
Kotatsu Takahashi
Illustration by Kakao • Lanthanum
2
BEFORE THE TUTORIAL STARTS
A Few Things I Can Do to Keep the Bosses Alive


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Kotatsu Takahashi

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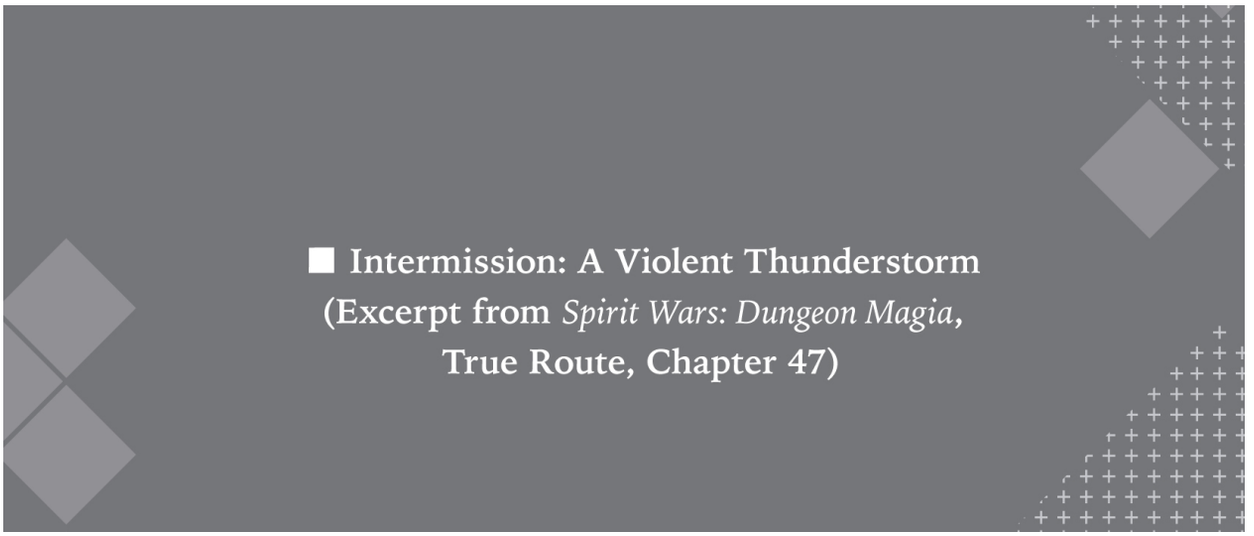
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◆◆◆ Spring 1193: Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #88, “Mother of All”: Fate Witch, the Empress of Light

Rain falls.

A pitch-black rain.

Steropes—the flash. Arges—the bolt. Brontes—the thunder.

Everything that unfolds in front of me is made up of *lightning*. And yet, what comes to mind is *rain*.

That’s because…

“There’s just so damn many of them…”

A hundred? A thousand? No, more. Thousands and thousands more.

Countless bypasses run through the sky, opening out into infinite discharge points.

Jet-black power runs through the spiritual bypasses. They’re like veins made of massive steel bars, and a continuous stream of dark lightning comes crashing down from the holes opened up at their ends.

“Kya-ha!”

They burst out with a deafening sound.

Crash, crash, crash, crash!

A black thunderstorm rages across the twilight sky.

It looks like a scene from hell. It's an assault on my senses.

"Help me!" someone cries.

The smell of charred living matter sticks to my nostrils.

All I can do is watch as smoke and flame rise from the city's skyscrapers, and the massive trees, now devoid of spiritual protection, are torched to cinders.

"This is a nightmare…"

A miasmic bolt of lightning falls from above. I use Brionac to dispel the bolt with a torrent of light. I curse—a curse aimed at both my enemy and myself.

There's no way I can forgive this black-lightning asshole for hurting the residents of this town. This piece of shit will pay for making the people I care about suffer. I swear, I'm gonna crush the life out of them. Even if it means I've got to die in the process.

But it's not just them. This is *my* fault, too. I should have never let that terrorist scumbag take things this far.

What a nightmare. Some Empress of Light I am.

"Please, Fate. Protect our town."

Tsurugi's words come back to me.

He left this place to me to protect. He *trusted me*.

And what did I tell him?

"I've got this. You go on ahead."

We both put on brave faces. Our fists were shaking as we brought them together. We promised we'd save this place…

"Kya-ha-ha!"

I run through the forest, cursing my powerlessness all the way.

The road is muddy. The trail opens out into a flower garden, painted in darkest black. It's in flames. The lightning tears it apart. Our forest, once so colorful, so full of life, has been charred black by a singular evil.

"Ah!"

And when I finally reach my old haunt, the home of the Rosso and Blu clan house, it's already gone.

The place where my friends and I ate our meals and rested our heads. My favorite salon. The training ground, the

amusement park, all of it, all of it, all of it!

"…!"

It was all burned away. Defiled. Turned to ash. To dust. Smashed apart and trampled like common garbage.

My teeth clench.

Don't cry. Don't shout. Don't scream.

There's no time to sit here playing the grief-stricken heroine.

Lightning comes crashing down from the sky.

It's clear that I'm its target.

There are five bolts. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.

"…Cut the shit."

I curse. My voice is filled with murderous rage. I unleash Brionac.

A golden beam of light pierces up through the charred earth and hits a black bolt as it falls.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha!"

A light show flashes through the sky in gold and black.

The terrorist's voice is coming from somewhere close by. With every step I take, it grows louder and louder.

What the hell is this scumbag after?

I can hardly believe it. This piece of shit has been blasting the whole city of Sakurabana all the way from here—from the outer edge of Mother of All.

And on top of that, they—

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

Miasmic lightning suddenly strikes at me from every conceivable direction.

They're seriously gonna take me on while *they destroy the city?*

"Fuck off already!"

I dodge. I intercept. I unleash my Regalia to block their dark lightning bolts and conserve my strength as much as possible.

And then—

"Kya-ha-ha-ha!"

And then I—

"Kya-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha!"

I finally, *finally* find the piece of shit who's put the whole town through this.

"Hey, mister. Mister Grumpy Man. Tell me—have we met before? Just looking at you makes my head feel funny. It's all

tingly and gross and annoying."

The asshole causing all this mayhem is a little girl.

She has long silver hair and deep red eyes.

She's wearing a gothic dress—she looks like she's on her way to a funeral. There are people at the little devil's feet. People I know. People who've treated me with kindness.

She stands in the middle of the scorched garden and cackles evilly. She doesn't even lay eyes on me. She merely looks down at the man and woman at her feet. It's like she's observing insects.

"Mr. Szilard! Ms. Eliza!"

Mr. Szilard is the only one who reacts when I call out. Eliza stays perfectly still.

She's lying, frozen, in the sea of burning flowers. She doesn't say a word. Doesn't move a muscle.

"You're pissing me off," says the little girl.

Squelch.

The bitch brings her foot down on Eliza's face.

I try not to think about the red stuff that bursts out. The little girl moves at the speed of lightning, and before I know it, Eliza's head is—

"You…" Before I realize it, my entire body is consumed by Brionac's spiritual power. "YOU BIIIIIIIIITCH!!!"

All the murderous rage inside me ignites like fuel, and it propels me forward across the garden.

I'll kill her. No matter what it takes. I'm going to tear this bitch apart.

"Kya-ha-ha! Wow! Wow, wow! Here's a fun one! You're all bright and sparkly like a twinkly little star!"

The terrorist in the funeral dress laughs.

And as I tackle her, lay into her from every direction, assault her with imperceptible flashes of light, and slice at her with glistening blades, she continues to cackle and deftly parries my every attack.

As she fends me off, her assault on the city continues.

The tens of thousands of bypasses that snake through the air carry her miasmic hell bolts and ceaselessly rain them down on the city—toxic bolts that rip through the sky and burn through our home. They'll tear it down until there's nothing left.

She's a monster. A demon wearing the skin of a young girl.

“What’s the point of all this?!” I shout. “Don’t you feel any guilt?! Any shame?!”

“That’s easy! So, so easy. I’m just taking out the trash! You’re all garbage, and it’s my job to sweep the streets clean! I’ve got some friends, and you know what they told me? They said this town is *ugly*. They hate it! And you know what? I asked my papa. You know what my papa said? He told me to go ahead. He told me to do it, to really run wild. To kill as many people as I wanted, destroy as much stuff as I could. He wants us to put on a concert with your screams of agony as the instruments!”

It’s like she’s in a trance. She keeps going on and on, talking a bunch of nonsense…

She’s insane.

I don’t mean it metaphorically. This isn’t an insult—this girl is an incarnation of insanity pretending to be human.

She can’t be allowed to live.

“So, cry for me,” she says. “Scream for me. Struggle in vain; humiliate yourselves! I, Jupiter, will enjoy every moment. Your worthless, incompetent squirming is your only path to redemption! Kya-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha! KYA-HA-HA-HA-HA!”

The terrorist continues to laugh hysterically as the world comes crumbling down around her.

Thunder rumbles. Jet-black bolts rain down.

This could be the end of Sakurabana.

Think, THINK. There has to be some way I can stop her.

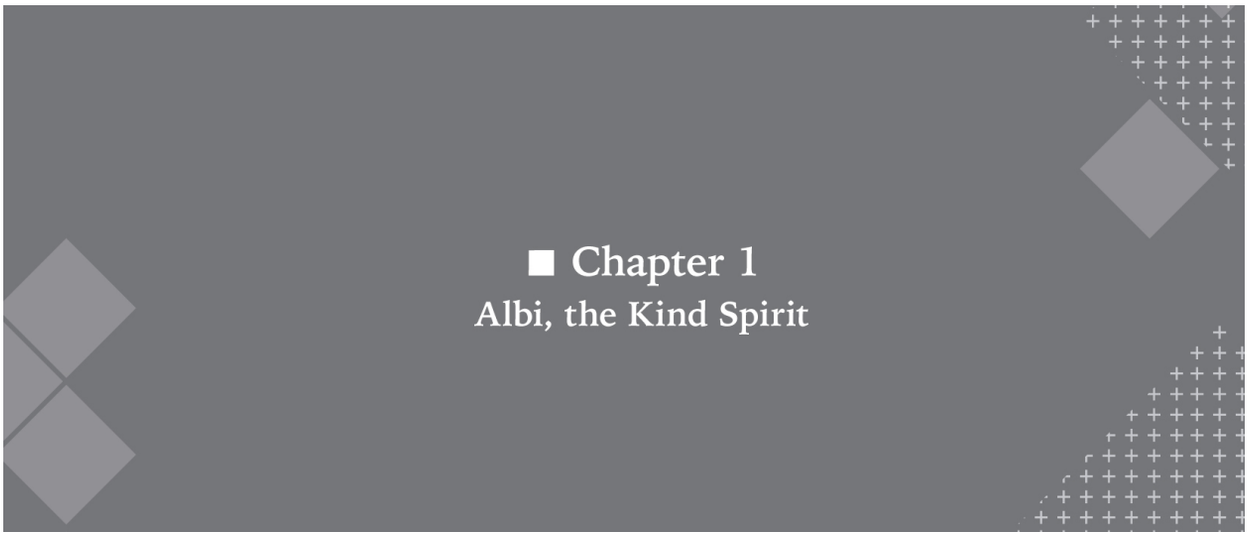
I run.

It’s pitch black, but I run.

My heart feels like it’s about to break. I beg it to stay strong. I run out of the flame-drenched garden, and—

“Got you!”

—a black flash pierces my chest.



◆◆◆ Spring 1190: Old Shrine Grounds: Kyouichirou Shimizu

In *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*, leveling up all comes down to strengthening your spirits.

They're the ones that absorb the experience points from enemies, the ones that awaken to greater power, and the ones that evolve.

It's not the people who get stronger. It's the spirits… Really puts the balance of power between the species in *Dungeon Magia* in perspective, huh? Spirit stones, astral power, and astral skills… It's like this entire world revolves around spirits.

The skill board system linked to astral levels is a good example of this.

A skill board, by the way, is a game system that lets you use points received from leveling up to activate panels that unlock new abilities. They're fairly common these days, so I would wager most gamers have likely seen at least one or two in their day. They're not exactly a staple, but they tend to give a level-up system a little bit of extra flavor. If I was comparing it to food, it'd

be like curry noodle soup—not something you see every day but not that unusual either.

The really nice thing about a game mechanic like the skill board is how much variety it can add to character growth. Unlike basic leveling up, which tends to be a fairly linear path, a skill board lends a sense of freedom in choosing how a character will grow which can be tailored to a player's play style. It makes the joy of leveling up that much more personal.

It's that freedom that makes skill boards so appealing.

You can choose to aim for the stronger skills first or steadily fill in stuff as you come across it. You can specialize, you can generalize, you can even create your own little story for why your character grows in the way you've chosen.

You're free to customize the experience how you like and make it suit your personal style.

That's the beauty of a skill board system—its flavor, its very essence.

And yet…

"How come I don't get that kind of freedooooooooooooooom?!"

With a desperate yell, I, Kyouichirou Shimizu, was sent soaring.

I rolled around in the dirt on the grounds of the old shrine. The area was aglow with white spiritual light. I choked back tears as sharp pain spread across my lower half.

I couldn't breathe. My body felt hot. My crotch had been devastated.

I wheezed trying to catch my breath. My eyes were ablaze with defiance as I glared at the perpetrator of this horrible crime.

Freakin' punk-ass secret boss! What the hell kind of training involves kicking me in the balls?!

"Ten-point-three seconds… Well done, Master. A new record," said Himinglaeva Albion. She held a stopwatch in her hand, as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

She might look like a white-haired young girl with otherworldly beauty, but this demon of a coach had just kicked me right in my special area without so much as a twitch of the eyebrow.

“You goddamn… This is…BS… How the hell is kicking me in the family jewels supposed to help me learn a new skill?”

“It’s quite simple,” she responded. “If I hold those disgusting private parts of yours hostage, you’re far more likely to take this seriously.”

“I’d be taking this seriously even without you kicking me in the crotch!”

“You may believe that to be the case, Master, but ever since I decided to employ the ‘Nutcracker Curriculum,’ the time it takes you to master new techniques has improved by approximately 170 percent. As long as the curriculum gets results, I have no plans on abandoning this training methodology.”

She was an honest-to-god demon. And not just any demon. She was the *devil*. Satan incarnate. The ruler of hell herself. Or, at least, that’s how it was beginning to feel.

Who would kick a dude in his nuts just to increase productivity? I didn’t sign up for a BDSM session. What the hell kind of training was smashing a dude’s balls anyway?

Why’d you have to go and sully the perfect world of a dating sim with something as base and vile as testicles in the first place, damn it?!

Not even Fate Witch was this sadistic.

Fate Witch is one of the heroines from the first *Dungeon Magia*. She’s a blond-haired girl with pigtails who comes to Sakurabana from a foreign land. She’s the kind of character you don’t see so much these days—a violent, foulmouthed *tsundere* type. She’s infamous for going on destructive rampages when she’s feeling particularly affectionate.

But even in her case, there was some sense to the chaos. Sure, she might beat the crap out of someone, but she never crossed the line.

Compared to her, my coach was an absolute demon—or perhaps I should call her a wicked deity. At any rate, kicking a guy in his manhood like this… Forget being a heroine; she wasn’t even human.

“I am neither heroine nor human. I am a god.”

My teary-eyed pleas fell on deaf ears. The secret boss didn’t seem to care one iota.

What's worse, as I begged her for mercy, she pulled out an egg salad sandwich and began to munch.

There wasn't much point screaming for help either. We were on the grounds of the old shrine, once her personal domain. No one would come to help me as long as I was here.

So, basically—

"Prepare yourself. It's time to resume."

—I was totally screwed. There was no escaping this ballbusting hell. The wicked goddess didn't have a single shred of mercy. The testicular torture would continue until it yielded the results she wanted.

"…Son of a— How'd it come to this?!"

To escape the pain, I thought back to what had led me to this awful situation in the first place.

◆ Shimizu Home: Living Room (Two Weeks Prior)

"Congratulations, Master. You've leveled up," Albi told me, like she was impersonating a results screen in some mobile game. This was the day after we settled things at the Moon's Eclipse dungeon.

Apparently, it happened as soon as we'd taken down that bony bastard. But between selling the spirit stone and responding to endless questions about what happened, I was completely dead by the time we got back. So Albi waited till the next day to let me know.

It was pretty considerate of her. Or, at least, that's what I thought at the time.

For a secret boss, Albi was pretty good at reading the vibe of a situation.

…Mind you, upon reading said vibes, she occasionally chose to do something horrible like kick me in the balls. But let's not dwell on the tragedy of my crotch right now.

Anyway, when she told me I'd leveled up, I was so happy I did a little victory dance.

Sure, part of it was the simple sense of accomplishment. But I was also just glad to have gotten stronger.

The spiritual blessings earned from leveling up are on a totally different level from those gained through simple training.

I had never experienced anything as cool as getting to pick unique skills or boost my abilities before. I was filled with childlike excitement.

Plus, the growth system in this world was a skill board, which meant that I could choose which skills and stat modifiers I wanted to focus on. The sky was the limit!

Just think—I could hem and haw over what to spend my points on and come up with a growth trajectory that suited me best. What an incredible feeling!

Whoooo! I did it! I freakin' leveled up, babyyy!

…Thinking back, it felt like I was soaring through the sky on a jet plane fueled by my own excitement. A huge airplane powered by enthusiasm. Oh, how free-spirited it was, flying boldly through the air. And it had more than enough fuel to take it all the way up to the sun. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your excitement speaking," the announcement would say…or something like that.

"Yes, how lovely for you. Now, then. Apply to put your points toward the Time Freeze skill. You'll also need to increase your spiritual capacity and your astral power recovery rate. I'll accept the changes right away. And then we can have a snack. Oh, and for the record, if you attempt to apply for any other skills or modifiers, I will reject all of them."

But that jet plane of excitement soon came crashing out of the sky.

Just like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and got burned, I, too, had been burned by my naive expectations.

My hands were tied. I was being forced to make a singular choice on the skill board. This was a bold new twist on the established system, and I wasn't sure I liked it…

I begged her, of course. I was fine with taking her recommendations into consideration, but what gave her the right to force me to choose something right from the get-go?

The secret boss merely pulled out a cookie tin and, looking terribly put-upon, responded, "Oh, is that so? Well, despite it being an utter waste of time, I will hear you out, Master. What do *you* want to do?"

And thus began our skill board debate—or rather, Albi's marathon session poking holes into my every argument (and she

went on for a while, so I really recommend skipping past this part).

“If you choose that skill,” she said, shoving a cookie into her mouth, “do you really expect it to work out for you? The distance from which you can effectively use skills is severely limited. You’ll never be able to pull it off. Time Freeze can not only be used defensively, but it will also prove indispensable when we visit the tenth floor of the Eternal Darkness dungeon… Allow me to ask you something. Without Time Freeze, how exactly do you plan to get through such a difficult area? Please, by all means, do tell.

“Oh,” she said, munching away at a rice cracker. “You plan to take *this* route to get to the skill needed to turn back time, do you? And yet, in order to obtain that skill, you will need to defeat *at least* seven enemies, each of which would be stronger than the Irregularity you defeated before. In the dungeon with an Elixir, there is only *one* enemy that fulfills that requirement—the Final Guardian. You do realize which of these two plans is the most effective…don’t you?

“Do you comprehend the meaning of ‘inverse stat modifiers’?” she asked as she slurped up udon noodles topped with out-of-season *sudachi*. “That’s right. It means that when you acquire skills for which you have no aptitude, the overall cost is far greater than it would be otherwise.

“Let’s use your general aptitudes as an example, shall we? Your ability to direct and scale up skills—in other words, your ranged effectiveness—would be impacted by inverse stat modifiers. By spending some of the blessing you’ve received on these inversely modified stats, you are wasting valuable points that could be spent elsewhere.

“Or, more specifically, if you were to spend the blessings on ranged skills, then you would be left with too few to use on either Time Freeze or other more useful stats.

“Finally, it is important to note that the strength you gain from blessings does not constitute permanent ‘enhancements’ but merely ‘modifiers.’ As such, the upper limits of these modifiers are dictated by your own base stats. Which is to say they would be exactly as weak and useless as you are, Master…

You really expect me to allow you to use your blessings so frivolously?”

She kept going on and on. It was complete overkill. In the end, I somehow wound up apologizing for all of it.

And to think that, according to our pact, the two of us were meant to be “equals.” *Hah. What a joke.*

◆ Old Shrine Grounds

“And after all of that, after finally learning the Time Freeze skill, now I gotta get my balls kicked in just ’cause I’m having trouble lengthening the skill’s duration? I tell you, it’s no wonder people don’t like violent heroines anymore. Actually, scratch that. Even *they* wouldn’t kick a guy in his crotch. You’re saying that if I don’t want to get my balls smashed, I gotta use my new skill to stop you? Is that it? That’s nuts! Like, literally…nuts…ah-ha…ha-ha-ha…”

Tears began streaming down my cheeks, and not just because of the pain in my testicles. Sure, they hurt. But more than that, my heart ached.

What had I done to deserve this? Why did my privates have to suffer this abuse?

…It was because I was weak. I was nothing more than the tutorial miniboss. Just a useless waste of space that would eventually get the crap kicked out of him by the main characters.

I want to get stronger. I want to get so strong that even if I get kicked in the balls I won’t flinch.

“Hmm.”

After I’d indulged in bit of self-pitying monologue, the secret boss walked up to me with her right hand held to her chin. (Her left hand was shoveling egg sandwich into her mouth. She wasn’t going to stop eating for anything).

“…What?” I asked. “Are you gonna start kickin’ me again?”

“No. I just had an idea.”

Her words sent a shiver down my spine.

This was the same woman whose last bright idea was holding my balls hostage to improve my skill’s uptime. Whatever she was thinking, it couldn’t be good.

“I’m gonna go ahead and say no to whatever you’re about to suggest. If you torture me any more than this…I think I’ll wind up pissing myself.”

“Well, then. Perhaps I should simply destroy your apparatus and prevent that from happening,” she said. “…I’m only joking. There’s no need for you to flee.”

Just as I was about to use up every last ounce of my strength to run the hell away, she grabbed me by the back of the neck.

Crap. I’m dead. She’s going to castrate me.

“Calm yourself, Master. I will not put you through any more torture today. Here, come. Rest your weary head for a moment,” she said. Then she kneeled and pointed at her soft-looking thighs.

Her thighs. Her…thighs?

“Just what are you planning, Albi?! You’re not really going to let me sleep on your lap, are you…?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re just gonna sucker punch me in the face as soon as my guard is down, right?”

“I wouldn’t do something so extreme.”

This woman, who had been kicking me in the crotch in the hopes that it would make my skill last longer, had a lot of nerve talking about what was and wasn’t extreme!

I bared my teeth and tried my best to seem intimidating.

I don’t want to be put through any more pain. I hate pain.

“Hmm. It seems our training has taken more of a mental toll on you than I expected. At this rate, it may negatively affect our future endeavors. As such…” She grabbed my head with both her hands and forced it down onto her lap. The egg sandwich had disappeared at some point. “I shall now administer emergency mental care.”

“Hey! You damned—”

But after that, no more obscenities left my mouth.

What…is this? It feels good. Like really, really good.

The sensation was soft and smooth but cool to the touch. Albi’s lap should have been nothing more than that—a lap. But it felt as comfortable as a fancy memory foam pillow.

“This is your reward,” she said. “I realized that I’ve been keeping you in a constant state of terror all this time. I want to balance the many sticks with some carrots, so to speak. I will try

hard to come up with a training curriculum that will be a little easier on you."

Before I could cry "Brainwashing!" Albi reached out and gently began stroking my head.

I wanted to resist, but it was already too late. I didn't know how it had happened, but this spirit had a special ability that compelled any member of the Shimizu bloodline to like her unconditionally.

So, what happens when she allows a Shimizu to rest their head on her lap and gently strokes them? The result is obvious: complete obedience.

"Let's see… How about this? Every time you increase your skill's duration by ten seconds, I'll reward you in the following ways: For ten seconds, you can lie on my lap. Twenty seconds and I'll gently clean your ears. Thirty seconds and I'll give you a hug. Will that work, Master?"

"Okay, fine."

I couldn't think straight enough to make any decisions. Her offer seemed perfectly reasonable to me.

"I'm feeling a bit sleepy…"

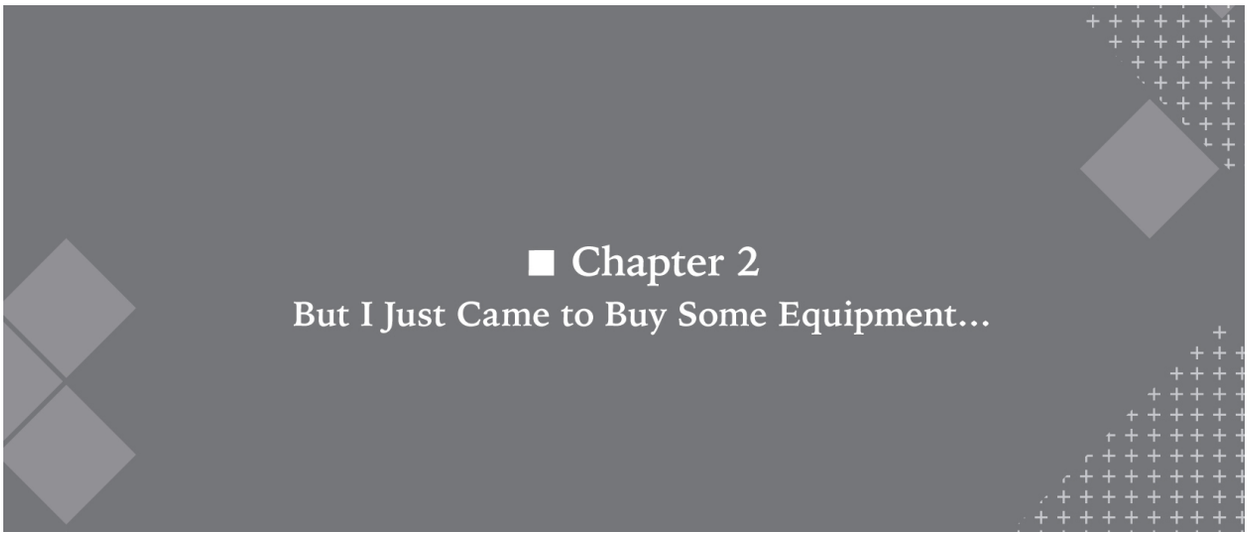
"Yes. Good night, Master."

As my thoughts dissipated and my consciousnesses began to fade, a sense of contentment slowly spread through my body. It was like taking a dip in a hot spring.

I didn't know what to think of anything anymore. But maybe Albi was a kind spirit after all.

"Your mental-care maintenance is complete, Master. It seems this will be a useful strategy indeed."

Oh, crap.



◆ Lali-Lali, the Workshop of Dreams

The Eternal Darkness dungeon was the resting place of the mystical medicine known as the Elixir.

All our efforts up to this point were for the sake of that one item—forming a pact with a spirit, combat training, getting my adventurer's license, meeting a comrade I could depend on.

After all this time, using the knowledge from my past life, and risking everything to take on the Reaper, I had gained much. But it still wasn't enough. Not even close.

Registering for housing inside the dungeon, reporting to the various government agencies, preparing my equipment, etc. The list of things we had to do before we could start exploring dungeons seemed endless.

When it came to my equipment, there was little room for compromise. My armor would be my lifeline inside dungeons. But my choice of weapons was equally crucial.

I already had the ultrarare legendary weapon Laevateinn. But when it came down to it, the knife was only good for cutting up living organisms. In certain situations, it could serve as a giant

killer, able to easily take out high-level foes. But when it came to locking swords, or fighting enemies that could regenerate, it was essentially no better than any ordinary knife.

If anything, Laevateinn was best used as a sub-weapon, or something to throw into a combo. Basically, it wasn't a great option to rely on alone. But as a backup weapon to throw out every now and again, it was crazy strong. Ultimately, Albi and I agreed that it would be a good idea for me to find a more suitable main weapon—something for more general use. And if it was tough and sturdy, then all the better.

"And that's why we're here," I said to her. "I think we'll be able to find what we need."

It was a cloudy afternoon, and Albi was stuffing her face with a crepe as I introduced her to a big gray building.

The secret boss and I were always together, but we didn't really go out much aside from training, and this felt somehow novel.

"This is Lali-Lali, the Workshop of Dreams," I said, showing off my knowledge of the game. "This group of shops offers high-quality goods at appropriately high prices. It's definitely not for beginners."

I'd taken the place's reputation in this world into consideration before choosing it, so I was hoping this wouldn't be a complete disaster. Fact-checking is super important!

"In dungeons, equipment is as crucial as having a good partner," I explained. "So I don't want to cheap out on any of it. Thankfully our financial affairs are in order, so I don't think it'll be much of a problem to buy what we need here."

"Indeed. Though I don't think these wares are very befitting of you."

"……"

She was right. I was a rookie who had only just received his license, and here I was acting like I could just buy up the stock of some fancy place geared toward higher-level adventurers.

But, Albi, you can't just say things like that…

"It doesn't bother me in the slightest… Though it seems *you* are a bit uncomfortable, Master."

"Ngh…"

She was right on the money.

How could it not bother me? We haven't even made our debut, and yet, thanks to what we pulled off during the exam, the whole city has their eyes on us.

And what would everyone think if they saw me rocking expensive gear made for high-class adventurers? They'd probably be like, "Oh, so this guy thinks he's a big shot, does he?" And even if they didn't, *I* would.

"I see you're ruminating over a host of unnecessary details, as usual. I don't see the problem. You risked your life to earn that money." Albi's placid expression was tinged with exasperation.

In a way, she was right, of course. The money I'd deposited into my adventurer's bank account already surpassed eight figures.

The spirit stone that perverted Reaper dropped after we'd pulverized him had sold for a ton. I'd split the money with Haruka, of course. But even after divvying it up, my earnings were considerable.

The more I think about it, the crazier it seems. Eight figures. That's not the kind of money some rookie in middle school should be throwing around. It could really mess up my financial awareness and have a negative effect on my brain. This is tens of millions of yen we're talking about.

...Not that my petty lower-middle-class complexes really mattered.

What was important was what I used all that money to buy and which shop I chose to spend it at.

That said, every shop sold equipment of some kind, and every single one of them had their own niche.

There were shops that catered to beginners and sold cheaper goods, those for seasoned pros that focused on gear functionality, and even those that exclusively sold equipment from overseas.

And if there was one thing that Lali-Lali was known for in this overcrowded market, it was high-quality goods.

Lali-Lali was a workshop and exhibition space where *perverse weirdos* plied their trade, used rare materials with abandon, and showed off their peculiar creations to the world.

That was what made it stand out. It was the place's niche. And for people like us who wanted strong gear, there was no better spot to find it.

“And that’s why we’re here,” I said. “I think we’ll be able to find what we need.”

“I recall you saying that exact same line mere moments ago.”

“That was me introducing the place to you. This time, I’m trying to strengthen my resolve.”

“…Sometimes I haven’t the slightest clue what is going through that head of yours, Master.”

I felt the same way about her, so I decided it was best not to dwell on it too much.

And so, off we went!

◆

Lali-Lali was a seven-story building crammed with a jumble of shops selling miscellaneous goods. That was my first impression anyway.

It had the vibe of a small-town street festival. Each shop was loud, vibrant, and eye-catching, but there was absolutely no harmony of design.

It might not have had the hustle and bustle of a shopping mall, but it was visually very noisy. Most of the storefronts were like peacocks spreading their feathers and showing off for all to see.

As Albi and I walked through this gaudy theme park for adventurers, my eyes eventually fell upon a shop with a sign that looked like lips meeting a heart and read MOTHER’S MILK.

On display in the shop was a variety of colorful gemstones sparkling inside acrylic display cases…probably accessories for boosting resistance. These items were essentially jewelry made from spirit stone. They weren’t exactly necessary on an adventure, but they could definitely come in handy.

“Mind if we go in?” I asked.

“By all means.”

I thanked Albi, and, feeling a bit nervous, I stepped into the shop.

“Welcome.”

An old man wearing a hat that looked like a baby’s bonnet came out to greet us. *What’s with the baby bonnet?* I wondered.

No way that's what it is. It's gotta be a coincidence that it looks like that.

I shrunk back for a second when I saw what he was wearing, but the old guy seemed nice enough. He was probably fine.

He's fine…right?

"Hello there. Uhhh. Would it be all right if I took a look around?"

"'Course. It would be even more all right if you bought something, too," he said with a big grin. I wasn't sure how to respond to that one.

Touché, old dude.

Aside from the name Mother's Milk and the baby bonnet, this guy was perfect.

"Can one really be perfect if they have faults you must excuse?" Albi asked.

"Just trust me, Albi."

There are a lot of things in this world that are better left unquestioned.

Either way, we decided to take a look around the shop. And, man, was it *something*. It fit in perfectly with Lali-Lali's hodgepodge vibe.

Each accessory on display was handmade, its abilities a cut above. Every piece was beautiful, and unsurprisingly, the prices were appropriately outrageous. But just looking at everything was more than enough for me. *Boy, window-shopping sure is fun.*

"Damn…look at the conversion rate on this one. It might sacrifice output, but it boosts resistance like crazy. This thing's way better than anything you can find on the regular market."

I sighed. The conversion resistance rings lining one of the display cases boasted stats that had even a seasoned *Dungeon Magia* pro like me staring in amazement.

"Listen up, pal. That one's a real bargain," said the shopkeeper. "A superior conversion rate, and all for the low, low price of eight hundred thousand. It's a must-buy item."

Unsurprisingly, the price also had me staring in amazement. Eight hundred thousand for an item you would definitely need to equip multiples of… I seriously debated it for a second, but I quickly shook my head and stopped myself.

Calm down, Kyouichirou. If you go dropping that kind of cash here, there'll be no end to it. We can spend some money, but we gotta stick to the plan.

"Sorry, we want to go check out some of the other shops, too. We'll be back later."

"Ooh, real shame! You'd better come back, y'hear? I'll hold you to your word."

The old guy had a warm smile on his face with just a hint of disappointment.

I don't know when it'll be, but when I need accessories, I'll have to come here.

"That clerk certainly played you for quite the sucker," noted Albi.

"Nah. C'mon. No way."

He didn't…did he?

◆

"Hi there! Welcome to Brainwash, the headgear specialists! We recommend the Astral Helmet, guaranteed to protect your head from any and all spiritual attacks! Both earphone and choker designs are available!"

The second shop we walked into, a helmet shop, had as much impact as the first. A beautiful, smart-looking woman with an amazing body wearing a nurse outfit came out to greet us.

…Don't misunderstand. It wasn't the nurse outfit that caught my attention, okay? The high slit in her skirt definitely made an impression, but that was just fashion. I wasn't about to fuss over every little detail like that.

The real problem was—

"Oh my goodness! You're sooo muscular! You must work out a ton."

—the clerk's voice, full of sensual charm and flattery, was very deep and very *manly*.

"I could throw in something extra special for a handsome, burly man like you, y'know…"

The clerk's breath brushed against my ear. It was spring, but I could feel a cold chill run down my spine.

Now, I don’t intend to judge anyone over how they choose to identify. There are a lot of different kinds of love in the world, and I think that’s great. And it’s also great that gender is a spectrum, and everyone approaches it differently.

“Ah-ha-ha. Th-thanks.”

But at the end of the day, I really like girls. So, having someone with a very manly voice breathing down my neck makes me shrivel up. I’m sorry, but that’s just how I am.

Please respect my personal space, ma’am. Also, your face is, like, way too close. You’re breathing all over me. And your perfume’s way too strong!

“Isn’t this wonderful, Master?” said Albi. “Your dream of having a beautiful woman from another world that you’ve just met flirt with you has come true.”

“This is absolutely *not* what I wished for!”

It’s seriously not! …Right?!

◆

After finishing up at that shop, our journey through the strange land of Lali-Lali continued.

Innerwear, outerwear, leggings, gauntlets, and leg guards—each of them high-quality and high-priced. And in every shop, a highly intense person would appear to show me their wares. To be totally honest, a bunch of the clerks were so damn weird that it made me seriously consider giving up and going home. But I hoped the outing would become a good memory someday. Actually, scratch that. I think I’d rather just reset my brain to before I met any of these people.

After a while, Albi and I found a trendy café inside the building and decided to take a break and refuel our glucose levels.

“I think we have a good idea of what your load-out is going to look like,” Albi began, as she absolutely demolished a massive parfait. No matter how many times I saw it, I was always surprised at just how much she could eat. “Seeing as you specialize in close-range combat, I believe we should buy your innerwear from Sodom, your outerwear from Masochist Formalin, and your astral headgear from Brainwash.”

“I agree with you on the headgear. But don’t you think something a bit lighter would work better for the inner and outerwear? I personally feel like Pedominus or Butter Dog might be better for more flexible options.”

“Very well. Then how about Pedominus for the innerwear and Masochist Formalin for the outer? Furthermore, if you’re concerned about mobility, I would suggest that you add gauntlets and perhaps some leggings from Pork Soup or Nudist Beats.”

“Hmm… I feel like some light protectors would be better for both of those. The stuff Cuckold’s Closet was selling had some decent resistance.”

“I suppose that is worth considering.”

This sort of weird conversation would be enough to make any uninformed listener pass out. All we were doing was listing off the names of the shops, but for some reason I could feel embarrassment welling up inside me.

This was all the fault of those weirdo shopkeepers. They were the ones who kept naming their shops like they were trying to show off their own perversions. It seemed they’d never heard the saying “all things in moderation.”

Back in my gamer days, I’d thought it was weird that Lali-Lali had so many tenants running shops, and yet the places selling weapons were all called “Weapon Shop,” and those selling accessories were all called “Accessory Shop,” and so on and so forth. Now I finally knew why. There are certain idiosyncrasies that one is better off keeping to oneself… Yep.

“Mmm. This stuff really hits the spot,” I said as I scooped some of the mountain of vanilla ice cream off my plate. The refreshing sweetness spread across my tongue.

I decided to stop thinking about those weirdos. The deeper I stared into the abyss of perversion, the more I felt the abyss of perversion staring back… Gawking at an exhibitionist felt just as sinful as being one… But anyway, enough of that.

What I needed to focus on was my gear. I tried picking the conversation back up with Albi to distract me from unnecessary thoughts.

“Seems like we’ve got equipment covered. But the real problem is my weapon.”

“Indeed,” agreed Albi. “I didn’t see any decent weapon shops.”

I sighed. By “decent,” she wasn’t referring to the quality of the shops’ wares. She meant “decent” as in “not depraved.” Basically, the shops selling weapons were all massively weird. And it wasn’t just the shopkeepers either. Their weapons were completely bonkers, too… And so, we were right back to talking about weirdos!

For example, one of the shops sold an exploding spear. It had a sign on it warning potential buyers that it was “recommended only for those not bothered by explosions.”

According to the shopkeeper, the spear’s explosive power had been increased far beyond what was recommended. The result was a spear that was about as safe for the user as a kamikaze bombing. He lamented that, as a result, he could only sell it to someone willing to be exploded.

…Makes sense in a way. If you ensure that the user doesn’t mind, you’re less likely to be held liable for it.

Another shop had a flying pile bunker set that could transform and fuse into five different forms. It was exactly like one of those things you’d see in a Sunday-morning robot anime on Japanese TV, and it supposedly attacked enemies for you automatically.

…I guess a weapon can be anything you want it to be, really.

But the one that stood out the most was…a maid. That’s right. *A maid.* The kind that says “Welcome home, Master” when you walk into a themed café. That kind of maid.

Apparently, it was a mechanical doll with advanced artificial intelligence that could assist in everything from combat to cooking and laundry. It could even “serve” its master on lonely nights.

I felt almost certain something like that did not, strictly speaking, count as a weapon. But I’ll admit that I was secretly pretty intrigued.

…I wonder if that guy would let me have the maid after all…

At any rate, those were the kinds of options on the table. They all certainly lived up to Lali-Lali’s reputation as the “Workshop of Dreams.” But they were certainly not what I would call “decent.”

Come to think of it, I remember seeing online that this place was primarily good for armor.

Had Kyouichirou's optimism done him dirty yet again? …No. There was no way I could have expected this.

When I played the game, there were definitely some decent weapon shops around here. And it sure as hell wasn't such a gathering place for weirdos.

Does something happen in the two years between now and the main plot of the game to change all this? Is that it?

There was no way a guy could have known that ahead of time. Least of all me, goddamn it.

"Were I forced to rank what we've seen so far," remarked Albi. "I would say that the selection of swords was the closest to what we are looking for."

Compared to me—currently at my wit's end—Albi was as calm as ever as she slowly demolished her towering parfait. Her stomach was a bottomless pit.

"That's true. Most of the swords were pretty normal," I agreed. "Even the weird ones weren't that bad. Like that sword with the bellows attached to it. Or that combo bow-sword."

My standard for what was normal had been thrown completely out of whack. But the swords *did* seem decent by comparison.

"Hmm. A sword, huh…?"

Imagining myself standing next to Haruka Aono, the legendary swordmaster, swinging a blade of my own made me feel like I'd become the butt of some cosmic joke. She could already make as many swords as she wanted, right?

Our lives were on the line. I couldn't risk getting some weird weapon. But I also didn't want to butt in on Haruka's territory.

…I guess there's no harm in asking her.

I pulled out my smartphone and thought over the whole sword thing again. It wasn't like there was some rule that I couldn't use a sword just because I was in a party with a trained sword expert that was already *way* better than I was. This wasn't an anime or a manga. Would it really be that big a deal if we used the same weapon? I didn't think anyone would mind.

Plus, we'd come all this way. And there were shops that had some decent swords. It felt like a waste to give up on them so

easily.

I decided to consult the swordmaster, and if she gave me the okay, then I would go ahead and get a sword of my own and wave it around like a real badass. I pulled out my smartphone and rang up Haruka Aono.

"Hmm. Nope. Rejected. ☆"

That was Haruka's curt response.

"But why? Sure, I'm nowhere near your level, but I can use a sword too, y'know."

"That's not what I'm saying. Swords aren't just about how you use them in battle."

"Huh?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. Weren't swords just a tool for fighting? What else did I need to do with them?

"You're wrong. Swords are really delicate, y'know. If your cuts are even just the slightest bit off, or if you try cutting something a little too hard, the blade could snap, and then you'd be in trouble."

"Oh."

That was all it took for me to realize she was right. Swords really are like that. As a weapon, they emphasize sharpness above all else. Which means they sacrifice durability, making them quite fragile and easy to break.

And when fighting in dungeons, being able to make it through successive battles is far more important than each individual attack. Having a weapon that's easily broken is a major weak point. It was definitely not the right choice for a powerhouse like me.

"That's not exactly right either. A sword doesn't necessarily sacrifice durability for the sake of its blade's sharpness. There's plenty of 'em that are thick and sturdy. But, that said…"

She went on to explain that it wasn't common these days to design swords like that. Not to mention that thick, sturdy swords weren't really made for repeated attacks either.

"But, hey, if you really think you can use a single sword without chipping the blade, be my guest."

"Nah. My bad. I'd better leave that sorta thing to professionals like you. I'll try to find something beefy for me to swing around instead."

"Oh yeah?"

I knew I didn't have the skills necessary to use swords for long stretches of time the way Haruka did without ruining their blades. According to Albi, even the most generous assessment of my martial skills would put me in the "average" category. I decided it was best to avoid weaponry that required any level of mastery.

"Thanks, Haruka. I'm glad I called you."

"*Oh, please. This was nothing. That's what party members are for, right? I'm here to help you whenever. Just like you are for me*," she said cheerfully. *"I'm really excited for Golden Week, by the way. Let's make our first adventure something special, all right?"*

"Yeah. You can count on me."

We chatted for a bit about unimportant stuff. When she hung up, I turned to Albi and resumed our conversation on weapons.

"Well. It's not like we've seen every shop in the place or anything," I said, "but I figure it'd be best if we just bought a weapon somewhere else."

"Indeed. There's no reason to force yourself to buy one here."

I stared out a window as the sun set and concluded, "Well, guess we'd better look elsewhere."

"Hey, hey! Do you have a minute?" Just as I decided to get up and leave, a woman's excited voice stopped me. "I think I might be able to help you out. I've got an extra special tidbit of info just for you!"

I turned toward the voice and found a woman staring at me intently from the seat behind mine.

"Uhh. Me?" I asked.

"Oh! Oh, wow! Don't tell me! You're that super rookie everyone's been talking about, right?"

Her orange hair was tied up into a side ponytail. Her eyes lit up and she clapped her hands as if to say *It really is you!*

...Super rookie, huh? This is the first time anyone's called me that to my face. Talk about embarrassing.

"That's probably me, yeah. So, um. Did you need something?"

At that, the lady's eyes sparkled with joy. She had the energy of a lively teen girl.

"Wooow. You're the real deal! I can't believe it! I'm so totally in luck!"

"...Umm."

“Oh! Whoops! Sorry ’bout that! I’m a bit of a space case. Oh! Right! I’m Guren Yashima! I run a weapon shop right here in Lali-Lali! Nice to meetcha! ☆”

Guren struck a pose and threw up a peace sign in front of her chin.

Oh geez. This girl’s super cute.

“Master, your one-track mind is reminiscent of an animal in heat.”

“……”

I couldn’t argue with her there. I was confident that I was as easy to please as a guy could get.

The woman and I exchanged brief introductions and started chatting.

“So, what exactly is this helpful information you mentioned a moment ago?” I asked.

“Whoops! I totes forgot! Here I am, chattin’ away. Anyway! Should be obvious, right?”

She bonked herself on the head with her left hand and apologized for forgetting. Then she started the conversation over again. Her every little move was so damn cute.

“What else? Weapons, of course! Hee-hee. ♪ Why don’t you stop by my shop? I’ll hook you up with a superspecial, very cute, and totally powerful weapon!”

Albi and I looked at each other.

“Master?”

“Yeah.”

We mentally switched on telepathic communication and started up a high-speed conversation.

Would we go? Would we pass?

It took us all of two seconds to decide that we should, indeed, go check it out.



■ Chapter 3

The Multipurpose Close-Range Weapon with Detachable Variant Combat Logic: “Eckesachs”

◆ Lali-Lali, the Workshop of Dreams

The shop’s sign read DVERGR. I assumed that the name had come from the fairy blacksmiths of old Norse myth.

It seemed like a pretty decent name for a shop to me. It was so regular, in fact, that it made me suspicious. Maybe *Dvergr* just had some kind of *sexual* definition I wasn’t aware of.

“Now, now. No need to worry,” said Guren, the shop’s owner, with a chuckle. “There’s no weird pervy meaning behind the name of my shop.”

Apparently, my uneasiness was written all over my face. “I’m sorry. It’s just that all the places in here are, well…quite unique.”

“You’re telling me! These guys think being creepy is like a badge of honor. It’s so gross.”

She laughed, saying “Musta been tough for you, Kyouichirou” as she used her trained hands to open her shop’s shutter.

Her response was so average and ordinary! It was almost like she didn’t belong in this hive of weirdos… But I still had my doubts.

“’Course, they’re a good bunch. They’re a real laugh once you get ’em chatting. I suppose you could say they’re, like, simple. Lovable idiots. Well, whatever. Just go it at your own pace, Kyouichi. Pal around with them and they’ll probably give you a good deal.”

Before long, the shutter was fully open, exposing the dark interior.

“Just gimme ooone sec, ’kay?” said Guren, disappearing into the back. As I watched her run off, I felt certain of something.

She’s genuinely just a decent person!

My heart was dancing. *A responsible adult! Not a weirdo! An actual, put-together adult!* I didn’t know why, but this alone was enough to fill me with joy.

This ten-out-of-ten service is making my heart throb.

She had the vibe of a trendy teen girl, but she was the most together adult in this place. The dissonance hit me like a weapon of mass destruction.

“……”

“What is it, Albi?”

“Nothing. I was simply thinking about how you reminded me of a pig in heat.”

Albi’s words were pure, 100 percent malice. It felt like getting ice water poured directly on my brain.

How does she always know when I’m fawning over someone cute? We stopped using telepathy a while ago.

“I don’t need to read your mind. Your virginal fantasies are written all over that thuggish face of yours.”

“Are you serious?!”

“I am very serious. Anyone even remotely acquainted with you would easily be able to recognize it… Don’t tell me you were not aware how obvious it was!”

“I wasn’t!”

I felt shameful and defensive and hid my face out of reflex.

Damn it, this is so freaking embarrassing. And what a weakness! It’s like the polar opposite of mind reading. What a crappy characteristic. What should I do? What if I wore a mask? Then no one would be able to—

“You want to start wearing a mask over something so stupid? I’ve never heard of such a lame backstory.”

“Stop it! Get out of my head!”

Am I seriously that easy to read?!

◆

A few minutes later, Guren emerged from the now-lit shop.

“Thaaanks for waitiiing! C’mon in! This is my workshop.”

Guren looked proud as we followed her inside and proceeded to check out the place.

The teen-like artisan’s shop was bathed in warm lighting, giving it a rustic appearance that greatly contrasted with her flashy style.

Maybe rustic isn’t the right word.

It was straightforward, orderly, dependable… That’s what it was: dependable.

The weapons lining the display cases were free of unnecessary decoration, and each and every one had a carefully written explanation. Everywhere you looked, Guren’s attention to detail was crystal clear.

After a day spent in a den of perverts, that kind of consideration really put my mind at ease.

“So, you’re the one shoppin’ today, right Kyouichi?”

“Yes, just me.”

Because of the Barrier Rule, Albi wasn’t allowed in dungeons. So, unfortunately, I was always going to be the one putting my life on the line.

“Got a particular kind of weapon you like? I’ve got all kinds here, so you can take your pick.”

“Uh, let’s see…”

When it came to simple weapon preference, I preferred the classics. Swords, katanas, that sort of thing. But she wasn’t simply asking about my taste. Whether it actually *suited* me or not was the crucial point. What kind of weapon would help me do my best and maximize my contribution to the party?

And in that case…

“I think I’d like something with a bit of weight to it. I guess I would rather smash something to bits than slice it into pieces. I don’t care for long range, so it should be something I can use up close. A weapon suited for a power-based fighter instead of, say,

an agility-based attacker. Maybe even something geared toward a heavy-hitter. Basically, I'd like the biggest thing you can get me… Does that make sense?"

