a strange relationship. However, there was only one point that was important to me right now. This man, who could only be

described as a prince, was Ms. Snow's fiancé. I was shocked to my core and my resolve was in shambles. From somewhere, the words "There is no way I can compete with him" floated into my mind.

Elmirahd, perhaps sensing this, said coldly, "I'm going to get straight to the point. She's not suitable for you. In fact, you don't even have the right to talk to her. You know that, right?"

"That's..."

"Above all, even if you're a new student, you already know the insidiousness of this academy. Interactions between incompatible people will only bring misfortune to each of them. Even if you do get along, you will eventually end up repeating the events of the other day...so just give up." With those words, Elmirahd released dense magic power from his body. It wasn't a spell, but it was enough to make me shrink in on myself. I looked away, fell to my knees, and felt as though my heart would break.

But that was no reason for me to give up. Never. With all the strength in my body, I glared back at him and ground out, "I won't give up..."

Elmirahd observed this with interest. "Well, you're level one. And I heard that you were an alchemist who specializes in helping others..."

Apparently he'd really looked into me. Elmirahd schooled his face again and continued his intimidation. "I'm sorry, but your opinion will never be valid. Give up and forget it. It's for your own good. You are in a more delicate position than you know, okay? Even the fact that the three of us are talking here..."

The magic pressing down on my body increased again. I could tell he was trying to end the conversation quickly. I knew he was right about everything, but at the same time...

"Even so, it felt like fate when Ms. Snow saved me! Ever since then...my heart is beating...so fast! It won't settle down and stop! If I give up now, it'll be the same as just stopping my heart! It's the same!" I shouted, I couldn't betray my feelings.

"It was fate...with just a glance? Damn it!" I wasn't sure if he'd really been moved by my speech, but he groaned in response, his face growing slack as he

took a step back. Of course, he quickly composed himself again and continued talking. “I understand your feelings. However, in reality, there are things that cannot be managed by feelings alone. I’m not just talking about life at this academy. The problems that Ms. Snow is facing are deep. Starting from the darkness of the great and noble Walker family, it is a problem that will shake all of the Allied Nations. To fight against it, you would have to be a hero. Yes, a hero. Do you have that resolve? Do you, the outcast of this academy, have the determination to become a hero that even I can’t reach?!”

“I do! Yes, I *am* weak right now! But someday I’ll become stronger than her! I will, absolutely! I’ll protect her!”

“But she’s the strongest! She is the final trump card that the Allied Nations take pride in and hide away! She is stronger than me, the strongest mage of all time at this academy! In a duel, I can’t think of any being who could defeat her! And yet, you say you will protect her?!”

“I will! As payment for saving me, I will save her!”

“So you’re saying you could beat me in a duel right now, and then beat Snow too?! That would put you at the top of the ranks!”

“Yes! That’s what I wanted from the very beginning! I’ll do it by the end of the year, I promise!”

“By the end of the year?! You sure are something!” At my immediate replies, he finally stopped hiding his joy and approached me to shake my hand. Elmirahd gripped my hand tightly and looked straight at me. Even so, I stared back at him, undaunted. I didn’t know how it had come to this, but somehow it had become something I couldn’t retreat from. We were practically nose to nose, staring at each other.

Ms. Snow also clearly had no idea what was going on as she interrupted me. “Wait! Wait, wait... I don’t want to talk to any of you in the first place. That kind of thing is bothersome. You there, you don’t need to thank me. Just stay out of my life.”

“Snow, isn’t that too cold? Can’t you at least talk to him?”

“Huh? El, weren’t you just saying the opposite?”

I didn't expect to get any support from her. Elmirahd left her looking stunned and turned his happy expression on me.

"Oops, that's not the point," he declared. "All right, Kanami, you are an inexperienced and foolish but passionate newcomer at heart, so as a parting gift, I will give you the right to challenge me, the second rank, Elmirahd Siddark, to a duel. I'm a busy man, but I'm willing to spare time for my friends. If you can beat me, then I will allow you to become acquainted with Ms. Snow. Personally, as her fiancé, I will allow it."

