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Illust. Saki Ukai
DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level


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Chapter 1: Side Fight

The semifinals of the Brawl were over. With Team Lastiara formally conceding, I had now advanced to the finals as the representative of the nation of Laoravia. That is to say, the plan that I had formulated alongside Lastiara was a success, as the bangle sealing my memories now lay destroyed.

I now possessed the memories of both “Siegfried Vizzita”—the me before the mind wipe—and “Aikawa Kanami,” the me after (and my actual name). And both of those memory banks held nothing but bitter recollections. I’d made an ass of myself after the semifinals, for one. I’d definitely be a laughingstock throughout the Alliance, probably for a good month or so. But that hardly concerned me, because in exchange, I’d been able to find what I truly wanted.

No more lies, and no more being toyed with. With that as my reward, some ridicule was a small price to pay. And best of all, I was able to reunite with two allies I could truly trust, Lastiara and Dia.

After the match, I described my plan to overcome the perils of the Brawl right away. While circumstances made for a plan that was exceedingly fragmentary and incomplete, Lastiara went along with it anyway out of her trust in me. Meanwhile, I was off on my own, fighting my utter exhaustion to shuffle out of the arena. I passed through the dim and gloomy corridor and returned to the contestant waiting room. Needless to stay, the ghost girl who’d seen me off before the match was there waiting for me.

Reaper flashed me an innocent smile. “Congrats, mister! You finally got your *true wish* back!”

But I couldn’t be too happy about her words on account of the alarm bells ringing in my head. I remembered my past failures, and I could pick up on ulterior motives lurking behind her celebratory remarks. I knew from the emotions coming through our curse-link that she and I were actually at odds. I was now sure that she was as formidable a foe as Palinchron himself.

“Thanks. The memories are on the painful side, but I’m glad I managed to

retrieve ’em. And it’s all thanks to your help, Reaper.”

She was all smiles. “Hee hee! That’s great! Now you won’t get what you really want confused anymore!”

But I couldn’t allow myself to be taken in by her toddler appearance or charming smile. She was, in truth, cunning and crafty. My conjecture, based on observing Reaper thus far, was that she could obtain more than just emotions through the curse-link. And no one ever said there was only one such link. There was a good chance that she was learning through the experiences and emotions of others by creating a whole mass of curse-links. In fact, supposing there was no upper limit to the number of links she could create, her targets were the entire populace of Laoravia. It was quite possible that, over the span of a handful of days, she could procure several centuries’ worth of experience, and that would explain why she sometimes displayed behavior that didn’t fit with her apparent age.

“Yeah,” I replied, “I’ll never forget what I really want again. It’s because of you giving me that push on the night of the dragon quest. Thanks, Reaper. I mean it.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t do a gosh darn thing. I was too busy with my own problems!”

I was watching her every motion via *Dimension.* Just as she said, she wasn’t doing anything—or so it might *appear.* In reality, however, she was most certainly giving a lot of people a supportive push while looking inert.

Her methods remind me of Palinchron’s, I thought. *Maybe she’s got a link with* him *too. But when did that link come to be?*

The day before yesterday, I had heard that Reaper had helped run a search for Lastiara. And who could Lastiara have been searching for but Palinchron? She’d already found me by that point, after all. I had no doubt she was trying to pinpoint the enemy’s location next. And so Reaper cast a *Dimension* of her own to aid in the hunt for him. As a result, Rayle’s residence was razed to the ground, while Palinchron was forced to flee past the country’s borders. Reaper had to have been there to witness that battle. And that was when she had come into contact with Palinchron. What other possibility was there?

“So, mister, what’re you gonna do now that you’ve got your memories back?”

That was all it took; I couldn't dispel my unease. Reaper's wish was to protect Lorwen. The crest at the nape of my neck was conveying that *that*, at least, was no lie. And that was the very reason we were at cross purposes. There was no mistaking it—she was giving me a wide berth because I held the power to erase him from existence. Everything she did, she did in order to drive me out of the Dungeon Alliance. That was the reason she'd urged me to leave Snow to her own devices and helped me retrieve my memories. It was all to distance me from Lorwen.

I spoke with caution. "I'm gonna go see Snow so I can talk to her."

"You wanna talk to her? You sure that's okay? Didn't you want her to solve her Walker Clan problems on her own?"

"Sure, yeah, but...wouldn't it be horrible if I just left without saying anything? I've gotta at least *talk* to her one last time."

"You're leaving... Yeah, you're right. You might wanna go talk to her once more. I mean, you've gotta go chase that mean, nasty Palinchron man without regrets!"

"That's right. I *cannot* let Palinchron get away with this. I'm surprised you know so much about him, actually. Who'd you hear about him from?"

"That's... It was Mr. Rayle. When Lorwen asked Mr. Rayle about your past, I was there too. That's why I know it's this 'Palinchron' who sealed your memories away."