"Hm-hm. Gotcha! Looks like I had you pegged perfectly. ☆ Of course a big burly guy like you wants something beefy."

"Ah-ha-ha, I guess so."

Even without relying on spiritual power, I could bench press over four hundred pounds. Back in my original world, I'd be considered a monster by middle schooler standards.

"By the by. Roughly how much are you looking to spend?"

"Well, it definitely depends on the quality of the weapon, but I was thinking of somewhere around three million yen."

"All right, so. Let's say for the sake of argument that I was selling a weapon worth more than three million. Would you consider it? Or is that out of the question?"

I turned to look at Albi. I wasn't sure where Guren was going with this. It felt like she was trying to figure out how much I had on me. Something about it felt off.

"What do you think?" I asked the spirit.

"I would have no problem with it if the weapon's value matched its price."

"I figured."

We'd prepared a rough budget ahead of time to make sure we didn't spend too much. But I was carrying quite a bit of cash with me. If I could find a great weapon for a high price, I would definitely be willing to loosen the purse strings a bit.

…If the bargain was done in good faith, that is.

"Well… I guess I could go as high as five mill… Actually, if we were talking about something *really* special, I'd be willing to go up to ten million."

Guren's eyes changed as soon as she heard those words. But I got the feeling it wasn't greed moving her but something else. Something more primitive, more urgent. And I could see it had lit a flame inside her.

"Seriously? No takesies-backsies, right?"

"Uh. Well, I'm not looking for anything too fancy. I'm talking about its practical value. If it's worth its price in battle, in other words."

“’Course! I can definitely guarantee that. I’ve got just the thing. It’s something *really special* I’ve been saving, and it’s easily worth its eight-figure price tag.”

Guren ran to the back of the shop like a bolt of lightning. It was refreshing to see her dedication. But if you looked at it a different way, she was making her priorities pretty blatant.

“I really hope this doesn’t turn into some sort of weapon version of the art-student scam.”

I hoped that I was being overly cautious, but it was obvious Guren was in the back grabbing something incredibly expensive. To be honest, I was more than a little nervous.

“She called out to us as we sat in a café and invited us to her shop,” observed Albi. “Then, after badgering you to learn how much money you were carrying, she disappeared to fetch a high-priced item she keeps in the back… I see. I’m sure she could make quite the pigeon soup out of you.”

“Why must you be so heartless?!”

If you thought I was playing the stooge in some scam, why didn’t you say something ahead of time?!

“This seems like it could be quite entertaining. I should take a picture and post it online. The title could be: ‘Tragedy Strikes! How the Famous Super Rookie Fell for a High-Priced Weapon Scam: The Sad Fate of a Loser.’ What do you think?”

“How can you be this cold-blooded?!”

Like, c’mon! You’ve already thought of a subtitle and everything?! Gimme a break!

“Have your little laugh. But just you wait, Albi. I will determine the weapon’s value with a keen eye and a calm—”

“Soooorry! Really kept you waiting, huh?” Guren was back.

“No, no! Not even a little! We’ve kept ourselves entertained just fine, ah-ha-ha!”

In an instant, my face melted into a smile as I welcomed her.

Quit looking at me like I’m a bag of trash, Albi. Us men naturally want to put on our best face in front a girl, okay!

“You two look super close,” said Guren. “Boyfriend and girlfriend? Am I right?”

“Hah!”

“Oof. Albi’s brutal. From her reaction, seems like I was way off.”

It was like the textbook definition of being shot down. And with a single laugh! But did this secret boss really have to flash me such a nasty smile?

Wait, hold up! That's the same look she makes when she kicks me in the balls! So you enjoy ruining your master's mental state by kicking his manhood that much! You damn sadist!

"I assure you I do not *enjoy* it. Nor am I a sadist. Considering your twisted predilections, I consider it a service."

Shut up! Quit reading my thoughts! And quit kicking guys in their family jewels like it's nothing!

...Ugh, whatever. Better get us back on topic, or we'll be stuck here forever.

"Um, in any case. What exactly is that?" I asked Guren. She had wheeled out a box that undoubtedly contained a weapon with an astronomical price tag.

"Oh, this little thing? Hee-hee. Piqued your interest, has it? In here is the special weapon I told you about."

With slightly exaggerated motions, I leaned in to take a closer look.

The item was covered in a reddish-brown cloth. I couldn't make out what it was, but it was definitely big.

"All right, well, no point drawing it out. How about we open 'er up? Aaand ta-daaah! ☆"

Guren opened up the container and revealed its contents.

Inside was a long black club. In between its grip and the blunt end of the club was a trigger and what looked like a chamber for ammunition.

I guess it's like a melee version of a gunblade? But nah, that type of stuff's only in video gam—

"Wait..."

I soon realized that I had seen this shape before. And it had indeed been in a game.

It appeared in the second installment in the *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia* series.

Stab and it becomes a spear. Slash and it becomes a sword. A sideways swipe and it turns into a halberd. That incredible level of versatility had been made a reality by the black staff that now sat in front of me.

But why? Why would this be here*, of all places? No. Calm down, Kyouichirou.*

That weapon was the top prize in the game's secret casino. Why would an underground blacksmith in Sakurabana be selling a rare weapon like that? There had to be some sort of mistake, and there was only one way to clear it up.

"Excuse me," I said, "but what do you call this weapon?"

It might have been weird to ask the weapon's name a second after admiring it for the first time, but Guren happily obliged.

"I call it the Eckesachs. This weapon is my greatest masterpiece! ☆"

◆

The Eckesachs. Its full official name was Multipurpose Close-Range Weapon with Detachable Variant Combat Logic: "Eckesachs."

"Want to know what's so amazing about this little guy?" she said. "It can totally change its shape at will. Its basic form is a club, but it can turn into a sword, a spear, or even a hammer. And I'm not just saying that metaphorically. It literally transforms."

A shape-shifting weapon. It was exactly as I had assumed. Shockingly, the item before me was the very same Eckesachs I remembered from my gamer days.

There was just no way. Guren was the creator of *the* Eckesachs? According to the flavor text in the game, no one knew who had made the weapon. So, there *was* a nonzero chance it had been Guren. If the creator was unknown, it was perfectly possible that it was a woman named Guren Yashima who looked like a flashy teen and didn't even show up in the original game.

But it seemed so unbelievable.

In the original plotline, the creator's name had been lost to time. What were the chances that such a master blacksmith would be so quickly forgotten?

By the time it showed up in the second game, the Eckesachs's inner workings were a complete black box.

Its unique ability to transform and its superhard, ultraheavy form gave it an overwhelming balance of offensive power and durability. The combination of these two factors made for an

incredibly versatile weapon capable of switching between blunt-, stabbing-, and slashing-damage at will. It was the kind of ultrapowerful item that could only have been created by someone with a few screws loose. But as for the mystery of how it worked—

"So, the secret of how it changes shape is a special metal I came up with that I call 'slime steel.' ☆ Basically, it's a superhard and supersmart memoryform alloy. When you imbue this baby with spirit stones and spiritual power, it activates a special algorithmic pattern programmed to transform and— Y'know what? I bet it'd be faster if you just tried it yourself, Kyouichi."

—it was cleared up for me in the most nonchalant way imaginable. I felt like I might pass out from shock. But I managed to snap out of it and grab ahold of the black club's grip.

It was heavy but not too heavy to lift. I didn't think it would hinder me in a fight either. But even with my fortress of a body, it felt quite heavy in my hands.

It had a good heft to it. I could feel my biceps rejoice under the weapon's weight.

"I knew it! You're really something, Kyouichi! Look how easily you're able to pick up this heavy little guy."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. Well, I've been working out."

I had said goodbye to Kyouichirou the Bean Pole over a year prior. The muscular beast that now stood before Guren had been forged in the fires of his demonic coach's training regimen and reborn. He had no choice but to don this armor of muscle to cover up the sad fact that he was just another mediocre guy.

"All I see is a repulsive, self-important narcissist," said Albi.

"Shut your face." *You're the one who turned me into this hulk of a man in the first place.*

Guren laughed, and I realized I should probably get back on topic.

"Sorry. I seem to be able to pick it up, but what do I do now?" I asked.

"Oh? You sure you don't want to keep bickering with Albi?"

"No. I'd rather not. I'm serious."

"Really?"

"*Really*, really."

"Hah!" Albi exclaimed.

“Would you stop looking at me like that?”

“Well, in that case!” Guren put on a self-satisfied grin and handed me a small object.

I was worried there had been some sort of misunderstanding, but I decided to ignore it as I looked down at the thing she’d just given me.

It was slightly larger than a typical ammo cartridge, and it had a very pointy end.

“Tell me, Shopkeeper, what is this used for?” asked Albi. It was unlike her to be so direct.

I figured she’d never seen anything like this back in her own time, and that was why she was interested.

I don’t think this thing’s used the way you’d expect, though.

“I call this a removable combat logic. In other words, a cartridge. To summarize, this contains blueprints that tell Eckesachs how to transform. Basically, it’s like expandable memory. And with that, why don’t we get Kyouichi here to stick the bullet labeled ‘Slash’ into the chamber?”

“Okay.”

I did as I was told and loaded the bullet labeled “Slash” into the chamber.

In the game, the next step was—

“Great. Now just cock that hammer!”

Makes sense, I thought and dropped the hammer as I was told. A satisfying clicking sound reverberated through the shop.

…Whoa, hold on a sec.

“Great, now pull that trigger! Bang! ☆”

Oh yeah! Now we’re talking!

But I hesitated. What was I supposed to do? Say “Oh, sure, gotcha,” pull the trigger, and then *bang*, right there in the middle of the shop?

“Umm. Are you sure it’s all right for me to pull the trigger in here?”

“It’s fiiine. No probs! I just made it look like a gun. It’s won’t actually fire anything off. Go ahead and give it a shot!”

I was relieved to hear that the Eckesachs worked like it did in the game. It seemed like I could pull the trigger without worrying too much.

“All right, then. Here goes…”

With the shop owner's permission, I placed my finger back on the trigger.

Here we go. One… Two… Three…!

I put some force into my index finger and released the bullet's power.

Next, we heard a pleasant sound as the weapon began to vibrate. This was more than just kickback from pulling the trigger. *Something* was making Eckesachs change forms.

If I had to make a comparison, it was like slime had been injected into the weapon. And this slime was causing everything beyond the grip to wobble, twisting the black club's shape.

Wobble, wobble, wobble. The tip began to taper.

Wobble, wobble, wobble. The whole thing started to form a sharp angle.

Wobble, wobble, wobble. The angular bit twisted and wove into the shape of a blade.

Wobble, wobble, wobble.

Wobble, wobble, wobble.

After about five seconds of waiting to see what would happen, the black club in my hands had transformed into an impressive black sword.

The sword was thick and elaborate, and the blade was as sharp as if it had been crafted by a master swordsmith.

There was no doubt about it. The weapon in my hands was the real Eckesachs.

"So? Pretty cool, right?" boasted Guren. I wholeheartedly agreed.

What could I do but tip my hat to this excellent craftsman?

Even in the future, the Eckesachs was considered an amalgamation of mysterious technologies. And yet, here it was in this time. And *she* had made it. Guren's achievements were sure to go down in history.

"It's really something," I said excitedly. "In fact, it's freaking amazing! You're incredible, Guren!"

"Whoa. You're an even nicer guy than I pegged you for, Kyouichi."

"…Right. So…" Now I was more confused than ever. "Please, tell me. How is it that you haven't been able to sell a weapon as amazing as this?"

How was it possible that Guren Yashima's name hadn't lived on in the original plotline of the game?

In the future, there was no one left who knew the identity of the Eckesachs's creator, and no trace left of the weirdos from Lali-Lali either. All that remained of them in the future was their technology and their high price tags. They had all disappeared, and Lali-Lali had been turned into a shopping center for luxury weapons.

What had happened? Or rather, *what was going to happen*?

If I wanted to find out, there was something I needed to know: Just what was this woman's deal?

"Tee-hee. You've got a knack for hitting someone where it hurts, Kyouichi." Guren turned her gaze upward and let out a dismayed sigh. Then, with a self-deprecating smile, she said, "Kinda tough to admit this about my own masterpiece, but this little guy's kinda half-baked. When you take into account stuff like how much it cost me to make it, it's not exactly the type of thing I can sell to a beginner. But the skilled adventurers all use Regalia anyway, right?"

"That's a fair point."

Regalia were special items dropped by spirits who visited dungeons, not as mere avatars but with their physical forms—essentially, boss-class enemies. These items came in a variety of forms, such as weapons, armor, and accessories, but they all had incredible destructive power transcending human comprehension. The reason was simple—Regalia contained the boss spirit's data. In other words, they granted the user access to the boss's unique skills and characteristics.

They were extremely rare items with enormous power that granted their users one-of-a-kind skills. If you asked most adventurers with Regalia—basically, cheat-level equipment—if they would be willing to use man-made alternatives, the answer would almost always be no.

It was common for members of adventuring clans called "clear squads" to be composed of only members who owned Regalia, and some of the bigger adventurer guilds had Regalia ownership as one of their prerequisites to join.

Regalia were proof of an adventurer's strength but were also crucial for increasing their level to unimaginable heights.

So truly strong adventurers tended to stick to using Regalia. Meanwhile, adventurers looking to make cash quickly tended to avoid expensive equipment like the plague.

"'Sides. This little guy's real heavy. There's no demand for this kinda weapon among people who attack from a distance. And even less among speedy types that attack from up close."

Which was why, Guren told me wistfully, she hadn't been able to sell the Eckesachs.

"I did some pretty stupid stuff to get this little guy finished, y'know. Borrowed money from some *really* shady types. So, to tell you the truth, I'm in big trouble if I can't make some money fast."

Apparently, that was why she was trying to aggressively pawn it off on strangers like some kind of scam artist. Not that it had gotten her anywhere, by the looks of it.

"All that to say, if you could buy my little guy here, you'd be helping me out of a *major* bind. This is gonna sound suuuper pathetic, but my life's totally in your hands, Kyouichi. So please! Save me! Buy the Eckesachs!"

She bowed her head low in a show of humility. She wasn't kidding—she looked pathetic. Worse—this was downright unfair to put on someone.

If I didn't buy it, something terrible would happen to her. So, if I said no, I'd end up feeling majorly guilty. It was an awfully effective strategy to use on a pushover with a savior complex like me.

Even worse was that—unbeknownst to her—I knew that Guren's very name would be practically erased from history in the not-so-distant future.

She mentioned having borrowed money from some scary people. That very well may have been what led to her disappearance. But I had no way of knowing for sure.

Still, her enormous debt was like a disease that would eventually claim her life. Knowing that, I couldn't just sit idly by.

Besides… Why's an incredible weapon maker like Guren gotta meet such crappy fate in the first place, damn it?!

She completed a weapon that's going to go down in history. I bet she busted her ass making this thing! She must have suffered countless hardships.

And now she can't even sell her completed masterpiece? Her debt's gonna ruin her, just like that? Screw that crappy destiny! I'm not gonna let someone who's worked so hard and successfully created this amazing weapon disappear without so much as leaving her name to her child.

"Albi."

My partner gave a small nod. She could be mean, but at times like this, she always acted calm and collected.

And with that nod, we'd solved our biggest problem.

The stats on the weapon were more than good enough. All that was left was for me to make it official.

"Guren…"

Supply and demand had reached a perfect equilibrium. Both customer and merchant were of the same mind. There was nothing more to be said. What happened next was only natural.

◆

"What do you think?" Albi asked as we were walking home from Lali-Lali.

In her right hand was a kebab. In her left, a fish-shaped pastry. With the sky bathed in twilight, for a brief moment, I felt like we were at a festival.

"About what?" I asked.

"About Guren Yashima. In the original plotline, we didn't buy that long stick you have now. Which means that the circumstances of her life are sure to change considerably."

"You're probably right," I answered.

I glanced at the special weapon case I had slung across my back. It resembled an incredibly slim casket. But it was surprisingly easy to carry. My new weapon was fast asleep inside in the shape of a basic black rod.

"I wonder if she will be spared from her fate. After she pays off her debts, Guren Yashima will be a free woman. Do you think she will resume her work and produce more revolutionary items that will astonish the world of weapon smithing?"

Albi's dulcet voice didn't hold the slightest hint of concern or affection. She simply sounded curious. And her question was apparently directed at me.

“Might not be so easy,” I answered honestly. “Personally, I’d love nothing more than for her to get a happy ending. But I have the feeling that’s not gonna happen.”

“Why do you say that?”

“There are too many things about Guren’s future that can’t be explained away by her debt.”

Like why Guren’s name had been wiped from the history books. And what had happened to all the pervs at Lali-Lali. Not to mention…

“Is it really true that the Eckesachs was unsellable?” I asked.

Guren had said that the weapon was half-baked. Too expensive for a beginner or someone chasing profit and too useless for Regalia-wielding pro adventurers. That did make a certain amount of sense.

But what about people who fell in between those two extremes? There was a truly staggering number of adventurers in the world of *Dungeon Magia*. Some must have been rich men and women of noble birth, or other people with cash. Those doing well for themselves who were skilled but who hadn’t managed to beat a boss just yet.

In fact, most shops in Lali-Lali seemed like they were specifically targeting this in-between class of adventurers. Creating a weapon perfect for that clientele and then calling it “half-baked” went way beyond simple self-deprecation.

Maybe if you were aiming your wares at the vast majority of adventurers, Guren’s words would ring true. But thinking in terms of the lineup within Lali-Lali made her view much harder to accept at face value.

The truth changes depending on how you look at things. It might sound like a cliché, but there are as many viewpoints as there are people in the world.

“Then you believe Guren Yashima was lying to us, Master?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Still, I got the feeling she was wrapped up in something or other that she wasn’t telling us about.

“She’s just a person,” I said. “She’s got things she’d prefer to keep private just like anyone else. A gentleman like me isn’t about to go accusing her of being a liar or a traitor or whatever over something like that.”

“Then you don’t question her motives?”

“Why would I? I haven’t suffered a loss of any kind. I got my hands on one of the best weapons around. And I paid what she was charging. That’s all.” *Plus, I got to exchange contact info with her. Booyah!* “So, if anything, I’m grateful to Guren. I don’t have anything against her in the slightest.”

Albi nodded, then inhaled what remained of her kebab. She was just stuffing her face, but the divine air about her made all her actions lovely to watch.

“I understand your point of view. You are quite easily fooled, after all. I have no plans to do anything rash at the current time, however.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“That said.” Albi’s beautiful eyes, like tiny works of art, stared up at me. “What would you do if something were to happen—something *unpleasant*, that is—that put her and her shop back on their original path?”

I assumed what she was trying to say was that things were likely to get troublesome in the future. Well, there wasn’t much else to do.

If that were to happen…

“…I’ll just bust in acting like I own the place and stick my nose where it doesn’t belong. ‘What the hell do you think yer doin’ to my favorite shop?!’ You know, that sorta thing.”

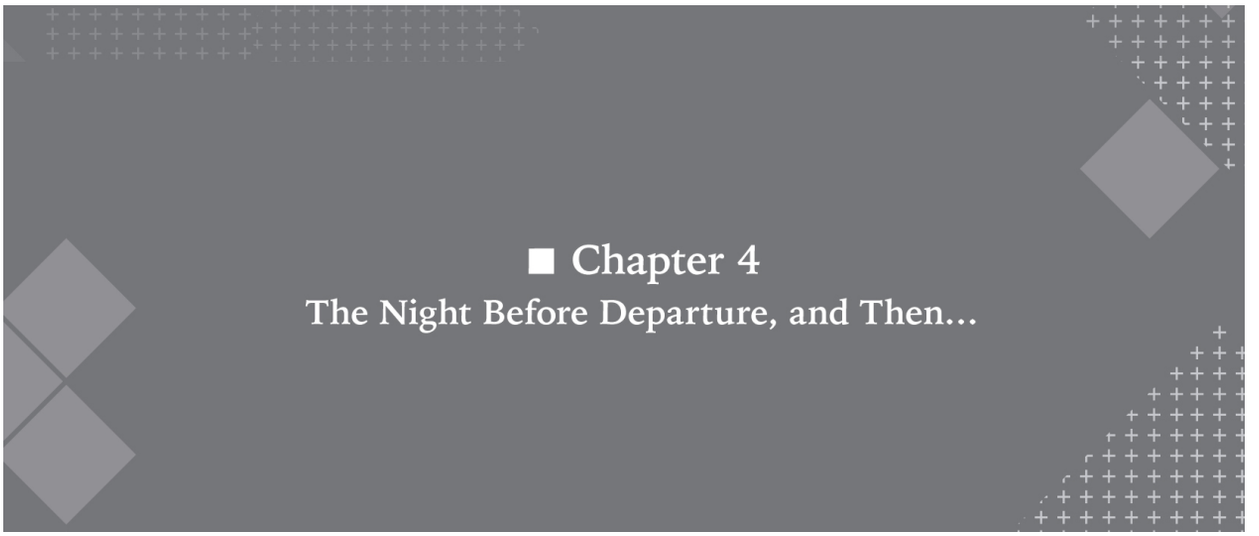
“That would make it quite apparent how much of a small-time delinquent you really are.”

“You better believe it. It’s specifically *because* I’m a small-time punk that I take care of my pals. And it’s also why I’m always gonna look out for number one.”

I’m no main character. I’m not about to play the hero and help every random person I come across.

But even a small-time punk like me is willing to stick his neck out for people he knows if there’s something in it for him. It’s the same logic as side quests.

I’m happy to help people. But forget randos way outside my orbit. I’ll stick with the people I know who are nearby. Yeah. A nice, shallow ideology like that suits Kyouichirou Shimizu perfectly.



◆ Shimizu Home: Living Room

Time passed by in a flash.

It felt like the cherry blossom trees had only just been in full bloom and spring was at its peak. But before I knew it, the blossoms had given way to leaves, and a major holiday was almost upon us.

Oh yeah. Everybody's favorite, Golden Week!

Whoo! Yeeeaaah! Party time! If I were a regular middle schooler, I would have been dancing around all excited like that. But I wasn't really in the mood.

On April 29—the very next day—I would be setting out on my first dungeon crawl with Haruka.

Our destination was the dungeon called Eternal Darkness. And our plan was to spend three days and two nights there.

That's right. The time had finally come. The dungeon where the legendary cure-all known as an Elixir awaited. And I was finally! About! To explore it!

I was so excited I could hardly contain myself.

I kept screaming into the air for no reason. Haruka and I chatted for two hours straight about everything and nothing. But even after that I still had too much pent-up energy. So I did a thousand squats at full throttle out of sheer gratitude. That is, until Albi got pissed at me for making too much noise and kicked me in the balls.

After all that, I finally calmed down a bit.

…Well, I *should* have been calmly preparing for the next day. But I was distracted, thinking about much less important stuff. Like the dates of this year's Golden Week.

The world of *Dungeon Magia* and my old world had completely different histories. Ditto with the makeup of their countries. And yet this world had Golden Week, just like Japan, and it started on April 29, the same day as back home. This seemed like way too big of a coincidence.

"Kyou! Stop daydreaming and put this in there, too."

A beautiful, melodious sound reached my distracted mind like manna from heaven.

When I looked over at the source of this angelic voice, I saw my lovely sister, Fumika, standing beside me. She seemed frustrated, a sleeping bag held in one hand.

The scent of soap wafting from her flaxen braids was absolutely divine. Piled high beside her was a mountain of donuts she had laid out as snacks to munch on while she worked. It was a heap of calories too numerous for a single person, and she looked so cute as she used long cooking chopsticks to shovel donut after donut into her mouth.

"Sorry, Sis. But, uh, what's with the sleeping bag?"

"I swear! If you could keep focused for just a moment, maybe you'd remember that you're spending the night in a dungeon tomorrow," she said. "Or do you plan on sleeping on the ground?"

I debated saying something along the lines of "Well, actually, we've rented lodgings there, so I don't need one," but decided against it.

I was the head of the Church of Fumika Shimizu, after all. My job was simply to go along with everything she said. If she told me something was "white," it didn't matter what color it appeared, it was white to me. If she said something was "round," it didn't matter how pointed it looked, it was a ball as far as I was

concerned. That was just how the world worked. Or at least, that was how it worked for *me*.

"All right. Thanks, Sis. I'll make sure I put it to good use."

I slipped it into my large Boston bag. I figured I might as well lay it out on top of my bed in the dungeon.

"Hee-hee."

"What's so funny?"

I was worried I had done something weird. Though, if I was able to relieve my sister's boredom for even a moment, that was enough for me, no matter what the reason. My sister's smile was the most precious thing in the world.

"Oh, nothing. I just remembered something from a long time ago," she said. "When I was little, Mother helped me pack for field trips just like this."

She smiled as she reminisced, then handed me a pair of pajamas with teddy bears on them.

Mother…

Our mother and father had died in a cave-in many years earlier. Because of that, even though she was at the age where people usually like to go out and enjoy themselves, my sister was stuck at home taking care of me (and the freeloading secret boss who had taken up residence in our home one year ago). Yet she never complained.

I felt so indebted to her. I respected her so much. I was filled with regret and bottomless gratitude. My sister was an incredible woman.

"Hey, Sis. Listen."

And that was why I changed the subject and brought up something I'd been mulling over for some time.

"I'm going to be in the dungeon for a while starting tomorrow. Plus, it's Golden Week. So, here. Why don't you use this and let your hair down a bit?" I pulled a card out of my bag and laid it in my sister's warm hands. "It's a debit card. The kind you can use at a convenience store. The PIN is 8931. It's easy to remember. Just think 'I *ate nine hundred* and *thirty-one* donuts.'"

I texted the PIN to her phone just in case. It was pretty easy to forget something if you only heard it once. You've gotta keep that sort of thing saved in a number of places.

Incidentally, the debit card was linked to a second account I'd opened, separate from the one I used to pay taxes and cover all the annoying little costs that came with being an adventurer. I'd put about seven million yen in it, so she could spend to her heart's content.

"What?! Not a chance, Kyou! You have to treat your money with more care than that!"

"That's specifically why I want you to have it, Sis. If I have access to it, I'll probably just blow it all on stupid crap," I said scratching my cheek.

I was just telling her what I figured she needed to hear. The part about me blowing it on crap was a lie. My life was on the line; I didn't have the luxury of blowing my money on anything fun.

Mind you, manga, light novels, dating sims, anime, and swag from voice actors I liked didn't count. Those were like health supplements. They were necessary expenses.

"I know how hard you work to stretch out the inheritance Dad left us. You've been like a mother to me ever since Mom died, and I'm really grateful. But I want you to enjoy yourself, too, Sis. Why not eat a bunch of yummy food every now and again? Buy something you like. Treat yourself to a nice day off, y'know?"

"Kyou…"

I couldn't tell if I'd swayed her with my passionate spiel, but she decided to take the card.

Thanks for everything, Sis. I hope you can find some time to kick back and relax this Golden Week.

◆ Shimizu Home: Kyouichirou's Room

Of course, I knew my kind, selfless sister would never actually use my debit card on her own. But I had a special backup plan, and I had called Albi to my room to set it up.

"So, you're saying I should pout and whine and tell Fumika I want to spend money on luxurious things, is that right?"

The secret boss mulled over my plan as she munched on some chicken-skin snacks that she had piled on a small plate.

I waited a moment for her to chew, then nodded. "Right. She's a real pushover when it comes to you, Albi. If you tell her you

want to go somewhere, she'll *have* to say yes and bring you."

"Yes, that is true. However, don't you think she will hesitate to use your money, Master?"

"That's why I'm leaving this here."

I handed Albi a letter I'd prepared ahead of time.

"Hmm…," she said, then began reading it aloud. "'I, Kyouichirou Shimizu, do hereby grant Albion Shimizu permission to use my debit card to withdraw money from my savings account for the duration of Golden Week. This money is to be used for indulgences only. However, said money is only to be withdrawn in the presence of Fumika Shimizu.' Oh, and look. You've even made it official by pressing your seal… You really are in love with that sister of yours, aren't you?"

"Sh-shut up, wouldya? It's so embarrassing when you compliment me like that."

"That was not a compliment. I was showing you contempt."

The beautiful white-haired girl shook her head in disbelief. I hated how even her smallest movements captivated me. I've always been way too easy to please.

"Anyway," I said, continuing. "This is the most important part, so listen up. If you and my sister are out walking around, you're gonna stand out like crazy. Think about it—my sister's a living angel, inside and out. Meanwhile, you have the appearance of a beautiful young lady steeped in an air of mystery and melancholy. Regardless of what you're like on the inside, that is."

"How rude of you. I will have you know that I am equally melancholic inside as I am outside."

"I think you're confusing melancholy with sugar and calories. Like, damn. How much are you gonna eat before you're satis—*Fuuuhhh?!*"

She kicked me. Thankfully it wasn't in the crotch, so her foot just glanced right off my muscles.

Heh-heh-heh. My armor of bulk is an impregnable iron fortress that prevents physical damage to every part of my body except my crotch. The kicks of a slender young lady don't even tickle! …Oh, God, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please don't aim for my little guy. Oh please, anything but that.

"A-anyway." I coughed to try and get myself back on topic. The pain I felt in my crotch was likely all in my imagination. "My

point is, if you and my sister walk around town, you're almost definitely going to get hit on. And when that happens…"

"…I should use End of Zero on their private areas, yes? Very well."

"What?! No!"

What a horrifying thing to say! Don't use the super move that gave you your spirit subtitle on a dude's most important bits, please!

"There is no need for you to worry, Master. I will use the full version of End of Zero. It will be charged instantaneously and will strike from long range. It will make quick work of those sexually perverse creatures and the disgusting object they have hanging inside their pants. And it will contribute to the town's public order."

"Quit being so scary!"

This lady's got some truly insane ideas in her head. There's a line you shouldn't cross in a dating sim, and she is waaay over it!

"Damn it. What I'm trying to say is…"

Our aimless conversation kept going until well past midnight.

There was no sense of urgency and no vulgarities spared. Even the night before I set out for the dungeon, Albi and I proved incapable of solemn discussion.

◆◆◆

And so, the morning of April 29 finally arrived.

I took a shower, ate my sister's homemade breakfast, brushed my teeth, and finished up my last gear check. Everything was in order.

As I prepared to leave, my sister gave me a warm hug.

"Please, please make sure you come back safe, okay?"

Her voice trembled tearfully. It was almost enough to make me cry, too.

"You had better not forget to bring me back a gift, Master."

Meanwhile, Albi's reaction was the same as always. Her words almost brought tears to my eyes, too, but for a very different reason.

She was as cool and collected as ever. It was so irritating that my annoyance almost looped around to genuine respect… Well,

almost.

“Welp. I’m off.”

They both followed me to the door. After I had finished calling out my energetic farewells, I placed both of my Boston bags and the Eckesachs in one hand and began running through Sakurabana at a decent clip.

As I stared out at the glow of dawn as it streamed down through the trees’ new leaves, I used Stride on myself multiple times.

Thanks to my higher level and all the daily training I’d endured, the effects of Stride had become incomparably stronger than they had been during my last battle.

I felt light and fast as I ran. It was exhilarating. But I remained totally composed.

I passed through the residential area, then the main street, then ran by the coast, and finally began ascending the mountain.

The slope’s steep incline was nothing to me. I leaped up the hills, strode over animal trails, and kept running up the mountain path.

I could see out over the trees. As my vantage point grew higher, the air began to thin.

Yet I kept running. I ran and ran and ran. And then I ran some more. And after about twenty minutes at that pace, I reached the peak of the small mountain.

“Damn, that thing’s huge,” I muttered, staring up at a massive tree.

The trunk looked like an amalgamation of several other trees. It was quite the sight.

This was it: Dungeon City Sakurabana, Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness.” The massive tree, so lush and green, looked like it could easily be thousands of years old. But it had only popped up two hundred years earlier.

That’s right. The trees that contain dungeons in *Dungeon Magia* simply appear one day without any warning. It was pretty fantastical— a fantastical *nuisance*, that is. And there were more than 336 of these monstrous trees in Sakurabana.

Anyway, I thought, and checked the time on my smartphone. It was twenty after eight. I was meeting Haruka at nine. There was still plenty of time.

I decided to go wait for her by the entrance.

"……"

I leaned against the massive tree's trunk and listened to the *chirp, chirp* of tiny birds.

I realized a bit late that I had gone slightly overboard. I probably didn't need to use Stride to get here if I was going to arrive forty minutes early. I must have been a little overexcited.

Dungeons were the sort of place people put their lives on the line. This was no time for me to be skipping around like some excited kid heading on a field trip. *…I guess that's kind of what I am.*

Somewhere in this dungeon lay the Elixir I needed to break Fumiko's curse. This was surely Kyouichirou Shimizu's dearest wish.

And yet, another part of me was genuinely excited at the prospect of having an adventure. I guess it really brought out the kid in me. I could feel the thrill of traveling to unknown lands to find treasure welling up inside.

She must be getting to me. The person I'll be exploring this dungeon with is always going on about the joys of adventure, and—Oh, look. Speak of the devil.

I waved my hand at the young girl approaching me wearing a large travel backpack.

She had her usual ribbon and hairpin in her hair, and she was wearing a tracksuit with her name on it. And naturally, her outfit's color scheme was blue.

"Hey!"

"Yo."

Haruka Aono's smile was illuminated by the sun and made her as radiant as a star. She was practically shining with energy.

"As early as ever, huh? I thought if I came thirty minutes ahead of schedule, I could beat you here."

"Mwa-ha-ha. Looks like you were ten minutes late." Not that ten minutes was anything to brag about. "Hate to break this to you, Haruka, but you're never going to show up somewhere before me."

"Big talk, Kyouichirou. Next time, I'm gonna make you say 'Sorry to keep you waiting.' Mark my words. Oh. That reminds me. Sorry to keep you waiting."

“You didn’t. You’re still thirty minutes early. I don’t think this counts as being kept waiting. Not that it matters. I’m gonna win next time.”

“Not a chance. *I’m* gonna win next time.”

“No way. I am.”

“No, me.”

Both of us growled and glared at each other jokingly until the tension peaked and both of us burst out laughing.

It never mattered what kind of trivial things we talked about. Chatting with Haruka was always fun.

“Well, anyway. Looks like the day has finally come, Kyou.”

“Yeah. It’s a momentous occasion. Our dungeon debut.”

“Whoo!” we exclaimed in unison, then gave ourselves a round of applause.

I could feel the gazes of other adventurers passing us by, staring daggers at us. But it didn’t bother me. Whenever Haruka and I were together, we gave each other a kind of buff that seemed to make the whole world around us sparkle. I felt like a billion yen.

“So, Kyouichirou, tell me. On this, the momentous day of our first official dungeon crawl, how far do you want to go, hmm?”

“Let’s see… Well, we’re total rookies. We’ve only just started. So…”

“So…?”

I took a deep breath and then let out a boisterous laugh from deep down inside.

“So I think we should start by breaking the record for the deepest floor anyone has ever reached! And then we can figure out where to go from there!”

Haruka’s almond-shaped eyes widened for a moment before she burst into laughter, too.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Not bad! That’s what I love about you, Kyouichirou!”

“Debut or not, we’re already in the spotlight. Might as well give ’em a show, right?”

“Heck yeah!”

Once we’d shared our resolve and pumped ourselves up, we bumped fists.

We were all fired up. We were prepared. All that was left was to dive in headfirst.

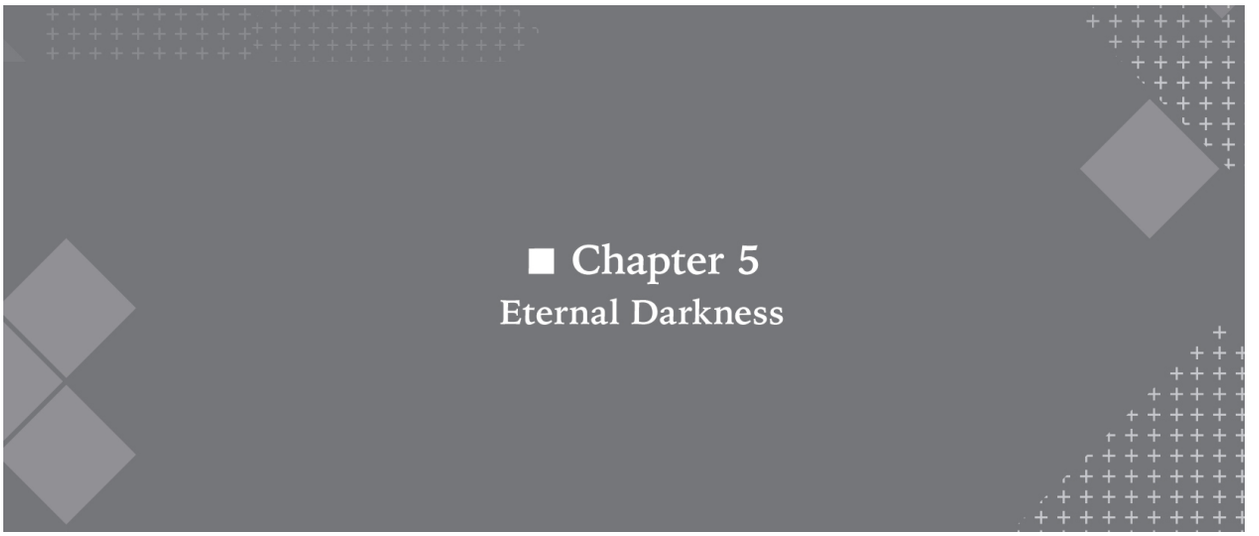
“Here we come, Eternal Darkness! Time to commence our dungeon crawl!”

Haruka and I walked side by side through the entrance of the dungeon.

We strode past large crowds of people, most of whom were probably adventurers like us.

Sorry to break it to you, guys, but we’re cutting ahead of you and clearing this whole damn dungeon.

No objections accepted. We’d shoot down all counterarguments. Every treasure in this dungeon would soon be ours.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” in front of the Portal Gate

It was 9:20 in the morning.

After getting our registrations out of the way, we’d hit the changing rooms. Now we were headed toward the portal gate.

“Whoa! It’s pretty busy in here. It’s totally different from Moon’s Eclipse.”

Haruka looked at the people lined up nearby. All this was brand new to her. She kept restlessly glancing around, then turning to me and commenting on every detail that was different from Moon’s Eclipse.

“Look, Kyouichirou! The sparks of electricity around the door here are purple! They’re not blue; they’re purple!”

“I guess that’s a bad thing, since you like blue so much.”

“Psh, please. Purple has an air of refinement. I’ll have you know I like it just fine, mister.”

The stellar swordmaster nodded to herself approvingly.

That said, the armor she had shown up with still had a lot of blue tones.

Her Japanesque order-made battle costume with its brand-new cyber-*tabi* footwear, the snowflake patterns on her astral headgear, and the blue-toned sheathe for her weapon were nothing short of amazing, as expected.

“Ooh, Kyou! You little pervert!” she exclaimed. “If you plan on gawking at a lady, maybe try and make it a little less obvious!”

“That’s not what I was doing! I was just checking out your gear, that’s all.”

After everything we’ve been through, there’s no way I could think of you in a perverted way… In fact, I would never look at any of my companions that way! I swear I was just innocently taking in your outfit.

“Oh, well, okay. Then how about I do the same? …Hmm. Mm-hmm. Hm, hm, hmmm… Well, well. You’ve got quite the chiseled body, Mr. Kyou, sir.”

“What happened to checking out my gear?!”

Despite my protests, it felt pretty nice to receive such a compliment from her. There wasn’t a muscle-brained goon alive that would complain about having his physique praised.

“Next in line, please.”

We chatted about this and that for a while, and before we knew it, we’d arrived at the front of the line.

We handed our adventurer’s licenses to the navigator so they could scan our details.

“Everything seems to be in order. Please head to the gate over there.”

We got our cards back and climbed the stairs toward the portal gate.

As I got closer to the purple vortex, each step brought a real sense that my grand adventure was finally about to begin.

The time had come.

“Here we go, Kyouichirou!”

“Let’s do this!”

With an ounce of nervousness and a hundred pounds of excitement coursing through my veins, I stepped forward.

We passed through the large gate that connected our world to the dungeon.

This was the beginning of our adventures.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Floor

Only a few seconds had passed, and we’d taken no more than ten steps.

But in that brief moment, it was like a switch had been flipped. The world in front of us changed in an instant.

The ceiling disappeared, replaced by a reddish-purple sky.

And that wasn’t all: The floor, which, only moments prior, had been nice and comfortable, had been switched out for hardened wasteland. The man-made walls surrounding us had completely disappeared.

Sky, wasteland, boulders, and wind. The first floor of the dungeon was composed of these four things and nothing else.

“Whoa! This place has a totally different vibe from Moon’s Eclipse!” exclaimed Haruka. “It feels so wild and untamed!”

“Well, though we call them dungeons, they’re more like a space between worlds. A basic labyrinth like the last one is actually pretty rare.”

I tried to appear as knowledgeable as I could. The truth was, a dungeon could be anything.

There were old classic dungeons like Moon’s Eclipse, but there were plenty of others that appeared to be massive outdoor fields like this one. There were special ones that took the form of oceans, volcanoes, massive forests, arenas, and even absolutely unbelievable ones that resembled outer space.

…Wastelands and deserts were one thing, but the fact that the devs of *Dungeon Magia* had okayed outer space really goes to show just how out there they were… The space stage was insanely fun, mind you.

But whatever. We were standing in Eternal Darkness.

We wouldn’t get our hands on the Elixir if we couldn’t make it through this reddish-purple wasteland first.

“How about we start by picking today’s destination?” I said.

We started talking about our strategy as we watched the more seasoned adventurers run ahead.

“First, let’s head for the fifth floor,” I suggested. “That’s where the midpoint is.”

“A midpoint, huh? That’s where one of those huge towns is, right?”

“You’re probably imagining one of the Five Great Dungeons. Unfortunately, there’s nothing quite that big here.”

Haruka seemed pretty disappointed, so I kept talking to try and cheer her up.

“The midpoint’s heavily affected by the scale of the dungeon. The bigger the dungeon, the more space its midpoint tends to have. And the more people come to challenge the dungeon, the more populous its midpoint.

“That’s why Sakurabana’s Five Great Dungeons kind of *need* to have big midpoints. Compared to them, other dungeons are small potatoes.”

“Gotcha! So you’re saying that us rookies are going to have to rough it in the midpoint boonies, huh? Light a campfire, that sort of deal?”

Not really.

I shook my head and continued speaking.

“As I was saying, *compared to the Five Great Dungeons*, most dungeons have pretty small midpoints. But the one here is well-developed. I don’t think you’ll have anything to worry about.

“Plus, even if this could be considered ‘the boonies,’ we’ve already registered for accommodations. Which means that at night we’ll have access to a room with a warm shower, a heater, air conditioning, the works.”

“Aw, really? Where’s the fun in that?”

Haruka Aono (aged fifteen) looked at me with a face full of disappointment.

Are you serious? I already told you all of this. You even signed the agreement yourself…

“Don’t tell me you’re the type to sign documents without reading them,” I muttered.

“I just stamped it without looking! I figured it’d be fine if I left the hard stuff to you.”

It will not be “fine.” And here I’d thought she was pretty quick on the uptake when we were getting things ready, but it turns out she was no thoughts, head empty the whole time!

The papers required a legal guardian’s signature anyway, so I figured it would probably be all right… Probably.

“How about you at least give documents a quick once-over before you sign them from now on? And get someone else to take a look as well. *Before* you sign, okay?”

“Okey-doke. Gotcha!”

It was a good response. *Too* good. I began to wonder if she was actually retaining any of what I was saying.

I swear. What am I gonna do with you…?

“Well, whatever,” I said. “I do get why you’re a little disappointed.”

What she was saying made sense to me. When I pictured adventurers resting in my mind, the image was more—how should I describe it?—*natural*, I suppose.

I imagined wholesome moments spent in nature. Everyone huddled around a roaring fire and eating under a star-filled sky. Chatting inside their tents late into the night about their aspirations. That sort of thing.

Adventurers were supposed to be like travelers, experiencing the kind of life you just can’t get in the city.

“But that’s just not how it is. People naturally crave convenience. And because of that, dungeons have been outfitted with comfortable places to rest.”

It’s not exactly supply and demand, but if a place has built-in conveniences, most people can’t help using them—that’s just how humans are. Not much to do other than accept it.

“I guess whether they’re trying to clear the dungeon or earn money, everyone’s basically here for work,” mused Haruka. “And after a long day of toil, you want to kick back and relax, huh? Hmm. I mean, it kinda sucks, but I get it.”

“Exactly. And since we can kick back in the evening, let’s make sure to work extra hard during the day. It all comes down to your outlook, right?”

“True enough! All right, glass half full. Okay… Okay. Okay! I guess a comfy temperature-controlled room isn’t so bad! I’m kind of looking forward to it now!”

A joyful grin spread across Haruka’s face. I felt like I could learn a thing or two from her positivity… Although, she could be a bit *too* positive at times.

“All right. Well, then, Ms. Aono. What do you say? Is the midpoint just past the fifth floor a good destination?”

“Yes, sir, Captain, sir! I, your faithful soldier, pledge to do my very best!”

With a silly salute, the stellar swordmaster cast her vote.

That was two votes. And so, by unanimous approval, our destination for the day was set as the midpoint just past the fifth floor.

“All right! In that case, let’s get going!”

“Yeah!”

◆

…And yet, despite our enthusiasm, it had been twenty minutes, and we still hadn’t run into anything of interest.

“This is unbelievable! What is going on?! We’ve been walking for *ages*, and we haven’t run into even one spirit!” Haruka stomped across the deep purple earth, clearly frustrated.

Apparently, in Haruka’s books, fighting was a necessary part of the adventuring lifestyle.

“No need to get so down in the dumps,” I said. “If we keep walking, we’re bound to run into something.”

“That’s what you said before! And we still haven’t found a single one!”

“Quit your whining! Here. Just eat this. It’ll calm you down.”

“Grr…! Oh, actually. This is pretty yummy.”

I had handed her a chocolate-filled pretzel (cherry blossom Frappuccino flavor—available for a limited time only), and it seemed to cheer her up for the time being. But there was no telling how long this strategy would remain effective. If I wasn’t careful, there was a very real possibility that Haruka would jump into another party’s battle.

Hmm. This could be a problem.

“Whoa! Look, Kyouichirou! Everything’s starting to glow!”

But then it happened. It seemed my prayers had been answered. Our surroundings began to glow with an eerie light.

As the ground flashed, a wave of power hit our spirit senses. The wind that swept across our skin grew stronger.

Soon, the eerie light began to split off and form into several pillars that each gave off heat.

There’s two…four…six…eight… Yikes. Ten of them? Seriously?

I can't believe our first fight is against a double-digit team. Our luck sure is—

"Yesss! Look at how many there are! Look at how many I can slice!"

—good, apparently? That seemed to be the case for Haruka, at least.

"Prepare for battle," I warned. "And don't get so excited you trip over your own feet, all right?"

"You don't need to tell me! Let's stay focused and enjoy this!"

We stood back-to-back and drew our weapons. I drew Eckesachs, of course. Meanwhile, Haruka's weapon of choice was…

"What is that? The aura comin' off that thing's crazy."

Her sword's pale spiritual light made it look very expensive. It was an *odachi*-style katana. *Hold on. That thing looks familiar.*

"This sword is called Azure Skies. It's a holy sword that only the head of my family or their agent is allowed to wield."

"Are you…?!"

That's the same sword Kana used to take down Rakshasa Sarama in her route! What a sword to be swinging around!

"Are you sure you should be… Gah, forget it! Here they come!"

Before I had a chance to vent my pent-up emotions, our opponents completed their preparations. I chucked my luggage onto the ground and eyed them carefully.

"Ngrrrr."

"Gyah-gyah-gyah!"

"Gi-hi-hi-hi!"

Our guests, newly arrived in the crimson-purple wasteland, were covered in poisonous-looking scales. They stood on two legs, carried weapons, and wore armor. But their appearance was clearly reptilian.

"Lizardmen, huh?"

Each Lizardman had enough strength to make Goblins and Kobolds look like jokes. And they were incredibly skilled at group combat.

These guys were the most basic of basic enemy avatars in Eternal Darkness. Fighting them would be the perfect test of our abilities.

“There are three archers at the back, over by you. Hey, Haruka can you… Wha—?!”

It all happened in an instant.

First, Haruka leaped into the air. Then she backflipped straight into the enemy’s ranks.

After that, I assume she sliced them with her sword. I say “assume” because I couldn’t see the trajectory of her attack. But by the time I realized what had happened, the heads of all three Lizardmen were flying through the reddish-purple sky.

These were the very same archers I’d just mentioned.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Before she had even landed from her backflip, the entire rear group had been eradicated.

“Nngyaah?!”

“Gi-gi-gi?”

“There’s no way.”

In that moment, I got the sense that the Lizardmen shared my disbelief.

“Yes, sir! Captain, sir!” shouted Haruka. “Mission accomplished!”

What kind of monster have I formed a party with?!

It made no sense at all. How the hell did she slice their heads off mid-backflip? Even the heads, newly freed from their lizard bodies, were frozen in expressions that screamed *Just who is this girl?!*

“Well, damn, Haruka. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised!”

Still feeling an emotion that was about three parts shock and seven parts amazement, I charged forward with Eckesachs, in its black-pole form.

Gaining the initiative in a battle could dramatically change its course, just like it had during the exam. Haruka’s aerial attack hadn’t simply wiped out the enemy’s ranged troops. In fact, it had accomplished something far more important—it had struck a deadly blow to their morale.

Our opponents were filled with shock from being caught off guard, despair at realizing the difference between their strength and ours, and fear from knowing that in an instant, any one of them might be next.

“Nyah! Nyaaah!”

“Gee-gyaa-gyaa-geh!”

“Ngyah! Ngya-ngyah!”

It was little wonder that the Lizardmen, now plagued by a host of negative emotions, all began to panic at once. To them, a psychological attack was much more damaging than any physical strike. It spread through their ranks like a virus.

In the game, these creatures excelled at group combat. But that didn’t mean they were good at organizing their attacks. Their strength was in acting as a collective—they coordinated their *consciousness*.