"Thank you. I will beat you and proudly gain the right to her acquaintanceship."

He laughed. "You'll beat me, huh?" He continued to laugh as he left the roof, even though he didn't know why I'd come there in the first place. With that, I, too, bid farewell to the girl of my dreams.

"Well, Ms. Snow, I guess that will be all for today. Please wait for me somehow, and the next time we meet, I'll be sure to..." I would certainly have the strength she deserved. I had already vowed this to myself before I really realized it, probably because of the exchange with Elmirahd earlier.

I left the rooftop, filled with the frustration that I was still not worthy of standing next to her. I couldn't waste even a second of my time to become stronger. I had to go and restart the development of my magic tools so that I would never lose to anyone again!

As that scene came to an end, Snow Walker was left on the roof by herself.

"What...was that?" she whispered to herself. "I can't deal with either of them. I'll have to change my hooky spot..."

This was the moment that Snow decided she couldn't deal with the new student Kanami, just as she couldn't deal with Elmirahd. So she began to avoid Kanami. Furthermore...

"Why...Kanami?"

The whole scene had been witnessed from a corner of the rooftop by Kanami's employer, Karamia Arrace, who was full of unrequited love. With this, she was going to make a fresh start for her life. The direction of her great innate

desire for control changed, and she transformed from Kanami's sponsor to his biggest obstacle. It was also the moment Kanami's journey through the Elt Order began in earnest.

Liner's Training (Manacles)

This happened while the party led by Sheer Regacy was having lunch in a town during their journey. The knight Liner bowed his head to the eminent figure from a thousand years ago across the table from him.

"Doctor Ide, I want you to train me!"

Ide, a Guardian of the Dungeon, the Thief of Wood's Essence, looked a little mystified by that. "You want to be stronger than you are now? I think you're strong enough, Master Liner. There are few knights on this continent who could be a worthy adversary for you. I would say you are in the upper echelons of strength."

"It's not enough to just be a top-ranked knight! My opponents, who are really the highest ranked—one is an Outworlder, another a god in human form, and the other a child prodigy! I must become stronger and faster!" Liner insisted, clenching his fist.

Ide narrowed his eyes and smiled. "It's not enough, huh? I can't say I don't understand. Even though I know I have no talent, I still want to somehow reach those heights. It's a little nostalgic, really."

"Please!" Liner said again, spurred on by Ide's response.

"Very well. When it comes to magic I have my own knowledge. However, I can only teach you how to fight those without skills, is that okay?"

Once, Liner had been taught Swordplay by the Thief of Earth's Essence, and now he was to be taught magic by the Thief of Wood's Essence. He bowed his head even further at this great fortune. "Thank you! Honestly, that will be more helpful anyway!"

"Well, then I'll teach you my personal spellcasting technique! Okay, then, here." Ide began casting a wood-aligned spell, and wood encircled and closed over Liner's wrists with a clunk.

“Manacles?!” There was no doubt that’s what they were.

“First, you need to stop relying on your hands.” Ide explained his training as he brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth. Naturally, the handcuffs stopped Liner eating altogether midsentence.

“Stop relying on my hands?”

“I’ve seen many races with unique physical characteristics. One of the tendencies was that those without arms were better at handling magic power, and this is the training method I developed based on that. I have confirmed that it produces specific results, so don’t worry.”

“I guess I kind of understand...hm...” Liner wasn’t convinced. He’d heard a bit from Ide about these races with special characteristics and knew they were commonly called semifers. He was doubtful that this technique would work on him, though, since he was not a semifer himself.

“Are you all right, Master Liner? Look for options. You probably think that you have no talent, your strength is poor, and your fighting options are very limited. But you’re wrong. There are endless options; it can just be hard to find them. You can even find them in your daily life...for example, from this lunch. This is an exercise in finding options, so to speak,” Ide said in encouragement as lunch continued.