Basically, Lizardmen shared their thoughts and emotions. It made commanding them very easy, but the major drawback was that when something shocking happened, it would cause the whole team to panic in unison. The result was a negative impact to group morale that was multitudes worse than the effect on any one individual.

Sure, thinking as one *sounds* ideal in theory. But that was only an *ideal*. In real battle, especially in such large numbers, it was too easy to topple that fragile order and send the whole bunch tumbling down.

Having to experience other people’s fears sounds pretty awful. Poor little lizard guys.

“Geh-geh! Gee-gee-geegah! Go-geegah!”

From within their ranks, one Lizardman was shouting something in a piercing voice. It was impossible to know what exactly it was saying, but it seemed safe to assume it was scolding the others and trying to get them to calm down.

So, that’s the leader, huh? All right, then…

“Nice to meetcha, Mr. Lizard Captain. And see ya later!”

I sped up and then rushed in. Using the confusion to my advantage, I started knocking lizards out of my way, aiming for the lizard captain. I wanted its head.

“Sshhk!”

I swung Eckesachs at its neck with all my might. There was no finesse in my movements. No thought behind them. I just let my muscles do the talking and took a big swing.

This kind of brain-dead brute-force attack was what I was made for.

“Gee… Gee-gee-gyaaah!”

But the lizard captain wasn't going to take that sitting down. It pulled out his curved sword and imbued it with spiritual power. Our weapons clashed.

Not bad. Looks like this one's more than just a loudmouthed captain. It's got the skills to lead the pack.

And yet…

"Sucks for you that you had to fight *me* today."

Crack. Fissures began to form through the creature's curved blade. My opponent was on the road to ruin, and it was gonna be a short trip.

Extreme weight. Extreme hardness. Extreme muscles. These three factors coalesced into a swing that easily overpowered the Lizardman's half-assed defenses. The Eckesachs smashed through my enemy's blade and connected with its cranium.

As the impact exploded its flesh and shattered its bones, it screamed in horror until its voice disappeared along with its vocal cords.

As soon as the lizard captain was dead, I followed the whim of my biceps and pounded the ground.

"RAAAWRRR!"

My giant-like stomp echoed through the purple wilds.

When the dust cleared, the smashed-up corpse of the Lizardman leader lay limp in the center, reduced to an unrecognizable pile of flesh. It soon turned into particles of light and disappeared.

GG, loser. Next time you log in, I hope for your sake that you run into a more standard party.

"Now, then…"

I looked ahead of me.

The rear guard had been decimated by Haruka's opening move. The captain had just been smashed to bits. And now, behind me, most of their remaining soldiers were probably being sliced into neat chunks by the stellar swordmaster.

There was no chance that they'd be able to keep their cool under these conditions.

Some tried to run away. Others tried to log out of the dungeon. Still others cried out in horror. Their ranks had been torn apart by the negative emotions they shared. At this rate, hunting down the rest would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Nothing personal. But, hey. At least you guys get to resurrect, right? Just think of this as experience. And get the hell out of my dungeon.”

That was all I had to say. It was time for the hunt.

“Grrrah!”

I slaughtered the lizards trying to log out first.

I was putting my life on the line. I didn’t care if this was a game to them. I wasn’t going to let them go home to the Astral Plane without paying the price.

“Gee-gee?!”

Next, I turned my attention to one that had its back to me and was trying to run away. I dashed up close and—*home run!*

I swung the Eckesachs at its spine and it connected perfectly. The Lizardman went flying through the air before turning into particles of light.

I took a step back toward the remaining group, now cowering on the ground. These guys were much weaker mentally than their flavor text had led me to believe.

“Haaah!”

I mashed up the remaining Lizardmen, ending the battle.

Everything had gone perfectly, especially considering we hadn’t used a single buff.

“Whoa! That was impressive, Kyou! You’re pretty strong!”

Haruka, still all worked up, gave me a round of applause. It should go without saying that she had already taken out her share of the enemies.

“I’ve just got a good weapon. This guy’s like seventy percent of why that was so easy.”

I tapped my staff and thought back over the battle.

The Eckesachs was pretty damn strong, even without relying on its transformations. Just swinging the thing was more than enough to do some crazy damage.

“I dunno about that. But you do have a point. Your little friend seems pretty amazing.”

“Right? Plus, it can transform!”

“Transform?! What does that mean?! You’ve got me on the edge of my seat here!”

I straightened my spine and gave a boisterous laugh, then I launched into an explanation of how Eckesachs worked.

“First, you stick this cartridge in here, right?”

“I see, I see!”

“…And then you pull this trigger, right?”

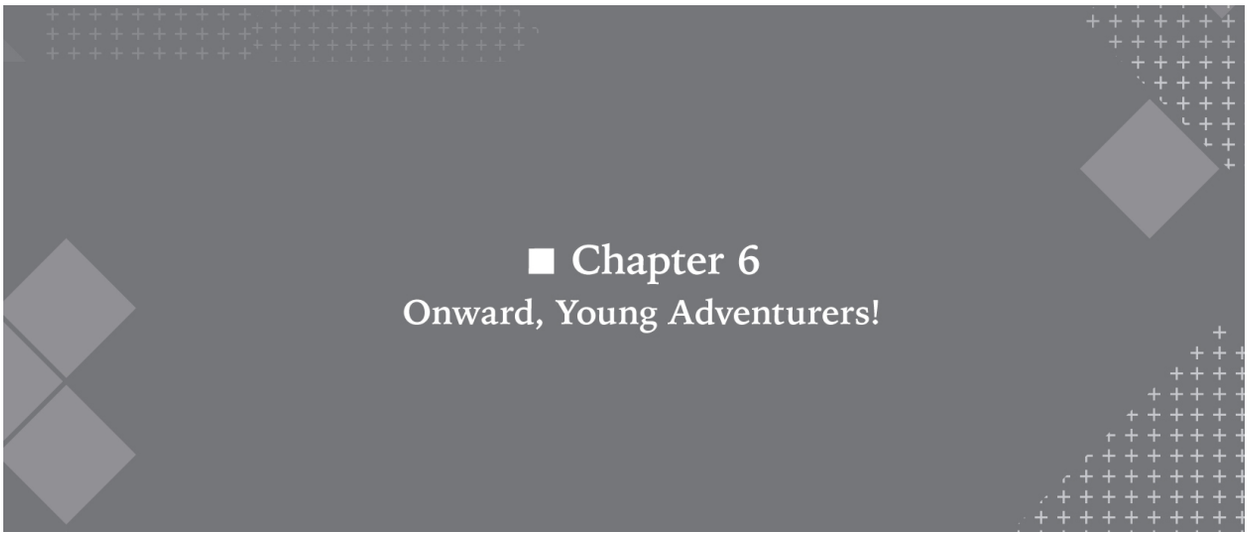
“Wow! It’s starting to wobble! Wibble-wobble!”

“…But that’s not all. Next, you do this.”

“It transformed again…?!”

I went on and on. I began to worry I was talking a little too much. But Haruka kept watching, eyes glittering with excitement. Every now and then, she’d interject with words that kept my spirits up. Thanks to her, I was able to blabber on with enthusiasm for some time.

It was nothing new, but this made one thing clearer than ever —Haruka Aono was an awesome partner.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Floor

After clearing our first fight in Eternal Darkness, we made it to the warp gate leading to the next floor without any issues.

Sure, we ran into a few more battles along the way, but our overwhelming combat strength kept them from causing us too much trouble. Or maybe I should say Haruka’s enthusiasm made short work of them… Well, whatever. The details don’t matter. The point is, we had no problem finding the transfer gate.

“Welp, we’ve broken through the first line of defense.”

Technically, we weren’t completely done. But having made it this far, we had all but cleared the floor. Might as well celebrate, right?

The gate’s purple vortex was right before our eyes as Haruka and I high-fived.

Whoo! We cleared the first floor!

“I think we’re moving at a good pace,” she said.

“Yep, sure are.”

I looked down at the analog watch on my wrist to check how much time had passed. It was 10:56 AM. We'd been in the dungeon for a little over an hour. *Oh yeah. We're making great time.*

"Huh? Is that a wristwatch?" asked Haruka. "Don't you have a smartphone?"

"There's no service in here. Plus, jumping around and swinging weapons with something like that in your pocket's kinda risky."

"Oh! Good point!"

Apparently, this had not occurred to her, because Haruka promptly took her smartphone out of her breast pocket and cheerfully placed it into her backpack.

That phone's seriously been in her breast pocket through all that leaping and bouncing and flipping?! I'd feel bad for the thing if I wasn't so crazy jealous.

"…That look on your face. You're having dirty thoughts, aren't you?" said Haruka.

"What! No way. My mind is exclusively focused on adventuring. So, uh, let's keep going, yeah? There are other adventurers coming through, so we shouldn't stand around getting in their way."

I tried to assume an air of nonchalance, but my heart was pounding.

This is bad. Now Haruka's starting to exploit my weak point, too. Everyone I get close to seems to be able to read my thoughts just from the look on my face. Maybe I should look up how to make a mask for myself.

"I dunno. I don't think a mask would suit you at all, Kyou."

"Seriously! What the hell is up with my face?!"

Is this my unique skill or something?! What a useless ability!

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Second Floor

After progressing to the next area, our adventure continued smoothly.

The second floor consisted of a deep-purple wilderness with steep, uneven roads in a complicated, crisscrossing formulation

that resembled a multilayered freeway. But thanks to our regular training, traversing this was nothing for us.

It wasn't a picnic, by any means, but we were able to keep chatting casually along the way. We took down the enemy avatars that popped up (mostly Lizardmen, with a few Goblins riding pig-faced spirits mixed in for good measure). And before we knew it, we were already at the next transfer gate.

It took us about an hour and forty minutes to get through. If we had access to a map, we probably could have arrived at the gate a lot sooner. But unfortunately, the dungeons in this world had a peculiar design—their layouts changed every twenty-four hours, making maps practically useless.

Between that and the Barrier Rule, it seemed the *Dungeon Magia* development team really enjoyed making things a pain in the butt.

"No way! That's what makes this so fun!" Apparently, Haruka felt differently than I did. "Just think, we get to walk on a path that's never been mapped before! Every step we take is a foray into uncharted territory. Don't you find that exciting?!"

Haruka's smile shined as brightly as a star.

What a straitlaced, purehearted adventure junkie. Seeing her excitement convinced me that some people really did have a calling in life.

We were setting foot into the unknown space between worlds, a place where no smartphone or GPS signal could reach. She had a point. Thinking about it that way made the concept kind of thrilling.

Maybe walking a path with no map isn't so bad.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Third Floor

Once we reached the third floor, the types of enemy avatars that appeared suddenly increased.

Among them was a spirit called a Chonchon. These guys were real terrors. And I mean that literally.

A Chonchon was just a floating head. It was almost like a reverse Dullahan—a head and nothing else. Their smooth, bald

heads, gaping mouths, and round, shining eye sockets were bad enough. But what really made them stand out was their ears.

A Chonchon's ears were *massive*. They were big enough that they could use them to fly. Yep, that's right—Chonchons could *fly*. They were heads that kept themselves afloat using their big ears.

On top of that, they were considered vampires. I couldn't stand these guys. They had way too many things going on for their own good. How do you even categorize a monster like that?

"Whoa, look at this thing! I guess this is what you'd call creepy-cute."

As she marveled at these strange monstrosities, Haruka used Futsu-no-Mitama to summon a copy of Azure Skies, then chopped off their ears.

Just like a fish out of water or a bird with its wings clipped, a Chonchon without ears couldn't do anything.

I seized this opportunity and squished them under the weight of Eckesachs. Talk about an easy kill.

I wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of crushing defenseless monsters, but Haruka egged me on, saying, "I don't wanna kill these creepy-cute little guys, so you finish 'em off, Kyou!" And that meant I had no choice.

"Cheh. Cheeehhh. Ah-gyahhh!"

Their gross death screams pierced the air, and soon, we'd sent the decapitated heads packing all the way back to the Astral Plane.

I personally didn't get what was so cute about the disgusting creatures. Were middle schoolers these days into that sort of thing?

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Fourth Floor

The fourth floor of the dungeon consisted of a series of deep valleys. There were no rivers or bodies of water, but great chasms broke up the sprawling land.

Thankfully, there were paths allowing us to cross from one valley to the next, so moving through the area was doable. But it was still far more work than a level path would have been.

We climbed up, we climbed down, we walked, we fought, and then we climbed up again…

All that running around at high speed while carrying our gear was starting to wear us down. So, we laid out a tarp in an area with a nice view and stopped for lunch.

“Yum, yum, yum! I’m starving!”

Haruka got out a rice ball, its salmon filling poking out the top, and chomped down on it with delight.

Watching people enjoy their food sure is nice… Whoa! She’s already done?! She eats like a cartoon character!

“This is going to sound like I’m bragging,” said Haruka, “but I eat superfast. And I eat a *lot*, too. In my neighborhood, they call me the Blue Meteor.” The stellar swordmaster’s eyes sparkled with pride.

Huh. So, you’re a big eater too, are you? We sure have a lot of those types around here. But wait, “Blue Meteor”? What’s that supposed to mean? Is it ’cause she eats at three times the normal speed or something?

“’Course, I might be the best in town at speed-eating,” she continued, “but when it comes to endurance or pure volume, I simply can’t compete. The undisputed champion of heavyweight eating is a person called ‘Fumika the Beelzebub.’ And then there’s the ‘Goddess of Time,’ who hasn’t received a title but is right at the top of her game. They’re the two biggest names in competitive eating. The Goddess has even been gunning for my speed-eating record lately… Uh? You okay, Kyouichirou?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing… I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

It’s gotta be a coincidence. Those have to be two totally different people. They’re both strangers I’ve never met before, and hearing their names makes me feel absolutely nothing. But I may have to track down whoever added “Beelzebub” to this Ms. Fumika person’s name and slit their throat.

Putting that aside for now… My lunch was a five-story bento box made with love by Beelze—I mean Sis. The lacquerware container was filled with several kinds of meat, vegetables, and fried foods. What’s more, these culinary treasures were neatly separated out by theme. Eating it renewed my body and filled me with vigor.

Man, oh man. Beelze—I mean Sis!—Sis really is incredible.

As I ate, my heart was full of gratitude for the boon I had received from the goddess known as Fumika Shimizu.

◆

Once we finished lunch, we picked up our heavy bags and resumed crossing the valley-covered landscape.

After about two hours of fighting, exploring, and making our way along a seemingly endless path, the two of us finally spotted the warp gate and heaved sighs of relief.

Looks like it's 4:52 pm—almost five, huh? That explains why the sky's getting redder.

"Now then, Private Aono," I said. "What do you think awaits us beyond the gate?"

"Sir! Every fifth floor of a dungeon contains a miniboss, Sir!"

I nodded approvingly at her correct answer and cheerful delivery.

She was right. On the other side of the purple vortex before us, a miniboss was waiting.

I'm sure that when you hear the word *miniboss*, the first thing that comes to mind is a certain loser whose laugh sounds like "nyeh-heh-heh." But don't worry. This time (and honestly most of the time), the miniboss was going to be serious.

"Let's make sure we're prepared for the fight now, just in case we wind up in an ambush. I'm sure I don't need to tell you, but minibosses are on an entirely different level from the random losers we've run into along the way. Let's stay focused!"

"Yes, sir!"

We both drew our weapons and prepared for the fight ahead.

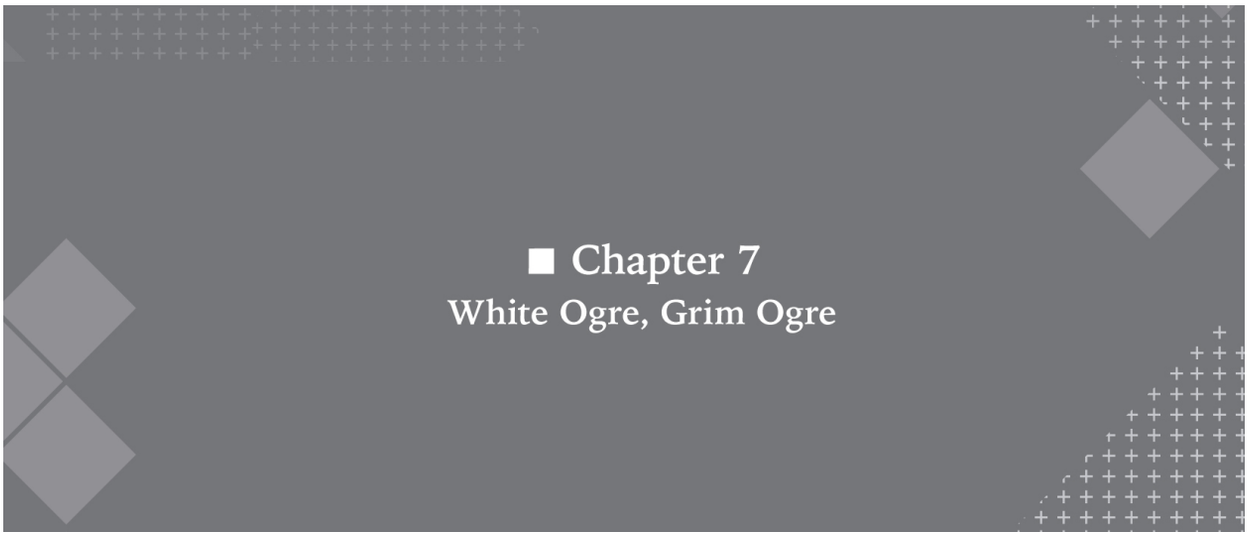
I wondered for a moment if Haruka was ready. But from the look on her face, I could tell we wouldn't have any problems. This was the most excited she'd been all day.

"Here we go, Haruka! This is our big battle for day one!"

"Oh yeah! Let's really enjoy ourselves, Kyouichirou!"

I nodded, and then we stepped through the gate together.

What awaited us on the other side? Well, according to the research I'd done beforehand…



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Fifth Floor

On the other side of the portal was a dark room.

The floor was bare, and a rusty scent hung in the air. Pillars made of plain stone stood at regular intervals, stretching up to a vast ceiling that was stained black.

The old stone walls had no windows. The only sources of light were strange purple flames that flickered inside lanterns and the glow of the portal gate at the back of the room.

It felt like something would appear at any moment.

“Whoa!” Haruka said, looking around with interest. “Get a load of this place! It’s like some kind of amusement park haunted house or something! It’s so dark and damp! And there’s nowhere to run! Hey, Kyou? What do you think will happen to us?!”

“Your tone is completely at odds with what you’re saying,” I replied. She was absolutely pumped. It took a certain kind of person to get excited in this sort of situation. “Aren’t you scared of dark places or ghosts or whatever?”

“Huh? Why? Ghosts are just a type of spirit, right? And if you’re having trouble seeing, you can always buff yourself with Noctovision.”

“…R-right.”

She had a point. In a world where fighting spirits inside dungeons was the norm, ghosts probably weren’t all that uncommon.

“Then what *are* you scared of, Haruka?” I asked. Meanwhile, I focused my spiritual power on my ocular nerves and activated Noctovision.

“Something that scares me? Umm. Not much does, I guess. If I really had to pick, I’d go with dolls. And Noh masks. And, like, anatomical models of the human body. I guess I just hate things that have that sort of expressionless look to them.”

“Ugh, I know exactly what you mean. Stuff that looks too perfect or humanlike, but not quite human enough, is really creepy.”

What we were talking about was the uncanny valley effect. Humans tend to develop an attachment to things that behave like people. But once those things pass a certain point of human likeness, they’re more likely to illicit discomfort.

What a weird bunch we humans are, getting so vexed by things that look similar to us yet not quite the same.

“I guess that’s why horror movies use things with a vaguely human shape as scares,” I commented. “They must be tapping into that psychology.”

“Huh. I never thought of that before. Humanoid creatures are so much scarier than straight-up monsters. You’re pretty dang smart, Kyou.”

We chatted about pointless things as we advanced through the fifth floor, now clearly visible thanks to Noctovision.

I was really glad to have someone there with me. Haruka might have been fine with it, but I was terrified of the dark and ghosts and stuff like that. Just having someone to talk to made everything so much easier.

My pride as a man would never let me admit it, but…thanks Haruka. The dark’s not so scary when you’re around.

“Hee-hee. If the dark scares you so much, you can call on me anytime.”

She had read my thoughts again. *Damn it! Why am I like this?!*

"Anyway," said the stellar swordmaster, voice full of disappointment, "where the heck's this miniboss supposed to be? I want it to show up already!"

"Well, I figure most of the time it shows up near the portal gate."

Looking ahead, we could see that nothing was blocking our way to the next purple vortex. That was an obvious red flag.

"Aw, c'mon. I was hoping for something a bit cooler than this. Like, y'know, the enemy quietly appearing behind us. Something like that."

"That might be asking a bit much from a replica."

Unlike the stray spirits we'd randomly encountered along the way, boss spirits were bound to their dungeons. That meant that once they were defeated, that was it—they were gone. But the dungeon saved their individual data and would use it to create new trials. These were called respawn battles. Basically, the dungeon wanted to make sure every adventurer passing through had to face the same challenge.

"I mean, sure. It's nice that we can fight strong guys whenever we want," said Haruka. "But I was hoping for something more, I dunno, *thrilling*. You know?"

"Geez. I didn't realize your kink—err, I mean, I didn't know you liked to put yourself through that kind of punishment."

"Punishment?" she said with a casual tilt of the head. "Hmm, I dunno if I'd call it that."

C'mon, now. If you're bummed out that a miniboss isn't ambushing you, you're either a combat addict or an insatiable thrill junkie. Though in Haruka's case, it's probably both.

"Hey! Quit treating me like I'm some kind of deviant. I'm just an innocent young schoolgirl looking for some excitement. And I — Whoa! Here we go!"

When we were about sixty-five feet from the gate, something began to happen.

One after another, symmetrical beams of purple light fell from the ceiling and a sharp burst of power assaulted our spiritual senses, like it was stabbing into our skin.

"Assume battle position!" I shouted. "There's two of them. Prepare a couple basic skills to fend them off just in case."

“Way ahead of ya!”

With a big grin, Haruka enveloped herself in an azure aura. She had already entered battle mode.

Next was my turn.

“Bwohhh!”

“Mmmeeehhh!”

The minibosses cried out and attacked just as I activated my skills.

They were over ten feet tall with muscular limbs. But what stood out about them the most were their faces.

The one who appeared to the left of us had the horns and eyes of a goat, and the upper half of its face was covered in white fur, while the lower portion was a deep red. It had no skin, and its large mouth looked like it had been torn into the widened shape of a crescent moon. It was a truly hellish sight. Just looking at its horrible mug made me feel sick.

Meanwhile, the monster to the right of us looked even more bizarre. Its body, covered in jet-black hair, contrasted with its partner’s. Its mouth wasn’t torn like the white creature’s. In fact, its defined features made its face look almost human—if it weren’t for the curled buffalo horns growing from its head, that is.

The problem with this one wasn’t the face itself; it was the *number* of faces—its body was covered with them. There were two on its shoulders, two on its arms, two on its thighs, two on its shins, and three more were lined up like dumplings across its waist. I assumed it had some more on its back that I couldn’t see.

A white-furred creature with a ripped mouth and a multifaced demon with black hair. Despite having little in common aside from their horns, these disgusting beasts were of the same species. They were…

“…Ogres.”

I nodded at Haruka’s guess.

They were indeed ogres—creatures with massive bodies, animal horns, and faces that resembled grotesque caricatures of humans. These things were true monsters.

The two before us were called Div-e Sepid, the White Ogre, and Arzhang, the Grim Ogre.

The smell of blood and animal breath wafted through the air. *Whoa, hold up now. What the hell kinda technology's capable of creating respawns this realistic?*

"Here they come, Haruka. Let's split up and take them down!"

"Oh, heck yeah!"

After our quick strategy meeting, we ran backward to put distance between us and our foes. I went left and Haruka went right. We kept our eyes on the two ogres and prepared our weapons to intercept them. And then…

"Mmmeeehhh!"

The two of them split up to chase after us.

The grotesque White Ogre charged at me like a car with its brakes cut. Between its crimson lower half, horrifying slashed mouth, and erratic movements, it felt like I was watching something out of a second-rate slasher flick.

Good. Come on. I'm gonna beat the crap out of you.

"Let's start by seeing what you can do," I said.

I filled my right arm with spiritual power and pulled the trigger on Eckesachs.

In a flash, the club changed into a thick blade, and the weapon took on its Black Sword form. It used up a bit of my AP, but I had successfully pulled off its Instant Transformation capability.

"Meeehhh!"

The White Ogre responded by reaching into its gaping mouth and pulling out a thick meat cleaver.

Oh, yikes. Gross. I could feel my sanity meter deplete just watching it.

I suppressed my desire to retch and used Shield, Lessen Impact, and the ever-important Stride to get myself into top form.

My opponent seemed to prefer fighting at close range, so I made sure I was ready to meet its blows head-on and strike back.

"Here I…come!"

I ran backward, then turned around quickly, using the pillars around us to zigzag in order to confuse my opponent. Then I suddenly rushed in close.

"!"

"Rrrah!"

The force of our clash shook us both.

The White Ogre swung down while I swung up. The result was intense—a piercing metallic screech rang out, followed by a gust of wind from the pressure as a heavy weight slammed into my shoulders.

I took a step back and tried to shake my foe with a move to the side, then quickly launched another attack.

But the ogre easily met this blow, too.

Again, a metallic screech pierced my eardrums, and I felt an intense pressure dig into my shoulders.

This isn't good. It's matching all of my attacks.

"Then how 'bout this?!"

Having grasped the situation, I tried to take a step back to regain my composure.

But the ogre, too, seemed to have realized our difference in strength.

"Mehh! Meeehhh! MMMEEEHHH!"

The slit-mouthed goat beast bared its blood-drenched fangs and unleashed a flurry of cleaver slices.

I had come into the battle confident in the power of my muscles, but even I struggled against a ten-foot-tall ogre.

I was hoping to overwhelm it with brute strength, but it seemed like I was going to have to change tactics.

"You think you're tough…DO YA?!" I roared, activating Strength.

In an instant, the balance of power tipped in my favor.

Now when Eckesachs and the meat clever clashed, I was the one that came out on top. Even better, I made the White Ogre reel backward.

"Hah-hah! You've got quite the muscles on you, handsome. If you were still alive, I might want to ask you a thing or two about your training regimen!"

That wasn't possible, of course. The original White Ogre had been killed a long time ago. All that remained was this respawn made in its image. So…

"No point in acting proud and showing off, but get ready for the real deal. Spiritual power, muscles, and a heavy weapon are all I need to crush you into a fine paste," I taunted, then advanced on my foe.

I held out Eckesachs in its Black Sword form and used Strength again.

The goat-faced beast responded by shrieking and lunging at me with its meat cleaver. But it wasn't prepared for what came next, and I knocked it so hard, it went flying.

"MEEEHHH!"

The White Ogre smashed through several stone pillars as it flew to the back of the room.

I ran up the wall and gave chase. The windowless rows of stones and pale purple flames flashed in and out of my vision. As I charged at my opponent, I looked to my right for a split second to check on the other half of our fight. It was quite the gruesome sight.

"BWOHHH!"

"There you go! C'mon! I know you can do better than that!

The many-faced ogre with the black hair was swinging a bone halberd with all of its strength as the stellar swordmaster egged it on, easily sidestepping her opponent's attacks.

If I hadn't noticed that nearly half of the Grim Ogre's faces had been sliced clean off, I might have interpreted the situation very differently.

Aw, man. I can feel my sanity meter tanking! And is that what happens when her opponent isn't a total pushover? I'd rather be taken out in one shot, personally!

"Haruka! I'm just about to finish mine up, all right?"

I didn't wait for an answer. I could hear grumbling behind me, but I ignored it.

If you don't want my help, you'd better finish up quick, Haruka.

And on that note…

"Let's end this!"

I fiddled with Eckesachs's cylinder and loaded a cartridge reading "Smash," then pulled the trigger. The Eckesachs absorbed some of my spiritual power, and in an instant, it transformed into a massive war hammer.

The huge head of the hammer looked like something right out of a manga. It was sure to have enough stopping power to put an end to a ten-foot monster.

And on top of that…

"Strength!"

…I buffed myself with three more stacks of Strength.

Including Noctovision, I had a stack of buffs seven strong coursing through my body. I was starting to feel the strain, but thanks to my recent level-up, I figured I could manage one or two more.

Not that I need it. This'll be plenty. Spiritual power, muscles, and one heavy-ass weapon. Get ready to suck on this triple combo, loser!

"Mmmeeehhh!"

The White Ogre had managed to get back on its feet after being sent hurtling across the room. But unfortunately for it, our contest of strength was at an end. I had an opening, and I was gonna take it.

"Grrraaahhhh!!!"

Just as the miniboss stood up, I put all of my power into one massive attack that connected with its head. The goat monster's skull and brains were smashed to pieces so fast that they turned into particles of light and disappeared before they could even kiss the ground.

My Black War Hammer, now with nowhere left to go, connected with the floor at full force. With a tremendous sound, it annihilated the ground and even sent shock waves through my body.

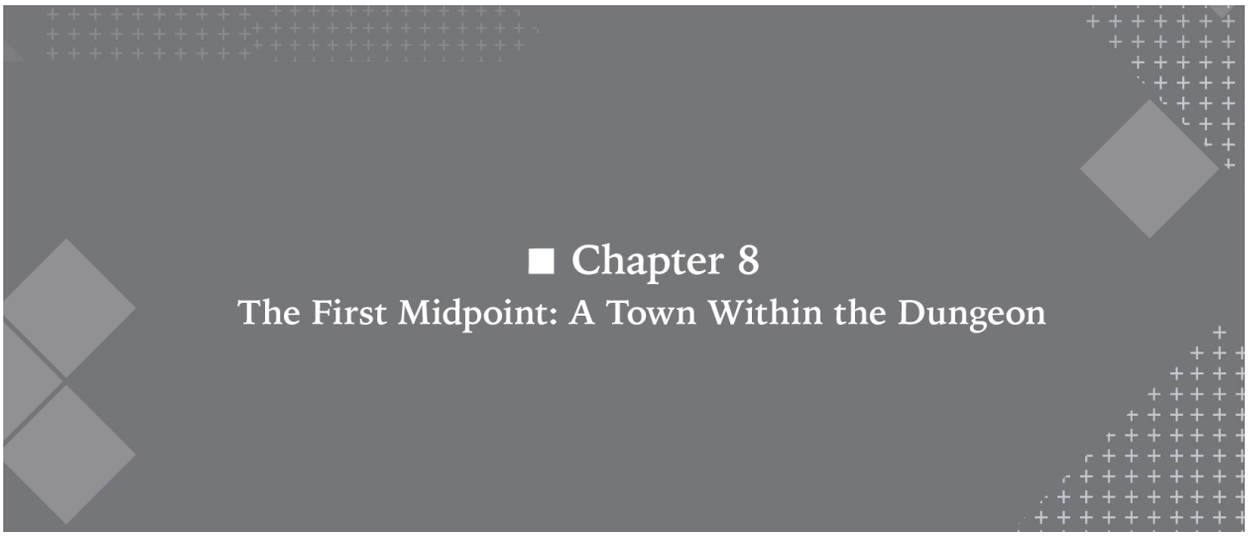
"…!"

Despite my Lessen Impact buff, the force was incredible. It almost made me feel bad for the goat (respawn).

But with that, I had officially won my first-ever miniboss battle. I was a bit disappointed that I had lost the strength competition, but I was happy I'd been able to overcome the thing without having to use a unique skill.

Huh? You want to know what happened to the other one?

Well, at that very moment, the Grim Ogre's freshly lopped off head went flying across my vision, courtesy of one stellar swordmaster.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Fifth Floor

“That was so cool!”

A cheerful voice called out as soon as we finished the day’s big task. It was Haruka’s, of course. She must have been quite satisfied after lopping off the Grim Ogre’s head. Her skin seemed to glow.

“I misjudged my own strength and went a little overboard,” I admitted.

“Ooh! Now, there’s a real tough-guy line! What if you threw up your right fist? That would really complete the look.”

I decided to indulge her. *Yeah!*

“Oh my gooosh! Kyou, you’re so cool!” Haruka cried in a fake-cheerleader voice.

I knew she was just kidding, but my lame need for approval felt strangely satisfied by her joke. I was way too easy to please.

I really *had* used more power than I’d intended to.

A large crater stretched out from where I stood. A number of stone pillars had been blown away, and a nearby wall had been

reduced to rubble. Not only had I smashed the miniboss's skull into unrecognizable dust, but I had also devastated everything around me.

This was too much. Like, way, *way* too much.

This was *not* the kind of power that a tutorial miniboss should have been swinging around.

I was no longer simply Kyouichirou. I had become **KYOUICHIROU**.

…What is that supposed mean? Is KYOUICHIROU the type of guy who makes the heroines swoon with a simple grin? Or can he turn on the ladies by simply patting them on the head? No way, that's too much. Right…?

"I mean, patting someone's head without their permission is just harassment," I muttered.

"Um, Kyou? Are you thinking about something weird again?"

"What? No. Of course not. Not in the slightest. Nothing weird here."

I shook my head, trying to mentally switch gears.

It wasn't my fault. The source of the problem was the massive weapon I was holding in my hands.

The battle just now had made one thing clear—while Eckesachs's convenient ability to change forms was eye-catching, its true strength lay in its sheer weight and hardness. It almost synergized *too well* with multiple Strength buffs. The simple fact of the matter was that swinging something so heavy around with that level of strength was enough to one-shot minibosses.

I quickly realized that if I hadn't buffed myself with Lessen Impact ahead of time, it might have put *my* life at risk as well.

…I decided to carefully consider how many stacks of Strength I would use next time.

"How'd it go for you, Haruka?" I asked.

"Eh-heh-heh. I did all right, I guess." She smiled bashfully.

At first glance, it was an endearing expression. But I already knew the truth: This radiant star had been cheering on the hideous ogre as she sliced off its faces one by one.

She was a lunatic. An ultra-positive lunatic.

"N-no, hold on! I was just taking the battle seriously! That's the only reason it turned out the way it did…!"

Here's what the defendant had to say for herself:

The Grim Ogre had pulled out a number of bone weapons from its many mouths and used those mouths to wield them—a truly perverse sight.

On top of that, each face served as a kind of high-powered sensor. Combined with its combat ability, this had allowed it to parry all of Haruka's attacks at first.

"So, I thought, 'Wow! This is amazing! This little guy's totally keeping up with me.' So, that's why…"

…That's why she decided to turn it up a notch. She stopped swinging her sword around recklessly and started taking the fight seriously.

"And that's when your old pal Haruka thought, 'Where's the best place to attack a monster that uses its many mouths as sensors *and* to hold its weapons?'"

The answer, of course, was obvious.

One's strength and one's weakness were two sides of the same coin. If the creature's mouths both produced and wielded its weapons, in addition to acting as highly accurate sensors, the best course of action was…

"…I decided to slice its faces off."

…That was her conclusion.

"And from there, it became like any other repetitive task," she explained. "The more faces I sliced off, the weaker it became. I mean, I guess it's pretty obvious when you think about it… Kinda boring, if you ask me!"

"So, that's why you decided to blow it up?"

"You got it!"

What a reckless tactic to use against a respawn boss. And why'd you cheer it on as you sliced off its faces, you total psychopath?

"Anyway! Who cares about all the boring details?" said Haruka. "We both made it out safely, right? That's all that matters!"

"The fact that you can call peeling a monster's faces off a 'boring detail' impresses me more than your battle moves… But whatever. I suppose skipping all the gruesome details of your crazy story will be better for my health in the long run. Let's keep going."

"Well met, good sir."

Why is she talking fancy all of a sudden…? Ah, well. She probably doesn't mean anything by it. Haruka always does as she pleases.

"And *hup*!"

We picked up all the gear we'd cast off to fight the minibosses and headed for the portal gate. Our baggage had become much heavier since we'd entered the dungeon. I was excited to make it to the midpoint and be free of the burden.

A hot shower. Ice-cold sparkling water and some steaming hot food. And last but not least, a comfy bed to sleep in. After a fun time adventuring, what could be better?

"Ahh! I can't wait!"

I practically skipped through the warp gate. *See ya later, darkness! And hello, path to the light!*

And waiting on the other end of our sixth dimensional warp was…

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," First Midpoint

"Whoooa!"

Accompanied by Haruka's gleeful cry, the sights of human civilization filled my vision.

Paved roads, bustling marketplaces, and rows of houses. The sight of benches along tree-lined streets and even a fancy fountain square were like a balm to my eyes. Even the color of the sky seemed warm and sweet. The poisonous purple tint characteristic of the Eternal Darkness dungeon had been replaced by the warm, soothing light of dusk.

And more than anything, there were people—*so* many people. They passed us by on the street and gathered here and there. All of them had such relaxed looks on their faces. No one had their weapons out, and there were no tense expressions. In other words, this place was safe.

"Holy cow!" shouted Haruka. "This is just a regular town!"

"Seriously… Is it just me? Or is this crazy exciting?"

"It's *so* exciting!"

We gave each other a high five for the hell of it and started laughing until we couldn't breathe.

Before I even understood why, my body was filled with a seemingly infinite joy.

Despite only being away from it for a few hours, I'd really missed the comings and goings of people.

"This place is so strange," said Haruka.

"Yeah, but it feels pretty nice, doesn't it?"

Our eyes met and we burst into laughter once again.

It was a while before the strange feelings subsided and we grew used to our surroundings at last.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," First Midpoint, Residential Area

"Here we are. From now on, this is gonna be our base of operations," I told Haruka, showing her a detached house. Our first impression of the place was that it was a pretty, Western-style building painted white with outdoor stairs.

"Wow! It just feels like a regular house, doesn't it? I thought for sure it would be more like a hotel room, y'know?"

"There's nothing wrong with a hotel. But it's much more convenient to register for accommodations. That way you can rent a whole house."

I chose to leave out that not only had I explained all this beforehand, but I'd also sent her numerous documents, which she'd signed, with all this information.

Her guardian signed them, too, as her guarantor, so it's probably fine…right?

"No worries!" Haruka said with a completely straight face. "I got my mom to sign all the papers!"

I had no idea where this girl's confidence came from.

…Anyway. What was I saying? Ah, right. The benefits of renting a house.

Essentially, by registering for accommodations, we would be able to use the midpoint as a base within the dungeon.

This was useful for storing any bulky baggage and stocking up on necessities, and it meant you didn't have to worry about anyone else and what they thought.

And the Eternal Darkness dungeon only had its first midpoint unlocked. That meant this was the one and only place where people came and went in the dungeon, and having accommodations here was *necessary* if we were planning on conquering the whole thing.

"So, what you're saying," said Haruka, "is that this is like our secret hideout?"

"Well, that's certainly the most exciting way to put it. So, how about we start exploring the inside?"

"You got it!"

I held on to the railing as we climbed the staircase, and when we reached the door, I inserted the metal key I'd received back in the other world into the hole.

Ka-click. The sound of it unlocking vibrated in my ears. *Oh, good*, I thought. *Looks like this is the right place.*

"Pardon me, I— Wait. I guess I should say 'I'm home!,' right? Or is it 'Nice to meet you'?"

"Just say whatever you like. Ah, here's the light switch."

My eyes, still buffed by Noctovision, spotted the switch by the entrance. I gave it a press. The next moment, the lights on the ceiling flickered on. They cast a warm color over the room, very easy on the eyes. It made me feel a lot more relaxed, and I took off my shoes.

"I'll explain the layout first," I said, turning to Haruka.

She was haplessly throwing her shoes off as I stepped further into the house …*Yep. As I expected, the sound is muffled. Looks like the flooring's been soundproofed.*

"When you walk in from the entrance, the shower room is on your right. You'll be pleased to hear it includes a separate changing room. And right next to that is the toilet. Then, a little farther back, you'll find the bedrooms. We'll split them up, one for the guys and one for the girls. Go ahead and pick whichever one you like."

"What?! You mean I get a *whole room* all to myself?"

"Well, if we get more female party members, you'll have to share with them. But for now, it's all yours."

She leaped for joy and shouted, "Woo-hoo!" I assumed this meant that the Aono sisters shared a room at home. I might have

more privacy, but I was a billion times more envious that she got to share a room with Kana.

"*Ahem.* Anyway. The door at the end of this hall leads to the living room." I kept talking as I turned on the lights.

The living room was a fairly large space, about 350 square feet, and fully outfitted with the rental furniture I had ordered.

The sofa was moss green. There was a round wooden dining table with chairs, and beyond that, an open kitchen complete with a refrigerator and shelves lined with a variety of utensils.

"This is amazing, Kyou! We've got a whole entire house to ourselves!"

"There's a Japanese-style room through that door. Why don't you go check it out?"

"'Kay, be right back!" she said, skipping off in the direction I'd indicated.

I was glad she seemed so happy with the place.

Looks like it was worth the two-hundred-thousand-something yen a month I shelled out for it.

In all honesty, I was a bit shocked that things were so lax in this world that all a couple of middle schoolers needed was an adventurer's license to rent a whole house. Plus, we could have as many people stay here as we liked, as long as they were part of our party. Talk about a good deal.

…I wondered if maybe this world put a little too much stock in adventurers, but there was no point in worrying about that now. As they say, "When in Rome," etc. Any deep thoughts I might have on the contradictions inherent in this society would unfortunately have to wait until I had time to actually think them.

"Hey, Kyou." The stellar swordmaster gleefully popped her head out of the Japanese-style room, her eyes sparkling. "We're splitting this."

Based on the context, I guessed that she was talking about the rent. I had just sprung for whatever house I could find. She really didn't need to worry about it.

"We're splitting it, you hear me?"

She was clearly not going to take no for an answer. Part of me wanted to play the cool guy and insist, but I didn't want to cause any unnecessary strife, so I decided to accept her demands.

“All right, fine. Thanks.”

“It’s *our* secret hideout, yeah? So it’s only natural for us to split the rent.” Haruka’s face blossomed into a smile.

She was surprisingly uptight about stuff like this.

■ Chapter 9
Let's Go for a Nighttime Stroll

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," First Midpoint, Residential Area

After we finished looking over our rental house, we each picked our room and set about making it our own.

I was surprised that Haruka picked the Western-style room.

I had assumed that because the Aonos lived in a Japanese-style home, she would prefer a room that matched, but…

"You don't get it. When I go home, I gotta sleep on a futon on the floor whether I like it or not. You think I'm gonna pass on an opportunity to sleep on a bed while I'm here?" she asked me as she jumped up and down on the rental bed like a child.

I'd thought it would be more a matter of familiarity than a question of "opportunity," but as long as she was happy, that was all that mattered to me.

"All right. See you in the living room in an hour," I said.

"Aye-aye, Sir!"

After making our appointment, I closed the door quietly behind me.

Well, I've got some free time till then.

After I finished unpacking my things in the room Haruka left to me, I sat on the rental bed and let my mind drift.

I'd suggested we take some time to make the place feel like home, but the truth was that I had already set the place up with all the necessary furniture when I signed the contract.

I had a bed, a desk, a refrigerator, a space to stash my gear, as well as an air purifier, and even an air conditioner. This simple room felt like my own little private kingdom.

I took out a bottle of sparkling water that had been warmed up in my bag and popped the cap off, then took a sip.

"Phew. I'm bushed." I leaned against the wall and sighed, exhaling a mixture of air and carbonation from the drink.

As soon as this comment left my mouth, my body began to feel heavy. It seemed that words had power after all.

Not that my exhaustion came as a surprise. I'd been carrying a heavy load all across the vast dungeon since nine o'clock that morning.

Though my body had surpassed that of a regular human, thanks to my pact with a spirit (not to mention all that daily training), my muscles still got tired, and I still got sleepy.

It felt nice to take a moment to truly relax for what felt like the first time in quite a while.

"Oh. It seems you've survived, Master."

Even the goddess of time had no right to disturb my perfect moment of rest. And yet here she was, doing exactly that. *How wonderful.*

"Yo, yo. You're late, Albi. You missed all the important bits."

"You'll have to forgive me. I was in the middle of a date with Fumika, so I wanted to avoid seeing anything gruesome and decided to cut our connection," Albi said, responding through our telepathic connection. *"And besides, I have spent the last year training you myself. I was certain that you would have no problems against such weak enemies, Master."*

"Th-thanks."

It felt weird getting a compliment from her out of nowhere like that.

"I see you are as easy to please as ever. I'm lucky to have such a simpleton on my hands."

“Shut your face.” I’m still maturing. “So? What about you? Did my sister have a good time?”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose. We went to several expensive restaurants of good repute, and she certainly seemed to be enjoying her meals.”

“Good, great.”

“However, the single portions served at such lavish restaurants were too scant to satisfy our stomachs, and we thought it would be in poor taste to order absurd amounts of food to make up for it. So afterward, we visited a familiar ramen shop known for its incredibly large portions.”

…Huh?

“They serve ramen with veritable mountains of vegetables, towers of pork slices, entire oceans of fat, and the topping menu features a truly all-star cast. The noodles are thick and curly. The soup base is a soy sauce and pork bone broth blend. Naturally, I ordered an ultra-sized portion of everything. I also ordered a deluxe fried rice and giga-jumbo dumplings. When all was said and done, I felt more or less satiated.”

“Hey, hold up. Are you saying my sister got the same thing?”

“No. Fumika ordered something else.”

Phew, that’s good, I thought, feeling relieved.

It was foolish of me to doubt her. I’ve been a bit suspicious recently, but Sis is just an average high school girl. She’s no competitive eater. There’s no way she could…

“*Fumika is the undisputed champion of that restaurant*,” Albi continued. *“Obviously, she ordered an item from their challenge menu.”*

…no way she could eat all of…

“Watching her elegantly and gracefully devour that monstrous bowl of ramen the size of an entire table with such ease was a thing of beauty. She truly is an artist. As a lover of food myself, I can only admire Fumika’s style—or perhaps it would be best to call her Fumika the Beelzebub.”

……

“There are likely none in this town who can match her. Other than, perhaps, the speed demon known as the Blue Meteor. Such is the greatness of Fumika’s eating power. It is a truly awesome thing to behold.”

“Hey, can we, like, please stop talking about this?”

Damn it, why does every last loose thread gotta get tied up like this?! And why the hell are all these queens of competitive eating gathering around me?! Isn’t that a whole different genre of story?!

*“…Hold on a moment, Master! These memories of yours… Don’t tell me that Haruka is…*the *Blue Meteor?”*

“Quit trying to keep the conversation going!”

Things were getting out of hand. Incredibly, irredeemably out of hand.

◆

“Well, well, if it isn’t Kyou. Why, it’s been one whole hour since I last saw you!”

Haruka showed up in the living room an hour later on the dot.

“Oh, you got changed.”

“’Course I did! Even the great Haruka Aono sheds her armor during down time, y’know.” The radiant star smiled, showing off her fashionable outfit.

She was wearing pale beige chinos, a white tank top, and a jacket in her favorite blue. Her style was edgy but elegant—a look that brought out her natural charm.

“I know it’s the girl that makes the outfit,” I said, “but I’m always surprised by your keen fashion sense.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Thanks. Pretty charming of you, Kyou!”

I could feel my face getting hot, so I quickly looked away. Every now and then, she said things that made my heart flutter.

“Sooo, uhhh, food? Want to get some food?” I suggested.

“Let’s go!”

I checked the doors and windows and made sure I had my wallet, then we headed out.

“There’s something so *new* about all of this,” said Haruka.

“Well, it’s not every day that a couple of middle schoolers rent a house in a dungeon. It’s pretty rare, actually.”

I was sure plenty of people got their adventurer’s licenses at a young age like we had. But most of them were probably scooped up by one of the larger clans right away.

So, for a two-person party like ours with no financial backers to be in a dungeon on our own like this was pretty incredible.

But apparently, that wasn't what Haruka had meant by "new."

"Sure, there's that. But I just mean walking around at night with someone my age. I've never done this before," she said, scratching her cheek bashfully.

Her face, lit up by the streetlights, had a warm bitterness to it, like a half-melted piece of dark chocolate.

It may have technically been nighttime, but it was still before eight o'clock. Being out this late wasn't exactly praiseworthy behavior for a middle school third-year, but we weren't likely to be scolded for it either.

Lots of people our age were out at this time. Maybe they were coming home late from cram school or club activities or hanging out with friends a little farther from home than usual. I didn't really want to think about it, but popular kids might also be out on dates.

They'd stroll through town under the night sky, chatting about this or that, maybe bickering about something or asking for advice. Maybe even holding hands, their hearts racing.

I guess it is *a bit depressing to have never experienced something like that.*

I could tell by the look on Haruka's face that she was envious. I could just picture the girl in blue, watching the green of spring from her dim birdcage, thinking to herself, *Must be nice out there…*

I couldn't get the image out of my head, so I decided to cheer her up.

"Well, in that case, you can just make up for lost time starting right now," I said, teasing her. "We don't need some big errand. We can pop out to grab a bite if you're feeling hungry or just take a walk to breathe in the night air. That's more than enough reason. Won't be that long till we graduate, right? There's nothing wrong with letting your hair down while you can."

Just think, Haruka. You've won your own freedom. There's plenty out here to get you excited. Let's find it together. You can count on me.

"…Yeah. Y'know what? Yeah! I really, really like that idea."

“For sure. It’s gonna be a blast.”

We both nodded and smiled bashfully at each other before beginning our nighttime stroll through town.

There was very little unity to the buildings in Eternal Darkness, and I mean that in a good way. There were square buildings, round buildings, rental properties, and even big, picturesque houses with red roofs. The architecture was a mixture of Japanese and Western. But there were no high-rises; aside from a midsize apartment building on the outskirts of town, the area had a very rural vibe to it.

And everything here was man-made. The buildings. The trees. The waterways. Even the stars in the sky.

“They did a pretty good job on this stuff, huh?” said Haruka.

“Yeah, no kidding,” I agreed.

The fake sky was filled to the brim with stars. Walking along underneath it felt like touring a planetarium with paved walkways. The artificial stars were a bit too bright, and there were way too many of them. It wasn’t quite dark enough to feel like true night, and the sensation made me feel dizzy. It was odd at first, but the lively, colorful streetlights all throughout town gradually helped us get used to the fake stars.