The words reminded Liner of his teacher at the academy, and he decided to take the instruction in stride. “So if the training means I can’t use my hands...then you mean I should use magic? *Wynd*.” Thinking he was taking a magic lesson, he tried to move the wooden spoon with the magic he was good at. However, there was no way that was going to work, and the spoon tumbled onto the table.

“I see you’ve chosen the direct attack, Master Liner. It’s not a bad choice, but there are other options. It’s fundamental to improve one’s control of magic in daily life. I’m sure that this situation, where you can’t even eat if you can’t control your magic, will help you grow.” Ide thoroughly educated Liner in his own way. However, that careful first lesson was misdirected by his prank-loving companion.

Sitting next to Liner was the red Jewelculus, Rouge. She activated her astral

magic with a big smile on her face. “I see! So it’s training that increases discomfort! Then let me help you! *Gravity!*”

Liner’s body was instantly trapped by gravity. “You...idiot! My body’s so heavy...”

“Yes, yes, you are heavy...but it makes you stronger, right?” Rouge understood exactly what Ide wanted to do. On top of that, she dared to enjoy the slight shift toward almost not helping.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to eat like this! This is hopeless, right, Doctor Ide?!” Liner immediately tried to convince his teacher that these restrictions were too much, hoping Ide would help him.

“Astral magic, huh? Not a bad idea. If you think about it, Master Liner is practically overflowing with skill compared to me. This level of restraint might be just right. Nice, Rouge. I couldn’t do this kind of thing on my own, and I wouldn’t have thought of it in the first place.” Ide flashed a thumbs up at her.

“Oh, I don’t know if I’d go that far...” she said as she flushed with embarrassment and scratched the back of her head.

The black Jewelculus, Noir, on Rouge’s other side, got even more excited. “This is a training technique from a thousand years ago! It’s just like I’ve read about in books! It looks good!”

“You do like this stuff, huh, Noir?”

“What I mean is, I’ll help too. Okay, Liner. Say ‘aah!’” She picked up Liner’s spoon and brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth.

“Huh? Uh, thanks...but why did you pull it away at the last moment?!” The spoon was hovering just out of his reach.

“Hee hee, this is helping. It’s to help you expand your limits! Now, c’mon, quickly, quickly! Please think carefully about how you’re going to reach it, Liner!” Noir continued to move the spoon in front of his face.

“Shuddup!” Liner cried. This interference, which was absolutely not going to allow him to eat, irritated him to his core. His expression made the two Jewelculi excited.

“This is fun, isn’t it? Next time, let’s try a mock battle like this!”

“Ah ha ha! It is! I like it! It’s kinda romantic! It would be very meaningful to fight Liner now!”

“Wait! I’m not done eating yet! No, actually, there’s no way I can participate in a mock battle like this! That’s...” That was straight-up bullying. Liner turned toward Ide to plead his case, but his teacher didn’t seem to be doing anything to stop the two Jewelculi.

“That’s why it’s meaningful, Liner. If you want to become stronger, you have to be backed into a corner. And then you come up with new moves.”

“Damn it!” Liner had no choice but to clam up and accept the situation with a statement like that. His knightly pride would not allow him to drop out here if he wished to learn.

The two remaining members of the party, Sheer and Wyss, who’d been watching the scene unfold, chatted amiably and didn’t seem inclined to offer him any help.

“It’s good they’re having fun. Do you think I should train too, Wyss?”

“No, you don’t need to. You’re the leader; it’s your job to be an imposing presence.”

“Okay, I’ll do what I can! Imposing!”

Thus ended the party’s lunch, and the promised earlier mock battle was to then take place on the plains outside of town.

There, Liner, his body weighed down by gravity on top of his hands being cuffed, roared, “Don’t underestimate me! Even if I can’t use my hands, or if I’m being weighed down, you won’t defeat me! I have wind magic! And...and lots of other things I’ll show you in this battle! I must become stronger!”

“You sure are ready to go. Well then, why don’t you play tag with *Gravity Demon!*”

“I believe in you! If you can overcome this, you’ll be like a character in a story!”

“You guys! Saying that all that like it’s nothing! Die!”