The streetlights, which glowed in red, blue, yellow, orange, green, pink, white, and purple, were beautiful. The sight made me feel like I’d shown up to a small neighborhood’s summer festival. There was no special music and everyone in town was dressed normally, but there was something strangely *festive* about the whole place. This, too, felt strange.

We left the residential area and crossed a bridge over a man-made river (I suppose it would be more accurate to say it was made using the midpoint’s terrain manipulation function) and entered the entertainment district. There, everything felt even stranger.

“Hey, come check it out! I’ve got candy apple-flavored potions for sale!”

“Whaddya say? Take a chance on the Soulstone Lottery! Everyone’s a winner! Plus, the big prize is one of Aleister Corp’s newest creations! Low risk! Big returns! Give the Soulstone Lottery a try and win big today!”

“The party meetup space is right this way! We’re currently short on healers, so any healers, please come join us! Other roles are also welcome!”

The streets were lined with food stalls, vendors, and even a party member recruitment center. If you widened your view, you could even see street magicians and clowns putting on performances.

It just felt so…*authentic*.

“This is amazing, Kyou. They’re having a festival! Is today some kind of special day? We sure are lucky, huh?”

“I dunno about that. I can’t say for sure, but I think this might just be how things are in this town.”

The cheap-ass boss of Eternal Darkness’s tenth floor was so broken that the second midpoint of the dungeon had yet to be unlocked. This meant that the local adventurers, who would usually be spread out between the dungeon’s numerous midpoints, all congregated here in the first one. In *Dungeon Magia*, it was pretty common for dungeons to remain uncleared for one reason or another.

“My guess is that adventurers who can’t progress but still want to collect the dungeon’s unique spirit stones, get stuck here and wind up opening shops as a side gig.”

“Whoa! You mean every day’s like a festival here?”

“…Guess so.”

I was getting pretty fond of the way Haruka summarized everything in the most slapdash way possible.

“Well, we’re here,” she said. “Why don’t we have a look around?”

“Of course. We could grab dinner while we’re at it.”

“Great idea! Let’s do that, at least for today.”

We decided to put together dinner from the festival stall offerings.

We had *takoyaki*, beef skewers, *yakisoba*, kebabs, buttery baked potatoes, *yakitori*, fish-shaped pastries, candy apples, barbecued corn on the cob, and even cotton candy and snow cones. We probably enjoyed our night out on the town more than anyone else. At the very least, the Blue Meteor’s gluttony that night was sure to become the stuff of legends.

“Geez, if I had known there’d be such a fun event going on today, I would have brought my *yukata* from home,” Haruka said as she pet a Chonchon stuffed toy she’d easily nabbed from a shooting gallery.

“Really? I mean, no one else here’s wearing one.”

“You don’t get it, do you, Kyou? It’s just elegant, y’know? It’s elegant! Who cares what *they’re* doing? It feels like a summer festival, so *I* want to dress in a *yukata*.”

Hmm. I have no idea what she means by “elegant.” Is she saying it’s all about feeling?

“All right, well, what about some fireworks?” I suggested. “They might not be seasonal, but they’re kind of festive, right?”

“Oh, hey! Fireworks sound great! We could set off some *warimono* here that would be like ‘KER-POW!,’ right? And then over there we could have a *nishiki kamuro* explode like ‘BLAAAM!’ and then watch as the little tails fizzle downward… Now, *that* would be *super elegant*.”

The way Haruka looked up at the sky, her cheeks flushed red, I could tell that in her imagination she was watching a truly stupendous fireworks display.

“You’re way more particular about stuff like this than I thought, Haruka.”

“Really? I just think it’s important to make sure things *feel* right, you know?”

“You’re quite the romantic at heart, huh?”

“Oh yeah! I just love anything exciting.”

Well said. I hope you stay this way, Haruka, even as you get older.

“Y’know, sometimes you remind me of an old man, Kyou.”

“What are you saying? For your information, I’ll have the heart of a second-year middle school student until the day I die.”

“Second-year? Aren’t we the same age? You’re a third-year, aren’t you?”

“Uh, right. Well, see, there’s this slang term, *chuuni*, which kind of means like…”

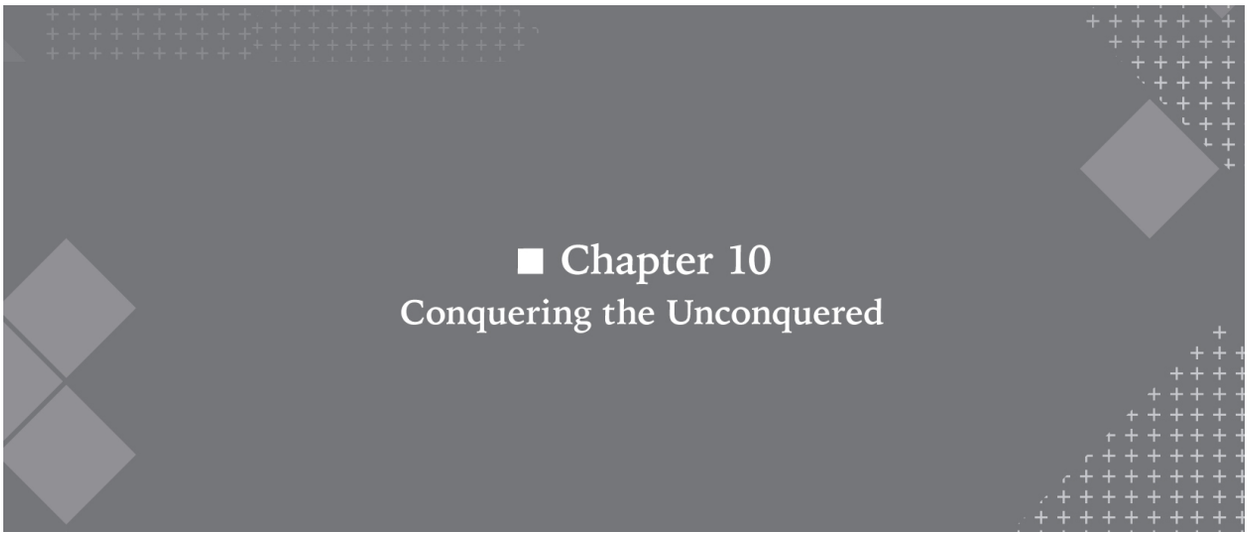
In the end, I wound up explaining the origin and meaning of *chuuni*, a term which translates to “second-year of middle school” and refers to the kind of person who acts like an edgelord with delusions of grandeur. Could there be anything more humiliating

than a textbook *chuuni* explaining what it means to a fellow middle schooler?

"What the—? Why would a person who had absolutely no special powers brag that they were the reincarnation of a fallen angel of darkness? What do they have to gain from such lies?"

"I just thought it was cool, okay?!"

…No, this was most certainly the ultimate form of embarrassment.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Midpoint, Entertainment District

On the morning of our second day in the dungeon, I got up early and left our rented house, then headed out to the town’s pleasure quarters.

Let me be clear: I was going to shop.

The previous night, Haruka and I had wandered around town like we were on an overnight school trip, and I’d gotten so excited that I’d completely forgotten to buy food for the following day.

It was a very middle schooler mistake, but back in my previous world, I was already…*cough, cough*. Well, I was a middle schooler again now, and that had probably had an effect on my mind. That’s my story, anyway, and I’m sticking to it. ☆

And so, to make up for childishly skipping out on my duties the day before, I decided to head out early all by my lonesome to take care of the shopping.

As for Haruka, she was still in bed. It had only just turned six AM. I didn’t feel like it was necessary to wake her, so I’d just let her be.

She was a happy-go-lucky girl, and I didn't expect her to make a big deal about me going out on my own. But just in case, I had left a letter in the living room telling her where I was. I assumed that would be enough to avoid any major incidents.

If only we could use smartphones in here, things would be so much easier.

Aside from inside the Five Great Dungeons, most objects that relied on signals were completely useless in places like this. There were no servers or cell towers in here, and without them, the TVs and phones we were so used to became little more than glowing paperweights.

Having now experienced this firsthand, I knew how much it sucked.

The widespread adoption of revolutionary telepathy-based telecommunications was still a long way off, so there wasn't much that could be done. But not having access to my glowing box was kind of stressing me out. Like it or not, I was a child of the smartphone generation.

...Man. I really want to read some web novels, I thought. *The entertainment here is just as engrossing as the stuff back home.*

I stepped across the bridge, my legs unsteady from the pangs of deprivation welling up inside me.

After a bit more walking, I finally approached the entertainment district. *Oh, I see it. Here it comes. Here it cooo—Wait. What the hell is this?*

"It's like a totally different place."

The streets were quiet, the stalls empty.

There was shockingly little foot traffic, and no one was shouting or laughing.

I probably should have expected as much, but the place had a completely different atmosphere when lit by the cold light of dawn. It was calm beyond imagination.

I opened up my map to make sure I was heading the right way as I walked through the unnaturally clean streets. After about five minutes, I arrived at my destination.

There, on the sign, below a cherry blossom logo, was the name SAKURAGI, followed by the words THIS SHOP IS OFFICIALLY LICENSED BY THE SAKURABANA ADVENTURERS GUILD.

Sakuragi was a chain of discount shops set up in each dungeon midpoint. Everyone who worked there, from the staff inside to the people who delivered their goods, were license-carrying adventurers. Its wide range of products and good service had made it well loved by all Sakurabana's adventurers… Or at the very least, that was the in-game description of the place.

It certainly felt nice to shop there. The whole store was decked out in cherry-blossom-pink hues, and it was clear the employees kept the place tidy and organized. They moved quickly and tirelessly around the shop. At least for the customers, it gave off a wonderful impression.

…Of course, it was probably a ton of work to operate these shops. In order to keep up the quality of service in a place like the midpoint of a dungeon, where there wasn't even access to the internet, the proprietors probably ran the place like a sweatsho—uh, I mean, they probably had to run a pretty tight ship.

Back in my world, I used to work part-time at a similar store when I was a student, so I know what I'm talking about when I say that discount stores are busy as hell. And this place was open twenty-four hours, so the employees were really on hard mode. I bet they were tougher than most adventurers.

With respect, gratitude, and just the slightest hint of kinship, I wandered around the place, trying to stay out of the way as much as possible.

I put all the basic foods that had good shelf lives—canned goods, rice balls, and even instant ramen—in my basket, and then grabbed some produce and the like, trying to keep our health in mind.

I found it incredible that I could buy meat and vegetables this deep in a dungeon. And it seemed the rumors were true—the varied lineup of products meant that I could easily put together well-balanced meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

And now for some seasonings…

"…Oops."

Just as I turned the corner to leave the produce aisle, I almost slammed into another customer who I hadn't noticed in front of me.

"Are you all right?!" I asked.

Though I was pretty sure I hadn't hit them, I decided to be polite just in case.

But as I turned to check on them and apologize—

"Wha—?"

—I was stupefied by what I saw.

Before me stood a girl with silver hair done up in pigtails and distinctive crimson eyes wearing a black gothic Lolita dress.

"Kya-ha-ha-ha! KYA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

I recognize her. I know this face.

"You're going to hurt. You're all going to hurt! I'll make you suffer! I'll make you disappear!!!"

My first thought was *But why?*

"So, cry for me. Scream for me. Struggle in vain, humiliate yourselves! I, XXXXX, will enjoy every moment. Your worthless, incompetent squirming is your only path to redemption! Kya-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha! KYA-HA- HA-HA-HA!"

But why? Why was *she* here?

"Um. Aren't you…?" I began.

"…It's okay. It was my fault. Don't worry." That was all she said before disappearing further into the shop.

Our conversation was short—it had lasted only a few seconds. Most people have probably had this sort of run-in dozens of times before.

We almost bumped into each other, I apologized, she said it was fine… And yet, despite how *normal* it had all been, my brain had judged this *normal* interaction to be exceedingly *abnormal*.

I couldn't understand what was going on. There was no way that *she* would ever be so sensible and polite.

Her face, voice, and fashion sense were exactly the same. But her personality was completely different.

Was it her twin sister? A doppelgänger? No, it couldn't be. I'd never heard of anything like that.

So, then, what was the deal with her?

I scoured the many reference materials and flowcharts in my mind to try and figure out all the possibilities pertaining to *her*. And after a while…

"…There's no way."



…I reached the most likely conclusion. And in the wake of this possibility, I could only stand in dazed awe.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Midpoint, Residential Area

“I hate to admit this, but modern technology really *is* amazing,” Haruka said, munching on the sugar toast I’d laid out on the table. She had only just woken up. “I can sleep in a bed, take a nice bath, and now I even get to eat this yummy breakfast… It’s almost too much. I’m never gonna want to leave this place.”

“Quit your daydreaming and eat your food quick—actually, scratch that. In your case, slow down and enjoy your breakfast.” I took a sip of the minestrone I’d poured into my cup as I half-heartedly scolded her.

Oh, man that’s good. The acidity of the tomatoes perfectly complemented the peppercorns.

“Aw, c’mon, you can’t say that after making me this amazing meal. Which reminds me. I’m surprised you’re such a good cook.”

“After helping my sister with the cooking for a while, I just naturally learned a thing or two.”

At first, I would just be on hand in the kitchen to help her out a bit. But before long, I was completely hooked. In the end, it became something of a special skill.

“I’m completely useless in the kitchen,” said Haruka, “so I’m impressed.”

“Yeah? But your sister’s a crazy-good cook, isn’t she?”

“Huh? Why are you bringing up Kanata?”

Crap. I let my Dungeon Magia *nerd out of the cage.* “Uh. No particular reason. It was just a wild guess. Really.”

“Hmmm… Well, whatever. Truth is, you’re right on the money, Kyou. My little sister’s cooking is amazing. And I’m not just saying that ’cause she’s family. She could run her own restaurant.”

Thought so. I remember Kana being a top-class cook among the game’s heroines. There was a scene in her route where she served the main character a fancy Japanese multicourse meal and tried to play it off as no big deal… Modesty has its limits, Kana…

“So, Kyou. What’s the plan for today?”

“Well, let’s see. How about we stick to our initial goal and break this dungeon’s depth record?”

Haruka’s mouth twisted into a smile as she listened to my boastful talk. It would have been a truly devilish grin if she didn’t have salad on her face.

“Conquer the unconquered, huh? ’Bout time, if you ask me. But no one’s ever gotten past the tenth floor, right? There’s gotta be a reason it’s never been done.”

“Yeah. I’ve taken that into consideration… And after thinking it over, I’ve decided we’re clearing the tenth floor today.”

“So, you’ve got some supersecret plan?”

“I dunno if I’d call it a secret plan. But I figure if I put a certain skill I learned recently to good use, we should be able to get through this ‘trial’ everyone talks about.”

I gave her a thumbs-up as I shoved a slice of hard-boiled egg from my salad into my mouth.

I had been sacrificing my family jewels to a wicked goddess for weeks. If my training wasn’t enough to get me through this trial, what good *was* it?

“All right,” I said. “It’s still a bit early, but let’s go over what we can expect on the tenth floor. First of all, the boss’s special traits __”

I went over the details of the tenth floor’s trial, focusing on the stuff that everybody already knew.

The tenth floor’s boss was so notoriously dangerous that there was even a warning about it posted on the portal gate leading to the sixth floor.

It shouldn’t seem out of the ordinary for me to have some knowledge of the boss. And even if, theoretically, I seemed to know more than I should, it could always be chalked up to a mistake or some rumor I’d heard.

I explained the details of the boss’s power, abilities, special features, and attack patterns, as well as its weaknesses and loopholes we could exploit. And all the while, I peppered in tidbits about how we were *actually* going to approach the fight.

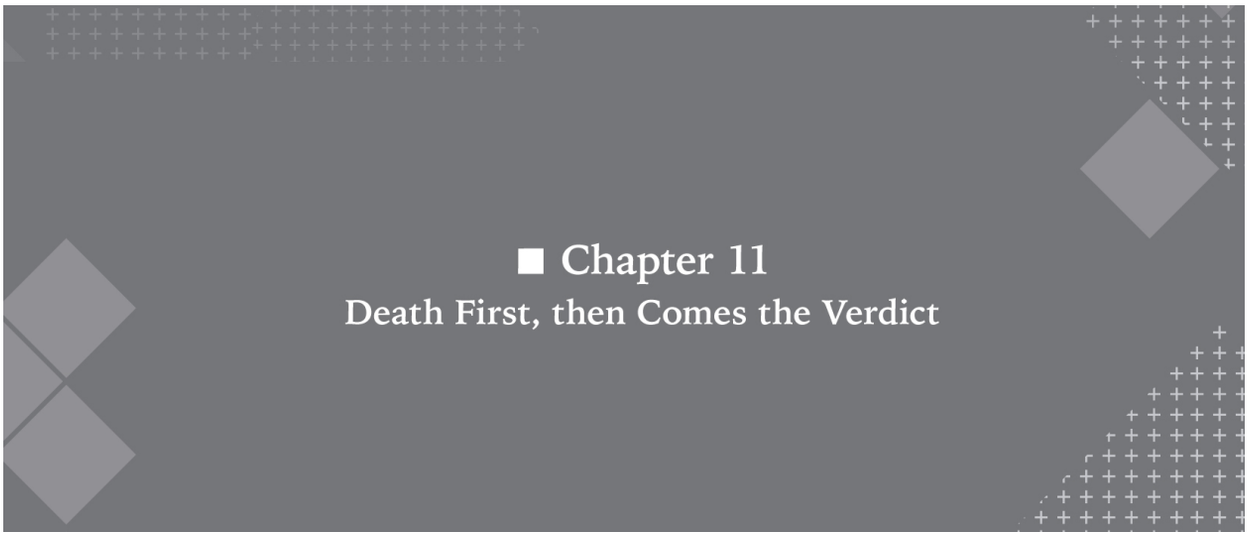
Not to brag, but my plan for beating the tenth floor boss was safe and speedy. And I wasn’t the only one who thought so either. Even the wicked goddess herself had given it her stamp of approval.

So, I'd thought for sure that Haruka would go along with it without a second thought.

"Yikes! That's so messed up, Kyou!"

But what I got in return was a look of shock and disgust.

Whoa, whoa. Hold up. How is this fair? You're the one always doing psycho stuff !



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness”

The journey to the tenth floor was no different from our previous adventures.

Well, sure, there were some changes to the types of enemies we ran into. And the path itself changed quite a bit.

But in the end, it was all stuff we could one-shot without using any skills. And the way there was easy enough to traverse without wasting too much of our stamina.

So, yes, some things were different. But those things were so trivial that neither Haruka nor I batted an eye.

That isn’t to say that I felt the fights were too easy or that I’d become so strong I was getting cocky. Just that, by the end, we still had plenty of energy left to go on. I even asked Haruka to give me a bit of sword training on the way to keep my head in the game.

“Your technique with the sword is humble, Kyouichirou. And I mean that in a good way. I can tell you see it as a *means to an*

end. Because of that, you haven't developed any strange idiosyncrasies."

The best swordmaster in the world told me I must have had a good teacher.

A good teacher, huh?

Albi was certainly *skilled*. Her instructions were precise, and she'd taught me a wide range of things. She was definitely the reason I'd become so strong in only one year. But if someone asked me if she was a *nice* teacher, the answer would obviously be no.

She used every kind of harassment in the book like it was no big deal, and she was quick to kick me where it hurt the most. Her idea of basic training was taking me to the very edge of obliteration.

…Looking at it from that perspective, she was most definitely a *bad* teacher.

I could just imagine the self-righteous dogpiling that would happen if this kind of question were asked online. But, well. When in Rome.

In the world of *Spirit Wars: Dungeon Magia*—where strength and results mattered more than anything—even if her methodology was a bit extreme, it would by no means be seen as deserving of reproach.

In terms of the value people put on life, it didn't even really make sense to compare this world to the standards of my old one. The two were completely different… But that wasn't to say that I had to pretend getting kicked in the nuts by a wicked, unfeeling goddess was right. Then again, it was true that it had made me much stronger.

…I'm just going around in circles at this point.

"She's an incredible teacher, but she's not exactly *kind.*"

In the end, I chose a relatively inoffensive response.

Incredible but not kind.

It was by no means a perfect answer, but it did a decent enough job of capturing the sort of teacher Albi was.

Then again, she was actually pretty— You know what? Forget it. If I keep going in circles, we'll never finish with this topic. Let's continue the story instead.

After we'd wandered all around the dungeon and had our fill of adventure for the day, we finally reached the warp gate leading to the tenth floor. It was around four o'clock in the afternoon.

Although we'd arrived at our destination later than we had the previous day, our overall time had been greatly improved by the fact that Haruka and I decided to run as fast as we could through the sixth and seventh levels to make up for missing our usual daily run.

"And here we are! Right in front of the gate to the tenth floor!"

"Yay!" we said in unison, then shared a high five. Haruka seemed particularly fired up.

Here we were, about to face an unconquered trial. Her energy was certainly heartening.

"Just make sure you follow the plan, all right?" I said.

"Gotcha. You'd better not mess up either, Kyou."

And so, the two of us middle schoolers headed toward our next challenge, a bounce in our step. Our mindset was the same as always; we might as well have been heading off on a field trip.

"Whoa, hold on, you two!" came a sharp voice. "Just where do you think you're going?!"

We turned around and saw a dark-skinned man running toward us, his face twisted with frustration.

"Do you realize that just beyond there is a part of the dungeon that has yet to be cleared? I won't judge you. Just please. Turn back now."

"…Are you a member of the Adventurers Guild?"

"No, I'm not. I'm a low-ranking member of Rosso and Blu, the Burning Blade of Ice. Do you understand what that means?"

"Nope!" answered Haruka. Her tone was blunt as she shoved a rice ball into her mouth.

I nodded quietly. "Rosso and Blu is one of the Five Major Clans, isn't it? And why exactly would a member of such a big organization be out here warning a nobody party like us?"

"I don't think I need some grandiose reason to stop a couple of young people from throwing their lives away. Listen: If you set one foot past here, you will die. That much is certain," he warned, his voice harsh.

I could tell that he was genuinely trying to stop us out of the kindness of his heart.

"Many hotheaded youths just like you have taken on the trial beyond this gate. And every one of them died. Do you understand? Every single one of them. If you step through that purple gate, the two of you are guaranteed to share their fate. Don't confuse bravery with recklessness. If you want to test your courage, do it somewhere else."

I was grateful for the warning, and I did appreciate that a more experienced adventurer was looking out for us. But…

"We greatly appreciate your warning," I said. "We were confident that we had researched the tenth floor well enough. But now that we've heard what you have to say, we'll make sure to be even more careful. Thank you kindly, sir. You tried your best to deter us. So, if anything does happen to us, please know that it won't be your fault. It will be ours. And we will take responsibility for our actions. Now, if you'll excuse us. I hope we meet again."

I bowed deeply and dashed through the purple vortex with my radiant partner by my side. We could hear the older adventurer shouting at us as we passed through.

I felt a deep sense of respect tinged with regret well up in my heart. But the predominant thought in my mind was a terribly cold one.

So, we've made contact with Rosso and Blu. And here*, of all places.*

Something told me that meeting would mean something for us in the future—it felt like a premonition.

We passed through the gap between dimensions, and waiting for us on the other side was…

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Tenth Floor

"Lo, welcome ye sinners."

We stepped out into a large cubic room. The walls were covered top to bottom with coffins, and the floor seemed unnaturally bleached. The creepiness factor was off the charts.

And there, standing in the center, was a man resembling a withered tree.

He was easily around seven feet tall, maybe even eight. If he had any meat on his bones, he might have been described as *gigantic*.

But the creepy figure before us had no meat. All he had was skin. And wrapped all around this lanky sack of skin and bones were white bandages.

This was the lord of the tenth floor—an eccentric stick figure of a man with no profile to speak of and a body wrapped in bandages. A tall, slender mummy with an intellectual male voice.

He was the reason no one had made it past the tenth floor of Eternal Darkness.

This being was known as the Lord of Death. But he had another name—

"I am Asto Vidatu. Hear me, ye sinners. Judging guilty souls be my charge, for I am the guardian of death's door. Now, sinners. Should you wish to proceed to areas beyond, thou must accept my judgment."

"Judgment, huh?"

I had already seen this in the game, and I'd heard about it time and again since coming to this world. But it seemed only polite to ask what this guy was prattling on about.

"And what crimes are we being judged for, exactly? Naturally, we have the right to plead our cases, right?"

"Your sin is that of being. My role is to bring death to those who would thusly sin. Shouldst thou be pure of heart, then open shall become thy path."

After listening to the creature's absurdly dramatic speech, Haruka tilted her head to the side in confusion.

"Hey, Kyouichirou. What the heck is this guy saying? I'm not getting any of this."

No kidding. This guy's speech was so needlessly archaic he sounded like a *chuuni* edgelord.

"Uhhh, let's see. Well, to put it simply, Mr. Asto Vidatu here says, 'You're both a waste of space, so I'm gonna kill you, okay? But if you can survive my superpowers, then I guess I can let you pass.' That's about the gist of it."

“I see, I see! …Hey, wait! This bean pole’s seriously full of crap!”

“No kidding. He’s absolutely full of it.”

Most bosses in *Dungeon Magia* tended to follow a simple “Hi there! I’m gonna kill you!” pattern. I guess you could say a lot of them were *normal*. But this mummy man seemed almost rational at first, which made him so much worse.

What kind of BS is “Well, you’re alive, and that’s a crime”? This guy had his game genres all mixed up.

…But whatever. When in Rome, blah, blah, blah, right?

“Fine. In that case, how about you pass judgment on me first?” I said.

“*Very well. Step forward*,” said the mummy man, pointing his withered tree branch of a finger at me.

I suddenly felt like I was floating—well actually, I *was* floating—and then I was abruptly sent hurtling toward the mummy.

“Huh?!”

I, the tutorial miniboss, flew through the air with my arms and legs outstretched. I must have looked pretty stupid from the side. And sure enough, I could hear Haruka burst into laughter.

Make no mistake, Radiant Star. I’m gonna remember this!

“*Halt*,” announced the Lord of Death once I was right in front of him.

Just as he had ordered, my body hit the emergency brakes and stopped on a dime. I let out a *gurgle* like a toad and floated in the air spread-eagle.

I’ve heard of humiliation kinks, but this is a bit much.

“Seize him.”

To my dismay, it seemed the Lord of Death wasn’t done with me yet. A countless number of black ropes flew out of the coffins decorating the walls to my right and left. They wrapped themselves around all four of my limbs and bound me.

“Who’s this for, exactly? What are you getting out of tying up a muscle-bound guy like me?”

“Nothing is gained, and nothing is lost. Your restraints shall keep you from escaping judgment.”

Damn mummy, sounding all high and mighty as he spouts off some crazy nonsense. This is starting to feel like some weird hentai manga, damn it. All that was left was—

“J-just finish me off, villain!”

“That was my intention.”

“BAH-HA-HA-HA!” came a burst of laughter from Haruka’s direction. *There we go*, I thought. *That probably knocked the wind out of her. Plus, I’ve always wanted to say that. “J-just finish me!” Heh.*

“Now. Let the trial commence.”

Trial, huh? Right…

Basically, the boss of the tenth floor, the Lord of Death, aka Asto Vidatu’s trial goes like this: “If I kill you and you don’t die, then you’re innocent!” Basically, it’s a bunch of unfair BS. When I put it like that, it probably makes the mummy in front of me sound like a real psycho, but that’s not exactly true.

As I mentioned before, most bosses in *Dungeon Magia* are the type of morons to say “Hi there! I’m gonna kill you!” So, for this dead-tree-looking mummy guy to say “I’m gonna give you the death penalty first, then judge you later!” isn’t really all *that* out of the ordinary. Even if it makes no sense.

The real unfair BS is the *way* he kills you.

His special ability is Instant Death, which affects the target’s very soul. Anyone who gets hit with it is dead meat. Game over. That attack’s got enough power to take out even the main character classes in the game.

On the other hand, it has a lot of flaws. For one thing, each use has a long charge time. It’s very slow and it can only attack one person at a time. In other words, it’s pretty finicky. If that balanced it out, it would be one thing, but…nothing’s ever that easy, is it?

In practice, all of these weaknesses are done away with by the “trial setting” of his boss battle.

By imposing a trial (aka playing by the boss’s special rules) and introducing conditions like “nullify all but certain types of attacks,” “limit defensive actions,” and “stop spirits from sending the target spiritual power for a limited time,” bosses could make up for their deficiencies. That was how Asto Vidatu was able to compensate for the glaring weaknesses of his attack and use it to full effect.

Essentially, there were three rules enforced during the tenth-floor boss battle:

Rule #1: Until a character has been attacked by the boss once, they are prevented from evading.

Rule #2: Until a character has been attacked by the boss once, the boss is impervious to attacks.

Rule #3: If the character dies from the boss's attack, the above two rules are applied once again.

So, no evading allowed, the boss was invincible until he attacked, and if a person died, the rules would be applied to the next person as well. It was basically a parade of unfair rules forced on all challengers.

Rule #1 made up for the boss's slow attack. Rule #2 made up for how long it took him to charge. And Rule #3 made sure that he could keep his impervious state indefinitely… What a terrible lineup.

Sure, preventing your opponents from attacking or evading so they're forced to get hit by your instant death attack is devious and all, but where's the fun in that? I had always thought this boss was a real piece of crap ever since my gamer days.

And now that this had become my reality, and I was forced to participate in his bondage routine, all I could think about was how bad I wanted to beat this punk-ass to death.

Loser! Dumbass! Cheating scumbag!

"Are you practicing your self-introductions, Master?"

As my mind reeled with righteous indignation, the words of the wicked goddess herself intervened. The fact that she was carefree enough to use telepathy to speak to me at a time like this was a testament to how truly evil she was.

"Well, well. Actually decided to show up on time for once, Albi?"

"Of course. I would never miss seeing you in such a comical—pardon me, I meant dreadful *state."*

"……"

That was all she had to say, despite the fact that her master had been strung up and was mere moments away from being sentenced to death. I would expect nothing less from a woman willing to kick a man in his junk without hesitation.

“You would think so ill of me when I have the good grace to see this farce of yours through? I suppose I’ll have to inform Fumika of just how impertinent you really are.”

“You leave Sis out of this! Blabbing to her is low, even for you!”

I didn’t even do anything to blab about!

But a “farce,” huh? I mean, she’s right. But she doesn’t have to be so blunt about it.

“What point is there in putting on airs and acting as though you’ve suffered some great tragedy? Oh, unless… Do you want me to tell you to stand up and fight in the name of all your poor fallen sperm?”

“Of course not!”

What a complete waste of time.

“…The preparations are complete. The time for your judgment is at hand.” A solemn voice echoed through the eerie coffin-filled space.

This was the Lord of Death’s proclamation, the words of that fiend and regent of the tenth floor that had sent so many before me to their doom. Any other time, this line would have sounded quite grave indeed.

But thanks to the stupid conversation I’d just had with Albi inside my own mind, the mood had been completely ruined, and the Lord of Death’s words seemed empty and exceedingly goofy.

Poor, poor Asto Vidatu… Well, maybe that’s going too far.

The incredibly silly way things had played out made it hard to take him seriously, but he *had* brought about countless atrocities.

I glanced around at the room’s walls. Coffins, coffins, and more coffins. It was coffins as far as the eye could see. Now that I was looking closer, I noticed that even the ceiling was covered in them.

I assumed that each of these tasteless decorations had been one of his victims. Using the guise of a trial, he’d trapped and murdered countless adventurers and added them to his collection. Talk about a grim way for this prick to pass the time.

He could spout as many lame, edgy lines as he wanted to justify his actions, but the Lord of Death was just a murderous sleazebag. *What’s with these death god types, anyway? They’re all a bunch of goddamn pervy pieces of crap.*

“Hey, Death Dude. If the point of all this is judging someone’s sins, then there should be time to repent, right?”

“If thou require it, it shall be done.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said sarcastically, then turned to face the mummy man properly.

His thin body, wrapped in bandages, was like a withered tree in the shape of a human. He had gone all in on his rule-based setup, and he’d paid the price. As far as I could remember, his stats were the lowest of any boss enemy from the first *Dungeon Magia*.

“So, why do you collect these coffins? If your goal is to judge sinners, then what’s with all these tasteless art pieces hung up everywhere?”

“Lives ended by my hand become mine to do with as I wish. Their still bodies become the stars that line the skies of heaven. This act is beyond the mere desires of mortal men. I, who governs mortality, hang these stars of death as heaven wills it.”

A basic translation of the mummy’s mumbo jumbo would be something like “Well, I killed them, so they’re mine. Check it out, don’t they look like constellations when they’re all lined up? Normies like you wouldn’t get it. I’m the chosen one, and this is my thing.” Or something like that.

So on top of being an edgelord, this guy thinks he’s the chosen one? Goddamn. Well, whatever. I’ve got your number. The time for repentance is over.

“Let’s finish this trial already, Asto Vidatu.”

“Admirable resolve… Now, then.”

The Lord of Death’s arms unfolded like petals on a flower. He emitted a purple aura, and it converged into a gaseous orb about the size of a small watermelon over the palm of his right hand. One look was enough to know that this venomous purple orb was bad news.

“*…Thy death be a noble one*,” he said, then immediately released his Instant Death skill.

Despite being fired from only about three feet away, the orb floated toward me so slowly I could easily follow it with my eyes.

Boy, he really did sacrifice everything to maximize killing power, I thought with a grin. Then I gave Albi the order to activate our newest ability.

“All right, enough of this farce.”

“As you wish. Deploying fourth-dimensional defensive barrier—Fourth Field.”

With the goddess of time’s proclamation, my perception of the world completely changed. Everything around me turned black-and-white, and time moved by as though it were advancing one frame at a time. Everything was deathly silent.

It felt as though my skin had been robbed of its warmth—and that was crucial. The very sensations of hot and cold had been completely erased from my body.

Time continued to tick slowly by in this lonely space devoid of all the important sensations that make up the world.

The Lord of Death’s attack drew closer. Closer and closer and closer and closer still—until the orb of Instant Death finally made contact with my chest and exploded magnificently, then dissipated like nothing had happened.

There was no trick to it. It was a simple problem of universal principles—something existing in the third dimension had absolutely no effect in the fourth dimension.

Fourth Field—a perfect defensive barrier that nullified any and all attacks by stopping time for me alone. Whether it was a sword, spiritual magic, or an Instant Death curse—none of them could affect me as long as I had this skill activated.

Mind you, this was the Kyouichirou version, so it came with a laundry list of weaknesses. But if all I was looking for was simple defense, it was practically invincible.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a cheat for a cheat.

Sorry, Lord of Death. You might be the bringer of demise, but I happen to be partners with the administrator of time itself. This fight was over before it even began. See you in hell.

“Such brazen words when you’re borrowing someone else’s powers. Just the kind of bare-faced shamelessness I’ve come to expect from you, Master. Even a third-rate move seems impressive when you go on like that.”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! I’m in such a good mood, I’ll forgive your sarcasm this time.”

I was feeling on top of the world as Fourth Field’s effects ended. Then my surroundings regained their color, and I was

immediately overcome with itchiness and nausea like a bad case of heartburn.

…Guh. This is why I absolutely hate freezing time.

“This cannot be…! How hast thou survived my judgment?”

“Clearly, your judgment didn’t mean shit to me, you mummy bastard!”

It took everything I had to ignore my body’s pain and focus on trash-talking the mummy man. And it was still too early to celebrate. *Now it’s my turn. Hope you’re ready for my counterattack.*

“…Very well. You have successfully overcome my trial and may proceed.”

“Before we do that, there’s one last thing… *We’re going to kick your ass!*”

The black ropes that bound me disappeared in an instant.

“…?!”

Four new ones quickly shot out of the surrounding coffins to replace them. But this time, the one helplessly bound was none other than the Lord of Death himself.

I’d now overcome the first rule—the one that went, “Until a character has been attacked by the boss once, they are prevented from evading.” And that meant it would now take effect for him instead.

“If your trial is overcome, the next one to have to bend to its rules is you—you should be aware of the risks better than anyone.”

At first blush, trials might seem to be set up entirely in the boss’s favor, but they had one fatal weakness—the rules could be reversed to affect their creator.

Like turning a buff into a debuff, a resistance into a weakness, or an advantage into a disadvantage—the moment someone made it through the mummy’s trial, the next one on the hook would be *him*.

The important thing for trial-based bosses was that they strike a good balance between the strength of their powers, and the risk of having the trial turned back on them. But unfortunately for Mummy Boy, he had focused exclusively on the former.

I guess it wasn't that surprising. When it came down to it, Asto Vidatu was just a low-level miniboss.

The only way this weak-ass edgelord mummy could manage such a horrible and unconquerable combo was to pay a considerable price and risk losing everything if he failed.

Because of the sheer cost of his attack, he had no more fight left afterward. And because of the rules he himself set up, he couldn't even run away.

At this point, he was just another scrub. Weaker than even the weakest Goblin in Moon's Eclipse.

"How does it feel to go from governing over death to patiently waiting for it to come? And, please, spare me your cringey dialogue. *I seem to recall giving you plenty of time to repent.*"

*"…*That *was the meaning of your words?!"*

He'd finally noticed. But it was too late. He had wasted what precious little time he had been given to confess on some cringey self-important poem. Besides, the rule of the level was that death came first, and the verdict came later.

"You know what they say. When in Rome, et cetera et cetera. But don't worry, sinner. I'll play by the rules of this area and judge you accordingly."

The Lord of Death suddenly realized the situation he was in, and his face began to twist in fear.

"Wait, sinner."

"Nope."

"Please listen—"

"Nothing to talk about."

"Mercy—"

"You'll have none… Oh, look. Here comes the executioner."

Carefree footfalls shook the air around us. The *tap, tap*, tapping of shoes across the white floor sounded so gentle, the owner may as well have been on her way to a picnic.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Haruka. It's finally your turn."

"That took forever. I was so bored I almost fell asleep!"

There wasn't the slightest hint of worry or relief in her eyes as she spoke. She wore the same expression as always—the one that said *Unconquered level? Instant death attacks? So what?* She drew her blade.

“Ground? Minced? Filleted? What about skinned? Or skewered? Hmm. Grated isn’t too bad an idea either. But then again, au jus might be good…”

The stellar swordmaster ran through the different cutting methods she’d like to try, like listing off options on a menu.

“Hold, sinners. What are these words you speak?!”

“Huh? Pretty sure it’s none of your business, dude. Quit butting into our conversation,” said Haruka. “So, what’s it gonna be? Ooh, I’m getting so excited. Might as well pick one with lots of slicing. I really want to get the most out of it, y’know?”

Then, suddenly, Haruka slapped her knee, as if to say, *Oh, I know!* She must have had a flash of inspiration.

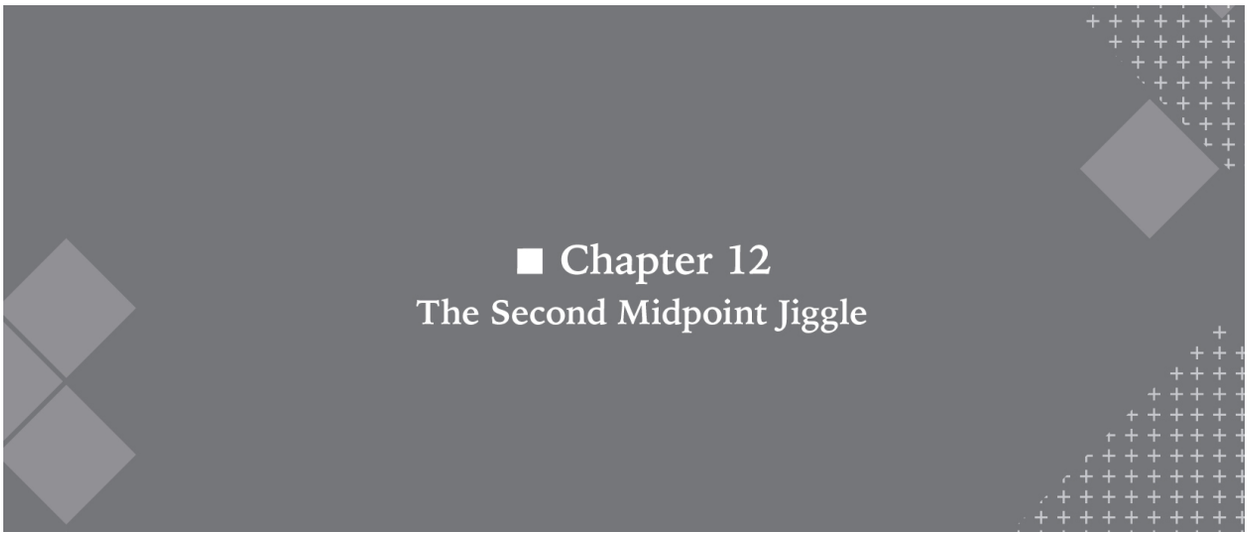
“I got it! We’re going to have diced steak today!”

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait, please wa—”

A few seconds later, the guardian of the tenth floor, the Lord of Death, Asto Vidatu, was no more. Out of respect for the recently deceased, I’ll leave out the gruesome details.

Yikes. Sliced, diced—whatever you call that… I sure as hell hope I don’t have to die that way.





◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Tenth Floor

“This spirit stone’s pretty big.”

“Well, it *was* a miniboss,” I said.

A dark purple spirit stone lay in place of the diced steak once known as the Lord of Death after he’d disappeared into particles of light. It was over twenty inches tall and just as wide and deep. It was big, but I figured we’d manage.

“That defensive skill of yours, the…uh…what was it called again?”

“Fourth Field.”

“That’s it! Fourth Field. That was amazing! It’s like totally invincible!”

“…It’s not actually invincible.”

Haruka was partly right. When it came to simple defense, the skill was practically impervious. But as I said earlier, Fourth Field had good output but was otherwise full of weaknesses.

First of all, it cost a ton of AP just to use. Even with the AP I’d gained from my level-up bonus and the boost to my spiritual

power cap thanks to all that training, using Fourth Field with full AP would completely drain me in less than a minute.

Plus, the longer I kept it up, the greater the toll on my body. Being in the fourth dimension wasn't easy on a person. And as soon as I left, every part of me would start screaming in pain.

Not to mention…

"I can't move while it's activated."

That was the biggest weakness of the Kyouichirou version of Fourth Field. I couldn't do anything while it was active. I couldn't attack, I couldn't dodge, I couldn't talk to my party members—all of that was impossible.

I was invincible while it was active, sure. But I was as good as a sitting duck immediately after.

If the enemy attacked from a distance and hit me just as the skill's effects ended, that'd be the end of my journey.

"Oh, wow… That's totally, uh, *hardcore*."

"You don't have to try so hard to put a positive spin on it."

Things might have been completely different if I could attack from a little farther away, but there was no point complaining about that now.

The only time I could freeze was my own—that was just the kind of guy that I, Kyouichirou Shimizu, was.

"All right. Well, we'd better get moving."

"Roger that!"

With its master gone, we put the coffin room behind us and carried away our spoils.

So long, Asto Vidatu. And, uh, y'know… Actually, that's all I've got to say.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Second Midpoint

What awaited us beyond the portal gate was a featureless plain.

The sky was bathed in twilight and there wasn't a cloud in sight. The climate was mild, and flat, even land stretched out before us as far as the eye could see.

"It's so quiet here," said Haruka.

"That's probably because we're the first people to get this far."

“A totally unexplored, undeveloped area, huh.”

“Well, the original inhabitants are still here, mind you.”

“The *what*?!” cried Haruka, her mouth agape. “You mean to tell me we’re gonna have to fight some kind of midpoint dweller?! Woo-hoo! What a nice surprise!”

“Whatever you’re thinking, it isn’t gonna happen. So just put your sword away, wouldya?”

Haruka was getting way too fired up, so I tried to calm her down by handing her a fruity cereal bar.

This girl’s absolutely battle crazy.

“But, like… You said the original inhabitants are here, but I don’t see them.”

“You can’t see them *yet*. They’ll come to us soon enough.”

About five minutes later, the indigenous inhabitants showed up, just like I’d predicted.

Jiggly purple gelatinous creatures about fifteen inches tall began to appear from under the ground.

“*Greetings to you, Mr. Adventurer*,” one of them said, addressing us as if we were a single person. *“I am known as Yalda 336. I am charged with the upkeep of this region.”*

If you crossed a sea cucumber with a rabbit and then split the difference, then tried to make it look like some goofy mascot character, you’d get a Yalda. They jiggled their—ears? Antennae? Whatever those things on their head were—and introduced themselves in their lovable little voices.

“Welcome and thank you for coming this far, Mr. Adventurer. I am called Yalda 336. I am so pleased to be making your acquaintance!”

“My name is Yalda 336. I would be very glad to help you, no matter how small the task. So please do tell!”

“Greetings. I am known by the name of Yalda 336, Sir Adventurer. I swear that I will do my utmost to assist in all your endeavors forthwith.”

One after another, the jiggly little creatures popped out of the ground and introduced themselves as Yalda 336.

One, then ten… Before long, there must have been a hundred of them, all jiggling furiously. I called out to them and tried to

calm them down a bit.

“Hello, Yalda! We’re grateful that you’ve come out to greet us, but if it would be at all possible, might you quiet down a bit…?”

“Mr. Adventurer! What is your name?”

“Oh, right. We forgot to introduce ourselves. I’m Kyouichirou Shimizu.”

“I’m Haruka Aono.”

“*Wah! How lovely your names are!*” called out the silly little characters in unison.

At this rate, we’re never going to get through this.

If we kept allowing them to set the pace of the conversation, we would probably be here till morning. In order to stop things before they got any more chaotic, I took something out from my bag and held it above my head.

“Hey. Would you all like this, by any chance?”

In an instant, all of the Yalda 336 stopped their jiggling. The way their beady eyes all turned up to look at the item in my hands was indescribably adorable.

It seemed that this, at least, was the same as it was in the game.

“What the—? Why’d the li’l jigglers stop all of a sudden? And what do you plan to do with *that*, Kyou?”

I grinned at Haruka’s question.

“Oh, this? I’m just going to do a little shopping is all. Now then, Yalda 336. Would this be enough for you to make us two chairs?”

I bent down and handed the closest jiggly alien creature two spirit stones the size of coins.

After a brief silence, the little characters all rejoiced. They cried out “*LORD STONE!*” in unison, and their bodies vibrated with delight.

“Yay! Yay! Lord Stone! He gave us Lord Stone!”

“Work, work! He gave us work!”

“Say, say. What kind of chair shall we make? Let’s think and think together!”

The jiggly little creatures completely ignored us and began chatting among themselves. They seemed so full of glee that one might mistake the scene for a festival. Everyone was pulled into

the whirl of excitement except for a certain radiant star who didn't seem to know their customs.

"Uh, Kyou? Explain, please."

"Okey-doke."

After clearing my throat with a fake-sounding *ahem*, I carefully thought over how much information I should reasonably share before launching into an explanation on the Yalda Series.

"The Yalda here are the caretakers of the midpoint. They have a number of special abilities, like Infinite Multiplication, Complete Information Sharing, Matter Creation, and all sorts of other stuff. But basically, while inside a midpoint, *they're capable of anything*. Their favorite things are adventurers and spirit stones, and their favorite way to pass the time is work. So as long as you have some spirit stones to trade, they can create a bunch of amazing stuff for you."

"Uh, kinda feels like you glossed over something crazy a second ago."

"You're imagining things. Anyway! The Yalda are cute and nice and perfect caretakers. So, we should make sure we treat them with the utmost respect."

Haruka stared at me with suspicion in her eyes. I wasn't lying, though. I was just leaving a few things out. Like the fact that, if you attacked them, a *terrible presence* would descend upon you, or that they all pooled their experiences like a hive mind, so that your reputation with them was shared across every dungeon, or that their source was the same as Albi's—*cough, cough*. Anyway, the Yalda were cute little mascot characters and the fact that I didn't go into all their little secrets was *by no means* the same as lying.

So, yes. I wasn't lying. Not at all.

"Just think of them as important business partners and the key to our success within dungeon midpoints."

"…Hold on. These little guys *freak you out*, don't they?"

"What. No. No, of course not. I am simply in awe of their incredible abilities."

"You think a couple flowery words are enough to… Well, whatever. Okay, fine. So, basically, they're cute and they're jiggly, but no poking fun, right?"

I was grateful Haruka was so quick on the uptake. But something was bugging me.

“Aren’t you a little *too* underinformed about this stuff?” I asked.

“Weeell, Little Miss Haruka is still just an adorable beginner, y’see!”

I shook my head at this sloppy defense.

“I’m not trying to chew you out for not knowing things. You *are* still a beginner. It’s natural for you to have some holes in your knowledge. But, still…” I tried to approach the subject as carefully as possible. “You attended a bunch of fan meetings for adventurers, right? Weren’t you devouring all the info you could find on the subject? And yet…”

“You think it’s weird that I’m so clueless?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

I could understand if she didn’t know about midpoints, or accommodations, and if I really gave her the benefit of the doubt, I could overlook the fact that she’d never heard of the Yalda Series.

They taught you all that stuff during a single training session, and it was the kind of quick course where you just read the textbook and watched a video. I could imagine how it would be tough to cram all that info into your head in one go.

But when she didn’t even know about Rosso and Blu, one of the Five Major Clans, it made me think, *Uh, what?*

Even the littlest kids in Sakurabana knew about the Five Major Clans. They were famous. It was impossible for me to believe that someone who went to clan meetings hadn’t heard of them.

“Well, it’s probably because I’m just a *casual*,” she said matter-of- factly.

Holy crap. I’ve never seen someone so into something so easily admit to being a casual.

“The whole reason I fell in love with adventuring was because of one specific person. And the only reason I know anything about her clan is because of her. When it came to other clans, I didn’t feel particularly inspired to learn more about them. Frankly, I just wasn’t interested.”

She sounded almost apologetic as she told me these things. A battle junkie who was just a casual. Haruka was like a walking parade of death flags.

“Huh. All right, that makes sense. Sorry for asking you something so weird.”

“What, is that it? You’re not going to tell me off with something like ‘You’re going to need to learn all this stuff ’cause otherwise blah, blah, blah’?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m not chewing you out or anything. Everyone’s gotta start somewhere. We all begin as casuals. I hate losers who forget that and act all high and mighty just ’cause they’ve been around a long time. They’re the worst.”

Even if you know a lot, if you show it off just to feel like a big shot, that means you don’t *really* care about what it is you’re talking about. *Real* fans are the ones with more enthusiasm than knowledge.

Besides, the depth of feeling required to consider yourself a fan of something varies from person to person, right? So testing people by asking them to recall a litany of trivia and then using that to claim superiority seems like a load of crap to me.

Not to mention it really pisses me off when people start mouthing off about “ambition” and “the mentality of a pro.” I don’t care if it’s work or play; quit pestering beginners with that BS.

Just ’cause someone hasn’t fully memorized the textbook or manual doesn’t mean they don’t care, assholes.

It’s holier-than-thou jerk-offs like that who help underhanded companies take advantage of their workers and… (the remainder of the text has been omitted).

“Uhh. What are you going on about?” asked Haruka.

“…What I’m trying to say is, you’re fine the way you are.”

“Whoa!” Haruka’s eyes suddenly lit up. “You’re such an understanding guy, Kyou.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Good, good! Compliment me more!”

Just as our small talk was really warming up, the little jiggly aliens came back.

“Mr. Kyouichirou. Mr. Haruka. Your chairs have been completed!”

I followed where the Yalda 336 directed and spotted two beautiful armchairs sitting side by side.

“Please look and then look some more! We’ve made them so, so well.”

“We tried really extra hard. Compliments, please!”

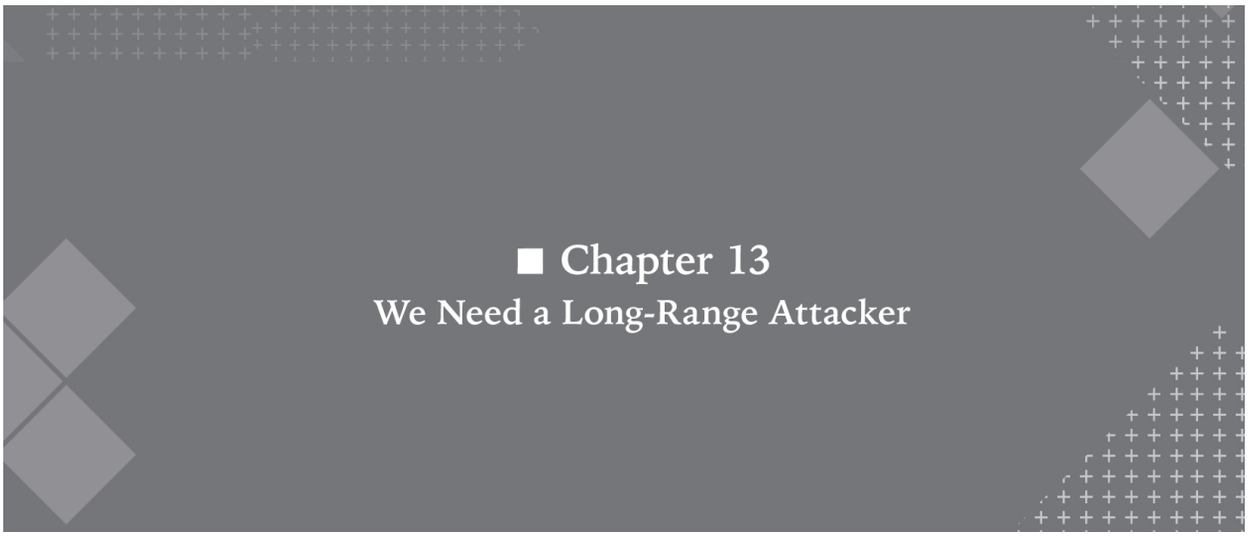
“Sit, sit, sit, sit!”

The jiggly aliens bounced around as they brought us to our chairs. We sat down as instructed.

“Oh, these are nice. Thanks for making these for us, jiggly little guys,” she said, looking totally at peace.

As if they had been waiting for exactly those words, the countless Yalda all erupted in cheers.

And that was how we made it to the dungeon’s second midpoint and spent our night there, relaxing.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Second Midpoint

“What should we do tomorrow?”

Night had fallen, and Haruka was roasting marshmallows over a barbecue made by Yalda 336. She was shoveling the gooey treats into her face but took a quick breather to ask me this head-scratcher.

“Ngh,” I grunted and awkwardly looked away, and my eyes inadvertently fell on one of the bouncing characters beside me.

“What is the matter, Mr. Kyouichirou? Maybe could it be that you have more work for us?”

“No, I think we’re fine for now. Thanks, though.”

For a moment it looked disappointed, but it quickly regained its composure and said, *“Very well! If you need anything at all ever, please do not hesitate to let us know!”* and resumed its gleeful bouncing. *These guys are so damn adorable.*

“Kyou?”

“Ah, right, sorry. Tomorrow. Right.”

Realizing there was no getting out of it, I resigned myself to answering her brutal question and turned my thoughts to our plan for the following day.

We had passed the fifth floor the day prior, and now we had defeated the tenth floor's boss. At this rate, our next destination would logically be the fifteenth floor.

…But, well, no matter how hard we tried, we didn't stand a chance against that boss in our current state.

This wasn't a matter of the fight being unfair like on the tenth floor. And the enemy's stats weren't anything special either. But there was no way for us to beat it. It was a physical impossibility.

But just because that was true didn't mean that I could blab about it to Haruka and tell her, "Look, it's impossible. Let's turn back." That would be selfish and arrogant of me.

And I knew what she'd say, too: "How do you even know that, Kyou?"

It wasn't that I didn't trust her, but there was too much risk involved in revealing that I'd been reincarnated. My knowledge of the game world was my greatest weapon. But if used incorrectly, that double-edged sword could slice me apart.

…To be frank, I knew *a ton* of really dangerous information about this world—the kind of stuff that could start wars if it was made public. I could always lie and say I'd heard rumors, or that I had a mysterious source of intel, but…

…I really don't want to lie to Haruka if I can help it.

If something came up that made telling her the truth unavoidable, that would be another story. But for now, at least, knowing what I knew wasn't going to change much. Intel or no intel, there was nothing I could do. Coming out as someone who had reincarnated wasn't the kind of cheap card I could just play whenever I felt like it. So, I decided it would be best to answer Haruka's question as plain old Kyouichirou Shimizu the adventurer.

"Well, we don't have any info about what comes next. We are on the absolute cutting edge of history on this one. So, let's proceed with even more caution than usual and try to make our way to the fifteenth floor."

"All right! Now you're speaking my language!"

A massive grin spread across Haruka's beautiful face.

It was close, but I didn't lie to her… Though I still felt like absolute crap about it.

To prevent her from reading my thoughts through my expression, I stuffed my face with roasted marshmallows. *Good. The perfect camouflage.*

Having a face like an open book is the worst. I'm gonna need to get my hands on some kind of item to fix this…

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Fifteenth Floor

The next day, our adventure came to an unceremonious end when we reached the boss fight on the fifteenth floor.

"Well. This is impossible," said Haruka.

"…Yep."

We both sighed and looked up at the ceiling of the fifteenth floor. *Ceiling* might not be the best word, since it was so high we couldn't even see it. I guess it would make more sense to just call it the sky. And laying its roots in that endless sky was what looked like a massive baobab tree. It was a real fantasy standard—the kind of area that made you want to spread your arms wide and shout, "Now, *this* is what I'm talking about."

The huge tree floated about a thousand feet in the air. And resting on its celestial boughs was a massive, regal-looking bird with folded wings.

It had poisonous-looking plumage, a wingspan about twice the size of its body, and the piercing eyes of a bird of prey. And right now, those eyes were trained on us.

This was Kamaku, the Doomquill Condor.

The guardian of the fifteenth floor remained motionless, perched on the giant tree floating in the sky. It didn't attempt to attack or threaten us. Kamaku didn't even move. It simply sat there, completely safe at a thousand feet above us, glaring.

"Heeey! Come down heeere!" Haruka called out. "Let's have a fun fight! C'mooon!"

"Goddamn chicken bitch! Get down here, you freaking bird! What the hell kind of miniboss is this lazy?! GET DOWN HERE!"

We hurled abuse at it and taunted it over and over, but no matter what we did, it completely ignored us.

Damn it. I knew this would happen.

There were countless boss fights in this game centered around unique gimmicks and strategies. And to short-ranged attackers like us, ones that involved “height” or “distance” were… basically a load of BS.

Damn thing’s got the terrain advantage and all it does is sit around glowering at us? Doesn’t it know it’s a boss, for God’s sake?

“I’m starting to think that bird’s never coming down,” said Haruka.

“If we exhaust ourselves by yelling till we fall asleep, it might come down eventually. But it seems to be on high alert right now.”

The truth was, in the game, you couldn’t even start the battle without bringing a character that could fly or a long-range attacker with a skill capable of reaching the enemy.

“I’m totally useless here,” I said. “So, if even Futsu-no-Mitama can’t reach that thing, I think we’re boned.”

“If only there was something to step on to get us up there!”

“Why not just make some sword copies and use those as platforms?”

“There’s no way I can do that. Not without snapping my sword,” she said with a wry grin.

Haruka treated her swords more delicately than I would have guessed. Then again, copy or not, telling a swordmaster to step on their weapon—their very life—did seem like a big ask.

I looked up toward Kamaku again. All I could see was the giant tree floating up above. There were no special gimmicks or anything.

Our options were to fly through the sky or shoot up at it. Unless we could manage one of those, we weren’t going to be doing any fighting.

“I think we need to find a new member.”

“A new member?” parroted Haruka.

“Yeah, for our party. We need someone who can fly, or at least someone who can attack from far away.”

“So, you’re saying this adventure’s over?”

“We can stay here as long as you like. If you have any ideas, I’ll do my best to make them happen.”

“…Hmph.”

After thinking it over for a while, Haruka sighed in resignation, then put on a bitter smile. “It’s pretty disappointing, but it looks like this is as far as we can go for now. There’s no way the two of us can get near that bird on our own.”

“All right. In that case, let’s head back to the fifth-level midpoint and gather our stuff. Then we’ll leave the dungeon for now.”

“Got it… I swear we’ll take this bird down on our next visit!”

“Yeah! We’re gonna make this thing pay big time!”

We bumped fists and swore that we’d be back, then I activated a Ring of Return.

A circle with a geometric pattern formed at our feet before sucking us in and whisking us away from the fifteenth floor.

You’re gonna get it next time, big bird.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness”

After two days away, what awaited us back in Sakurabana were heaps of praise and a flurry of questions.

We had conquered the unconquerable tenth floor, unlocked the second midpoint, and seen the new “deepest level” for ourselves. Not to mention we were still a couple of rookies on our debut adventure. We drew crowds.

The dungeon staff listened to our tale with tense expressions. The more senior adventurers were in a frenzy, trying to invite us into their parties. We received several million yen as a reward. We were celebrated and given honors that most adults couldn’t even dream of, let alone a couple of middle schoolers.

“I didn’t think this would be such a big deal.”

“This is even more exhausting than that fifth-level boss.”

“I hear you.”

We both sat on the bench by the entrance and laughed dryly.

I learned quickly that standing out could be tiring in its own right. I felt like I was starting to understand why the characters in web novels always tried to play down their own accomplishments.

Unless you're some kind of narcissist with a need for approval, it gets exhausting fast. Plus, now there are all these other people we gotta think about.

"We sure got a lot of business cards from clan members."

"Not to mention all these party invites."

The moon's glow lit up the stack of business cards I'd been handed. I looked down at them and began to space out. *Man. There's even a few famous people that show up in the game in here.*

"Think you'll join any of them?" Haruka asked.

I felt her eyes on me and turned to face her. The moon cast its light on her hairpin, and her eyes sparkled like sapphires.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested."

"Yeah."

"But I don't plan on joining any of these clans," I said decisively.

It might seem easier to ally yourself with a big, dependable group, but you had to sacrifice a lot in exchange.

My labor, compensation, time, and most importantly, the Elixir—I didn't want to have to hand any of it over. This meant that joining a clan was out of the question. And the same went for joining a party—the answer was no.

I wasn't much of a leader, but if I wasn't in charge of how we explored Eternal Darkness, then there was no point to any of it.

"What about you, Haruka? What if the person who inspired you invited you to her clan? What then? Isn't that your dream?"

"Ugh, that's such a mean question, Kyou." She put a hand to her cheek in frustration and bent her head to one side.

I understood how Haruka felt, mind you. Kaika Renge was *really* cool.

"Hmm, I dunno," she said at last. "I think I'd turn her down. Sure, one day, I'd love to go on adventures by her side. But first, I want to go on tons of adventures with you, Kyou. So, if you're not going to join any clans, then neither am I."

I could feel warmth well up in my heart.

Why does that make me happier than any other praise I've heard today?

"Thanks, Haruka. I want to go on a bunch of adventures with you, too."

"Looks like the feeling's mutual."

“Yeah, guess so.”

We both stared at each other and smiled.

The moonlight shone down on us, and the wind rustled the branches of the giant cherry blossom tree.

Talk about an *elegant* way to end our first adventure.

■ Chapter 14
Growing Tensions

◆

The phone call came a week after the end of our first adventure.

"Hello there. My name is Kirishima, head of client relations for the 336th Branch of the Adventurers Guild. Pardon me, but may I speak to Mr. Kyouichirou Shimizu, please?"

According to the woman on the phone, a certain "guest" had come to Eternal Darkness to pay Haruka and me a visit. She very politely explained that the guest wanted us to come to the dungeon "in full armor and as soon as possible."

But I wasn't about to just say "I'm on my way!" Instead, I told her, "I have a schedule to attend to. Please let them know that I'll meet them as soon as I'm available." This "guest" could wait for me until then.

…I felt kind of bad about it, to be honest. After all, what right did I have to keep my visitors waiting like some big shot. But just think about it—I was a student, and this call had come in at two thirty in the afternoon.

In other words, I was right in the middle of my studies.

That said, the school I attended was Sakurabana #2 Secondary School, and they were very approving of students aiming to become adventurers. So, if I told my teacher, “There’s something in the dungeon I need to deal with…,” they would probably let me leave without question.

But despite that—or rather, because of it—I wanted to make sure I didn’t take advantage of that kindness.

I wouldn’t go so far as to say that a student’s only duty is studying. But I figured that if I didn’t go to school while I could, I might come to regret it one day. And that’s why I… Ah, sorry. I guess it’s obvious I’m just trying to look cool. The real reason was that I was only allowed so many absences each year, and I didn’t want to waste them on some random errand from a stranger.

“All right, who wants to do the next problem?” asked the teacher.

“I do, sir.”

“Why’s Shimizu the only one with his hand up again? Why don’t the rest of you apply yourselves for once, huh?”

And so passed yet another average school day in my average student life.

◆ Sakurabana #2 Secondary School: School Gates

“Hey, Kyou!”

But that average day came to an end as soon as classes were over.

A crowd of people had gathered in front of the school.

Standing in the center was that radiant star I knew so well, made all the more stunning by her current outfit.

The casual way she wore her school’s sailor uniform—an increasingly rare style—made her look like a famous idol. There was no way I could walk next to someone like her.

“Whoa, look at you in your school uniform, Kyou! Aw, you’ve even got all the buttons done up. That’s so cute.”

“Sh-shut it! I’m just trying my best to fit in, okay? And what about you?”

I heard the crowd grumbling. They were saying things like “What’s that Shimizu punk doing with a cutie like this?” and

“What, you didn’t hear? That girl’s a member of his party” and stuff like that. Neither my mind nor my heart were ready for this.

“C’mon, Haruka. You’re drawing too much attention.”



“Wha—?” But your pal Haruka was enjoying watching her dear friend Kyouichirou squirm.”

Meeting up with a girl from another school at the gate—that alone was enough to cause heart palpitations for an otaku. But to walk home side by side with a girl so beautiful she could have jumped out of a painting… There weren’t enough hearts in the world to get through this!

◆

“You’re not in any clubs, Kyou?”

Haruka was drawing attention everywhere we went. A crowded spot like the school gate was one thing, but even walking along a quiet country road, she turned heads.

“I’m not. I’m too busy with housework and training,” I said.

The reason was likely her outfit—a classic sailor uniform. The length of her skirt and the ribbon on her chest looked slightly altered, but it was nothing excessive. It looked elegant and clean.

Strangely, it made her several times more radiant than usual. The fact that she was showing so little skin only enhanced her beauty, and I didn’t feel lecherous staring at her.

…But this is bad. Like, really bad.

The unique scent of the nearby farm fields wafted through the warm air. I looked up at the fresh blue sky and the puffy summer clouds.

What the hell kind of situation was this? I felt like I was in some corny coming-of-age movie. And the girl walking next to me was as pretty as any idol. I didn’t know what I had done to deserve this prize. My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

“Hmm.” The radiant star brought a bottle of *ramune* soda to her lips. She’d purchased it earlier at a candy shop. “So, I guess that means you’re the type of guy who doesn’t usually go out and have fun, huh?”

A question like that was like poison to a gloomy guy like me. Blood quickly rushed to my face. *So, you don’t usually go out and have fun, huh?* Translated through my filter of paranoia and pessimism, this became: “You’re a loner, aren’t you?”

Now my heart skipped a beat in an entirely different way. I couldn't handle this kind of question. I couldn't handle it at all.

"Well, I mean. You know…," I said, trying to buy some time and keep my cool. "…If you're asking if I 'have fun,' well, I do. I have lots of fun. I play games and read, and I've been really into cooking lately. Plus, I guess weight training is *kind* of fun. But you know what? If you're asking if what's fun to me is fun to someone else, then that's a completely different story, y'know? Some people think playing soccer or dodgeball is fun, while other people find ball sports to be absolute torture. There are a lot of ways to look at stuff like that, and 'fun' is actually pretty difficult to define. And if you think about how varied 'fun' can be for different people, you begin to realize how truly difficult it is to have 'fun with friends.' In fact, how are we supposed to define 'friendship' to begin with—?"

"Whoooa! You're talking like a mile a minute right now."

By the time I came to my senses it was already far too late. Unfortunately, I had let the otaku cat out of the bag. I only ever moved my mouth that fast when I was talking about something I liked or when I was trying to make excuses. And whenever that was pointed out to me, I would turn beet red.

What a nightmare.

"So, basically what you're saying is…" The marble inside her *ramune* bottle clattered. "…you've got a lot of free time after school. Right?"

"If that's how you would choose to describe not having many appointments with schoolmates, then yes, you are correct."

"Nothing but free time, eh?" Her voice sounded somewhat cheerful. "Sounds fun."

"Umm, eh-heh-heh. I'll be honest. It's pretty great."

Haruka laughed. But I didn't feel any malice or derision in it. Her tone and the grin on her face were as clear as a mountain stream.

"I'm not trying to make fun of you or anything, y'know. Actually, I'm glad you're usually free after school."

"…What do you have to gain from my being free after school?"

"Huh? Think about it!" The radiant star did a pirouette in place. The little performance was absolutely beautiful, from the

way she moved her feet to the way each strand of her hair fluttered as she held the *ramune* soda bottle like a microphone. “If you’re free, that means I can invite you out to have some fun with me after school, right?”

“Uh.”

She laughed. Her cute smile made my heart pound in my chest. Not to mention… *Oh, boy.*

“Of course that makes me happy!” she exclaimed.

I no longer had any idea what to make of this creature. Everything she did and said felt totally unfair.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Reception Room

Soon after that, the two of us visited Eternal Darkness and were led by an attendant to the reception room. Inside was a simple wooden coffee table and two black leather sofas. From the window frames, to the painting of fruit hung on the white wall, to the humidifier and water cooler, and to the green houseplant of indeterminate species, the place practically *screamed* “reception room.”

“These snacks are so good,” said Haruka.

“Don’t eat too many, okay?”

“It’s fine! I can eat all I want. It just goes right to my boobs.”

The radiant star continued to munch on the matcha-flavored financiers we had been served with tea. At her comment, I nearly spit out my coffee. I quickly changed the subject. There was no way I could keep my cool if I let her go on in that vein.

“I wonder who called us here.”

“Yeah, seriously. What a mystery.”

Haruka’s exposed cleavage swayed as she ate. She was wearing the same risqué battle costume she always did. Yet, despite how much of her was on display, each part of her armor generated a protective field called Astral Guard, so it had her fairly well covered.

The person we were here to meet had told us to come prepared in our dungeon-crawling armor.

“Who is this person and what exactly do they want us to do?” Haruka asked.

“Who knows. But, hey. What if your beloved Kaika Renge walks through the door? I bet you’d totally flip.”

“There’s no way. There’s seriously no way…right?”

She gulped down the rest of a financier and suddenly sat straight up. She was so easy to read.

Unbeknownst to us, my little joke wasn’t too far off the mark…

◆

“Pardon me,” came an authoritative male voice as the door to the reception room opened.

A man and a woman walked in.

The woman had silver hair, one red eye, and wore a classic maid outfit. The man had ashen hair and a sturdy build. Both were exceedingly good-looking. But it was the man, in particular, that drew my attention.

His hair was spiked, and he wore a jet-black trench coat. His piercing eyes were the steely blue of a tempered sword.

…There’s no freaking way this crazy famous guy is here.

The premonition I’d had before we plunged into the tenth floor had come to pass. But, to think that we would be meeting the man himself.

“James Szilard,” I said.

“Oh, you know of me?”

“There isn’t an adventurer in Sakurabana who doesn’t know who *you* are.”

“Huh? Who’s this gu—?”

I shoved as many financiers into Haruka’s mouth as I could, then began singing the man’s praises.

“The head of Rosso and Blu, one of Sakurabana’s Five Major Clans, and the most accomplished thermolurgy user in all the land. It is an honor to meet you, sir.”

I bowed and stretched out my hand, which he gladly shook.

“I’m the one who’s grateful to meet *you*. I appreciate you coming all this way on such short notice, Kyoushi…Kyouji… Ah, you’ll have to excuse me. Would you mind telling me your names?”

“I’m Kyouichirou Shimizu, sir.”

“And I’m Haruka Aono!”

“Ah, yes. Kyouichirou and Haruka. I’ve heard so much about you two recently, but I have trouble with names, you see. Please excuse my rudeness.”

“I should be the one apologizing. I’m truly sorry for keeping you waiting so long.”

“Not at all. I should have thought it through a little better. Considering your ages, I’ve no doubt that you were both hard at work studying. The fault lies with me,” said the head of Rosso and Blu with a dignified bow of gratitude.

Oh, man. He acts just like the James Szilard from the game.

He’s got an aura so sharp it could cut you, but he’s actually just a kind, thoughtful guy who cares for those around him. A true, handsome gentleman… Man, main characters really are in a class of their own.

…Wait. What the hell am I going on about right now?

I had to stop myself from getting carried away. Still, a couple of nobodies like us getting called up to see the leader of one of the Five Major Clans was practically unheard of. I wondered what we had done, or what we were about to be put through.

I spoke first, hoping to get to the bottom of it all and find out about the maid he had brought along with him (who was famous in her own right).

“Please, do tell us if there is anything we can do for you today, Mr. Szilard. And who is this you’ve brought with you?”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be overly formal. I just wanted to have a little chat with you is all. And, yes, my apologies once again. This is my secretary. Eliza, introduce yourself.”

“Yes, right away.”

The silver-haired maid had a veil that covered her right eye. She introduced herself as Eliza Wispard. What only I knew was that within roughly two years, she was destined to become the vice master of the intimidating Rosso and Blu clan.



…Where exactly is this gonna lead?

James Szilard and Eliza Wispard. I could feel my stomach twist itself in knots at the sight of these two famous characters. I wouldn't say I had a bad feeling, per se, but I couldn't imagine us getting through this without incident.

What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?

◆

"Hah-hah-hah! How delightful! How truly delightful! I do love hearing about the exploits of youthful adventurers."

"Ah, ah-ha-ha. Thank you, sir."

"Hey, Kyou! These sweets are really good! There's cream cheese in some of them!"

"Oh, are those to your liking, Haruka? In that case, Eliza, send for more immediately."

"As you wish."

Despite my concerns, the meeting was overall a pleasant affair. We spoke about our adventures over tea and sweets.

We were the ones doing most of the talking. Szilard mostly sat and listened to us. He was thrilled by the tales of our exploits in Eternal Darkness. He particularly enjoyed hearing about the tenth and fifteenth floors and let us go on for almost an hour about them.

The conversation moved on to weapons next. He absolutely ate this up as well.

He seemed incredibly interested in Haruka's Azure Skies. His eyes practically lit up like a child's as he listened to her describe it.

He seemed so interested, in fact, that she actually pulled it out to show it to him. That *really* got a reaction. He got so worked up, he switched back to his native tongue. I didn't expect such a tough-looking guy to act so…cute.

"—and just as we were about to cross over to the tenth floor, we ran into one of the members of Rosso and Blu."

"Ah, that was Dam. I've already heard about it from him. He's a quiet man and not very quick to praise. So, when I heard him speaking well of you two, I took an immediate interest. And now

that I've met you, it seems I was right. The two of you are *quite capable*."

"Th-thank you, sir."

I tried to remain modest, but it felt like a bomb had gone off inside me.

This was *the* James Szilard. The very cool and superstrong leader of one of the Five Major Clans. He even joined the main character's party depending on what route the player took. And now he was paying *us* compliments. There was no way I could keep a cool head in this situation.

"……"

Haruka was squirming in her seat as she munched away on financiers. She didn't seem to be in a bad mood, but the look in her eyes was a bit unnerving.

"What's wrong, Haruka? Do you need more snacks?" I asked.

"Huh…? No, no. The snacks are great. Plus, I'm super happy I get to talk to such an accomplished guy. Seriously! But, well…"

My excitable psychopath of a party member paused, tilting her head to one side as she chose her next words.

"…I was just wondering how long this farce was gonna continue, that's all."

And just like that, I felt the atmosphere in the room freeze over. Mr. Szilard grinned ever so slightly, and Eliza silently poured another cup of tea. But it was clear that the mood had changed completely. Only the person responsible seemed completely oblivious.

"What the he— Watch your language!" I shouted.

"Oh. Sorry. I chose my words poorly. Uh, let's see. Umm. Isn't all this a little transparent? Pretentious? A charade? I guess, what I'm trying to say is, umm, y'know. If it would be all right, could we perhaps hurry up and get to the point? Please?"

This girl was unbelievable. I thought she would try to cover up her mistake, but she chose to dig the hole deeper and deeper instead.

I moved to lower my head and apologize for my partner's rudeness, but Mr. Szilard raised a hand to stop me.

"There's no need for you to worry. In fact, I'm pleased by her candor. You've got quite the capable partner, Kyouichirou." The gray-haired hero grinned gently as he turned to the radiant

psycho by my side and asked her, “Tell me, young lady. Has something about me rubbed you the wrong way?”

“No, no. I’m not upset with you, Mr. Szilard. If anything, I think you seem like a decent guy. And that’s what made me wonder.”

Haruka seemed to struggle with her words. After a moment, she slowly and haltingly cobbled together her argument.

Oh, geez. This is kind of cute to watch.

“Well, first you push this place’s staff around and force them to call us here, and when we finally show up, you have us spend a bunch of time talking about nothing. You’re acting like some stuck-up aristocrat. But you don’t seem like the type to waste everyone’s time like this. You seem more, uh, rough around the edges. Like, in a good way, I mean…”

Oh, crap. That wasn’t cute at all. I’m starting to wish I’d brought some duct tape to keep her mouth shut.

“And most of all—” She picked up her beloved sword from where she’d leaned it against the wall and stared at Mr. Szilard with the cold, hardened glare of a world-class swordmaster. “—you wouldn’t have told us to bring *these things* along if we were just here for a friendly chat.”

That part of her argument was solid. It was exactly as she said—there would be no point in telling us to come equipped if we were just having a meet and greet.

The fact that he’d asked us to bring Eckesachs and Azure Skies along meant…

“Hah-hah. I see the type of person you are now, Haruka. Then I suppose there’s no point in drawing this out. To be honest, I would have enjoyed chatting with you two a little more. But what sort of gentleman would I be if I kept an impatient lady waiting?”

He narrowed his eyes at us like a bird of prey, but the master of thermolurgy’s voice was crystal clear now that he’d decided to move on to the main event.

He glanced at his maid before turning back to us and saying, “What do you think? Would you be up for a little match against the two of us?”

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Simulation Battle Room VIP Area

Most of the battles against other people in the first *Dungeon Magia* were *real* battles.

Real battles, as the name suggests, are the barbaric kind where people use their real bodies to fight to the death. One side is bound to get injured or worse, killed. It's the kind of fight that follows the laws of the physical, three-dimensional world.

I suppose it should go without saying that only evil people were awful enough to use their weapons and astral skills in town. But there was *another kind* of battle used by the main characters and other allies of justice. And that was the sort of battle we were about to have.

This kind of fighting allowed adventurers to take each other on without having to hold back, and without any risk of injury. It was like something out of a dream, in more ways than one. They were called—

"Whoa! A *simulation battle*?! I've heard of these!"

The radiant star looked around the simulation battle room, her eyes sparkling.

A white cocoon-shaped case was hooked up at regular intervals to thick wires that looked like pipes. The whole place had a cyberpunk vibe to it.

"I take it this is your first simulation battle?" said Szilard.

He smiled as we silently nodded. Why did his every little expression have to be so cool?

"Simulation battles take place in a virtual space accessed by lying inside those cocoons. Once inside, your biological data is scanned, and a highly precise avatar created in your image. That's what you'll use for the battle. You can think of it like an ultra-immersive virtual reality game."

I couldn't have said it better myself. Simulation battles were like virtual sparring matches. It was like duking it out in the most realistic game imaginable.

"Being inside the virtual space is like being in a dream. Nothing that happens there will affect your real-world body. This way you can *really* show me your stuff."

A grin crept across my face. The absurdity of getting a lesson on VR games in a world full of spirits and adventurers was so

uniquely *Dungeon Magia*. From the very first game in the series, they didn't pull any punches when it came to blending genres.

"We'll take care of all the complexities on this end. All you two have to do is get in the cocoon and put on the headsets. Now, before we continue, do you have any questions?"

I reluctantly raised my hand.

"Things are moving so quickly that we still don't know *why* we have to fight you in the first place."

"Kyou! What are you saying?! We don't need a reason to fight! If he wants to fight, we'll fight! That's how we humans do it!"

"Quiet, you."

No one's interested in the opinion of a battle-hungry lunatic. Least of all me.

Someone like Szilard wouldn't fight some newbie adventurers without a very good reason. Usually, you'd have to pay money to fight the leader of one of the Five Major Clans. There was no way he'd give us such a precious experience out of the goodness of his heart. As of the last time I checked, hell still hadn't frozen over.

"I can't imagine there would be anything for Mr. Szilard to gain from having a practice match with us when we're not even in his clan. And if he was looking to humiliate some rookies, we wouldn't be in a private VIP room right now."

"I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I said that I simply found your conversation so riveting that I decided to fight you on a whim?"

"I would not, no. You told us to show up with all of our equipment. In other words, you've had this planned out from the very beginning. Am I right?"

Szilard lowered his head like he was thinking something over. After a moment, he looked up as though he'd come to some conclusion. "All right, I'll tell you what we'll do."

The illumination in the VIP area fell on him like a spotlight. Apparently, Eliza was in the back adjusting the machinery. Szilard certainly had a penchant for flare.

"I've been hoping to gain a monopoly on all profit generated within Eternal Darkness, and I figured that if I could send my comrades to the farthest reaches of the dungeon, where only two

adventurers have ever set foot, I'd stand to make even bigger returns."

His words gushed forth smoothly and at length, like water from a spring. Under the lights, the great man grinned with an almost deranged glee.

"So, my plan was to invite you here and then convince you to partake in a little bet. If I won, I would force you to form a party with members of my clan and then make you go back down to the tenth floor once more. Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I thought it was quite the devious plot, if I do say so myself."

The leader of Rosso and Blu's laugh rumbled up from the depths of his belly.

Bullcrap. You came up with that on the spot, didn't you? All we'd have to say to a hairbrained scheme like that is no, and it'd be over and done with.

"I don't think there's much point asking this guy any more questions, Kyou. He's just going to make stuff up."

"I'm well aware. But…"

In the unlikely event that he was being serious, revealing his plan like this had just lost him all his leverage.

So, unfortunately…

"I'm sorry, Mr. Szilard. Battling you is one thing, but you can't expect us to risk so much on such a one-sided—"

"You said you needed a skilled bombardier for the fifteenth floor, did you not?"

His words caught me off guard. Even among the powerful long-range spirit-user classes, bombardiers were known for their immense power.

His assumption was correct. That was exactly the type of person we needed on our team.

"For the sake of argument, what would you say if I told you that, were you able to defeat me, I would let my most accomplished bombardier officially join your party?"

"Wha—?!"

For a brief second, my mind went blank. *Calm down, Kyouichirou. And whatever you do, do not accept this offer out of hand. Think this through calmly and carefully. Consider the balance of what you stand to gain versus what you're putting at risk.*

“…A bombardier? Would it be possible for you to elaborate on that a little more?”

“Well, I can tell you one thing—while they have their *quirks*, I can guarantee that this person has firepower and range equivalent to my own.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing—a bombardier on the same level as Szilard himself? If he was serious, this person had to be at the top of their class.

Damn it. He’s seen right through me.

Forget Kamaku; if we wanted to take care of the boss at the end of Eternal Darkness, we would need a bombardier of Szilard’s caliber no matter what.

Is he playing me? Is this a trap? But I don’t really have the luxury of worrying about that right now.

If we were going to beat this dungeon’s cheap-ass last boss, we’d need to take on some risk. And no matter how much this person might be under Szilard’s thumb, as long as we signed a proper contract, it would be difficult for them to betray us. Ultimately, Szilard was a strategist, not a loan shark.

If we won, I had a feeling he would give us the gunner exactly as promised. And with that, we’d be one step closer to getting the Elixir…

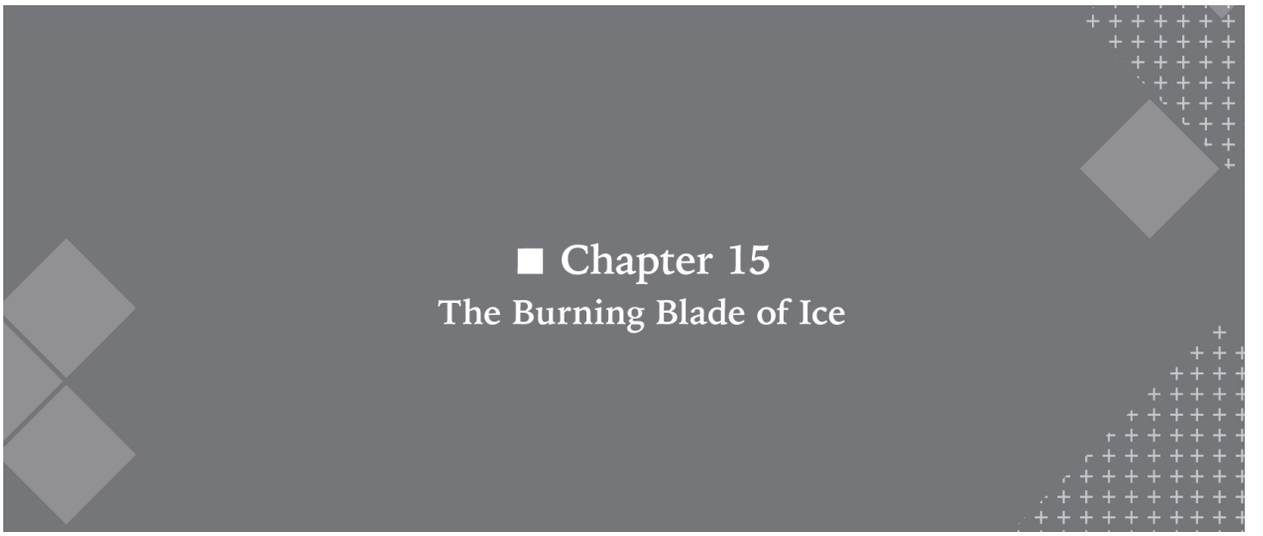
“By the look on your face, it seems you’ve decided to gamble with me. Am I right, Kyouichirou?”

“…I should have expected as much from the master of one of the Five Major Clans. You certainly know how to get someone into your pocket.”

Cold sweat poured down my neck. But my heart burned at the prospect of what we stood to gain.

Lose and we’d be forced to conquer this dungeon for Szilard. Win and we’d get the thing we needed most right now…

Goddamn it. Hate to say it, but this is gettin’ me all fired up.



◆ Virtual Space: Plain Stage

A black space spread out just over a mile in all four directions, illuminated by regularly spaced electric lights. And there, standing at its center and illuminated by the glow, were four figures.

“Woo-hoo! This is incredible! It’s feels just like moving around in the real world!”

I glanced at Haruka as she bounced around gleefully before turning my attention to the leader of Rosso and Blu.

“So, this is a single-round battle with no time limit. It’s a free-for-all with no special rules. If both members of a party are defeated or they use the simulator’s surrender option, they lose. Both teams can start from anywhere within a six-hundred-fifty-foot radius of the center line… Do I have all of that correct?”

“Indeed. That’s the gist of it,” Szilard responded with a calm nod. This was clearly nothing new to him.

Despite how far things had come, I started getting cold feet. I could hardly believe what was happening. Was I seriously about to fight *the* James Szilard? …In fact, there was even a chance—

“Understood. In that case, would it be all right if I asked you one more thing?” I turned my gaze toward his partner.

Eliza Wispard—Szilard’s secretary and the future vice master of the clan. She was a tank, also known as the iron wall of Rosso and Blu.

“So, she’s really not participating?”

“Right. She’s got nothing to do with this battle. She’s just a spectator.”

“Then why doesn’t she simply watch us from the monitor *outside*?”

“……”

The silver-haired maid had nothing to say to my suggestion. Szilard spoke in her place.

“She seems to have taken quite an interest in your party. She wants to see you fight up close. She practically begged me. Can’t remember the last time I saw her do that.”

Szilard looked over at her and she responded with a small nod.

“Should I do anything whatsoever that you deem as interference, you are welcome to turn your weapons on me. Whether I am defeated or not has nothing to do with the outcome of this match, and I shall under no circumstances put your lives in danger.”

“If she does anything that in any way contradicts what she’s just said, then we’ll accept an instant defeat as punishment,” said Szilard. “What do you say, Kyouichirou? Will you grant my beautiful, hardworking secretary this rare selfish desire?”

“……”

I put my mostly useless brain into overdrive and thought everything over. I couldn’t remember having done anything that would make her take any sort of interest in me. But then again, considering I was facing down James Szilard, nothing about the situation made any sense to begin with.

“May I have a moment to talk things over with my partner?”

I turned to Haruka, and after some mumbling back and forth, we came to a conclusion.

“Very well, Eliza,” I said. “Please feel free to spectate to your heart’s content.”

“You have my thanks for your generous understanding.” She lifted her apron dress slightly and curtsied. I was taken aback by her beauty. It felt like the more I stared at her, the more I was drawn in by her charm.

“Kyou…”

But before I could be further distracted, the face of my party’s radiant star butted in to block my view. She was raring to go and seemed to be getting impatient. I made a slight apologetic gesture at her before turning my gaze back to Szilard.

“Then, you’re saying that if Ms. Eliza breaks these rules you’ve mentioned, the victory is ours? No questions asked?”

“Correct! On the honor of Rosso and Blu, I swear that we will abide by the terms we’ve agreed to.”

“Understood. Then I’ll expect Ms. Eliza to keep to your promise. Ah, one other thing. How should we begin the battle? Shall we use the standard ‘ready, set, go’ system announcement?”

“There’s no need for that. You can decide when we begin. Let’s see… How about we start as soon as either you or Haruka cross over the center line and take your first battle action?”

“Can you define ‘battle action’ for us, please?”

“Let’s call it any movement or attack,” he replied. “That, of course, includes any long-range strikes.”

Any movement or attack that crossed the center would signal the start of battle. In other words, we had as much time to prepare as we needed.

“That’s tremendously generous of you, Mr. Szilard.”

“I’ve forced you into a fairly unsportsmanlike gamble, after all. This is the least I can do.”

“Whoa! How cool and flexible of you! I guess this is why you’re the leader of a top clan, huh?” said Haruka, completely unintimidated by him. At times like this, I really envied her natural nonchalance.

“I’m expecting a fiery match from the two of you,” said Szilard.

“Understood. We’ll try to live up to your expectations,” I responded.

“You don’t have to worry about that!” said Haruka.

We exchanged handshakes and bows before splitting up, us on one side, Szilard on the other. Each of walked off at our own

pace, with our own unique feelings in our heart.

The starting positions our two parties picked were as different as night and day.

Szilard settled into an area about six hundred feet back from the center—a standard position for a rear guard unit like him.

And as for us—

“Here we go! This is the place!”

“Nowhere else it *could* be, really.”

—we stood immediately next to the center line and nodded to each other in agreement.

Close-range attackers like us would want to be as near to the opponent as we could possibly be.

The ranged attacker sat at a distance while the melee types got up close—we had picked the most orthodox starting positions available.

“All right, time to go over our incredibly serious battle plan,” I said. “Do you have any good ideas?”

“Hmm. Well, we’ve been given all the time we want, right? Why don’t you just use your thingy? Y’know, that superspecial move of yours.”

“End of Zero?”

She nodded vigorously. She was as sharp as ever when it came to combat strategy. She cut right to the chase.

Other than one single—albeit glaring—flaw, her plan was perfect. The End of Zero took an unreasonably long time to charge. But as long as that weakness was removed from the equation, our victory was practically assured.

If we waited on our side of the line until it was ready to activate, then stored up even more AP to use Hasten Time, and then had Haruka keep me safe, we could almost definitely take Szilard out.

The problem was…

“I don’t know this one hundred percent for sure, but I think that if I hit Szilard with the End of Zero, he would die.”

“Well, I mean, those are the rules, right? What’s the problem?”

“No, I don’t mean his virtual avatar would be erased. I mean his *real* body would be destroyed, too.”

“Oh.” Her face fell.

Sorry, Haruka. But we can't have someone die during a mock battle like this. Plus, James Szilard is a super important character in Dungeon Magia*.*

"And if we can't use *that*, then I don't have the power to be our main attacker against Szilard. That means you've got to take the lead on this one. Think you can handle it?"

"Wha—?! You mean I get to have this scrumptious buffet of a fight all to myself?"

"Yeah. I think your Azure Skies is a good match for Szilard's abilities. But most of all"—I took a deep breath of virtual oxygen, and then continued in a voice loud enough for Szilard to hear me—"even if he's the leader of one of the Five Major Clans, Szilard practically lives on the back line! If we get in close enough, we'll probably wipe the floor with him, y'know?!"

"Uh, Kyou? Why're you raising your voice like that all of a sudden?"

"What?! We're just having a regular strategy meeting, y'know what I'm sayin'?! But, anyway! The leader of Rosso and Blu's totally gonna be fair with a couple of rookies like us, y'know?! I betcha he'd never do anything mean like, y'know, attack us from all the way over there, right?! Like, omigosh!"

Somewhere along the line I'd started talking like a teenage girl, but eventually I figured I'd taunted him enough and called it quits.

At the end of the day, if we lost, we'd have to clear the dungeon for him. And if we won, we'd get a new party member. If there was even the slightest possibility that it would put us at an advantage, I would have gladly dressed up like a clown and laughed with the best of them.

"So, anyway. Let's discuss our *actual* strategy," I said to Haruka in the quietest whisper I could muster. "What do you think our main advantage is in this fight?"

"The fact that he doesn't know anything about what we can do, right?"

"Right. Meanwhile, this guy's famous. We know at least some of what he's got up his sleeve."

To be frank, I was well aware of even his most secret abilities. But I carefully danced around that as I began describing his combat style.

“James Szilard is an all-range shooter who tends to stay in the rear. He’s a real beast, capable of using thermolurgy skills to fire off dense energy at machine-gun speeds. He’s crazy strong from a distance.”

“How strong, exactly?”

“It depends on what technique we’re talking about, but I’d say he’s strong enough that even your Azure Skies and Futsu-no-Mitama combo wouldn’t be enough to stand up to him.”

Haruka’s eyes widened in complete disbelief. “Wait a sec. How’re we supposed to win, then?”

“If he was actually trying to kill us, we probably wouldn’t stand a chance,” I told her, lowering my head. *Sucks to admit, but it’s the truth.* “He’s a first-rate shooter with some of the best long-range and densest attacks out there. If he decided to mow us down from a distance, there’s basically nothing close-range attackers like us could do.”

And that wasn’t even mentioning the countless Regalia Szilard had in his possession. If he decided to use those, we’d be in for the most one-sided fight ever.

“But I don’t think we have to worry about any of that happening.”

“Why not?”

“The whole point of this fight is so Szilard can see what we’re capable of, right?”

If he had just been looking to humiliate us or get his kicks picking on a couple of rookies, he would have done it in front of a crowd.

And if he was seriously looking to monopolize the profits in Eternal Darkness, he wouldn’t just be having us help clear the dungeon. If we lost the bet, it would be way more effective to force us to join Rosso and Blu.

I still don’t buy this stupid “bet” thing.

The James Szilard I knew from the games wasn’t the type to force a couple of rookies like us to help expand his turf like some common criminal. He was a righteous, charismatic adventurer. At a glance, he seemed the type to do things without thinking. But he was actually a tactical genius. Often, you’d realize after the fact that everything had happened exactly according to his plans. That was the kind of man James Szilard was.

“I don’t know if he’s just trying to get info or if he’s testing our abilities, or what. But I know that his real motive for this fight is to experience what we’re capable of for himself. Not to mention that if rumors got around that the clan master beat up some brand-new adventurers, don’t you think that would be bad news for Rosso and Blu?”

“That does make sense. I can’t imagine him soiling his clan’s reputation like that.”

“So, while I don’t think he’s going to ‘hold back,’ necessarily, I believe that it’s in his best interests to make this an interesting fight.”

This was starting to sound less like a fact-based assessment, and more like wishful thinking. The chance may have been razor-slim, but it was our only hope if we didn’t want to get shelled to bits by Szilard.

“The question of the day is *just how much* does he hope to see from us in this fight. Anyway, try to put some distance between you before things get too intense, and then get in as close as you can. Like I said a second ago, if you can turn this into a close-range fight, you’re definitely going to win.”

“Huh? I mean, I’m glad you’re so confident in my abilities, but are you sure you’re not overestimating me? He might stick to the rear, but he’s the master of one of the Five Major Clans, just like *she* is.”

“Right. Based on the videos I’ve seen of his fights, Szilard’s close-range skills are extraordinary. But listen, Haruka,” I said. I puffed out my chest and told her in a firm voice, “You’re even more extraordinary. And I believe in your extraordinariness more than anyone else.”

I wasn’t lying, and I wasn’t exaggerating, either. Haruka was an absolute natural. Her talents were out of this world.

Based on her skills with a sword alone, she was easily in the top five if not the top three of the entire *Dungeon Magia* series. She was in a class of her own.

I didn’t know what Szilard was expecting from her, but he was in for a rude awakening regardless. All the intel in the world wouldn’t be enough to prepare him for even a fraction of this girl’s talent.

“Anyway. About Eliza.”

I took a peek at where Szilard had set up. Even further back, the tall, silver-haired maid was standing quietly in a corner off to the right side. It was unthinkable that a close-range tank like her would stay behind a ranged attacker like her master. But then again, she was a spectator. She was completely unrelated to this match. And that meant…

"Forget about her," I told Haruka. "Let's believe what they told us."

I knew it was best to be careful, but I decided that I would be responsible for handling anything unexpected. Haruka's role would be to take down Szilard. He was the kind of opponent that required absolute focus.

"I'll do whatever it takes to get you to Szilard. All you gotta worry about is getting pumped up and having one hell of a good time."

"Roger! I'm gonna have the time of my life! So, if you'd do me the honor of escorting me, sweet prince."

"I'm not much of a prince, but I'll do my best, princess."

"Well, I'm not much of a princess."

"*That*, I know."

We both had a good laugh before filling our hearts with determination and spiritual power.

"Here we go, Haruka. This is the big one."

"I'm counting on you, Kyouichirou. So, you'd better count on me, too."

We bumped fists and began our advance.

A white spiritual power poured out from my body while Haruka sent six copies of Azure Skies dancing through the virtual space.

I hadn't been this excited since our brush with death in Moon's Eclipse. It felt like every part of my brain was firing on all cylinders.

Here we come, Mr. Rosso and Blu. Today, just this once, we're going to surpass you.

We stepped forward, crossing over the line that separated life and death.

And the next moment, we—

◆

“So, you’ve stepped over the boundary, young ones. Good! I’ll meet that brave advance of yours with the respect it deserves!”

◆

—saw the face of true despair.

A special move that used both ends of the thermal spectrum—ultrahigh heat and extreme cold—to bypass the laws of thermodynamics. The two extreme temperatures created a matter-erasing effect guaranteed to destroy anything it made contact with. This skill was synonymous with James Szilard and the origin of his clan’s name—Rosso and Blu.

Szilard started the battle by firing a blast of pure annihilation straight at us.

■ Chapter 16
Maxwell's Demon and Adamant

◆ Virtual Space: Plain Stage

James Szilard's Demis-class spirit was known as Maxwell. And its ability, as implied by its name, was Molecular Motion Manipulation.

In the simplest terms, it had the incredible power to freely control the movement of heat.

This wasn't as simple as being able to make fire or create ice—Maxwell had the ability to manipulate the very origins of those phenomena and make even the contradiction that had given Szilard's clan its name—the Burning Blade of Ice—a reality.

And Szilard had unleashed Maxwell's full power—Rosso and Blu. This skill of absolute annihilation was coming straight for us right out of the gate.

I'll be honest—I almost wet myself.

"Kyou!"

"J-j-just calm down! I'll f-f-figure s-s-something out!"

"That does not inspire confidence!"

Before my mind went completely blank, I pulled myself together and kicked my dumbass brain into high gear.

The beam of absolute destruction drew a perfect spiral as it soared toward us.

If it hit us, we were done for. Avoiding it wasn't wise either. Maxwell's ability to control its skills was a cut above other Demis-class spirits. And its pact-holder, James Szilard, had improved his own control through careful manipulation of his stats.