When the strongest and most merciless magic was unleashed, Liner was seriously wounded.

“Okay. *Full Cure*. Again.” Of course, Ide was able to heal him completely, and Liner was soon forced back into the fight.

“Again? You mean I have to do this until I win?!”

“Of course, Master Liner. Good luck!”

“I will! Win! This! I’ll definitely win! I will definitely win!”

In the midst of such torturous training, Liner’s mind gradually toughened up, and a year later, he seriously appreciated it. During a battle with a certain Essence Thief, he was saved by the fact that Ide had taught him this style of spellcasting. And, when he was alone and reflecting back on this day, he realized that this was what made him happy.

Snow’s Training (Fishing)

“So, until we can get swimsuits, we’ll be having a fishing competition!”

The words echoed across the deck of the *Living Legend*, which was currently gliding along under the blazing sun. A unanimous “Yay!!!” came from her friends. Reaper, who had been practicing swimming just a few minutes before and was still soaking wet, jumped up and down with joy.

“Fishing, huh?” Sera muttered, wiping the sweat off her face with a hand towel she’d brought. She wasn’t enthusiastic, but she didn’t seem opposed to the idea either. Lastiara and Maria, who had been standing by in their undergarments, joined in.

“I’m really looking forward to this! I’ve never done this before!” Lastiara said.

“I’m not too confident about this. I am interested, but...” Maria added.

When Snow, the initiator of the event, found out that everyone was going to participate, her eyes lit up. She was most pleased with Maria’s reaction. Despite not having confidence in herself, Maria was often good at this kind of thing, so it was entirely possible that she would turn out to be the best fisherman of all of them. At least that’s what Snow figured.

Snow, who always thought of nothing but being pampered, was aiming to improve her standing among everyone through this fishing tournament. During their boat trip, she'd skipped out on the Dungeon and chores, but never let a day go by without improving her fishing. What was on Snow's mind now? Her only thought was her desire to stand out in this tournament, to be thought of differently, praised, and pampered by everyone. And she thought it would be great if her usual slacking off would then be tolerated and everyone would leave all of the fishing to her. She giggled a bit.

As Snow contemplated a warm future and gave a dopey smile, Reaper quickly brought over fishing gear for the group from the other side of the deck.

"I thought you would say something like that, so I prepared all of this! Here!"

"Good job, Reaper!" Snow praised her.

Maria picked up a fishing tackle and said, "Well then, let the competition begin."

While everyone was getting ready, the inexperienced Lastiara was the last to pick up a rod. "I suppose I'll just learn by example. Oh, I was just thinking, wouldn't it be fun to wager something on this? Wouldn't it be more fun if there was some kind of reward for first place?"

Snow had already cast her line out into the ocean, and her eyes glinted at Lastiara's words. It was just as she'd planned. Snow had said the word "tournament" as loud as she could because she knew that Lastiara would pick it up and run with it. All in order to effortlessly gain respect and rewards in her field of expertise.

Snow spoke carefully. "Huuuh, that *is* a good idea, Lastiara. I agree, we definitely need to do that."

"Well, nobody seems to be disagreeing, so that's that! Well then, this is my first time, but I'm gonna win!" With great enthusiasm, Lastiara swung the fishing rod with hands that didn't seem like they were new to the sport.

Snow, thinking that was also all part of the plan, attempted to declare her own victory with spinelessly formal language. "I'm sorry, Lastiara, but I cannot go easy on you. It may just be fishing but—"

“Whoa! I got my first fish!” It was Reaper who interrupted her.

“Huh?!” Snow’s eyes opened wide in shock.

“Oh! So fast, Reaper! Good job!” Lastiara praised her, clapping her hands.

“Hee hee, Snow gave me lessons the other day!”

Snow, after her apprentice’s betrayal (although Reaper had made no promises), immediately made up her mind to get serious. It was the same seriousness that she’d chosen to unleash a few days ago in the country of Laoravia.