When our foes had that level of control, trying to dodge was practically impossible. They'd just adjust and finish us.

"Haruka! Let's move farther away. Get behind me! I'll handle this one!"

"All right, I'm trusting you!"

The only choice I had was to use Fourth Field.

If he was going to hit us with an unfair move that annihilated matter itself, I would have to use an even more unfair power to protect us.

I stabbed Eckesachs into the ground to my right, and while still holding on to the grip, I struck a blocking pose. I then activated Fourth Field, using my weapon to try to widen the area of effect and close any gaps.

The annihilation beam was steadily approaching, destroying everything in its path. I felt my senses flood with fear in the wake of the demon's energy.

But then the roaring sound of the attack began to disappear, and the colors fell away from the virtual space around me. The world resembled a silent black-and-white film. I looked down and watched as the annihilating light consumed me.

Thanks to the power of Fourth Field, my body, now a fourth-dimensional entity, managed to hold back Szilard's Rosso and Blu attack. I didn't enjoy watching the annihilation beam give me a full-body smooch, but thankfully, aside from the itchiness and nausea, I was perfectly fine.

It felt *awful* but not *painful*.

But whining about it wasn't going to help. I just had to stand there and take it.

I was worried about how fast I was burning through AP, but Szilard was in the same boat.

A tremendous amount of spiritual power was necessary in order to access Rosso and Blu's overwhelming force and ability to penetrate matter.

Even if Szilard was one of the best around, fusing ultrahigh heat and extreme cold to make energy capable of destroying matter wasn't something that could be kept up for long periods.

If the move was anything at all like how it was in the game, then it used up approximately four times the amount of AP per second that Fourth Field did.

If Szilard kept this up, Rosso and Blu would empty his reserves before long. And as soon as that happened, the tides of battle would turn in our favor. But of course, Szilard would also see that coming.

The beam of annihilation slowly began to lose power.

Just as I had expected, the attack dissipated after less than a minute.

I knew it. There was no way the leader of one of the top clans wouldn't take his energy expenditure into consideration. Much as I would have liked him to use up more of it, this would have to do.

Things had been pretty close for me, too, but it seemed that I had managed to withstand his attack.

◆

"And there you have it. Now, go, Haruka! Have your fun with Szilard! Kick his ass!"

The only response I got was the sound of the wind rushing past me.

The very instant Szilard's attack ended, the natural-born swordmaster pounced, her long black hair flowing behind her as she sped toward him like a hurricane. And there, dancing alongside her, were six Azure Skies.

Each glittering blade spun around her like planets orbiting a fixed radiant star. Along with their master, they exerted incredible pressure as they fell upon their foe. A microcosm of celestial bodies, painting a six-tiered circular orbit.

Each blade spun razor fast, moving and striking with a different sword style. A six-sword dance that was six-styles deep.

And yet, with every rotation, they would change their trajectories, weaving in and out of sword styles. Their movements were impossible to predict.

But this was only the beginning. Little more than a warmup for the skilled swordmaster.

At first, even Szilard seemed to grit his teeth. But, no, he was actually cheering her on. He was enjoying this.

“To think you’d be this fierce… I’m impressed, Haruka. Your talents are incredible! They burn like a flaming sun!”

“It’s too early for you to be impressed, Mr. Szilard. The excitement’s only just begun!”

After this short exchange, the two of them took off once more.

Szilard created countless discharge points across the field and sent skills flying from each of them simultaneously.

Rays of heat burst forth from some, freezing blizzards from others. Plasma erupted from this one, chunks of ice fell from that one.

Despite having just unleashed his ultimate attack, the master of Rosso and Blu bombarded Haruka with a host of thermolurgic skills with no sign of holding back.

Holy crap. This guy is an absolute monster.

I forced my limbs—which were still screaming in pain from the recoil of using Fourth Field—to carry me out of Szilard’s line of fire just in case.

If a stray attack comes my way, it’ll be game over. Talk about a disaster.

Even if there was *no way anything could hit me*, it was only natural to want to get as far away from the fray as possible.

I looked over at Haruka. The radiant star’s eyes sparkled as she cut through beams of fire that came flying at her.

Yes, she was cutting through *beams of fire*. I realize how little sense that makes.

Even a one-of-a-kind master of the sword like her shouldn’t have been physically capable of cutting through condensed beams of thermal energy. So, the reason for this otherworldly feat must lay outside her pool of talents.

Rather than her, it was Azure Skies—that treasured sword gifted to Kanata Aono by the head of her family to use as a secret weapon against Rakshasa Sarama in *Dungeon Magia*.

It was capable of interrupting and dealing special damage to spiritual and energetic bodies—essentially, it could counter

entities which were otherwise untouchable.

It could slice through that which could not be sliced, sever that which was inseverable.

As a weapon exclusive to one of the main characters of *Dungeon Magia*, its effects might not seem particularly strong at first, but Azure Skies came bundled with the ability to hit for nonphysical damage.

It sacrificed overall versatility, but, stat-wise, it was the highest source of special damage in the entire game. In fact, it's always been common practice in the *Dungeon Magia* community when fighting enemies weak to special damage to forego bringing Regalia weapons and instead bring Kanata as a physical attacker and give her Azure Skies.

Using Azure Skies this way was even effective against that completely broken boss, Rakshasa Sarama.

This treasured anti-magic blade of the Aono line was able to cut through spirit forms, liquids, and even energy itself. This alone would give someone an incredible advantage against Szilard who attacked primarily with energy blasts.

But the truth was, when Azure Skies was wielded by its original owner, its fiendish powers were ten times more lethal.

Why? Because of the Demis spirit that Haruka had formed a pact with: Futsu-no-Mitama.

This spirit's special ability allowed its user to duplicate their equipped sword and manipulate the copy. In other words, Haruka was able to summon and control copies of Azure Skies.

The sword copying ability of Futsu-no-Mitama was incredibly intricate. Aside from granting power befitting of a higher-level Demis spirit, the clones came with several restrictions that made their creation and manipulation possible. But, well, there's no point getting into the details of that now. Maybe someday.

The important point to keep in mind about Futsu-no-Mitama's power was that the sword copies it created were not only exactly as sharp and strong as the original, but possessed the blessings granted by the original sword.

And that *still* wasn't the whole story. This next facet was almost too terrible to describe. Yes, every single one of the copies created by Futsu-no-Mitama was considered to be *equipped*.

Between the original in her hands and the copies, Haruka had seven Azure Skies altogether. Each of those swords had their own special attack blessing, and each one counted as being equipped by Haruka.

Seven swords with seven blessings… Do you see where I'm going with this?

The damage bonus granted by Azure Skies's special attack blessing was multiplied by seven. As if its ability wasn't already broken enough, it now had a sevenfold stack. Even crazier was the fact that each individual sword shared in the blessing's bonus damage equally.

This was the true power of Futsu-no-Mitama. It granted its owner the earth-shatteringly broken ability to multiply the blessing granted by a sword by the number of copies it made.

And now the OP swordmaster was using this cheat skill to boost the already broken ability of her sword to hit for seven times its special damage.

It was a three-tiered combo that should, by all accounts, be completely against the rules of the game.

Even Szilard, with his thermal barrage of skills, could hardly compete with Haruka's insane combo.

At this point, your only real choice would be to fire off another skill like Rosso and Blu… But I seriously doubt you can manage that now, can you Szilard? The whole reason you were able to use it right at the start was because you had enough time to charge it.

But that was no longer the case.

Now that an excited psychopathic swordmaster was rapidly closing the distance between them, Szilard was stuck fending her off with a barrage of skills and didn't have the luxury to prepare such a devastating move. This one-on-one was the worst kind of situation for a long-range attacker like him.

So, what're you gonna do now?

I looked around, taking in the edges of the field with my peripheral vision. The fourth person in this virtual space still hadn't budged. But then, in one graceful movement, she lifted up the skirt of her dress, revealing the garters adorning her beautiful legs. And suddenly…

"……"

…the battlefield rumbled.

She had taken two tubes out from under her skirt and transformed them into two massive halberds which had just hit the ground. A low tone reverberated through the air. The halberds sounded *heavy*, but Eliza lifted the two massive objects easily in either hand and began to throw them up so they spun in the air. They spun and spun. It was like watching a halberd-juggling performance. Left, then right. Left, then right. The halberds danced through the air.

“I knew it. Of course this would happen,” I muttered.

The ground shook. In an instant, the maid was gone. I responded by using Hasten Time to boost my speed by 50 percent.

“I knew it would come to this!”

Moments before she could reach Haruka, I dashed in close to the assassin maid and slammed my weapon into her solar plexus.

But as soon as my blow connected, I felt the impact surge through my arms with the force of an avalanche. She was hard. Literally. My attack bounced off her, doing no damage. She turned her crimson eye toward me and shot me a vacant glance.

“Have you grown restless, Master Kyouichirou?” she asked me. “I am afraid that I, loathsome and lying pig that I am, have broken my word. As was agreed, you have the right to punish me as you see fit.”

I had been thrown off-balance, and she swung both her halberds down, aiming two killing blows right at my neck. I dodged out of the way using minimal movement and then cast Delay on my black great sword.

“Nah.”

My Delay skill would gradually slow the movements of any opponents that made contact with me, even if it was only through our weapons. A valuable skill for close-up one-on-one fights.

“You haven’t broken any rules yet, have you? The only thing you’re actually forbidden from doing is killing us. Which means you’re basically allowed to do anything else.”

It had been a sneaky choice of wording, but that was the gist of it. We were facing James Szilard, after all. *Dungeon Magia* players referred to him as the “handsome devil” for more reasons than one—dirty tricks like this were routine for him.

“I’d already done my part, so I actually *was* getting a bit bored. I’m afraid my party’s little princess isn’t available now, but if you’re looking for a dancing partner, I’ll gladly take her place… *Hup!*”

I canceled my Hasten Time buff and switched to the more energy-efficient Stride. Then I began parrying her halberd strikes with my great sword. Our weapons clashed. Shockingly, their clanging felt much less intense than attacking Eliza’s body directly. Her weapon was nowhere near as hard.

Her High-Demis spirit was known as Adamant—it could blend the physical, the spiritual, and the metaphorical together using an ability called Harden Existence.

This power granted diamond-grade toughness, enveloped its user in ultra-durable spiritual aura, and imbued her with the very concept of *indestructibility*. Taken together, these gave Eliza *near-impenetrable resistance to all manner of physical damage*, turning her into an iron wall as tough as the mythical element Adamant. Even Haruka would struggle to damage her. Even Eckesachs, the famously hard and sturdy weapon, had cracked from a single impact. If a regular light sword made contact with her body, one hit would be enough to snap it.

And so…I was going to have to restrain her.

Thankfully, she was held back by the rule that forbade her from killing either of us. As proof, she was currently fighting me off with twin halberds—her sub-weapon. If she was looking to kill me, she’d use the martial arts skills she was known for to crush me with her hardened body, not the soft weapons she was currently swinging. She had no plans to kill either of us. Which meant that Eliza wasn’t taking this seriously. She was holding back.

It seemed she wasn’t satisfied standing by and watching the match, but there was something half-hearted about how she’d chosen to participate. It was strange that she was fighting me fair and square like this.

Partly as a means of buying time as Delay crept into her body, I asked her, “How serious were you when you said you were interested in us? I mean, sure, I get that Haruka and I stand out. But we haven’t done anything deserving of a fight with the secretary of one of the Five Major Clan’s leaders yet.”

“Yet? Then, you mean to say that you have plans to do so?”

“Well, yeah.”

The adamantine maid jumped away. She must have noticed that something strange was beginning to happen to her. No matter how strong Adamant’s defenses were, there was no defying the logic of the fourth dimension. And her powers were nothing in the face of an Ultima spirit. The speed debuff had taken effect.

“Tell me, Eliza. What is your real goal here? Both of you.”

In the space of three blinks, I heard a man and a woman laugh loudly behind me, followed by the sound of air burning and countless slashes delivered in quick succession.

“Selection…,” the beautiful one-eyed girl muttered to herself. “Our goal is to judge your worth.”

“Our worth? To what end?”

But Eliza’s lips were sealed. Instead, her crimson eye sparkled with the sharpness of steel. It was almost like she meant to tell me that the time for questions was at an end. In fact, I’m positive that’s what she meant. *In that case…*

“They’re having quite an exciting battle over there, aren’t they?”

While keeping 80 percent of my attention on Eliza, I pointed a finger over at the main event.

As the two of us background characters duked it out, the battle between Szilard and Haruka raged on. The clash between the firestorm and the tornado of sword slashes was growing more and more intense…

“With how things are going over there, I seriously doubt Szilard will have much chance to pay attention to us.”

“And? What of it?”

I laughed. I’d put my back to Szilard and Haruka’s fight and was doing my best to make absolutely sure he wouldn’t look our way.

“There were three conditions I needed to meet. I needed us to end up somewhere Mr. Szilard couldn’t see what we were doing. Then I needed to get you within a fifteen-foot radius of me. And finally, I needed to slow you down to guarantee you couldn’t run.”

“And? What are you getting at?”

“What I’m saying is—” I paused a moment to have another laugh“—I’ve already won.”

A red flower slowly began to bloom on Eliza’s chest. Soon, blood came gushing out of her. The left breast of her apron dress was bathed in red. She collapsed. She had no idea what had killed her.

Adamant completely defended her from any and all attacks. We were too far apart. And I hadn’t seemed to move in the slightest. That was no doubt how things had appeared to Eliza.

And yet, she had collapsed. Rosso and Blu’s impenetrable wall had fallen.

“You see Haruka over there? The way she fights, she basically shows her opponent all of her cards right from the get-go.”

Eliza’s body began to glow as I delivered my parting words. This was the sign that she was about to get booted from the virtual space. Her avatar was being given a one-way trip out of here.

“But I’m the opposite. I play my cards as close to my chest as possible, you see.”

“I do see.” Eliza gave the slightest hint of a smile. She seemed strangely happy as pale light poured from her body. “It seems I’ve misjudged you. You are multitudes stronger than I could have ever imagined.”

“I’ve just got a lot of secrets. Plus, this matchup happened to work out in my favor.”

She was completely defense-oriented, had no regenerative abilities, and her natural vitality was nothing special. This made her the perfect opponent for an easy victory. The fact that I had what it took to one-shot her was also huge.

“Please keep watching the battle from out there. I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.”

“Very well… Oh, yes. Master Kyouichirou…” Adamant’s user disappeared from the virtual realm as she said these final three words: “You have passed.”

And so, only three of us remained in the virtual space.

◆

Having disposed of the beautiful interloper, I rushed toward the main battle. Not that there was much for me to contribute aside from picking a decent position and preparing to act as a human shield if it came down to it.

Considering how perfectly the stars had aligned a moment prior against Eliza, there was nothing wrong with waiting for another such opportunity to present itself, but…

…I don't really want to stand in the middle of all that.

Between the hurricane of sword slashes and the explosive torrent of extreme heat and frigid cold, today's main combatants had turned the field into a gloriously dramatic scene that only grew fiercer with every passing moment.

"Here I come, Haruka," Szilard shouted cheerfully.

The master of Rosso and Blu summoned two blades made of ice from his hands and used special leggings he had equipped to create pillars of fire that launched him into the air.

The fact that he had overcome Haruka's dominance of the horizontal plane by using jet propulsion to allow him to move in three dimensions was truly incredible.

Isn't that crazy? The guy was a ranged fighter. But here he was, rushing headfirst into a sword tornado.

"If you've been able to do that this whole time, then you should have used it to get out of range from the get-go!"

"Spare me. You think that, in the face of such an incredibly talented young lady, I would turn tail and run?! As a veteran adventurer, what I need to show you is not the art of the cunning escape, but the courage of one who charges forward! There is a way out of any desperate situation! Now, worthy opponent! Let's dance, shall we?"

"Ooh, that's a pretty good tip. Well, if that's how you want it, then…let's do this, Mr. Szilard!"

The twin ice blades came straight down while a flurry of swords went straight up.

In an instant, the entire area had been transformed into a kill zone.

Beams of pure heat flew in every direction as a storm of swords blew across the field.

The two beasts unleashed skill after skill at tremendous speeds and fended the other off with unbelievable displays of

combat prowess.

Haruka was holding her own against one of the masters of the Five Major Clans. Meanwhile, Szilard was matching the ferocity of Haruka's close-range skills, something that would be unthinkable for most long-range shooters.

What am I even watching?! This is the kind of fight that's gonna go down in history for sure. This is incredible. They're both incredible! They're so incredible, in fact, that there's no way I'm gonna be able to get in there!

It was unthinkable for some pitiful tutorial miniboss to crash the crazy party these two big shots were throwing.

Swordsmanship versus thermolurgy. Rookie versus pro. These two warriors with completely different battle styles, combat positions, and lots in life were now duking it out. A dance of death, featuring hundreds of skills.

Slash, evade, jump, fire, run, crash, defend, feint, close in, manipulate.

Every second, the two of them fired off these battle commands and more. For a while, the fight seemed to be at a complete stalemate.

In terms of sheer skill with a weapon, Haruka was the clear victor. Szilard had excellent form, but in terms of pure martial prowess, he couldn't hope to compete with my party's radiant star.

However, Szilard did have her beat in terms of vastness of repertoire and pure adventuring experience. Even if he was pushed into a corner, he would lay down a sweeping beam of fire before she had the chance to attack.

His ability to move in any direction he needed thanks to his jet propulsion gave him a massive advantage, and he covered all his blind spots with a barrage of thermal bullets. It was practically impossible to approach him.

He used countless tricks to overcome Haruka's natural superiority and keep the tides of battle in his favor. He put up a fight worthy of a man of his storied history. Doing battle against an opponent that had him outclassed in martial talent seemed almost second nature to him.

"This is great, Mr. Szilard! I'm having so much fun!"

"I'm so glad to hear that, little lady!"

The two fearless warriors exchanged pleasantries as they attacked and defended countless assaults from their opponent.

Talent and a type advantage versus experience and wealth of skills.

Who could say which was stronger? Who could say which was more crucial to the fight?

The answer would not be found during this, nor any other battle.

But the outcome of the fight itself would eventually reach a clear conclusion.

"Haaaaaahhh!"

The satisfying sound of a sword cutting through something echoed across the field, and Szilard's right arm was sent flying through the virtual space.

The back-and-forth had been long and drawn-out. Haruka had used an incredible combination of repeated feints, as well as a technique known as Variable Arts—a dazzling array of mixed sword arts thrown out at once. This, combined with a seven-sword rush, had created the split-second opening she needed.

Szilard's arm flew through the air, spattering blood as it went.

Then it instantly transformed into a bomb and exploded, threatening to engulf Haruka. But the radiant star avoided the explosion with the slightest of movements, launching a follow-up attack on the newly unarmed Szilard.

Haruka's extreme adaptability proved the key to her victory.

As she repeatedly traded blows with Szilard, she slowly analyzed his attack patterns and came up with a strategy that was custom-tailored to dealing with him.

She did all of this, of course, while still actively fending him off.

Attack at such and such an angle, and Szilard would launch a thermal blast; focus on dodging when this skill comes out; go in swinging like so, and he would parry with his own weapon—these were the type of meta-tactics that the radiant star had developed on the fly.

There were no words to adequately describe her incredible talents. It was all one could do to stand by and say, "Damn…" Language could only take one so far.

Talent aside, the speed at which she learns and grows isn't human… Even broken characters have limits, Haruka.

"Heh-heh… Hah-hah-hah-hah! To think that I'd be outdone in single combat by a rookie. Bravo! *Bravo!* It seems Sakurabana's future is still bright!"

As the specter of defeat loomed and with the guillotine all but hanging over his head, Szilard laughed in triumph.

Is he actually about to admit defeat and die with dignity?

"However! …Victory shall be mine!"

In an instant, Szilard shot a fire beam toward Haruka and retreated from the battlefield.

Haruka's mouth was agape in disbelief as the leader of one of the Five Major Clans beat a hasty retreat, carried by his full-throttle jets.

"He just…ran away."

Her words were so brief and to the point that I couldn't help but grin.

That's right. James Szilard was the kind of man who would gladly choose to flee.

Despite being a shooter, he had no problem with close-ranged skirmishes. But when faced with impossible odds, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to admit defeat, turn tail, and run.

But as he had just announced to us, even if lost the battle, he still had a dirty way of winning the war.

"Hey, uh, Kyou? Isn't this, like, really, really bad?"

Haruka was sweating bullets as she pointed a finger at the newly frozen ground of the virtual space.

The area below us was now covered in frost cold enough to sap the strength out of even our spiritually enhanced bodies. And yet our upper halves felt like they were about to burn up.

But why? Who had messed with the temperature settings in the virtual space? Szilard had, of course. After he ran away.

Above us, the blistering sun. Below us, an icy hell.

This was one of James Szilard's most powerful skills, one on par with Rosso and Blu. The air itself had been imbued with annihilation energy. The skill targeted everyone on the field and was impossible to avoid.

It was called Calmi Cuori Appassionati. I think I remember it being translated in the game as the "space between serenity and

passion.”

But it had one catch—it did not discriminate. That meant even the user would fall victim to the deadly attack. After all, it didn’t target any one spot—it engulfed the entire space.

This was almost guaranteed to kill his opponents, but even Szilard himself, who had resistance to thermal attacks, couldn’t usually make it out unscathed.

Considering he had lost his arm in the fight with Haruka and used up an incredible amount of his AP, using this skill put him at considerable risk.

But if it worked out, the result was clear—Calmi Cuori Appassionati would fill the entire virtual space with annihilation energy and rip it apart. In other words, Haruka’s avatar would be destroyed.

I couldn’t even protect her with Fourth Field. The space itself was being transformed into annihilation energy. There would be no way to stop her from being engulfed and forced to log out.

And what about the weak-ass miniboss left behind? I’d be out of options. Even if I tried to hit him with something big, he’d mow me down with thermolurgy. I was toast. Game over.

Even if *all* of his limbs had been torn off, this would still be an easy win for Szilard. We couldn’t dodge it. We couldn’t defend against it. And no matter what we did, he was planning to jet around and avoid us to buy more time.

I had blocked his special move. I had taken down his iron maid. And Haruka had beaten him one-on-one. And yet, all it took was one attack and we were totally screwed.

This is unbelievable. What a load of crap. But I’m not gonna let you get away with this.

I’m not gonna let anyone get away with making Haruka look bad.

I’m gonna…

“Haruka! Catch up as soon as you can!” I told her and began to dash across the field.

I buffed myself with Stride and Hasten Time.

Hasten Time—my first-ever unique skill. Thanks to its power, I could make time move faster.

In gaming turns, what this meant was that it gave the user more turns to act. But in the real world, it essentially meant that I

was able to move incredibly fast.

At my current level, I could move at roughly sixty times the speed of a normal person. In other words, for every single second of time they experienced, I would have an entire minute.

Add Stride to that and I had one hell of a winning combo. I was a literal speed demon. I could act faster and earlier than anyone else on the field now.

I dashed through the virtual world running in slow motion. But even at such unparalleled speed, there was no time to get excited. Even in this slowed-down state, every sixtieth of a second counted.

Stay focused, Kyouichirou. One misstep and everything's over.

◆

Even though I was practically cheating to move at sixty times normal speed, two real-world seconds had already passed.

I came face-to-face with Szilard again. He greeted me with a friendly beam of fire, but I easily sidestepped it.

I could hardly believe how many beams he was firing off despite being in the middle of using one of his ultimate skills. But whatever the case, I wasn't going to let him hit me.

Then Szilard raised his left arm.

"Bifrost!" he called out, and the silver ring on his finger began to glow.

In an instant, the ground of the virtual space lit up in seven colors, and I was surrounded by rainbow spears of light. There were nine spears in all and any one of them could dissolve anything they touched.

I contorted my body and spun around to avoid them as I prepared to deploy my trump card.

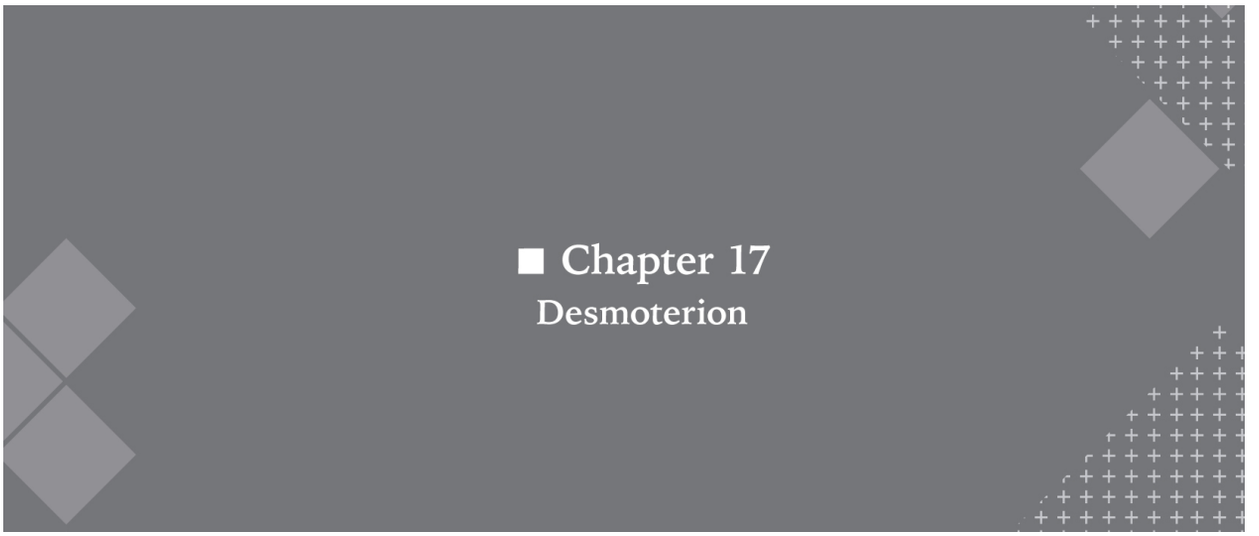
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a Regalia for a Regalia.

I focused my killing intent into the skull ring on my right index finger.

All right. Rise and shine, asshole.

I called out the name of the Regalia, the last vestige of the Reaper.

"Get him, Desmoterion."



◆ Virtual Space: Plain Stage

Regalia are special items dropped by spirits who inhabit dungeons not as mere avatars but with their physical bodies—essentially, boss-class enemies.

They come in a variety of forms, such as weapons, armor, and accessories, and they each possess incredible destructive power that transcends human comprehension.

The reason for this is simple: Regalia are the remains of boss spirits.

They serve as proof that one has conquered a powerful foe, and grant the Regalia User that foe's abilities or skills. Due to the incredible power of such items and the difficulty of obtaining them, many people equate the term Regalia User with "high-level adventurer."

If it weren't for the rule that a Regalia's powers can only be used by their rightful owner, who knows how much these things would sell for. Or how much violence would erupt from people fighting over them.

And to the gods who came up with that rule (the game's developers), I just want to say: Good job!

Now back to the fight. I had just used one such Regalia. Its name: Desmoterion.

It was an accessory I had obtained by defeating the Dungeon Reaper—an ugly skull ring imbued with an ability it had inherited from that monster: Moon's Eclipse. This move allowed me to call forth invisible Reaper Chains that would drain my opponents of their power.

They were perfect reproductions of the Dungeon Reaper's chains that had caused us so much grief in Moon's Eclipse.

"Get him, Desmoterion."

The space around me began to warp and turn black in response to my call.

Three black holes formed, and those trauma-inducing red chains of malice and resentment leaped out of them. They wrapped themselves around Szilard's body, rendering the clan master powerless in an instant.

They not only restrained him physically, but also temporarily blocked him from using spiritual power.

Unlike the original chains, the effects of my chains came with a time limit. But their absolute ability to lock down an opponent was still intact. They were just as stealthy, too, leaving no room for my opponent to dodge.

Top-class adventurer or not, there was no way to avoid these things if you had never seen them before, especially in a one-on-one fight.

"…Gotcha."

I looked my prey over while cautiously keeping my senses on high alert.

Szilard was lying on the ground, bound and unable to move.

Yet, despite this, he still wore his trademark cheerful grin.

"Why not finish me off, then?"

"I'm not going to fall for that, Mr. Szilard. I seem to recall hearing that you own a Regalia of revival."

More accurately, it was a Regalia triggered upon the user's death. It would change his body into heat energy and then resurrect him from that. It was honestly pretty bonkers, but none

of that mattered. The important thing was that if I attacked him wrongly, he could recover from it.

"That's why I'll leave this part to the professional. My team's ace can cut you into little pieces even if you transform into heat energy."

"Is that right?" he said with a self-satisfied nod. Then he let out a small sigh.

"Then I suppose there's not much for it. Looks like I'll just have to *finish myself off* and start over before she gets here."

The next moment, a rainbow spear pierced Szilard's skull. He had laid a trap when he used his Bifrost Regalia a moment earlier.

I'd managed to dodge the nine spears of light that burst from the ground, but with no target to hit, they had hurtled into the sky.

He must have had them wait above us.

He had prepared a surprise attack for me. Or, for himself. In other words…

…he saw this whole thing coming?

"Oh, come now," came a voice wrapped in crimson light. "I couldn't predict *everything*…"

His Resurrection Regalia had been activated upon his death, triggering Reincarnation of the Phoenix.

This was a special technique linking "heat" and "rebirth"—there was no better way to combat it than Haruka's Azure Skies. I should have waited. If Haruka had been around when the skill activated and cut through the energy Szilard had transformed into, we would have won on the spot. But—

"…You were able to defeat Eliza. Pulling off something like that wouldn't be possible with any of the skills you've told me about."

—it was no use. That wasn't going to work anymore. After dying, Szilard's body turned into several pillars of fire that easily slipped through my Reaper Chains.

"So, I knew you had something up your sleeve. And I assumed it had to do with the Reaper you defeated in Moon's Eclipse this past spring."

His flames spread across the field. The pillars turned into orbs, the orbs formed the outline of a body, and before long…

“All I had to do was think backward from the intel I had about the Reaper. Then I thought of the worst-case scenario and prepared a little contingency plan.”

…the ashen-haired hero had come back from the dead. He no longer had any of his equipment and was instead covered in blue and red flames. He was looking way cooler than a certain pathetic miniboss.

“Now, young man—”

Szilard opened his hands and spread both his arms out dramatically, as though showing off that he’d regained the limb Haruka had cut off earlier.

“—it’s time for round two.”

The moment the words left his mouth, a barrage of fire beams and icicles came blasting toward me. I only managed to dodge the onslaught of astral skills because he’d purposefully telegraphed his attack.

If someone way stronger than you says that round two’s about to start, you don’t have to be a genius to run for cover. Taken in a positive light, he was being fair. Taken negatively, this meant he still had energy to spare.

But he’s already used his resurrection for this fight.

I’d put up Fourth Field and was now contemplating the situation at Mach speed.

He could only use Reincarnation of the Phoenix once—or, more accurately, the cooldown was so long that it might as well be a one-use skill. Anyway, the point was, if we could take him down one more time, victory would be ours.

But once Calmi Cuori Appassionati was done, he’d win by default.

If he was able to complete that outrageous area-encompassing annihilation skill of his, there wouldn’t be a single thing we could do about it. And I had already revealed the counter I’d prepared to deal with it.

…The fact that he was grinning and showering me with attacks as I maintained my state of invincibility was proof of his confidence.

As long as I was inside Fourth Field, I was impervious to all damage, but I also couldn't do a damn thing. I couldn't use Hasten Time for a surprise attack, I couldn't use Desmoterion to restrain him, nothing. And I was running out of AP quickly.

Things were looking worse by the second. All I could do was block his attacks. Meanwhile, as Szilard had me pinned down with a shower of astral skills, he began to slowly widen the distance between us. I had no doubt that he was trying to get away so he could wrap up preparing his big move.

Since the world seen from inside Fourth Field was black-and-white, it was difficult for me to make out the changes happening outside. But I could tell that there was something going on above and below me.

Szilard laughed, and as he did, the red and blue flames engulfing his feet took him soaring into the air. He was about to beat a hasty retreat and put an end to this battle once and for all.

Heh…

But it was my turn to laugh. I couldn't move my facial muscles at all, mind you, but inside my heart, I was laughing all the same!

Hey, Szilard…

He'd fought, been restrained, self-destructed, resurrected, and started all over again. I had to admit that his tenacity and the sheer number of actions he'd pulled off were impressive. Yes, despite that—or should I say, specifically because of it…

You shouldn't have wasted so much time.

…my party's ace in the hole showed up just in time.

Blades of snow came soaring onto the battlefield, full of beauty and grace. Clones of Azure Skies fanned out in front of me and began slashing through thermal bullets. The light I had seen through my black-and-white filter must have been blue. Even in a world without color, the azure hue of Haruka's aura reached my eyes.

Haruka Aono passed in front of me.

"Kyou!" she called out. I couldn't hear anything, but I could more or less make out what she was saying by reading her lips.

"Sorry…"

I'm the one who's sorry.

"I took too long."

You got here just in time.

"Let's…"

Yeah, let's…

"Let's do this."

As soon as two of the Azure Skies had quelled the thermal barrage ahead of me, I dropped Fourth Field. All at once, the three-dimensional world around me began to move as ever. The sounds, smells, and colors assaulted me all at once. As did the recoil of dropping my barrier—pain, nausea, and dizziness.

But most of all, I felt the extreme temperature. Smoke wrapped around my shoulders while frost crept across my legs. My mind reeled from the cognitive dissonance of these contradictory conditions.

This was the power of Calmi Cuori Appassionati. This was what fighting James Szilard was like. He continued spreading his deadly special move into the space around us, all the while floating through the air, pelting me with thermolurgy, and fending off Haruka.

He was like a multilimbed war god on the battlefield. Yet, despite all that, he continued to look for any opportunity to get away and nab an easy win.

This guy's a demon. He's got everything covered…

"Haruka!" I called out through the oppressive heat as she swung her sword. "Can you get up there?" I asked, keeping it brief.

"I'll try!"

But she seemed to understand what I meant. In an incredible feat of acrobatics, she leaped into the air and used a clone of Azure Skies as a foothold to carry her upward.

The radiant star pressed the tip of the sword in her hands to her forehead and flew straight at the master of the Burning Blade of Ice.

"Haruka! You're incredible! To think you've been keeping a technique like that from me this entire time."

"I wasn't, Mr. Szilard…" Sweat poured down her neck, but the blue-eyed girl flashed him a grin. "…I just figured this out a second ago!"

Despite the fact that this been my own crazy idea, I trembled with excitement as I watched her make it happen.

Surfing through the air on a sword like that was practically insane. Swords were tools for cutting, not riding.

But in a single bound, she had completely done away with that simple premise—with logic altogether. She'd poured a massive amount of spiritual power into her clone sword to manipulate it beyond the usual limit and then used her sharp senses to guide it.

Haruka was soaring through the air toward Szilard, slicing heat beams and dodging Bifrost spears the second they erupted from the ground. When she caught up with him, she charged him with a vicious slice.

"An arm's not gonna be enough this time. I'm coming for the rest."

"Hah-hah-hah! Give it your best shot, young lady."

But Szilard was still hanging tough. His attack and defense seemed even more formidable than before, and now he was sending countless Bifrost spears sailing through the air to home in on Haruka and get in her way.

"That circus trick of yours must be burning through your spiritual power reserves," he said.

"I wouldn't count on that!"

Haruka shot him her usual grin, like an idol's smile, but Szilard was probably right. In order to stay airborne, she was expending a *tremendous amount of spiritual power and using it to intricately control her movements*.

Even without him pointing this out, there was no way she could last long the way she was going, especially taking into account how much she had burned in the previous skirmish. I guessed that she had enough AP left for, at best, thirty more seconds of air time. It would be a miracle if she could last a minute.

Hasten Time. Stride.

That was why I had to move.

I sped up my own time and ran with everything I had through the field of frost and flame.

"Ngh…!"

But in an instant, my shoulders caught fire and my feet froze in place like they were stuck in sherbet.

Not surprising, considering I had sped up time for myself. Hasten Time's major flaw was that it also accelerated negative status effects like poison and burning.

Even though my pain receptors had been turned off while in the virtual space, alarm bells began ringing in my head. …*This is fine. And even if it isn't, I've gotta act like it is. If I don't do something here, we're almost definitely gonna lose.*

"Well, now, Kyouichirou. I'm afraid I can't keep ignoring you."

Szilard followed these words up with an array of thermal beams. The two Azure Skies clones accompanying me sliced through the red and blue attacks.

For a split second, Haruka and I locked eyes. The sparkle in her gaze spoke to me louder than words ever could. The radiant star was telling me to leave things to her.

I ran. Without so much as a word or a nod, I spun around and got behind Szilard.

"Haaah!"

With Haruka's shout, three clones of Azure Skies climbed up through the virtual space. Haruka avoided spears of Bifrost as she and the swords charged. Szilard laughed and turned his body to the left.

"Not a chance!" I cried and threw Eckesachs in its spear form at him.

I concentrated all the muscles I'd gained from my daily training and launched the weapon with every fiber of my being. But Szilard turned around at the last second and it went whizzing past him.

No problem!

The three sword clones came hurtling through the air like comets. They bore down on him from above as the swordmaster came in with a thrust.

He didn't have a wealth of options—he could move downward or dodge to the side. Not that it mattered one way or the other. We had already closed in on him.

Get him, Desmoterion.

The three chains that had been lying in wait on the ground stealthily leaped up to grab their foe once more. With so many things to focus on at once, so many attacks coming his way, Szilard was cornered. He couldn't possibly avoid all of—

“I thought I’d wait for the perfect time to show you this one!”

Szilard *exploded*. It was a massive burst—big enough to engulf Haruka, the comet-like sword clones, and the three Desmoterion chains. The heat, the blast wave, and the sheer impact of the detonation were enough to eradicate the encirclement we had trapped him in.

I snarled as I tried to escape the epicenter of the explosion. But that damned epicenter—he began to chase me down.

“Chains you can neither see nor detect. Quite hard to deal with, aren’t they? But invisibility aside, it seems their ability to go undetected is a one-time trick, hmm?”

He was unharmed. He had survived thanks to the thermal resistance granted him by his spirit, Maxwell. The large ashen-haired man rose into the sky, carried by the blue and red flames at his feet.

I heard Haruka groan nearby. It seemed that the blessing of Azure Skies had spared her from most of the damage.

But we had completely lost our advantage.

And what Szilard had said was true: Desmoterion’s characteristic ability to avoid being detected by an opponent was a one-time effect granted to each individual chain.

But once the chains had been detected once, there was no pulling that trick again. They could continue to fool the eye, but an opponent could use their other senses—especially spiritual—to detect them.

And Szilard had seen right through that. Not only had he sensed the chains, but he had figured out the Regalia’s characteristics and timing and prepared the perfect counter.

We hadn’t messed up. But I had misjudged just how clever my opponent was and how seriously he was taking this fight.

“You’ve done well.”

Szilard floated in midair as red and blue flames enveloped his palms. I felt like I was staring death in the face. Haruka was still alive, but it was unlikely she could make it in time.

“Unfortunately for you, it wasn’t enough to defeat me.”

Szilard was about to unleash Calmi Cuori Appassionati. The light of Bifrost spears shined at my feet. It was over. It was all over. Blink once, and everything would come to an end.

“Do you have any final words?”

“…No.” I shook my head.

I must have been laughing, because Szilard’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. A direct hit.

“One move may be just that—*one move*…”

A red blossom spread across Szilard’s chest, and blood began to spurt out of the wound. His heart had been pierced. We were separated by a mere fifteen feet. The three chains, no longer undetectable, lay silent on the ground. And yet…

“…but one move is all we needed to win.”

…Szilard, the master of Rosso and Blu, fell in a heap on the ground.

“The Dungeon Reaper has four chains, you see. In other words, the maximum number of chains my Desmoterion can deploy is…”

“…Four…?”

I used three of them to restrain. But I kept one hidden as a final contingency plan. This was the result of my careful planning. The fact that Haruka had sliced off his arm to make the situation that much harder to read had been a big help.

“Please, Kyouichirou. Tell me, so that I can learn from my mistake,” said Szilard. “*What* did you use to finish me—to finish both of us?”

“…That damned Reaper only ever used these chains to restrain people.”

As I spoke, I focused on the knife in his chest. I wasn’t going to get distracted. He’d have to hear my secret as the life slowly drained out of him.

“But the truth is, you can wrap one of these guys around a weapon and hide it, as long as it’s no bigger than a knife.”

It was like a knife on a chain that I could use at long distances.

Only, that knife couldn’t be seen. And it couldn’t be detected. Not to mention—

“This was the absolute last card I had up my sleeve.”

—the chained knife that pierced his chest was none other than Laevateinn. It leaped up ferociously and split Szilard’s virtual body in half.

Laevateinn—a weapon found in the secret boss’s dungeon in the original *Dungeon Magia*. It was an illusory blade that could

only be obtained under the strictest conditions.

Its ability was known as Karmic Sever. In the game, it dealt an incredibly high amount of fixed damage. All who made contact with this blade would be sliced apart, no matter how resistant or tough they might be.

Naturally, it had a lot of shortcomings as well. In a word, it was a knife that could cut through anything—no more, no less. To damage a foe, you'd need to be in range, for one. And since it was about the size of a dagger, that meant that it was practically useless against large enemies.

Also, if the enemy had the ability to regenerate, that was it. And it was not much good against slimes, wisps, and other creatures without a physical form.

But if you needed to kill a person, it was the perfect weapon. As long as they couldn't regenerate, and they had already wasted their ability to resurrect themselves, it didn't matter if they were as tough as the mythical Adamant or the leader of one of the Five Major Clans—they would get sliced apart.

Desmoterion plus Laevateinn.

It was an unseeable, undetectable combo that could slice through absolutely any defenses—a partnership between a weapon from the secret boss's dungeon and a Regalia. There was no one alive who could avoid this one-hit KO combo. Well, maybe one person—Haruka, my party's radiant star. She alone could avoid such a strike. But that was an exception among exceptions. Anyone else would certainly be cut. Just as Eliza and Szilard had.

"So, what did you think, Mr. Szilard? Was that enough to satisfy your curiosity?"

The ashen-haired gentleman, having already used up his one-time resurrection, began to turn into particles of light as he returned to the real world. He gave a satisfied nod.

"Indeed! I've seen all I need from you two. I admit defeat! You've beaten us fair and square!"

As soon as the declaration left his mouth, he disappeared from the virtual space. Rainbow-colored letters floated where he had once been.

WINNER: TEAM KYOUICHIROU AND HARUKA

LOSER: JAMES SZILARD

Cheers were raised. Fireworks went off.

I mean, sure, it was just a little visual effect inside the virtual program, but it felt like a grand celebration to me. Excitement filled my body. With every beat, my heart seemed to pound harder and harder.

I…won? We…actually beat James Szilard and Eliza Wispard?

I pinched my cheek to check if I was dreaming. It didn't hurt at all.

Guess I was dreaming after all… Wait, that's right! We're inside a simulation.

I read the rainbow words over and over to make sure that what had just happened virtually was indeed real.

WINNER: TEAM KYOUICHIROU AND HARUKA

There was no mistaking it, no matter how much I stared at them.

The results screen said it clear as day: We were the winners.

"YEEEEEEESSSSSSSSS!!!"

A cry of absolute, pure joy leaped out from deep inside me.

We had won. We had really won. We had managed to make it through!

"Kyou!"

The radiant star rushed over with hurried steps.

Her smile bloomed more vibrantly than any cherry blossom. She was sweaty and she looked tired, but she seemed so happy. And more than that, she was so, so beautiful.

Our gazes met; we were so close we could feel each other's breath. We reached out our palms and slapped them together with a satisfying sound.

"We really did it!"

"Yeah! We won, Haruka! We won!"

After we shared a high five, we continued to scream and cheer until the voices of our avatars grew hoarse.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Simulation Battle Room VIP Area

"Hah-hah-hah! Well, well, well. That was quite the match. There's no two ways about it. We lost!"

What awaited us once we returned to the real world was high praise from our opponent.

“First off—Haruka. Your sense for battle and your adaptability blew me away. Your entirely unique sword skills, your exceptional control, and your ability to quickly evolve over the course of a battle are tremendously impressive. I feel like this is the first time in ages that I’ve met a truly natural talent like yours. What do you say? Why don’t you join my clan? If you do, you can aim higher than ever before.”

“Oooh, thanks! But respectfully, I’m going to have to pass!”

Instant rejection. She didn’t even think it over.

Szilard merely shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated way that seemed to say, *What a shame*. He didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

Next, he put on a wide, handsome grin as he turned to face me.

“Now, then. Kyouichirou. I shall make my pitch to you. I believe that you’re quite an impressive leader on the battlefield. You have unique abilities and an eye for tactical strategy. I felt like you had a good grasp of what was going on the entire time… I was particularly impressed with the judgment you showed in revealing your hand slowly over the course of the battle.”

“Th-thank you, sir!”

Oh, God. Oh, geez. James Szilard just complimented me. I can’t handle this. I’m so freaking pumped!

“It’s not often I come across a commander with the speed, offense, and defense necessary to change the tide of battle, let alone one who has the skills to put those faculties to use effectively, even if it means sacrificing themselves. I would love nothing more than to offer you a place in my clan.”

This heavenly barrage of compliments was starting to get to my head. I could feel myself becoming overly excited. But I quickly regained my composure and bowed.

“I am incredibly honored to receive such high praise from someone of your caliber, sir. I know that this is a rare opportunity, but I’m afraid that I, too, must decline.”

“Hah-hah-hah! You’ve both rejected me so easily. But that spirit of yours is commendable! Promising youths relying on no one but themselves to seize the future. How exhilarating!”

Szilard gave another hearty laugh that seemed to well up from deep inside him. Eliza was standing to his side, and, though

quiet, I could have sworn she laughed as well.

“Our goal is to judge your worth.”

I still had no idea what she meant by that.

And I was even less sure of what Szilard was hoping to gain from all this.

He was too pleased with the results for someone who’d wanted to win. And yet, he seemed too earnest to be messing with us.

Szilard certainly was a peculiar man.

But something had become clearer during the battle—the fight, in and of itself, was the reason he had summoned us in the first place.

The proof was in how he chose to fight.

Despite it being a glorified sparring match, he had pulled no punches and used all the skills befitting of his clan’s name.

He showed no sign of holding back, nor did he spare any expense in how much AP he used throughout. All throughout the match, Szilard had done his best to try to defeat us.

…The real head-scratcher was how he’d gone about it.

Like how his opening move had been Rosso and Blu, an attack that focuses all of its energy onto a single point. He had used this despite knowing that I could defend against it with Fourth Field.

Or how he had chosen to take Haruka on one-on-one at close range despite knowing he would be at a complete disadvantage.

I wouldn’t go so far as to sully our victory by saying that he’d given us a handicap. Not at all.

But the fact of the matter was that Szilard had fought us a little *too* fairly. Or I guess it would be more accurate to say he had taken us both head-on even in situations where he knew we would have the upper hand.

I’d told Haruka before the battle that he didn’t know anything about what we were capable of, but that was definitely not the case. He had clearly gathered as much intel on us as he possibly could before our match.

Yet, despite going through all that trouble, he repeatedly fought us head-on in situations where that was ill-advised. And that meant that his *real* goal hadn’t been to win—it had been to observe.

If that was the case, it would certainly explain what Eliza had said to me. He had put his reputation on the line along with a powerful member of his own clan. Winning couldn't have been his goal. He wanted to judge our worth.

Despite the fact that he had lost the bet, he was still in high spirits. That made me think he didn't care one way or the other about the results.

…Oh, right! We won the bet!

That jogged my memory. We had won, and Szilard had lost. And as a result, we were about to get a super bombardier to add to our party!

"Pardon me, Mr. Szilard," I said. "Do you recall what it was that you promised us before the battle if we won the bet?"

"You speak much more politely when you're not fighting, don't you, Kyouichirou? I find that quite adorable."

"Th-thank you, sir."

"Whoa. Hold up," said Haruka. "You play for both teams, Mr. Szilard? And how come you're acting all shy and embarrassed all of a sudden, Kyou?"

"While I admit that I am a man of many passions, I'm afraid we'll have to get to know one another a little better before I tell you anything quite *that* personal, little lady."

"Ugh, fiiine!"

The two of them shared a laugh. But I noticed something—Haruka only *seemed* to be smiling on the surface. Her eyes weren't laughing, however. She was serious.

"What's wrong, Kyou?"

"Nothing. I don't know what you're talking about!"

I didn't see anything, all right?

"Pardon me. It appears the conversation got off track for a moment. How troublesome. I always seem to get overexcited when you two are involved."

"Forget about that. How about you go back to what you were saying?"

"Ha-ha! Very well, young lady. Yes, of course, the bet is perfectly valid. I'll notify the one in question immediately and get the paperwork settled. After that, you'll have yourself a new party member."

As soon as we heard that, Haruka and I grabbed each other's hands and began cheering.

"……"

Eliza watched us celebrate. She didn't interject, nor did her face give any indication of what she might be thinking. She just stared at us in silence.

◆

To be honest, I'd figured the whole deal would go sour.

It was unheard of for a bombardier from one of the Five Major Clans to be traded to a party made up of a couple middle schoolers who didn't even belong to a clan.

I was sure the whole thing would fall apart.

I assumed the bombardier would act up and cause problems.

But despite all that, on paper, their transfer to our team went off without a hitch.

We had defeated James Szilard, the clan master of Rosso and Blu. And now we were about to get the bombardier we so desperately needed…

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," First Midpoint, Entertainment District

"Nice to meet you… Although, we've already met once before, haven't we?"

That was how I came face-to-face with *her* once again. The one who showed up to meet us at the appointed time in the fountain square was the same crimson-eyed girl in a black gothic Lolita dress, her silver hair done up in pigtails, that I had almost bumped into in Sakuragi.

"I saw you three weeks ago in that shop… Do you remember?"

"Yeah," I answered, "I remember. You left an impression."

I almost wished I *could* forget her. I knew what she would become in the future.

"Well, I can tell you one thing—while they have their quirks, I can guarantee that this person has firepower and range equivalent

to my own.”

Szilard’s words from that day came drifting back into my mind. I finally understood what he had meant.

I now knew why he’d said that her powers were comparable to his own.

She was special.