“*Vibration!*” She secretly activated the vibration magic she was best at. Normally, it was an attributeless basic magic that was of no use whatsoever, but when she used it, it became something else. The vibrations emitted from her hand traveled down the line from the fishing rod and reached the sea. It was nearly impossible to transmit the vibrations to something that wasn’t made to let magic power through. But because Snow was serious, she succeeded. The vibrations spread, reverberated, and then returned to her. By sorting through this information, she was able to pinpoint the location of the fish, target it precisely, and successfully catch it. “All right, I’ve got my first one—”

“Oh! I got another!” It was again Reaper who interrupted her.

“Huh?!” As Snow sat there in shock, Sera and Maria went over to make a fuss about Reaper’s second catch.

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Reaper. I can’t lose to you either!”

“You’re amazing, Reaper! You really do learn fast!”

Snow, who was envious of the praise being showered on Reaper, gritted her teeth and exuded even more magical power. “*Vibration!*” she said to herself as she concentrated on her magic.

Now’s not the time to think about how difficult this magic is! I need to improve it here and now. Sharpen it up. Use my unique power on the fishing rod, on the line, on the hook, in the sea, in the water, in every nook and cranny! she thought.

“Yes! It worked! I got my second fish—”

“Oh, I got my third! Hee hee, I’ve got a good feeling about today!”

“Huh?!” Now, it wasn’t enough to just catch fish, Snow needed to be more creative. She had to make contact with the fish. For example, she could thread a sound that fish like into the water to lure them out.

Don’t think of vibration magic only in terms of strength. Instead of making it small and loud, make it thin and thick, bend and stretch it, and let the vibration propagate in the sea to attract fish!

“Yes, I got my third!” she cried.

“Oh! I got my fourth!”

“Huh?! Well, it’s not over yet!” Each time Snow caught a fish, Reaper caught one too. Snow’s dormant dragonewt cells were awakened by this unplanned and heated battle, not in the Dungeon, but on the deck of the ship.

The other members of the team could not keep up with this battle that would frighten even seasoned fishermen. It gradually became a one-on-one showdown between the two women, with those around them cheering them on. Snow’s attributeless magic was refined and sublimated, reaching the next level. However unbeknownst to her, her vibration magic even allowed her to speak underwater. She was unaware of this growth in her magic power, and their fishing duel became a dead heat before finally reaching its end.

“Oh, Kanami’s returned. Okay, unfortunately, that’s where we’ll have to end it!”

Kanami appeared on deck, having completed the swimsuits, and Lastiara stopped fishing. As soon as it was over, Snow and Reaper both checked their catches.

“I-I won! I did it!” Snow wiped her dripping brow, shook her body, which was now completely depleted of magic power, and raised her fist to the sky. She’d taken the win from Reaper, a child, by childishly using a shock wave to disrupt her rival’s fishing.

“Awww...I lost...but I’ll win next time! I’m getting the hang of it!” Reaper was aware of Snow’s cheating, but she cheerfully proposed a rematch without paying any attention to it.

In response to this angelic statement, Snow said, “Next time?! Well, I won’t lose to you, either! I’m your teacher!”

Her face paled as she changed into the swimsuit Kanami had prepared for her. And from that point on, she always found time to train her vibrational magic for fishing. Because of her natural talent, she’d had no rivals before today. If she was serious enough, no one could match her. Therefore, in her life at the academy in the Allied Nations, she had never been able to become stronger through friendly competition with others.

In her life on this ship, however, there were many mages who were comparable to her. It became necessary for her to make a real effort. In other words, during this ship’s journey, Snow seemed to have been slacking off but was really doing her personal training properly without Kanami’s knowledge. If she’d reported it to Kanami, everyone would have thought better and more favorably of her, but Snow didn’t realize this until the very end.

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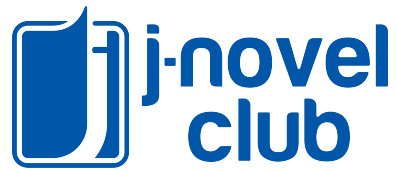
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 8

by Tarisa Warinai

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