Her upbringing, her spirit, her status. All were quite extraordinary.

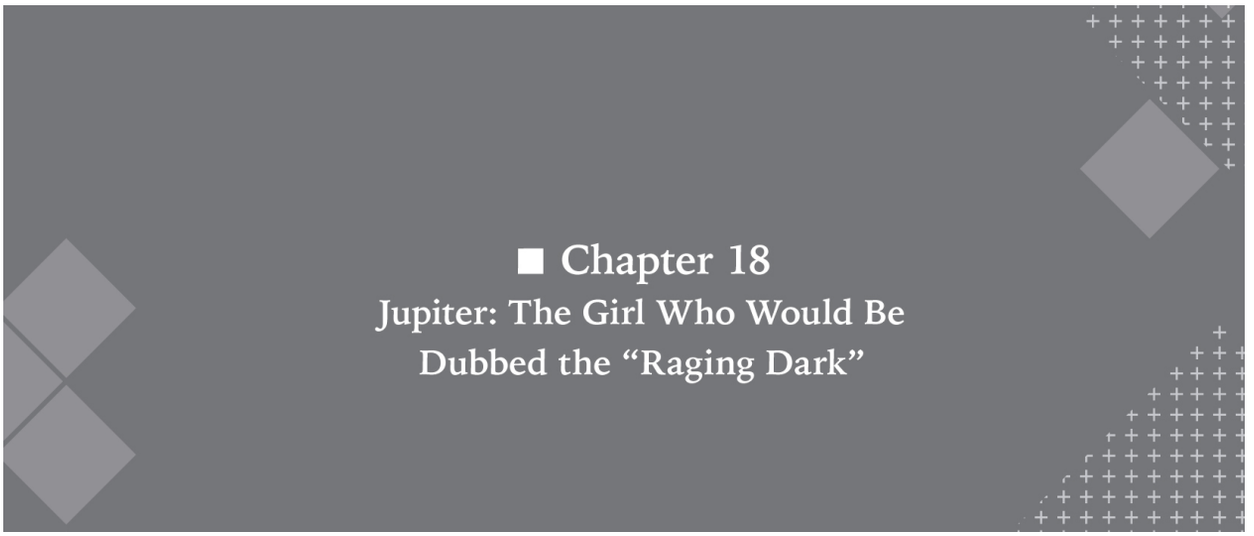
But most special of all was her place in the original game.

“I’ll introduce myself. I’m Jupiter. Position—back line. Best role—bombardier… Nice to meet you.”

Jupiter. In *Dungeon Magia*, she was better known as the black bolt of enmity—the Raging Dark.

“So, cry for me. Scream for me. Struggle in vain, humiliate yourselves! I, Jupiter, will enjoy every moment. Your worthless, incompetent squirming is your only path to redemption! Kya-ha! Kya-ha-ha-ha! KYA-HA-HA- HA-HA!”

The girl who had come to meet us was a member of a certain *organization* that opposed the main characters. She was a miniboss from the game’s true route.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Midpoint, Entertainment District

How had things come to this?

The bombardier we were about to add to our party had turned out to be a miniboss from the game’s true route.

Damn you, Szilard! You might as well have sent us a live nuke!

Jupiter was an enemy from the original *Dungeon Magia* game. She was *super* crazy and *super* dangerous. And now that maniac was about to become our new party member…

“What’s wrong, Kyou? You started scratching your head all weird… Oh! I bet I know! It’s that edgy *chuuni* thing you were going on about earlier, right?!”

“No. That’s not it *at all*. I just…felt a bit dizzy all of a sudden.”

I tried my best to brush off Haruka’s rude question as I straightened out my thoughts.

Calm down, Kyouichirou. Now’s no time to be entertaining Haruka’s rude nonsense. Sure, you’re a bit shaken up now that you’ve seen her *here in person, but just think about all the hard work you’ve put in these past two weeks.*

You've been doing all sorts of prepping for this with Albi ever since Szilard sent over the paperwork with her name on it, right?

We've considered the risks.

We've analyzed the situation.

All that's left now is to puff out your chest and move forward.

So, c'mon. Just give her an easy breezy self-introduction.

"Welcome to our party, Jupiter. My name's Kyou-bicheh…!"

I fumbled my words. I couldn't even manage to pronounce my own name.

"Kyou…bicheh?"

"I'm Kyouichirou… Kyouichirou Shimizu. Nice to meet you. And this is—"

I passed the intros off to Haruka as fast as I could to hide my shame.

Damn it! It wasn't supposed to be like this!

"I'm Haruka Aono! Nice to meet you, Ju… Or maybe Joop…? Or, uh, hey. Do you have a nickname you prefer?"

"…Call me whatever you want."

"Okay, then! How about Jupi? We'll try it out and see if it sticks. Welcome aboard, Jupi!"

"…Thank you."

Haruka's voice was loud enough to drown out the sound of the water fountain. Meanwhile, Jupiter answered so quietly it felt like her voice might disappear.

They were like polar opposites… Then again, there weren't many people around like my party's radiant star. But anyway…

"All right, since we're all here, how about we do some briefing? Oh, but we can do that somewhere else. You're staying at a hotel, right, Jupiter?"

"Well, I have a reservation at one… But I don't have much money. If possible, I'd like to stay with you two."

"Gotcha. Then how about we celebrate our new roommate over some snacks while we have our briefing?"

"…Thank you," said the silver-haired girl with a formal bow.

I was having a hard time believing this was the real Jupiter. But it had to be her. This wasn't a case of split personalities or doppelgängers. I was just seeing her at a different point in the timeline.

This was Jupiter before she joined *the organization*.

That seemed to be the best way to sum up the girl standing in front of me.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Midpoint, Residential Area

We moved to the living room of our rented house.

After quickly setting up a space for our new occupant, we laid down a bunch of prepared foods and soda that we’d picked up on the way and sat down for a little party.

“All right, and with that, I’d like to welcome the newest member of our party!”

“Cheeeers,” we all said as we raised glasses full of amber liquid.

Don’t worry. It was ginger ale.

Sitting with other kids in the middle of the day and having a junk food party made me feel young again.

You gotta love times like this.

“Would you mind me asking if you’ve been an adventurer for long, Jupiter?” I had meant to sound casual, but it came out oddly stiff and formal.

But, hey, I happened to like being polite with people when I first met them. You can’t go wrong treating someone respectfully right off the bat.

“Oh, boy. Here Kyou goes with his overly stuffy way of talking,” said Haruka. She turned to me and added, “You *know* you’re gonna drop it at the first opportunity anyway. Why not act casual from the get-go?”

“Quiet, you.”

The radiant star had just poured us tea when I shoved some chicken nuggets into her mouth to shut her up. I then returned my attention to Jupiter who was sitting diagonally across from me.

I could see my bad-guy face reflected back at me in her ruby eyes. I looked as much the delinquent as ever.

“You can speak casually. I usually do the same… Unless you’d prefer I speak more formally, uh…sir.”

“No, no. You’re fine. Guess I’ll try to be franker, too.”

Haruka nodded with a self-satisfied look, her cheeks full of nugget.

Why are you always acting so high-and-mighty…?

"Anyway, back to what we were saying. How long's it been since you started adventuring?"

I tried speaking a bit more casually as I attempted to slowly get her to open up and tell me more. This seemed like the best place to start.

"About two years," she replied. "Ever since I moved here when I was ten."

So she was ten when she started! I already kind of knew, just working backward from the info about her in the game. But hearing it from her in person was totally different.

It was crazy to me that it was normal for a ten-year-old girl to work here. As someone who didn't come from a world of swords and magic, I had a hard time accepting stuff like that.

That said, I wasn't about to go on some tirade, yelling stuff like "This world is corrupt!" and judging another culture's morals like some stuck-up warrior of justice. Even so, I couldn't help feeling uneasy about it.

"You've been an adventurer since you were ten?" said Haruka. "And you were working with Mr. Szilard? You're amazing, Jupi!"

"I don't think so. I'm not from this country, and James only let me into his clan because he felt bad for me. The two of you have done way more. You broke the record for the deepest level ever reached right after debuting as adventurers, right?"

It didn't sound like she was just being humble.

Rosso and Blu was known to offer assistance to those from abroad. Szilard had probably taken Jupiter in partly to bring her under the clan's protection.

The empire was strict with people from other countries and those of other races.

Some members of the aristocracy still looked down on beast people in particular and treated them like scum.

People from abroad like Jupiter and Szilard were treated a trillion times better than beast people were. But if something bad were to happen, they would still be treated harshly in the eyes of the law.

Mind you, all countries were like that. It was deemed necessary to protect that nation's stores of spirit stones and Regalia. If countries let adventurers come in from foreign lands and snatch up Regalia as they pleased, it would be a free-for-all. It wouldn't be hard to imagine legions of adventurers sweeping across the world, taking over all the dungeons in other countries.

This country's approach was to force adventurers to naturalize and become citizens. And anyone who refused was prohibited from entering dungeons and other related areas. In addition, those who naturalized were forced to change their surnames to conform to the local syllabary.

They were strict, even with something simple like one's name. So, if a foreign girl at the tender age of ten was to show up in this country, she would have had very few options.

This world's so damn corrupt.

"While in James's clan, I was switched in and out of parties a lot…because I'm a novice who can't control her powers. I think that's why I'm here… 'Cause they…gave up on me."

"I don't think that's the reason." I chugged the rest of my ginger ale to perk myself up before jumping in to contradict her. "At the very least, Mr. Szilard genuinely seemed worried about you. 'If anything happens, call on me right away.' That's what he told us."

"He was probably just saying that because he feels bad about throwing me out of the clan."

"You really think he'd feel guilty over something like that? The guy's got nerves of steel."

"…I guess that's one way to put it."

It seemed she had some thoughts about Szilard. He was known for being a handsome *devil*, after all.

Jupiter nodded. "Still, that doesn't change what I said about always getting kicked out of parties. I've even injured some of my party members in battle before. I'm not very easy to have around."

"…What exactly do you plan to achieve by telling *us* that, Jupiter?" I asked the silver-haired girl in the kindest voice I could muster. "If you don't want to join our party, we can just let Szilard know that you want to go back to Rosso and Blu. But if you *do* want to join us, we'll welcome you with open arms. Or if you're

thinking of something else completely, we'll help you figure that out, too. So just lay it on us and tell us what it is you want to do."

"I…" The silver-haired girl's voice sounded tiny and strained as she worked through her words one at a time. "I want to try being a member of this party. I have nowhere else to go. And I don't want to cause James any trouble… But I *am* dangerous. I don't want you two to get hurt. So, I needed to let you know."

These words came straight from her heart. How many people in a brand-new environment would have the guts to tell their new comrades-in-arms that they were dangerous?

It must have hurt. And it must have felt awful.

She could have tried covering it up, but instead, she told us how she truly felt.

She was very brave and kind.

I knew I had to respond appropriately to her sincerity.

"Thanks, Jupiter. I would be honored—actually, forget the formalities—we'd love to have you along for our adventures. Our party's kind of a mess, but it's a pleasure to have you on board."

"…Thanks."

The silver-haired girl gave a slight bow before gingerly grabbing a lettuce sandwich.

The sandwiches *were* pretty tempting, and I brought an egg one to my mouth while the radiant star grabbed a mixed sandwich with both hands.

Here we were, the miniboss from the tutorial, the boss of the traumatic route, and a miniboss from the true route, all sitting around a table eating sandwiches. And, of course, there was the spirit I had formed a pact with—a secret boss so devious she could make any child cry.

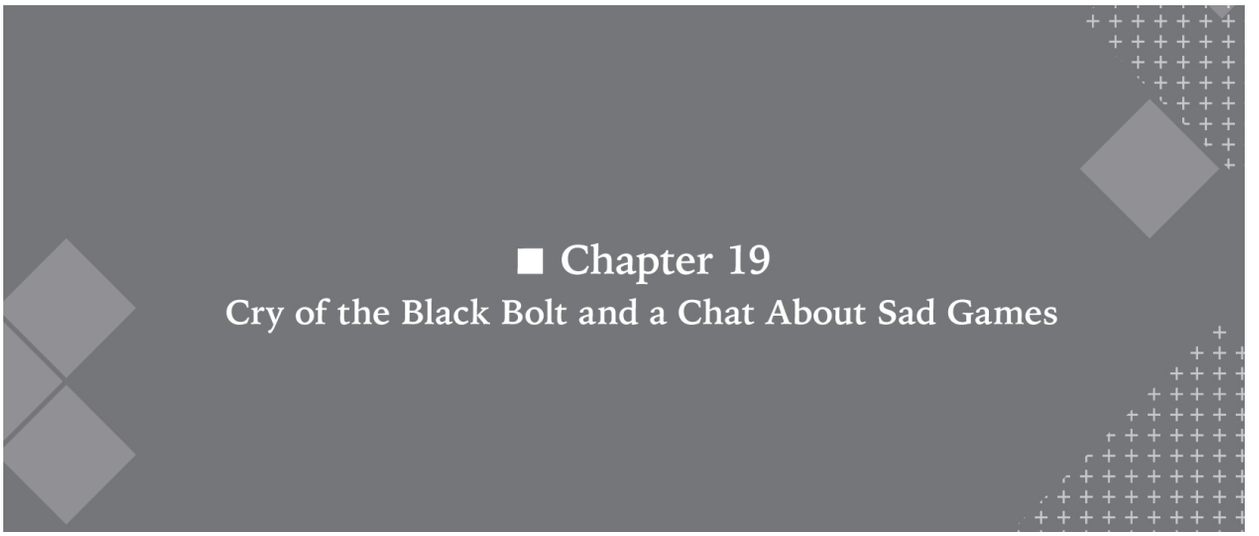
They say that three heads are better than one, but with this many bosses together, our adventuring party was starting to look more like an evil organization.

If one hundred *Dungeon Magia* players saw us all sitting together like this, exactly one hundred of them would think we were up to no good. Not that we were planning anything evil, mind you.

A party full of boss characters sounds kind of fun, actually.

I thought this and other similarly pointless things as I munched on my sandwich.

The food I shared with my fellow baddies was delicious—rich, with just the right amount of spice.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Sixth Floor

After we finished our welcome-party lunch, we decided to set out right away to do a dungeon crawl.

But our goal wasn’t to make it to the lowest floor of the dungeon or anything intense like that. We were just going to do a bit of grinding and beat up some enemy avatars on the level just past the midpoint’s warp gate.

That way, we could stay safe and head back to the midpoint anytime we wanted. It would be easy to wait around for spirits to log on and leisurely beat them up as a team to collect the spirit stones. We were basically acting like bandits, but this was just how modern-day adventurers were.

We weren’t risking our lives. We weren’t trying to make a fortune either. We just wanted to defeat the enemies we could and grind out some cash for our daily needs.

Why were we acting like day laborers all of a sudden, you ask?

Well, the answer to that is that the money…wasn't really the point.

What we really wanted was to get a sense of what Jupiter was capable of.

Jupiter, the bombardier girl, had joined our party as if drawn in by the hand of a black fate. She had told us herself that she was inexperienced and unable to control her powers.

Unexpectedly, it was Haruka's bright idea to come out here. "Can't control your powers, huh? …Okay," she had said. "Then, let's try to figure out just how much control you have."

I was surprised at first that such an adventure-crazed girl as Haruka would suggest something as simple as grinding, but I assumed she was being considerate in her own way.

I agreed with the radiant star's idea and was grateful for the suggestion.

Frankly, I had been thinking since that afternoon that taking Jupiter all the way to the second midpoint would be pretty tough. Haruka's idea was a godsend.

And that was how we'd ended up on the sixth floor of Eternal Darkness.

The sixth floor of the dungeon was a lot like the fourth—precipitous valleys with plateaus that seemed to stretch on forever.

The sky was purple, of course, as it was on most of the floors of Eternal Darkness.

After cheerfully walking across the gloomy landscape for about two hours, we reached the highest plateau in the entire slope-laden area.

It was high enough to see the entirety of the sixth floor. We could even see the warp gate to the seventh floor off in the distance.

This was the perfect spot for our group of laborers to camp and grind enemies near the entrance without much risk of drawn-out encounters.

"All right, the early bird gets the worm!" I declared. "Well, not that it's early anymore, it took us forever to get here, but anyway! Let's see what you can do. Are you ready, Jupiter?"

"…Yes."

The girl with the silver pigtails nodded. She was decked out in black and silver battle gear.

She seems like she's good to go. Let's see what all the fuss is about.

"All right, you see that big Chonchon flying all the way over there? Try hitting it with an attack." I pointed to an enemy flying alone, not a care in the world, about sixteen hundred feet away.

"Which one do you want me to hit?" she asked.

"What do you mean, 'Which one'? The one right over there."

"That's it? Just that one?"

Huh…?

Something was off about the way she was talking.

There's no way she's saying what I think she's saying, but I'd better ask to make sure.

"Are you saying you can see other Chonchons, Jupiter?"

"There's lots of them. There's this one in front. And then there's a group on the other side of that mountain. Two valleys away, three Chonchons are happily chatting away. Three plateaus that way, an adventurer is fighting four—oh, three Chonchons. They just defeated one."

"……!"

A shiver ran up my spine. But it wasn't because of the temperature.

Her words had chilled me to my very soul. I felt the same way I did whenever Haruka did something unbelievable.

There was no way to know if what Jupiter was saying was true. Neither I nor Haruka could sense any other Chonchons. Not even the ones that were supposedly on the other side of the closest mountain.

Is this even possible? Being gifted is one thing, but being able to sense spiritual power over six miles away is nuts.

"Hey, Jupi, just curious. Out of all the creepy-cute little guys you can sense right now, do you know how many of them you can hit?" This question came from the radiant star. The expression on her face was deadly serious.

"If I can sense them, I can hit them. If you want to know how far I can hit, that would be about *two mountains farther* than the farthest one I mentioned."

Having heard those words, the unthinkable happened—Haruka fell silent.

And me? I almost pissed myself.

“Let’s get back on topic,” I said. “Can you just hit that one right there in front of us?”

“Y-yeah. Just that one’s fine for now.”

“Okay.”

Jupiter gave a slow nod and delicately pointed at the Chonchon floating around about sixteen hundred feet away.

“Fall.”

In an instant, a horrific sight was burned into our retinas as a black bolt of lightning fell from the sky onto the floating Chonchon, wiping it out. Not a trace of it was left behind.

The creature itself probably had no idea what had just happened. The jet-black bolt had struck thousands of times faster than the speed of sound and perfectly hit its target. It was a lethally fast technique that left no time to react, let alone dodge.

And yet the silver-haired girl said that she could accurately hit targets about five mountains away. Jupiter soon proved this true when she used another of her black bolts to hit a target right at the edge of her vision.

Power, range, and accuracy—she was top-class in all of them.

I guess I should have expected as much from a miniboss from the true route. This girl is an anomaly—a monster.

However, I also knew what she’d meant when she said she *couldn’t control her powers*. And I knew very well why—despite her considerable talents—she had been passed from party to party.

Despite all that, I could still say this honestly:

“Szilard…the fish you just released turned out to be a real lunker.”

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” First Midpoint, Residential Area

After seeing what our new bombardier was capable of, we set up our party formation and wandered around the sixth level, seeing how we did.

We had Haruka, someone who had gone toe to toe with one of the leaders of the Five Major Clans, and Jupiter, a bombardier with an effective range of fire and detection spanning over six miles. Unsurprisingly, a party with two characters that broken that included both close- and long-range attackers proved quite strong.

Or I guess it would be more accurate to say that the enemies on the sixth level were no match for us.

Our usual approach was to one-shot KO them before they even noticed us.

I made sure we didn't overdo it and draw the ire of other adventurers, but when all was said and done, we'd had quite the successful grind session.

"Really? But if we split the money like this, you hardly get any, Kyouichirou."

"I-i-it's fine. I didn't even take down any of them myself."

…Well, it had been a successful grind session for *some* of us.

This wasn't exactly a surprise, though. Now that we had a weapon of mass destruction on our team who could preemptively one-shot entire groups of enemies, there wasn't much for a loser like me to do.

Much as I hated to admit it, the difference in stats between the tutorial miniboss and the true route's miniboss were patently self-evident.

"Maaan," I said with a sigh as I flipped the switch on my game console. "Guess I'm gonna have to train even harder now."

It was eleven PM by this point. The other members of my party were asleep. I was alone in my room in our rented house, playing games on my console. Dating sims, of course.

…Talk about addiction. Here I am, reincarnated into a dating sim world, and I'm still playing them.

But who can blame me? Dating sims are the best! I'm always working till I vomit blood, so I should be allowed a little treat like this every now and again, right?!

After a couple seconds of loading and a few short splash screens featuring company names, I was greeted with the title screen.

The piano soundtrack drifted in through my headphones. Five teenage girls stood in front of a blue sky.

Ultramarine Canzone—Canzone for short. It was a romantic adventure—one of those games that real connoisseurs considered a hidden classic.

The game was centered around the fictional sport of Dragon Tail. It was a true masterpiece—a medley of twists and turns spiced with bittersweet romance between the main character and the heroines.

Even for a veteran gamer like me, it was a title I would easily rate ten out of ten. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call this game an important cultural property.

The thing that really set *Canzone* apart was the story. All good dating sims live and die by their story, but *Canzone* has a surprising self-imposed narrative challenge that makes it truly something special.

And that narrative challenge is—

There was a gentle knock at the door to my room.

So late? I wonder who it is.

I left the game on its settings screen and went to answer the door.

"Can I ask you something?"

Crimson eyes glittered up at me from the dark hallway. I was taken aback to see the silver-haired girl—decked out in gothic nightwear, no less—standing there in my doorway.

"Uh. What's up?"

"No one told me what time to get up tomorrow."

"Oh, right."

I thought it would be enough to simply tell her when we were leaving in the morning, but Jupiter had only just joined our party a day prior. It had been pretty careless of me not to be clearer with her.

"Sorry about that. If you wake up around seven, that should give us plenty of time. We can have a chill breakfast and then head out after that."

"Okay… Hm?"

Just as I thought the conversation was over, Jupiter's eyes suddenly widened.

"Isn't that…?" The silver-haired girl pointed a tiny finger at the TV in my room.

“Oh, I was just playing some games. We get power here in the dungeon, but there’s no TV or internet, right? So, about all there is to do for fun is playing gam—”

“You’re playing *Canzone*.”

“?!”

I almost fell over in shock. But it wasn’t because Jupiter knew of this absolute masterpiece of gaming. The young pigtailed girl had been able to identify the game from its settings screen alone.

“How the hell did you know that?”

“The *Canzone* settings screen is pretty unique. The blue sky. The oval cursor. The default font stands out, too. And most importantly, the only settings available are the ones for the voices and the music.”

What the—?! I mean, she’s right, the Canzone *settings screen definitely has a particular look to it. But someone who’s only played the game normally wouldn’t be able to tell that at a glance.*

Even a seasoned gamer like me might have to think about it for a sec. But she had identified it immediately and without hesitation.

Hold on. Wait, wait, wait, wait. Calm down, Kyouichirou.

I knew it was way too early in the conversation to fully unleash my inner otaku.

Sure, it was amazing that she had been able to memorize the layout of the settings screen. But it was also possible that the girl simply had a photographic memory.

…The Jupiter from *Dungeon Magia* didn’t, but real life and the game were different, right? There’s a reason they teach kids not to confuse games and reality. I needed to proceed with caution.

Even if she said something like, “I really love that game!” there was always the chance that the meaning behind the word *love* was different than what people like me meant when *we* said it. Think about it: Everyone enjoys things in their own way.

If I let myself forget that and just assumed that another person’s version of “liking something” was the same as my own, it could cause unnecessary friction in our relationship.

That’s why *truly capable* otaku judge the depths of people’s love for something first.

There were many ways to do this—lightly quiz them on what they know, ask them directly just how much they like the thing,

or simply launch right into a really nerdy topic and see how they react. For my part, I preferred to draw my conclusions based on what they told me they enjoyed about the thing.

"W-wow. So, you've played *Canzone* too, huh? It's a pretty great game, right?"

"It's the best. And that's putting it lightly."

"Yeeeaaah, *Canzone* sure is great. What's your favorite part?"

A question as light and fluffy as meringue. But it was this sort of abstract inquiry that would give me the best glimpse of just how deep this rabbit hole went!

Now, Jupiter! Show me! Show me how hot the passions of your soul burn!

"Everything about it is high quality. If I started naming things I liked, the list would go on forever."

"Mm-hmm…"

"But if I had to name one thing, it would be the quality of the story."

Oh. If she noticed that, she might be more of a true fan than I expected.

"Agreed. A good dating sim's only as good as its plot."

"No," Jupiter protested, rejecting my opinion and shaking her pigtails from side to side. "The thing that makes *Canzone*'s story extra special is the fact that it does away with *a certain element* that was viewed as *necessary* in most other dating sims. And even without it, it still manages to be moving to players."

"And what 'necessary element' are you talking about?"

"…Death."

The word was enough to make my very mind tremble.

"Death, even tragic goodbyes—Canzone doesn't have anything like that. Not even the main characters' backstories include a single death. Even the characters that *did* suffer tragedies in their past don't have any traumas they can't recover from. All their scars can be healed. There were none of the usual tragedies—no parents or important loved ones die because of accidents or anything like that.

Seriously? She's on the same level as me. At her age…?

"Emotional dating sims tend to start off as casual slice-of-life stories that necessarily end in tragedy. There are some differences here and there, but many of them stick to the same

formula. That's fine. I don't think it's bad. By bringing the player up to emotional heights and then dropping them to emotional lows, they help us realize the importance of everyday life and lead into the moments of catharsis in the endings. I think it's a very good formula.

"However…," continued Professor Jupiter, her cheeks flushed as she continued her righteous speech, "…if you think about it another way around, you could say that formula uses the misery of its characters as they endure hardships and face the pain of death to emotionally manipulate the player. I know that's a little crazy to say. But most of the emotional games I've played end in death or some kind of heavy loss. Although they do it to varying degrees and over different spans of time, they all lean on that trope."

It made perfect sense. These games were called tearjerkers precisely because they put the player through painful experiences that forced them to cry by making them feel loss, resolution, and redemption, thus offering them catharsis.

To be honest, the death or misfortune the characters suffered in tear-jerking games was their greatest spice. And *Dungeon Magia* was the pinnacle of that philosophy.

Every major character had the kind of heavy backstory that would make anyone reel. And depending on the route the player takes, different characters *will* die.

Dead relatives, tragic pasts, characters surviving because a loved one sacrificed themselves—it's like a who's who of human misery and the characters who shine by overcoming it.

It's so wonderfully human. So wonderfully cruel.

Even if it's unbearable from the point of view of one of the characters, it's hard to argue that the pull of that kind of tragedy is irresistible.

People die, and the characters suffer. "Okay, so what," right? As long as it's emotionally cathartic, what's wrong with that, right?

And I agree. That is absolutely true. Here I was, after all I'd been through, still bawling my eyes out over these games. This wasn't a question of what was good or bad.

And these types of stories have never stopped moving people from all walks of life—that's what Jupiter was saying.

“But *Canzone*,” she continued, bringing the conversation back on track. “*Canzone* is different. None of the characters in *Canzone* die. None of them even have to suffer through anything particularly tragic. All *Calzone* has is the fantasy sport, Dragon Tail, and the characters that passionately devote themselves to it. That’s it. But their passion really spoke to me.”

She was right. *Canzone* had absolutely none of that spice that other dating sims so heavily relied on. No death, no tragedy that forever changed the characters’ lives, none of it. The only spices in *Canzone* were conflict, frustration, regret, and hard work—all ingredients that would be relatable to anyone.

To be honest, if it had been executed poorly, it could have been a terribly bland game. But that’s not the game we got. The blend of zeal for sports and the earnest hard work of the heroines came together to form a chemical reaction that was nothing short of miraculous.

“I wouldn’t say that it’s the only one of its kind, or even that it was a trendsetter. There are lots of games where characters don’t suffer tragedies. But—”

“Foregoing the usual spice and still managing to evoke deep emotions from the player makes it an exquisitely developed game, right?”

“Yeah. Looks like you get it too, Kyouichirou,” the silver-haired girl nodded.

I wanted to say the exact same thing to her. I was impressed.

“I think stories where people die or get toyed with by fate are also wonderful. But the fact that *Canzone* can make you feel the same way without doing any of that makes its story truly incredible.”

“The high aspirations of the developers and the heavenly quality of the acting elevated the story to a whole other level, too.”

“Yes. It’s the sort of sublime joy that can only be found in dating sims.”

After we had finished sharing our feelings about the game, a silent moment passed between us. Then, though I don’t know who reached out first, we gave each other a firm handshake of fellowship.

“Well, no use standing in the doorway talking the whole time. Want to come in and keep chatting?”

“I’d love to…”

So, we talked about dating sims for the rest of the night, with *Canzone* at the center of our conversation.

As I’d expected, Jupiter had deep and vast knowledge. I unleashed my full-throttle nerd talk, and she kept up with no issues.

“I’m impressed, Jupiter…!”

“You’re quite impressive yourself, Kyouichirou.”

To be as passionate as I pleased and have my conversation partner keep up with me—people called an event like this meeting a kindred soul.

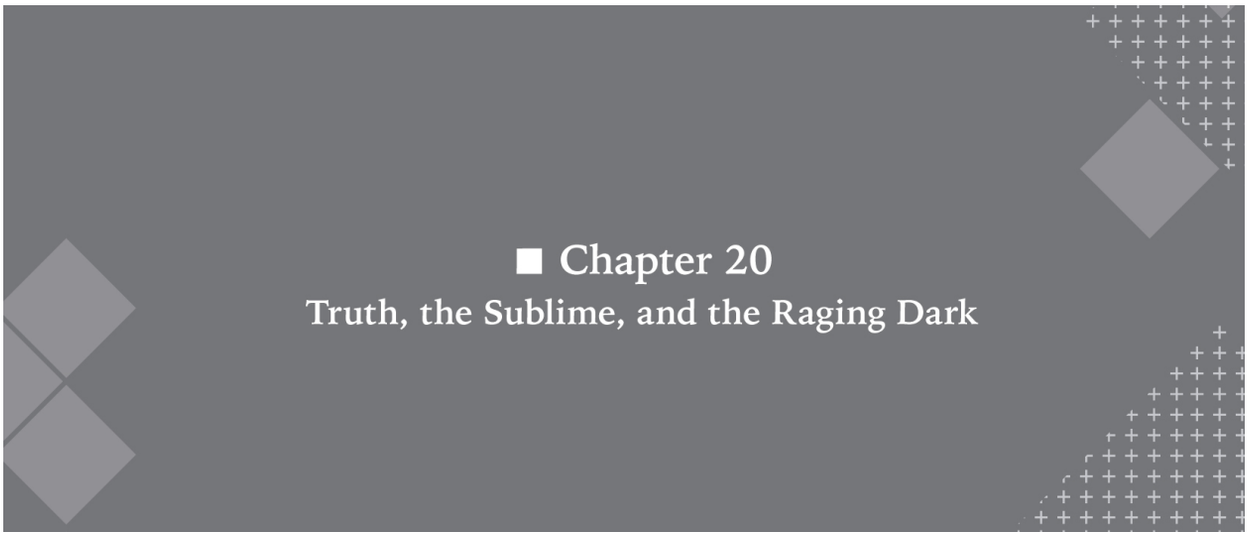
But who suggested she try dating sims in the first place?

I seriously doubted she had just naturally started playing them herself. I figured there must have been some reason why this twelve-year-old girl who could barely speak the language of the empire had gotten consumed by the world of dating sims…

“Hey, Jupiter. Tell me. Who was your teacher? Who taught you about these games?”

“No one. I can’t remember how I started. But before I knew it, I was hooked.”

Hmm. How very mysterious.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Eighth Floor

We left early the next morning and made for the tenth floor.

Jupiter hadn’t reached the second midpoint yet, so we had to start at the sixth level.

“Bleh. I wish they’d just register midpoints based on your party and not on a person-by-person basis, y’know?”

“Quit your complainin’. If they did that, people’d just cheat to get ahead.”

“Aw, c’mon!”

As we sloshed our way through a mist-covered marsh, the radiant star looked past me at what was ahead.

“But ’cause of this stupid system, Jupi’s exhausted!”

“…Again?”

I quickly looked behind us and checked up on Jupiter for the first time in about a minute.

She was huffing and puffing, and she looked like she was about to pass out. Her legs were shaking like a baby deer.

“My bad. Let’s take a break. I’ll go scoop her up.”

I ran back to offer the silver-haired girl a hand.

“Hey, Jupiter. Let’s take little break, huh? Whaddya say?”

Jupiter responded by furiously shaking her pigtails from side to side. Then she looked up and put on the most see-through tough-girl act ever.

“…Mime mokay…”

“You are clearly *not* okay.”

You can’t even talk right. C’mon, now.

“You spend your time in the rear. It’s no surprise that you’re out of breath.”

I scooped the little princess into my arms and sat her down on the flattest rock I could find.

I looked over at Haruka who had gone on ahead, and she made the *okay* gesture with her fingers before skipping back to us.

“Okay, Jupi,” she said. “Let’s you and me take a li’l break, okay? Taking breaks is just part of the adventure, y’know.”

She pulled some rehydrating solution from her backpack and brought it to Jupiter’s lips.

For a battle-crazed psychopath, she’s surprisingly responsible at times like this.

“…Sor…ry. I’m being a bother.”

“Don’t worry about it! You’re the whole reason we’ve made it this far safely.”

“She’s right,” I agreed. “Everyone has stuff they’re not good at. You tell us where to go, and then we move. Everyone plays their part, right?”

“That’s right!”

“Wah-hah-hah,” Haruka and I laughed, our voices light and cheerful.

Seeing our boisterous display of vitality, the true route’s miniboss muttered, “…You’re both so tough. I’m jealous…”

Jupiter sighed and looked at us with a heart full of envy as she sat on the purple rock.

I dunno… As a complete weakling of a miniboss, I think the fact that Jupiter can drop an enemy from miles away is way more impressive.

“If you train a bit, you’ll be able to keep up with us in no time!” Haruka exclaimed. “Let’s go for a run together sometime!”

“…I hate exercise.”

“Did I just get rejected?! Waaah!” Haruka cried, pretending to be hurt.

I know exactly how you feel, Jupiter. I get what it’s like to not want to exercise. But there’s no way you’re going to get the physical stamina you need without doing something.

It’s not like you’ve got to run a full marathon while wearing fifty-pound weights or do ten thousand sword swings while changing up your form every time or anything crazy like that.

You can start with simple stretches and then gradually increase your load… The important thing isn’t the amount you do or how long you do it for; you’ve just gotta keep it up.

Unless you have some extenuating circumstances, like having to build yourself into a fortress of muscles within a year, you should just start with doing what you can.

And as long as you keep that up, the rest will—

“Hm? Oh!”

“What’s up, Kyou?”

“I just had a good idea.”

I shared my brilliant thought with Haruka, and the radiant star’s face lit up like the sun. With a big grin, she agreed to help. We just needed to convince Jupiter.

“Hey, Jupiter. I’ve come up with a way to make it so we can move a lot faster while tiring you out less. Will you hear me out?”

“Please tell me.”

“All right, now we’re talking,” I said and started to explain my idea with emphatic gestures.

The good idea I had come up with was…

◆

“Tell me, madam, are you comfortable up there?”

“I’m comfy… But I also feel like I’ve suffered some indescribable indignity,” grumbled a discontented voice from my upper back.

Yes, that’s right—I was carrying the girl with silver pigtails along with our supplies on my back.

But this was no simple pigtailed piggyback. It was a three-pronged strategy: First, Jupiter, who was good with long-range

attacks and detection, acted as a sensor to alert us of anything nearby. Haruka, meanwhile, created a battle formation with Futsu-no-Mitama to take care of any enemies nearby. And then, should any enemies get past her, I had Eckesachs at my side, ready to take them down.

The results of my insane training carrying that demonic deity while running triple marathons had finally come in handy. *Wah-hah-hah-hah!*

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

"What's the matter, Kyouichirou? Am I heavy?"

"Not even slightly. Compared to carrying around that gluttonous evil goddess, you're as light as a sack of feathers."

Gritting my teeth and holding back sobs as I thought back to those awful days of training, I pushed ahead through the mucky marshland.

Someday I'm gonna show that wicked goddess what's what. I swear it!

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Tenth Floor

"Please stop! Why do you keep picking on me?!"

"One diced tomato, coming up!"

Between my Fourth Field and Haruka's psychotic cooking skills, we quickly sent the edgelord mummy's respawn back to where it came from.

"All right! Now Jupiter can access the second midpoint, too!"

"Good job! Time to go see the li'l jigglies!"

As Haruka and I chatted about this and that, our footsteps eventually brought us to the warp gate for the second midpoint.

"……"

…Huh?

I couldn't hear any footsteps coming from behind me. I turned around and noticed that the silver-haired girl was standing perfectly still.

"What's wrong, Jupiter? Are you getting tired?"

"She must be. C'mon, Kyou. Piggyback time!"

Compelled by Haruka, I started walking toward Jupiter.

I don't know why she doesn't just call on me when she's tired. I'll lend her my back whenever she needs it.

With each step I took, Jupiter's figure grew larger in my sight. I soon saw that she was standing with her arms slack, staring silently at the ceiling. The tenth floor's weird atmosphere made her look strangely mysterious.

She sure is delicate, though, huh?

She was probably a bit skinnier than other kids her age. Not to mention the fact that black lightning was sparking around her as she stood. It made her look particularly—

"Huh?"

Black…lightning?

Why? There aren't any enemies left…

"Hey, Jupiter?"

"……"

She didn't answer. She simply continued looking up, like some unmoving statue. But then…

"Kyou!"

…the next instant, a massive bolt of lightning came down from above. The pitch-black bolt crashed down mere feet in front of me.

"Wha—?!"

I scrambled to get Eckesachs ready, and waited for what would happen next.

Black bolts continued raining down over the same area at regular intervals. But the silver-haired girl kept standing perfectly still. Her crimson eyes looked completely hollow, as though they were devoid of life. She didn't so much as blink and remained unmoving.

Something's definitely wrong with her.

Approaching her was way too dangerous, though.

"Hey, Jupiter! Snap out of it!"

"Jupi! Are you okay?!"

The only option left was to desperately call out to her. We reassured her that there were no enemies left, and after a few minutes of trying to calm her down, the light returned to her eyes. As soon as it did, the jet-black lightning vanished like smoke.

"Ah… I—I…"

Apparently, she realized on some level what had happened. As soon as she came back to her senses, Jupiter's face turned deathly pale.

"I… I…"

"You're okay! You hear me, Jupi? Everything is okay!"

Jupiter looked like she could collapse at any moment, so Haruka hugged her and held her close.

"She's right. We would never get upset at you for something like this, okay? Everyone here is your friend. We won't force you to do anything. We won't get mad at you. There's nothing to be scared of."

I chose my words very carefully as I began to come up with a theory about what had just happened.

I would still have to ask her about it, but I guessed that something had caused her to lose control of herself.

When Jupiter mentioned that she "couldn't control her powers," she wasn't talking about her skills. We had seen as much for ourselves the moment we saw her drop an enemy with pinpoint precision.

She could control her skills just fine.

What she *couldn't* control was the root of her powers, the truth that lay behind them.

Modified Sublime Demis Model "Keraunos"—the spirit that had formed a pact with Jupiter.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," First Midpoint, Residential Area

"I can't control my spirit. The reason is that the people at *the facility* implanted it inside me by force…"

A gloomy atmosphere hung over the living room of our rental house.

After Jupiter finally recovered from her state of shock, she told us that what she wanted to do most was "talk."

So, we gave her the space to do so, but…what she had to tell us was pretty heavy.

She said that when she was still a child, she was sold off to a facility called the Paradise of the Chosen. And the people there

conducted inhumane research day and night to create a suitable host for the spirit they had modified.

After she survived a horrible competition, she had been imbued with a spirit known as Keraunos. *Jupiter* was a code name given to her by the facility and she could no longer remember her real name.

She had only been freed from the facility because a hero had appeared out of the blue to rescue her. And despite that hero successfully destroying the facility, he was injured in the battle and died soon after.

His dying wish was for her to go to the empire. And soon after he died, his companions showed up, too late to save him. But Jupiter convinced them to help get her to the empire.

She told us more and more and more and more.

Her life story, which she had woven for us, was the tale of a girl enduring hell. Every aspect of it was enough to break your heart.

“Keraunos is a special kind of spirit. Regular Sublime types don’t have a will of their own. But Keraunos was modified to have emotions in order to make it stronger.”

Sublime types were masses of pure spiritual power created after an incredibly long maturation period. It was a general term for godlike forces that have no will or awareness.

That’s probably a bit hard to wrap your mind around, but this might help: They’re classified as spirits, but really, they’re closer to incredible amalgamations of spirit-like energy.

I hope that makes it easier to grasp. It’s a bit haphazard, but that was the way the producer of *Dungeon Magia* explained it, so it should be pretty accurate.

Basically, Sublime spirits grant access to incredibly powerful abilities but are ridiculously hard to control. After all, they have no will. They’re just an amalgam of raw power. So, unlike other spirits, with whom the owner of the pact can form an understanding, Sublime types won’t even listen to their master’s orders half the time. Forming a pact with them was closer to coding. They just mechanically follow the program they’re given.

So, while they’re capable of outputting the most power of any Demis-class spirits, Sublime types are seen as difficult to use effectively. Even if it means losing a bit of power, using a Divine

Demis (like Haruka's) or a Relic Demis (like Eliza's Adamant—loyal, faithful, and strong spirits that offer strong passive skills) is better in the long run because you can reach an understanding with them.

Mind you, these are just my opinions as a player. The truth is, from the point of view of someone from this world, any Demis spirit at all would be enough to make most people drool.

But, in any case, the characters in *Dungeon Magia* who form pacts with Sublime Demis spirits are often portrayed as having problems controlling them.

I can't even count how many times there have been scenes throughout the series where a character undergoes special training to finally be able to control their Sublime spirit.

In that light, it seems inevitable that Sublime Demis spirits, while powerful, will always be hard to control. But there was one group that tried to overcome this weakness using any means necessary—the Paradise of the Chosen. The very same people who ran the facility who had bought Jupiter at such a young age.

They collected Sublime spirits through a variety of special means, conducted research on them, and poured endless amounts of certain human emotions into them to try and make them more susceptible to control.

"Keraunos was imbued with emotions relating to *fatherhood*. Their goal was to make the spirit feel that the pact holder was its own child so that it would want to protect them like a loving father would."

In most cases, the love of a parent for their child would be considered an admirable emotion. But the Sublime spirit of black bolts was injected with the memories of countless test subjects *and nothing more*. Naturally, it became imbued with twisted emotions.

"He sees me as his daughter and refuses to let anyone hurt me. But that doesn't stop at only enemies and when I'm being attacked. If I get even a little scared or feel any amount of stress, he flies into a rage and destroys everything around me. People, things, spirits…it doesn't matter. He attacks them all…"

That was the real reason Jupiter had been passed around from party to party. Sure, she was a powerful bombardier, but if

she took even the slightest amount of damage, she would become an uncontrollable natural disaster.

“The reason I lost control earlier was probably because I started thinking about how bad I felt that I wasn’t being useful. I didn’t do anything today. You carried me everywhere like a kid, Kyouichirou. And, Haruka, you were so worried about me that I didn’t get to do anything during the boss fight. So I started thinking about how sorry I was…and then I just…”

She told us about how she began obsessing over how useless she was.

“I was thinking awful thoughts. Your kindness made me feel weak and small, and I started sulking selfishly, and then my power got out of control. It doesn’t matter how much I say I’m sorry. It’ll never be enough. I’m…so, so sorry.”

She bowed low before saying that she was going to leave.

“I don’t want to cause you any more trouble than I already have. I get it now. I shouldn’t be around people anymore. So, I’m just going to—”

“You’re not about to say ‘I’m gonna live on my own’ like some little kid, are you?”

It seemed like I’d hit the mark, because the girl’s eyes clouded over.

“I don’t have any other choice,” she said. “I shouldn’t even be allowed to exist.”

“Yeah? All right, well, for argument’s sake, let’s say you did go off and live on your own. Let’s assume you decide to make your living as an adventurer. You’d be a solo adventurer, right? You could pick some place where you wouldn’t bother anyone. Let’s say the eleventh level. You’d go there to take down spirits every day to make ends meet. Makes sense. I’m sure it’d work out fine at first.”

With Jupiter’s powers, living in the dungeon would be no problem.

Not to mention the fact that the three of us were the only ones capable of getting past the tenth floor for the time being.

“But listen, Jupiter. You never know what might happen in the world. Maybe, one day, the enemies in Sakurabana’s dungeons start going berserk all of a sudden. Or a strange phenomenon occurs that amplifies the darkness in people’s hearts. If society

were to become unstable, everyone around you would only get meaner. Envy, jealousy, unjust discrimination. ‘How come we’re all barely scraping by, but that brat’s raking in all the dough?’ Crap like that… If something like that happened, what do you think would happen to you?”

“Well…”

“You’d get stressed out, right? Not only would you be lonely, but anytime you did meet people, they would all hate you. You’d lose it. That’s only natural. Anyone would have a hard time withstanding that kind of pressure.”

And when that stress reached critical mass, the real tragedy would occur.

“Filled with loneliness and anxiety and envied by those around you—once those emotions build up inside of you, your spirit will start to act out. And since you won’t be under the protection of any of the major clans, imperial officials would show up and throw you in a prison cell for a long time.”

Foreign people who commit crimes in the empire, even if only once, tend to face severe punishment. It doesn’t matter if you’re a naturalized citizen or not. The authorities see that as little more than flowery words.

You might be a citizen, but you’re still a foreigner. So, even if they treat you kindly at first, the instant something goes wrong, they’ll gladly stone you to death.

And it’s not like that way of thinking was limited to the empire. Most countries in this world treat people the same way, more or less. Even after getting their hands on the perfect source of energy, the creatures known as *people* remain just as irredeemable as ever.

“Or you might become the target of an evil organization and get tricked into joining them—something like that’s possible, too.”

That’s how extremist losers were born.

“None of this is your fault. Society is to blame.”

They’d feed her that kind of clichéd crap, luring in their lonely prey and then using her as a tool. It made me want to puke just thinking about it.

“And then you’d find yourself in a world of violence, doing these crappy adults’ bidding as if they were your stupid parents.”

This is all society’s fault.

You don't need to hold back anymore.

Everyone around you is a bad person who has hurt you.

"Whenever you kill someone, they'll praise you. Destroy a building and you'll be showered in gifts. And, hey, why feel guilty? Everyone you've killed is just a bad person that's made you suffer, right? But ask yourself this: Would you still be yourself after going through all of that?"

"…All of these examples are hypothetical," she said. "None of these could happen. You made all of this up."

"Maybe. But tell me, Jupiter, while I was talking, didn't you think to yourself that, *if* all that stuff really *did* happen, you'd probably end up picking all the choices I mentioned?"

"……"

You won't be able to deny it to yourself. After all, in another, very similar version of this world, a stupid, stupid girl followed that very same path.

Do you know what they called that girl, Jupiter? They called her the Raging Dark. Pretty extreme name, huh? Makes you wonder why she's so pissed off.

It's lame as hell. So, so lame.

"Sorry, Jupiter, but I ain't gonna let you make such stupid choices."

What, was I supposed to let her go off on her own? Be persecuted? Go berserk? Get tricked? And in the end become nothing but some crazed terrorist who can't even remember Szilard's face—the very man who saved her?

Screw that! Like anyone would accept that kind of garbage-tier fate.

Calamity, unfairness, tragedy—to hell with all of it! I'm gonna ruin your piece-of-crap sob story, you damned parasite devs.

Sorry, but now that she's our friend, she's gonna be happy and prosperous.

And if that dumbass secret society (Hah! Don't make me laugh) wants to talk a bunch of crap about this and that being society's fault, well, they can just choke on it and die.

"So what if you can't control your powers? So what if your spirit goes berserk every now and then? In that case, let's just kick that overbearing lightning-bolt dad's ass! Teach him a thing or two about butting into his daughter's social life!"

“Oh yeah! And once we do that, we can castrate him to boot! Cut him down to size so he won’t misbehave ever again!”

“Now you’re talkin’! Haruka coming in hot with some great ideas.”

“Heck yeah!”

“Wah-hah-hah!” We let loose our trademark laugh 30 percent more intensely than usual.

The silver-haired girl stared at us in complete disbelief. “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Nope.”

“Aren’t you sick of me causing trouble?”

“It’s no trouble at all. If anything, you should lean on us even more.”

“Wh-why…? Why are you so nice to me?”

“That’s easy! It’s ’cause—

“—the three of us are—”

“—a party!”

Haruka and I took turns saying that last part. We hadn’t planned it, and it was a bit embarrassing, but it was the truth.

“The whole reason we added you to our party is ’cause we couldn’t make it past the fifteenth floor. Now that we’ve made it past the tenth floor again and our goal’s right in front of us, we’d be totally lost without you, right?”

“That’s right! Pretty soon, *you’re* gonna be the one carrying *us*! We’re counting on you, Jupi!

“Kyouichirou… Haruka…” Jupiter slowly covered up her face like she was trying to work through something. “If you both think so…then I’ll try…a bit harder, too.”

We responded to her courage with two of the biggest smiles we could muster.



■ Chapter 21
Kamaku, the Doomquill Condor

◆

Eternal Darkness is a dungeon with twenty-five floors in all.

It's not extremely long, but it's not short enough for most beginners either.

Considering the beginner-friendly Moon's Eclipse has five levels, and the Five Great Dungeons each have over fifty, Eternal Darkness sits roughly in the middle.

And in the middle of that midsize dungeon was the fifteenth floor. The most middle of the middles.

The boss of that level didn't have otherworldly strength like the one waiting on the final level, nor did it have a cheap set of rules like the Lord of Death on the tenth floor.

Still, it wasn't a complete pushover. It had a tough body, a healthy supply of spiritual power, and the area it called home was enough of a pain to make it way more of a challenge than the Grim Ogre and White Ogre on the fifth floor.

This middle-of-the-road boss made its home on the middle floor of a midsize dungeon. It was the midmost of middling midbosses you could imagine. That was the best way to describe

the boss we were about to take on: Kamaku the Doomquill Condor.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Fifteenth Floor

The massive baobab tree’s roots stretched across the infinite sky.

And there, sitting on a tree floating roughly a thousand feet above the ground, was the boss.

It had sickly purple plumage, and its massive body seemed imposing even from far away. It had the same dignified bird-of-prey glare we’d seen last time.

Kamaku the Doomquill Condor, guardian of the skies and ruler of the fifteenth floor, continued to stare down at us from its perch atop the tree, just as it had on our last visit.

“Long time no see, you boneless chicken. We’ve come back for seconds.”

I brandished Eckesachs and taunted the bird. Thinking back, I realized that a lot had happened since our last visit.

We had faced off against Szilard.

We had met Jupiter.

She and I had played dating sims together. I remembered all the exciting and serious conversations we had shared.

Ahh, the memories are coming back to me. It feels like it just happened yesterday…!

“What do you mean, ‘like it just happened yesterday’? It literally did happen yesterday.”

“You’re weird.”

“……”

I wished the others would take a hint. I was just trying to have one of *those* moments before a big battle.

“…What kind of moments? I don’t get it.”

“Jupi, I think this is that edgy *chuuni* thing he’s always going on about.”

“That’s not it at all!”

I couldn’t believe Haruka had the gall to teach a young kid words that she didn’t even know how to use herself!

“…I think she’s right. Kyouichirou, you’re very *chuuni*.”

“See?! I told you, I told you! Kyou’s a little *chuuni* edgelord!”

“Grrr…!”

These two are conspiring against me!

“Well, whatever. Point is, it’s time to get our revenge on the fifteenth floor! Are you punks ready to do this?!”

“The only punk around here is you.”

“…Please try that again.”

“…Are your preparations complete, oh beauteous damsels?”

“Wooow!” they cheered, raising their hands.

Man, these two are exhausting. Why do they have to be picky about every little thing like a couple of middle-school kids?

“I *am* a middle school kid!”

“I’m still in elementary school. Sixth-year, correspondence.”

Ah. Right, right. Everyone here’s literally a brat.

“I gotta say, though, you seem to be in much higher spirits today, Jupiter. It’s almost like yesterday didn’t even happen.”

As soon as I pointed this out, Jupiter, who had been talkative up until now, suddenly looked embarrassed and hesitated.

“Yesterday I…was a bit negative is all. But you both accepted me for who I am. So I’m going to give it my all for the sake of this party.”

“Sounds good to me. We’re counting on you, Bombardier.”

“Leave it to me,” she said with a nod. There was no sign of doubt in her eyes.

It seemed like we didn’t have to worry about her losing control anytime soon.

“All right, then. I think it’s about time for you to drop that birdy.”

“Okay.”

Jet-black spiritual power began to surround Jupiter.

Looks like she’s ready. Good. Hit it where it hurts.

“Fall.”

In an instant, a jet-black bolt crashed down onto the airborne tree.

There was a flash of light.

A terrifying thunderclap.

Suddenly, a pillar of fire erupted at the top of the massive tree.

A thousand or more feet above, a discharge point had formed, and black lightning bolts continuously poured out of it.

What's your move, bird? Your favorite spot's about to come crashing down.

"KRYYYYYYY!"

A deafening screech came from the blaze that had begun to encompass the tree. With its perch on fire, the large bird had finally decided to get off its butt.

The Doomquill Condor spread its toxic-looking wings and took to the sky.

Mere moments later, the massive baobab tree had been blown to bits by the dark lightning bolts. Chunks of what remained of it came crashing down in the distance.

That was one hell of an opening move.

Just having a bombardier on the team really makes a difference… Anyway, keep it together, Kyouichirou! I gotta start thinking about our plan of attack.

"Get ready to intercept it! Haruka, you start setting up Futsu-no-Mitama and keep an eye out for any incoming attacks. Send the copies of Azure Skies up above us, just in case this thing's got any energy-based moves."

"Gotcha!"

"Jupiter, you start frying that chicken! Try focusing on attacks that hit from the air in a straight line and have the least impact on the ground! Don't worry about your positioning. I'll take care of that and keep you safe!"

"…Are you saying what I think you're saying…?"

"Piggyback time!"

The silver-haired girl paused for an unnaturally long time before nodding.

"I very reluctantly accept."

"Don't give me that. My back's the safest place for you!"

"It's not your fault, Kyouichirou. But piggyback rides make me feel like a little kid…"

"That's silly, you *are* a kid! Just leave it to your big bro Kyouichirou and hold on tight!"

"…Boo."

After voicing her complaints in the most obvious way imaginable, she climbed up onto my back.

"You got a good grip back there?"

"Yes… It's like holding on to rocks."

“That’s just proof that my muscles are primed and ready to go. Just hold on tight and—

“Here it comes!”

A giant fireball came falling down toward us from the sky.

Kamaku had begun its attack. It had produced three fireballs from its beak, and they were barreling down at us at tremendous speeds.

It’s not gonna be that easy, bird boy.

“Haruka! Intercept it!”

“You got it!”

There was no chance that those meteoric balls of fire would ever reach us. The treasured anti-magic blade of the Aono line was able to cut through energy itself. Our foe’s attack was as good as useless.

“Haaaaahhhh!”

Haruka let out a piercing scream as a destructive storm of blades danced through the air.

Shing! The sextet of swords sliced through the rumbling fireballs with a satisfying metallic sound. It was like watching a candle try and resist a typhoon.

Kamaku fought back by firing several rounds of fireballs but to no avail. The six sword clones of Azure Skies sliced through each of them with a single blow.

“All right! Looks like we’ve got its long-range barrage covered. You ready, Jupiter? It’s about time for us to begin our counterattack.”

“I’ll try.”

The pigtailed piggybacker rustled and squirmed on my back.

She seemed to be creating a discharge point.

Usually, long-range astral skills were fired by first creating a *discharge point* and then releasing the attack from those points.

If spiritual power was the gunpowder, and astral skills were the bullets, then discharge points were akin to the muzzle of a gun.

The most basic element of effective long-range attacks was creating discharge points capable of accommodating the scale, power, range, and trajectory of your astral skills.

Truly skilled long-distance attackers were able to create discharge points further away by using bypasses—arteries that

connect the discharge points to the user's spiritual power.

Jupiter was skilled enough to use bypasses to set up discharge points miles away from her.

I focused my ability to detect spiritual power as much as I could and expanded it before looking up at the sky.

Following the trails of spiritual power with my eyes to their terminal point, I saw something I could hardly believe.

"Ha-ha! Damn!"

The sight made me laugh unconsciously.

Kamaku unleashed more fireballs, but surrounding him were a dozen or more discharge points.

Spiritual veins stretched throughout the heavens, each with massive cavities at the end of them.

The series of tubes and holes encircled the Doomquill Condor. Each opening was like the muzzle of a gun whose express purpose was downing the bird.

"?!"

Kamaku must have sensed the amount of spiritual power flowing around it, because it flapped its wings in a desperate attempt to reposition itself, releasing a screen of fireballs in its wake.

"It's no use."

But it failed to shake the encirclement.

Jupiter moved the bypasses at will and chased the bird. In an instant, the discharge points found their target and encircled it once again. And then—

"Pierce."

—a blaze of pure-black lightning rumbled through the sky. Dozens of bolts struck from point-blank range.

Jupiter's bolts of darkness passed through the bypasses, came out the discharge points, and fried the Doomquill Condor, turning it into barbecued chicken.

"Is that enough, Kyouichirou?"

"…Not yet. Don't stop until that thing's been turned into light particles and disappears."

"Okay."

The charcoal-blackened chicken had been exposed to an incredible midair beating. It was pecking at death's door.

But it wasn't dead yet.

The fact that it was still in the sky taking the hits was proof of that.

If it was still alive after everything Jupiter had put it through, it could only mean that it was using its recovery skill. This was similar to the one Szilard had used—it transmuted thermal energy.

The bird converted its body with flames and used that to mend its wounds. It was a desperate yet miraculous move. If I remember correctly, the description from the game mentioned that it healed its HP, as well as boosting its thermal powers and resistance.

Talk about a pain in the ass. A buff, a heal, and a boost to resistance all in one move. A real bargain deal.

The astral skills Kamaku used weren't that high-level, but they were enough to withstand Jupiter's onslaught.

Slowly, parts of Kamaku's body began to burn with purple flame as it transformed into energy. It would soon scorch its whole body until it was as good as new, just like a phoenix.

"This isn't good," I said. "It's raising its resistance to thermal energy."

"It's okay. My dark bolts aren't like normal lightning. The secondary effect should kick in soon."

Mere moments later, the meaning behind her words became clear.

"Kry…?"

All of a sudden, the Doomquill Condor began coughing up purple blood.

It wasn't caused by damage from the lightning, either. Its insides were being torn apart.

"…My dark bolts have two properties. They strike with both electricity and a poisonous miasma. Even if it could survive the lightning, there's no running from the poison that's destroying it from the inside."

It was nothing less than a death sentence.

Even if the bird turned its entire body into flame, there was no changing the original blueprint of its existence. That blueprint was how it returned its body to normal after turning it into flame. But the dark bolt's miasma would tear that blueprint to shreds from the bottom up.

Even if the powerful black lightning bolts weren't enough to finish a foe, the accumulation of poison in its body would be enough to tear it apart… Jupiter had a truly devilish ability.

"KRYYYYYYYYY!"

Kamaku emitted a piercing screech as it writhed violently in the sky.

It would be no exaggeration to call this its death knell. The dark bolts rained down on it without ceasing as the miasma began to rot it from the inside. Its death was only a matter of time…

"Kyou! The birdy's coming this way!"

The first to notice it was Haruka. The radiant star pointed a finger up at the large bird whose figure seemed to be getting bigger with each passing second.

It's not falling…is it? It's trying to make it look like it is, but the way its muscles are moving is too dynamic.

It was clear—it was dive-bombing us… It was going for one final suicidal strike.

"Haruka, intercept it. Make sure it doesn't get too close."

"Okey-doke!" she responded, relaxed as ever as she fixed up her Azure Skies formation.

The six copies of Azure Skies created a blade vortex around the area where Kamaku was most likely to fall.

If the bird were to dive into that death swirl for even an instant, it would surely be turned into ground chicken.

But it had no other options left. No other directions it could go.

The black lightning bolts continued their assault. Soon they would snuff out the bird's very life.

Fall and you're dead. Run away and you're dead. So, what's it gonna be, Kamaku?

"……"

The Doomquill Condor glared at us with a sharp glint in its eyes.

It had chosen to fall.

The massive bird wreathed itself in flame and dove into the tornado of blades.

The violent slashing of Haruka's swords nullified the flames' regenerative ability and began to cut the avian lord of the

fifteenth floor apart.

Its wings were clipped.

Its feet were severed.

Its torso was sliced open, exposing its organs. The pitch-black lightning began piercing its innards.

Once Kamaku's head had been cut clean off its body, I knew it was over.

Its body, torn apart by the hurricane of blades and the rain of black lightning bolts, fell to the ground.

As it landed, I realized that, large as the bird had been, all that remained of it above us now was its head.

Sorry, bird. I didn't want it to end so gruesomely. Hate us all you wa—

"KRYYY!"

Wait…huh?

"Did that bird's head just squawk at us?"

But before Jupiter could even answer, the unthinkable happened.

Kamaku, now reduced to only a head, opened its beak. It was radiating red heat.

This head really thinks it's gonna—?

"Get away from me, Jupiter. I'll block its attack!"

"Okay."

The small girl hustled down from my back.

Good. That's good. Just leave the rest to me.

Kamaku's beak opened wide. It had only one chance to fire something off before it hit the ground, and this was it.

I stood in front of its line of fire and activated Fourth Field.

All right, birdy, fire away. I'll block your attack and then this'll all be over.

So, c'mon, shoot. C'mon—!

"……"

But Kamaku didn't launch its fireball.

Its head became perfectly still—beak open and at the ready—as it collided with the ground.

It hit with such an impact that bits of brain went flying in all directions before it bounced and—

…It bounced?!

—the impact from slamming into the ground caused the position of its head to shift ever so slightly, altering the trajectory of its fireballs.

But I was stuck in Fourth Field, unable to move.

This thing was tenacious and full of loathing. It had plunged into mortal peril, all for this one chance. It had made it through the blade tornado, survived the barrage of black bolts, and bypassed my defenses for one final attack.

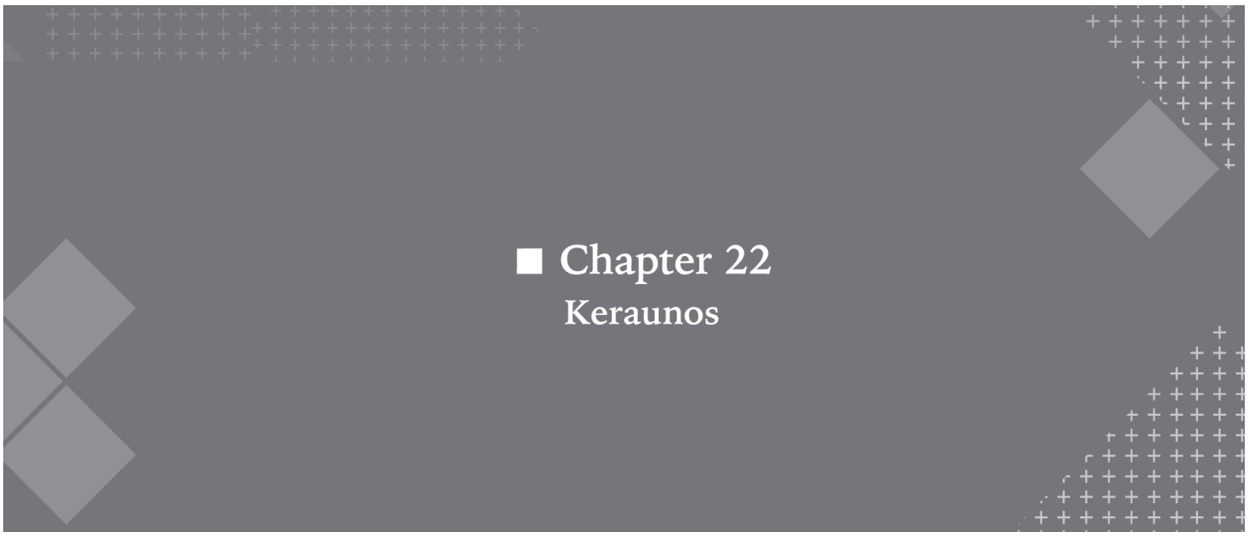
“Run, Jupiter!”

I yelled to no avail. My words were blocked by the law of the fourth dimension.

In the brief moment before it expired, the bird set its sights on the girl’s back as she ran, aimed its beak, and—

“KRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!”

—let its fireball fly.



◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Fifteenth Floor

Kamaku had sacrificed its life and put everything it had into one final attack.

The massive fireball it unleashed was like a condensed mass containing all of its hatred. The attack narrowly missed me as I stood there in Fourth Field.

Oh, crap.

The moment I realized what was happening, I dropped Fourth Field and tried to recover in time.

“Jupiter!”

Please make it. Please make it, I thought, turning back toward her.

I didn’t expect such a weak attack to cause any serious harm to Jupiter, but if she *felt* like she was being attacked for even a moment, we were in trouble.

It wasn’t a matter of whether she could defend it, or a question of how much damage she would take.

The instant she felt like she was in danger—

“Ahh…!”

—*it* would be consumed by rage.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

An angry roar shook the very world around us.

The sky turned dark and jet-black bolts of lightning came crashing down to the ground.

A beast of darkest black had manifested.

It was the incarnation of a father—one hell-bent on eradicating any and all threats to his daughter.

The modified Sublime spirit, which had paternal emotions forcibly installed into it by a heartless group of scientists, had been unleashed on the world, and at the worst possible time.

This is really bad.

I tried to call out to Haruka, but I was too slow.

Or, perhaps more accurately, *it* was far too fast.

The change that came over the fifteenth floor happened as fast as a flash of lightning.

First, the beast absorbed Jupiter into its body. It opened its darkly shrouded maw and devoured the dazed girl whole.

But it wasn’t eating her—what it was doing was quite the opposite. It was trying to protect its daughter—it wanted to do what we had failed to accomplish.

It realized that it was the strongest being present, and that by absorbing her, she would be protected from all harm.

In a way, it was the ultimate display of paternal love. But its daughter’s feelings on the matter were of no concern—its warped desire to protect her was one-sided.

“AWOOOOOO!”

It let out a dark roar and trampled the bird’s fireball underfoot.

It was like watching a lit match be crushed by a piece of heavy machinery. And so, the Doomquill Condor’s final desperate attack was snuffed out by one movement of this mighty beast’s front leg.

The difference in strength almost seemed unfair—poor Kamaku never stood a chance.

And then—

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

—the beast began its purge of the offender.

Its second roar brought with it a rain of black lightning bolts. But those bolts had now been transformed into weapons with deadly aim.

The bolts consumed the beast’s hated foe—the one who had dared to put its daughter in danger. The countless bits of flesh that had once made up Kamaku were torched by the bolts of enmity and reduced to ash.

The weather raged and the land became desolate—the beast’s rage was a veritable natural disaster. And that calamity continued unabated even after the threat had been eliminated.

The creature was larger than a truck. It looked like an amalgamation of every carnivorous animal imaginable.

If it weren’t for the jet-black fur standing on end all over its body and the endlessly flowing black lightning bolts that surrounded it, it would simply look like an incredibly fierce wild beast.

Goddamn it…

“…Keraunos. You damned bastard!”

I really wanted to avoid you if possible.

But we had unleashed the beast. This was our own fault.

In other words, the fact it had shown up meant that we had failed to protect Jupiter. My heart clouded with guilt. I wanted to punch myself in the face for being so useless. But—

“Haruka! Intercept the black thunderbolts and make your way over here.”

“Got it!”

—there wasn’t even a second to waste on self-pity. This was an emergency.

We ran across the black bolt-laden battlefield and met up. Then we huddled together in a defensive formation.

“I’ll use Fourth Field to protect us from attacks from the front. You use Azure Skies to protect us from lightning from above. You’d better cast Shield and Lessen Impact on yourself for protection. Especially to guard your ears from the sound. Any questions?”

“Uh, are you okay? You look really pale, Kyou.”

“I’m just a bit sleep-deprived is all. Sorry. I’ll make sure I’m well-rested next time,” I told her, hoping my made-up excuses were enough to dispel her concern. Then I immediately activated Fourth Field.

The world turned monochrome as my body changed into a fourth-dimensional entity.

I held Eckesachs in its great sword form at a diagonal angle to improve the width of my defenses and had Haruka stand behind me. I had to be ready to intercept an attack at a moment’s notice.

C’mon, you damn beast.

Just as I had expected, the creature moved.

Keraunos’s gaping maw glowed black. Light swelled around its mouth. Lightning crackled. Thunder rumbled.

The attack it was charging was so massive that its spiritual power was visible to the naked eye. Keraunos stooped down, turned to face us, and—

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

—the moment his spiritual power reached its peak, my monochromatic vision went black.

It unleashed a spray of lightning breath capable of extinguishing any and all living organisms in range.

The lightning beast wasn’t going to let anyone that might cause its daughter stress survive.

Its thirst for murder was bottomless. Insatiable.

The beam it fired was murderous rage, incarnate. And all I could do was stand there and take it head-on.

I stood in that quiet, colorless realm, completely unable to move.

“Hmm. I’ve heard of toxic parents, but this is truly something else.”

A beautiful voice, full of fourth-dimensional logic, reached my mind.

Himinglaeva Albion. Only she, the goddess of time, was able to act freely in this fourth-dimensional realm.

I responded—not by vibrating my vocal cords, but instead by vibrating my very soul.

“This is on another level than toxic parenting. This guy’s a monster.”

“Hmm. A fair point. I’m surprised that you of all people would make such an astute observation, Master.”

She was always saying one thing too many.

But even if this wicked goddess was quick to fling insults, it was a relief to hear her voice. The world inside Fourth Field was terribly lonely. There was no sound. There were no colors. There was no anything. So being able to talk to anyone at all while I was being overwhelmed by this pitch-black force made me feel a bit better.

It was such a relief that I even opened up to her.

“I failed.”

My heart ached. Guilt and powerlessness poured out of me like so many tears.

“I wasn’t able to stop Keraunos from showing up.”

Despite how harsh I’d been with Jupiter the day before, I had failed to live up to my promise to her.

I felt so ashamed. I hated myself.

“Hey, Albi.” I had no one else to ask. *“If we can make it out of this alive, what the hell am I even supposed to say to her?”*

Lost in darkness without an exit, I asked Albi a question without an answer.

I couldn’t be completely sure, but normally, skills such as Manifest that allowed spirits to appear in the physical world could only be used for short periods of time.

Taking into account the countless AOE attacks coming from the sky and the black-lightning breath that Keraunos had just launched at full blast, it was reasonable to assume that the manifestation would only last a few minutes.

There was a very good chance that between the experience I’d received in the dungeon and in our battle with Szilard, Fourth Field had become strong enough to outlast Keraunos.

But unfortunately, that was only a temporary solution. Even if I was able to run out the clock, all it would take was for Jupiter to recharge her spiritual power and get stressed out again for it to show up once more.

And when that happened, I was sure that she would only blame herself. And the more she blamed herself, the more her stress would pile up. And the more her stress piled up, the more active Keraunos would become.

It was a vicious cycle. An endless loop that got worse and worse with each rotation.

It made me shudder just thinking about it.

“I believe you’ll be fine, Master.”

Albi’s answer was terribly irresponsible.

“*No way!*” I barked, full of anger.

My mental voice suddenly turned nasty.

“There’s nothing fine about this! You think a couple flowery words from me are gonna be enough to dry her tears? Even with this busted-ass cheat-code-level power, I couldn’t do anything to protect her, to keep her smiling… How can I be so freaking weak?!”

I knew that I was just venting, but I couldn’t control my horrible emotions. I felt so low.

I know it’s my fault. This is all because I’m weak.

Damn it! If only I wasn’t completely useless from a distance…!

“Indeed. You’re quite right, Master.”

“Huh?”

Albi’s voice rang through my mind.

I couldn’t make heads or tails of what she was agreeing with. My rampaging emotions calmed down long enough for me to imagine a big question mark.

“What’s this thing I’m supposedly right about?”

“You’ve hurt your party member because you’re still inexperienced. So, just as you hurl curses at yourself now, so, too, will she disdain herself. And in that case, what you should say to her is clear, is it not? The words that you yourself wish to hear the most at this very moment—those are the ones you should say to her. Do so and you’re certain to avoid any extra conflict.”

I was astonished. She was totally right.

I was used to Albi saying only horribly mean things to me. I could hardly believe the good advice she was giving me.

“Luckily for you, you still have some time to fret and ponder. Think carefully about what words you should give to this girl that you’ve disappointed.”

“Yeah… I guess you’re right.”

I gazed out at the world that had been dyed in black and took a deep breath.

…After a while, I managed to calm down somewhat.

Maybe I can think of something now.

I tried to keep a cool head and focus my thoughts solely on Jupiter, the girl from abroad who lived her life in constant fear that her angry father figure might hurt the ones around her.

The powerlessness, the guilt I feel from hurting someone close to me—I understand exactly how you feel now.

But despite all that, you keep moving forward. You keep trying your very best.

Even though you're still just a kid, you've been trying so hard all by yourself to make sure you're not a bother to anyone… Ah, goddamn it! Why's this messed up world gotta make someone who's trying so hard suffer so much?

Not her family, not society, and not even her spirit treats her with any basic human decency!

…Kids aren't just your damned playthings.

How come no one recognized her for the upstanding person she is?

How come no one ever made a place for her in this world?

How come no one ever believed in her?

The reason Jupiter joined the organization in the original version of this world wasn't because they tricked her into it.

It was because she had always, always been alone.

She was sold by her parents to be used as a test subject by some evil scientists and then treated like scum in her adopted country… Under those brutal circumstances, if the devil himself whispered, "None of this is your fault" in your ear, any reasonable person would want to believe him.

If there had been even one person along the way that had been there for her, there's no way she would have ended up like that…

So…why…?

"…Oh."

Suddenly, I found the missing piece of the puzzle I'd been looking for.

For a second, it felt like a small light had been lit in the pitch-black world.

I can't believe this. The answer's been staring me in the face this whole time.

I feel like an idiot for not realizing sooner.

It was so obvious—if she didn't have a place where she belonged, we just needed to make one for her.

"…Hey, Albi. I figured out what I should say to her."

"Let's hear it."

And so I—

◆

"Haruka!"

—I yelled. The world was full of color once again. I was back in the three-dimensional world, and it tasted like a mouthful of blood.

"Is it… Is it still going?"

The beast's black breath had ceased. That massive attack had wasted a ton of the spiritual power it needed to stay manifested. Keraunos wasn't budging an inch. But it kept its eyes trained on us the entire time.

It was a glare that seemed to say, "I'll let you live *for now*." Its stare, a mix of hatred and ridicule from a being who knew it was in charge, almost made me lose my nerve.

In all honesty, if I was looking for the most efficient path to self-preservation, I likely should have chosen to accept its silent offer.

If I had continued cowering, let it beat me, or even just tiptoed around Keraunos in an attempt to keep it happy… Each of these options would have been correct, and each one was incredibly tempting.

But—

"We're takin' that thing down."

—that wasn't good enough for me. Not in the slightest. I hadn't been able to prevent Keraunos's rampage. I had allowed Jupiter to hurt her own friends. I had no doubt that when she came to, she would blame herself for everything. She would probably apologize a bunch.

…I want to tell her that it was no big deal. I want to laugh and say, "Psh, that thing? What a pushover. We kicked its butt."

You think I'm gonna let some cheap knockoff like you "allow us to escape"? In your dreams.

“We’re not letting this thing get away. Time to stomp this dark lightning daddy into the dust.”

I felt a clap on my back and thought I’d been struck by lightning for a second. *Slap.* It was exactly the kind of heartfelt response I’d expect from her.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself!” said Haruka, coming out from behind me to stand at my side. “That’s why I like hanging out with you, Kyou! Just sitting around and waiting for this guy to disappear on its own isn’t *exciting* enough!” With a ferocious, ice-cold grin, the radiant star readied her katana. “Let’s kick its ass.”

“Let’s do it.”

I was lucky to have been blessed with such a great partner. I felt like I could do anything as long as she was by my side. No matter how tough things got, I knew we could laugh it off and overcome.

“That thing’s practically out of spiritual power by now. There’s no way it’s packing anything else like that big breath attack anymore.”

The black bolt beast was perfectly silent. It stared at us as it discharged small bolts of electricity around it. It looked down at us…and down on us.

“…Huh?”

Suddenly, Keraunos moved.

It howled as it swung its front right leg at us with tremendous speed. It was so massive that it cast a shadow as it fell onto us.

“Fourth Field!”

The best way to deal with such primitive tactics was simple—dodge and defend. Haruka leaped into the air like a rabbit, and I took the brunt of the hit head-on. The creature stomped on me with all its might, almost like it was trying to punish me for the insolence of having refused its mercy. It collided with me, but I had other plans.

Suck on it and die, loser.

Keraunos’s front right leg crumpled as it collided with Fourth Field.

Seeing its leg shattered, I immediately dropped my defenses and swung my weapon upward to give the black-bolt bastard a big face full of great sword.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

In an instant, an infinity of black lightning bolts rained down all around me. It had detonated the sparks that had been surrounding it. My heart almost stopped, and I broke out in a cold sweat. I clicked my tongue in disappointment and retreated. A split second later, the area where I had been standing was bathed in a shower of lightning bolts. And a split second after that, six clones of Azure Skies danced through the air to fend off the bolts.

This thing…*this Keraunos* wasn't the real Keraunos. This thing was a fake. It was a cheap forgery created from Jupiter's negative emotions. And yet…

I'm surprised it's able to hit this hard… Looks like I might have underestimated it.

Keraunos was packing more spiritual power than I had given it credit for. It had a hardheaded personality and was clever enough to calmly assess our movements before acting.

This was no simple doting father. It had a clear look of mockery on its face when it gave us the opportunity to escape, and once we rejected it, Keraunos's expression changed to blind rage.

Deceit, narcissism, stubbornness, and self-righteousness—this beast was a twisted incarnation of paternal obsession. A father figure who would destroy everything if it meant its daughter would have to keep relying on it. That was the truth behind the monster named Keraunos.

And as soon as I thought about the girl who had suffered for so long at the hands of this monster, my eyebrows unconsciously furrowed. *I can't lose. I won't lose. My heart's burning with a determination like it never has before. But more than anything…*

"Ngh…"

I was starting to see stars. I was almost out of spiritual power to use on astral skills. The recoil from using Fourth Field so many times was starting to hit me hard. I hate to say it, but I could barely even stand.

"Hang in there!"

Just as I thought I might collapse, my party's radiant star wrapped a warm arm around me for support. Her beautiful white limbs were covered in beads of sweat, and she was breathing heavily. But her eyes were sparkling and unclouded.

“We can beat this guy without taking damage, right?”

Six Azure Skies danced through the air.

“We don’t want Jupi to feel like she’s hurt us, do we?”

Floating as gracefully as butterflies, and glowing as bright as a swarm of comets, the sword clones cut through the incoming rain of black bolts.

I was grateful for both her kindness and their ferocity.

Thanks, Haruka. I’m so glad you’re by my side.

“Yeah.”

I nodded, then turned my gaze to the black-bolt beast. The monster parent was sending some of its spiritual power into its shattered front leg to try and recover from its wounds.

My mind reeled imagining all of the times Jupiter had suffered because of this selfish lightning beast. Who could even begin to imagine how many times it had broken her heart? And the more I thought about it, the more the clouds seemed to lift from my tired mind.

It’s taking this thing ages to regenerate. And it’s having trouble summoning a lot of lightning bolts at once. Not to mention how weak its attacks have gotten… This is going to work. It’s definitely going to show us an opening.

It was as battered and bruised as I was. This was no time to give in to exhaustion.

“Haruka.”

“Yeah!”

We naturally extended our arms to the side at the same time.

“Here we go. One electric freak, coming right up.”

“Pfft! What does that even mean?”

Our fists met. We both laughed as we turned to face forward. I breathed in deeply, then exhaled. And after waiting a beat…

“HERE WE COME, ASSHOOOOOOOOOOOOOLE!”

We ran.

Haruka dashed to the left, and I launched myself to the right. By dividing and conquering, we could overwhelm our foe’s ability to accurately process our movements.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The black beast roared. It forced the leg it was still regenerating up into the air and then spun around. At first blush,

it looked like it was going to try to smash into us with brute force, but we soon realized that it had a much more sophisticated plan in mind.

This thing's avoiding me.

It had learned from our previous exchange. Keraunos carefully adjusted the timing and position of the leg it was using to pivot in order to focus its attacks only on Haruka.

But that wasn't all.

There was no way this electric psychopath was going to let me off the hook just because I had proved that physical attacks had no effect on me.

"So, that's your game, huh?!"

Keraunos focused its bottomless rage and unleashed it in a new way—the sparks that radiated from its body were transformed into black electricity that shot across the battlefield in a linear pattern.

Basically, it was firing beams of black energy at me. There were ten in all. It didn't take a genius to realize that even a glancing blow from one of these beams would mess me up.

Fourth Field.

I only used it for a split second—I timed it perfectly, just as each beam was about to hit me. The ten-beam volley collided with my impervious body and bounced off. There wasn't an attack around that Fourth Field would let through. It had protected me from every beam. But—

"Ng…guh…"

—I had reached my limit. My body had spent its entire store of spiritual power. And repeated use of Fourth Field had left me physically battered. The only things I had to defend myself now were the remnants of the buffs I had used while fighting Kamaku, the weapons I held in each hand, and one incredibly dependable, spirited party member.

That'll be plenty.

I forced a grin and clenched my blades with as much power as I could manage.

In my right hand was a black sword of unimaginable weight. In my left, a white dagger capable of severing cause from effect.

I entrusted my life to this unbalanced pair of blades, each one with a different size and purpose, and clenched them tightly as I

boldly leaped into near-certain death.

“NYEH-HEEEEEEEEEEHHH!”

I unleashed all of my pent-up emotion with a sound that was part war cry, part bravado and served as a warning to my opponent.

I lopped the large beast’s front leg off with Laevateinn and then swung Eckesachs, which collided full force with its newly exposed stump.

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Steropes—the flash. Arges—the bolt. Brontes—the thunder.

The enraged thunder beast let out a piercing roar and a blast of lighting. Dozens of black discharge points flooded the area with dark flashes.

Having spent all of my spiritual power and with my body in terrible condition, my odds of breaking through the bolt blockade were slim.

“Hey, you oversized mutt!”

But the odds that I’d bite it here—

“Is that all you got?”

—were practically zero.

“Nyeh-heh! Isn’t that right, Kyouichirou?”

The sound of a lovely voice floated to my ears. It was so beautiful and so comforting that it immediately warmed me to my core.

But the focal point of what happened next wasn’t the radiant star’s radiant voice, but the technique she unleashed on the monster.

The Blue Meteor cut a swath through the darkness. One by one, Haruka’s sword and its six dancing clones sliced through each of the dark flashes of lightning.

This was no surprise. To Azure Skies and its six clones, whose power to slice through energy had been increased sevenfold by Futsu-no-Mitama, the bolts of lightning were about as much trouble to cut through as blocks of tofu. In its incomplete form and having exhausted most of its power, Keraunos couldn’t so much as scratch Haruka Aono.

“You’re totally out of spiritual power and you can’t use any of your big fancy moves. Looks like you’re barking up the wrong

tree, pooch! If you think you can pick your twisted paternal bone with us, you've got another thing comin'!"

I ran at the thing and howled like thunder. I sliced at it with Laevateinn's unblockable attack, lopping off all of its limbs. Then I slammed down my massive weapon and made it kiss the blade's edge.

My synapses were firing like crazy. The adrenaline inside me began pumping. In the midst of my frenzy, all my senses seemed to fall away. The only sensations I felt clearly were the weapons in my hands.

"Yo."

The black-thunder beast was brought down to my level, and our eyes met. Keraunos, now freed from the baggage of its four legs, lay on the ground in front of me. It opened its jaw and growled with a voice dripping in hatred. The creature was quite literally in front of my very eyes. I gripped my monochrome dual blades tightly. The monstrous paternal beast reached its head out, its razor-sharp fangs primed to chomp down on me. But just as it was about to…

"Do it, Keraunos," I said.

…it promptly shut its mouth.

Had it been a false start? Had it gotten so excited that it missed its attack? No. Nothing like that.

Keraunos wasn't just some rampaging beast.

It was a spirit full of hostility and malice, but it also possessed clear intelligence.

At the very last moment, it had bowed out. It had *realized that it wasn't worth the risk* of me using Fourth Field.

The clever beast thought twice about what would happen to it if it attacked me with a physical attack. It had mistaken the fact that I had used the same skill to counter its swipe and to defend against its beams to mean that *I had plenty of energy left*.

And, falsely assuming I would surely use Fourth Field again, it had decided that it didn't want to relive the disgrace of losing to my diamond-tough defense. As a result of all these distorted perceptions, it had given up its attack.

It was a wise choice. It had analyzed its opponent's strategy, weighed that against its current circumstances, and reached a levelheaded conclusion.

Hypothetically speaking, if I were in Keraunos's situation, I would have probably done the same.

But all of this meant only one thing.

"You're scared of me, aren't you?"

With that piercing, decisive declaration, I had shamed Keraunos with the ultimate humiliation.

"You tried to go man-to-man with me and tucked your tail between your legs and ran."

The Keraunos in front of me was nothing more than a mass-produced forgery. A virtual body that reared its ugly head every time Jupiter's emotions were out of control. Still, it was immortal, undying, and connected to the real thing.

"Heh. I'm glad I got to see this pathetic face of yours."

It was an ugly face, twisted in agony, shame, and terror. A personification of Jupiter's angry father figure, the ultimate ruler of her soul. And here it was, completely unable to deal with mere insects flitting around its daughter. Worse, it was afraid of them.

Keraunos would never forget the disgrace that it had suffered at our hands.

This was a moment worth celebrating. The immortal beast known as Keraunos had suffered injuries that it would never be able to heal from.

Enjoy, Keraunos. Savor the shame, the suffering, the fear, and the defeat.

"Hope you're ready, you deadbeat dad."

In my right hand was a black sword of transformation and unimaginable weight. In my left, a white dagger capable of severing cause from effect.

"We're *never*—"

They were parting words. But they were also a declaration of war.

"—gonna let you—"

—or evil organizations or BS twists of fate or anything—

"—take our Jupiter!"

After swearing an oath to heaven that I'd drag the real Keraunos out and kick its ass, I swung both blades and cut an X across the creature's face.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, “Eternal Darkness,” Third Midpoint

The fireball-spitting bird was dead, and the beast had been quelled.

Once we had finally cleared these two battles on the fifteenth floor, we rushed to our unconscious party member and made our way for the third midpoint.

We desperately needed a breather. Our bodies had been run ragged. We were out of spiritual power. We were at our limit, and if someone had asked me then and there what I wanted more than anything in the world, the answer would have been “sleep.”

Yet, despite that, both Haruka and I felt surprisingly okay.

“Woo-hoo! That was some crazy experience, huh?”

The radiant star seemed almost happy.

To go through such a harrowing encounter and still remain as positive as she had was nothing short of incredible. She truly had a gift for that sort of thing.

But, despite her smile, which was as bright as the sun, the battle had clearly taken its toll on her. I could tell that beneath it all, she was pretty exhausted.

Which is why I ran over to pick up Jupiter as soon as the battle ended. I was hoping to do what little I could to lessen Haruka’s burden.

“Oooh, what a nice guy you are, Kyou.”



Haruka smiled at me like she knew exactly what I was thinking. In a flat voice devoid of energy, I cursed and told her to shut it as we headed to the portal gate.

We'd been able to make it through everything without any major injuries.

All in all, the adventure had been pretty successful.

"It wasn't just *pretty* successful! This was a huge success!" Haruka corrected me as the jiggly little alien creatures welcomed us with all their jiggly might.

"We have a new friend, we got our revenge on a tough enemy, and we reached an even deeper level of the dungeon! If you can't be proud of this one, what *can* you be proud of?"

The radiant star's face in profile was lit by the pale light of a campfire. It was more beautiful than any star in the night sky.

I swear, this girl. It's impossible to be glum around her.

You really are the best, Haruka.

"Hey, Haruka. I want to talk to you about what comes next."

"If your plan involves anything even resembling kicking Jupi out of the party, I'm completely against it."

She turned her sapphire eyes up slightly to look at me.

She would have looked incredibly beautiful if it weren't for the fact that she was holding multiple sticks in both hands, each with an unreasonable number of marshmallows for roasting.

"I would never. Quite the opposite, in fact. I want to come up with a plan to make sure she's never alone again."

"Then I would like to hear you out."

I explained my plan to Haruka, and to the Yalda 336 that had gathered around.

"Sure! Sounds good to me. Shoulda expected you'd come up with something great, Kyou."

"We do not very much understand the plan, but nonetheless we shall help as best as can be!"

The jiggly little guys bounced and cheered as always. I was just glad that Haruka was behind me on my plan.

"All right, then. All that's left is…"

I cast my gaze over at the wooden bed that the Yalda 336 had created for us. A short distance from the fire, sleeping on the bed, was the silver-haired girl.



◆

There's a dream I have.

In it, someone is pulling me by the hand.

A lady laughs and says, "Sorry."

A man tells me, "You've got no right to blame us for this." He looks mad.

Snow begins to fall. A lot of snow.

It's so, so cold.

Ever since that day, I've always been alone.

◆ Dungeon City Sakurabana: Dungeon #336, "Eternal Darkness," Third Midpoint

Jupiter woke up sometime around eight PM.

"Where…am I?"

Those were the first words out of her mouth.

"Who are you?" she asked me.

"Are you still half asleep or what, Jupiter? It's me. *Me.* Kyouichirou Shimizu."

“I don’t know anyone called that.”

“…What?”

What she was saying didn’t make any sense. And it didn’t sound like a joke. She had a look of genuine fear in her eyes. It was almost as if—

“…Wait. I do know. You’re…Kyouichirou. And you’re Haruka.”

The gross, hot feeling that had been building in my upper back was dispelled in an instant. *She really was just half asleep.*

“Good morning, Jupiter. Are you feeling okay? Like, in general?”

“I’m oka… Ah!”

Her red eyes slowly opened wider. It seemed like her muddled memories were coming back to her piece by piece.

“I—I… Keraunos…”

The young girl’s body began to discharge black sparks of electricity. Things weren’t looking great. But we had seen this coming.

All right, time for step one.

There was only one thing to do. Before Jupiter could be consumed by guilt, we just had to take something else—

“Now, then. Yalda, if you would…”

—and distract her with it!

“…please help us celebrate Jupiter!”

I called out in the cheeriest voice I could muster so that it would carry to all the jiggly creatures in the area. From all directions, they jiggled and jiggled. They jiggled so hard that the jiggling completely dispelled the serious air that had come over us!

“Welcome, welcome! We welcome you!”

“I don’t very much understand but congratulations, Mr. Jupiter!”

“On this most hallowed of occasions we have a song that we would ever so much like to sing to you!”

The jiggly purple creatures cheered, bounced, and jiggled with excitement as they charged Jupiter’s bed.

Now what, Jupiter?

Not even you can be glum when you’re swimming in an ocean of these carefree little guys.

“K-Kyouichirou. What’s…going on?”

“What do you mean? It’s a celebration! We wanted to have a party for the MVP of the day, so we asked the Yalda to help us out.”

“No! But I—”

“Stooop! If you want to talk, you’re going to have to do it once you’ve filled your stomach. A growing girl like you needs to eat, and you are severely lacking in essential meats and sugars!”

I snapped my fingers and the jiggly little aliens brought meat skewers in droves. Then they began to try to feed them to her. “Say ‘ahhh’!”

“S-stop! Okay! I’ll eat, I’ll eat, just… Let me do it on my own…!”

“Let us serve you!”

Yay! Yay! Yay! Yay!

The countless little mascots swarmed the girl and (forcibly) kept her entertained.

Watching these ultimate hospitality pros do their thing was exactly as impressive as I had imagined.

“This is nice and relaxing.”

“You said it.”

Haruka and I kicked back and watched Jupiter having fun with the jiggly little creatures from a distance.

◆

“What…is all this?”

That was the first thing out of Jupiter’s mouth once we had all finished eating. I guessed that this was her attempt at resisting what we were trying to do.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve caused you nothing but trouble. So…why?”

“Hmm.”

I turned to Haruka beside me, and we both tilted our heads in overt confusion.

“Trouble? What trouble?”

“I’ve got no idea what you mean… What about you, Kyou? Any ideas?”

“Nope. Not a one.”

It was obvious that we were putting on an act.

But we were also being sincere. And to prove that, I added a little addendum to what I had said.

“Oh. Are you talking about that beast of a dad of yours? Don’t tell me you’re worried about *that* old guy. Sorry. I’d completely forgotten about him. I guess it didn’t leave much of an impact. My apologies.”

“What are you…?” Jupiter’s crimson eyes opened wide in disbelief.

It was an understandable reaction.

Up to this point, her spirit had cast a dark shadow over her entire life. Even in her wildest dreams, she probably never imagined that anyone would ever make light of such an imposing figure.

She seemed overwhelmed with confusion, albeit in a different way than when she had woken up.

“I *know* that Keraunos attacked you…”

“Attacked? Whoa, whoa, whoa. You’re kidding, right? Just look at me and Haruka. We’re totally fine. If that old man of yours can’t so much as scratch a couple of rookies like us, he clearly can’t be all *that* tough.”

“…Huh?”

She looked us over in the light of the campfire and it finally seemed to dawn on her.

We were completely uninjured.

If we had been hit by the lightning’s combo of electric and miasma damage, there was no way we’d be sitting here, healthy as could be.

In other words, the only conclusion she could draw was…

“You really made it through without taking *any* damage…?”

“That’s what we’ve been saying!”

“Yeah! It was super exciting!”

I hadn’t found it the least bit exciting, in fact, but I followed the radiant star’s lead and agreed.

Jupiter seemed a little put off by my reaction, but there was no helping that, so I just rolled with it.

“But it’s still true that I caused you both a lot of trouble…”

“If you’re gonna think that way, then I’m just as much to blame. If I’d blocked that damn bird’s fireball like I was supposed to, none of this would have happened in the first place.”

“I should have diced it to bits instead of tearing it to shreds. I’m sorry, Jupi.”

We both bowed.

And we were serious. What had happened on the fifteenth floor was not entirely Jupiter’s fault.

It was just as much our fault for letting her get attacked despite knowing what the result would be.

We deserved to split the blame three ways. There was nothing to be gained from anyone playing the victim.

“In the end, no one got hurt. And we’re at least partly at fault.”

“Yeah. So, there’s no reason for you to take all the blame, Jupi.”

Jupiter’s jaw dropped. “Why? Why would you do all this for someone like me…?”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean? You’re our dependable bombardier. How about showing yourself some self-respect, huh?”

“We wouldn’t have been able beat that bird without you, Jupi. Now it’s your turn to let *us* help *you*.” Haruka reached her hand out and gently patted Jupiter on the head.

“I don’t…get it.”

Her voice was trembling. It was like she had to force the words to come out.

“Everyone… Everyone’s scared of me. They all… All of them. They left me behind.”

“But we’re here for you.”

“My powers hurt people. So that makes me a bad person…”

“No one here has been hurt by your powers, Jupiter. So, you’ve done nothing wrong. Actually, you never have. Not even once.”

She was sold off by her parents and forced to carry a terrible power. But without that very power, she never would have survived. After going through all of that, who in their right mind could think she was a bad person?

“I always have the same dream… In it, there’s a man and a woman I don’t know. We’re walking through the snow… In the end, the people from the facility always show up. And then they…”

“That must have been so painful. It sounds awful…”

“I’ve always been alone.”

Haruka wrapped her arms tightly around the frail young girl. “You’re not alone anymore, Jupi. Me and Kyou, we’re gonna be by your side forever! Let’s go on plenty of adventures. And we’ll have so much fun. So, so much…fun…”

The radiant star’s back trembled slightly.

Ugh… You’re such a damn good person, Haruka… Now my eyes are… Gah! Damn it!

“So, anyway! That’s that as far as we’re concerned. From here on out, you’re our party’s bombardier. So, you’d better get ready, ’cause we’re gonna expect great things from you during our next big fight!”

My voice was embarrassingly high-pitched as I struggled to get those words out.

But I had gotten my point across. Jupiter, ever-expressionless, gave a small nod once I was done talking.

“All right! That’s it for the debriefing. Next up, we discuss our next big battle!”

“Battle…? Are we going to the twentieth level…?”

“No, no.”

I shook my head dramatically so it would be easy to see in the darkness.

“We can leave the twentieth level for another time. There’s a new enemy that’s reared its ugly head. And we need to take it out before we can even think about the twentieth level.”

“Enemy? Who…?”

Her expressionless crimson eyes looked up at my villainous face.

“It’s a monster you should be pretty familiar with. A pathetic father whose overprotectiveness has gotten way out of hand.”

“……!”

You get it, right?

Of course you do. There’s only one common enemy we share that fits the bill.

“It’s Keraunos. That monster of a dad of yours has caused enough trouble for everyone. It’s about time we cut that beast down to size.”

◆

I had already declared war on the beast.
All that was left was to take it on.
Between the three of us, and with Jupiter's power—

"We're gonna overturn our crappy fates."

—we were going to grab hold of our future.

End of Part 2

To be continued in Volume 3…

Afterword

First you grill some mochi rice cakes. Just toss three or four of them into the toaster oven. Everyone probably likes it to be a different level of crispy, but at the time, I liked the surface of the mochi to be ever-so-lightly browned.

Then you make some miso soup. You can carefully dissolve the miso paste and chop up all the ingredients for some more authentic miso soup. But if you think that's too much of hassle, you can just use the instant packets. But if you go with instant, make sure to buy the slightly more expensive stuff. The ones that come with a good amount of stuff in the soup as well. The instant miso they have these days is really good. Just a bit of hot water is enough to make a really tasty soup.

Anyway, now that you have your mochi and your miso soup in front of you, next comes the final step.

Just throw them both in the same pot. This step doesn't require any complicated techniques. Just stir it up a bit and shake a bit of *shichimi* seasoning or red pepper seasoning or whatever you like, and then you're done.

I call it *grilled miso zoni*. It's the best way to eat zoni, the Japanese miso dish served on New Year's. And it's delicious 365

days a year!

The key is to grill the mochi, not boil it in the soup, and to make sure to use a full-flavored miso instead of a clear broth. Don't just make zoni because it's New Year's. The real essence of zoni can only be grasped if you incorporate it into your daily life.

Now, then. Why have I thrown this in here like so much grilled mochi in miso soup? The reason is simple—at present, my stomach is rumbling, and I am very hungry.

I want to eat something sizable. But cooking something elaborate is far too much of a bother. And I'd like to avoid going outside on this cold winter night if I can help it. So, I went to the kitchen to see if I could rustle up something. And—wouldn't you know it—staring up at me was mochi that I had left over from New Year's and some expensive instant miso I got from work a while ago.

At times like this, there's only one thing to do: throw guilt and morality to the wind and have myself a little zoni party!

In any case, on to the acknowledgments.

This volume was made possible thanks to the support of countless people.

A big thanks to the editing, proofreading, and book design staff, as well as the operations and advertising staff that helped with this book. And more than anything, I'd like to thank Kakao Lanthanum for the wonderful illustrations that really make this story come alive. Every time I see them, I feel grateful for having been born.

I'm also pleased to say that this story will continue in the next volume. With every new volume, the number of revisions I add to the story grows. By the next volume, I think about half of the material will be original to the light novel. Talk about exciting. I'm currently hard at work writing.

Will Jupiter be able find happiness? For readers of the web novel version, I hope you'll keep your eyes peeled on that front while you wait for the next volume. Until we meet again in the next story!


A fantasy story where our heroes are rebelling...against the plot itself!
VOLUME 3 scheduled for release in 2025!!
"I'm counting on you, partner!"
"Leave it to me!"
BEFORE THE TUTORIAL STARTS
A Few Things I Can Do to Keep the Bosses Alive

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