"Gotcha. Explains why you're so knowledgeable about my past."

I endeavored to seem as indifferent and matter-of-fact about it as possible, and she was probably doing likewise. If either of us ever got worked up, our respective thoughts would leak out to the other by way of the curse-link. As a consequence, we kept each other in check by lying through our teeth.

I had my memories of the Day of the Blessed Birth. She had gained centuries' worth of experience. We were no longer the innocent little know-nothings who had met on Floor 30 of the Dungeon. Each of us tried to dispassionately probe the other, our expressions never-shifting masks.

"But are you doing okay, mister? You don't gotta rush things, do ya? Your

memories are back, so maybe you'd be better off resting a few days."

"Nah, I wanna go after Palinchron as soon as possible. So I'm gonna go visit Snow right now."

"Oh, okay. If you wanna chase after that guy...I guess it can't be helped, huh?"

It wasn't a fib; I did urgently want to persuade Snow. I'd been about to commit the same error as when I had failed Maria. I'd hung on to the naive hope that Snow would be able to overcome her predicament on her own strength, and so I had run from her troubles. I never looked her problems square in the face. Not really. But I was determined never to turn tail and flee again.

This time, I'll snatch a win. I swear it.

"Reaper, could you search for Snow with *Dimension* for me? As you can see, my magic energy's running on empty."

She paused to think. "Okay, got it. Let's see here... Looks like she's in a med-ship in the west area at the moment. I'll take you there!"

I started in that direction without delay. "Thanks. Let's hurry over, shall we?"

She followed behind me. I didn't have to look to know that; I was still observing her every move. I could sense her staring a hole into my back, but I continued striding, cautiously and calmly.

The plan I'd shared with Lastiara was going without a hitch so far. By having Reaper use *Dimension* instead of me, I was replenishing a bit of my MP.

We reached the west area, moving on to the med-ship. Leaning on my status as the guildmaster of Epic Seeker, I got Snow's room number from the attendant. I was having Reaper wait on the deck. I'd basically forced her to agree to it by telling her I wanted to talk to her alone since it would be the last time. Yet if she deployed *Dimension* and put a bit of juice behind it, she'd have front-row seats to what was going on inside anyway. That was why she'd given the nod to begin with. I could hardly rest easy.

Compounding my troubles, not only would persuading Snow be hard, but I also had no time to spare. Still, I put one foot in front of the other, vowing

inwardly that I would *not* fail again.

I reached the door to Snow's room and found one of the members of Epic Seeker there. It was Ms. Tayly. She must have been waiting on Snow as she recovered. I felt conflicted. I might have retrieved my memories, but it wasn't as though my recollection of the good times I'd spent at Epic Seeker had disappeared.

"Ms. Tayly..."

The gloomy look on her face brightened up. She seemed surprised and delighted in equal measure. "K-Kanami? You came!"

"Yes ma'am. I thought I'd come talk to her one last time, so..."

"One last time? This is it?"

"Yes ma'am."

I didn't actually know if it would be the last time, but since Reaper was lurking nearby, I spoke as though it was.

"Please, Kanami, darling...please understand where Snow's coming from. She was fighting, you know. Desperately. She was fighting, in her own way. Listen here!"

Ms. Tayly reminded me of a big sister going to bat for her younger sibling. She must have figured this was the last chance she'd ever have to talk to me, so she gave me a relatively thorough account of Snow's past.

"Snow's gotten serious enough to draconify three times before. And each one of those times, it resulted in disaster. The first time, it laid waste to her birthplace. The second, it killed the 'hero' she looked up to. The third, it led to the death of the friend who'd escaped alongside her. And yesterday's match marks the fourth time. She must be thinking to herself, *I lost what mattered to me* again."

I'd been vaguely aware already. Snow's life was one of constant failure. By messing up over and over again, she'd formed the unfortunate tendency to just give up on everything. And if I had turned the wrong corner once or twice, I might've wound up like her too. I couldn't think of this as *her* problem.

“Please, Kanami. You’re a ‘hero,’ aren’t you? Save her. If Snow doesn’t make it out of this intact, we all stand to lose out. We’ll all suffer for it!”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do that; I’m not a hero.”

She grimaced, utterly disappointed, and hung her head. She knew I hated the hero thing, but she clearly wanted me to be one for Snow.

“Then what *are* you to her?”

“I’m...her partner. I’m going to talk to her as her *partner*.”

Unless I had the wrong idea, she and I had truly started things off by being colleagues. Back then, she hadn’t hung her hopes on me, and she hadn’t seen me as a selfless hero type. That was the sort of relationship I felt was ideal for us, so I proclaimed myself her partner now.

“I see. Her partner,” muttered Ms. Tayly.

I opened the door and entered. “Snow, I’m coming in.”

The room was stark white. The high-end bed was white, as was all the furniture. The big white curtains were swaying, and Snow was looking out the window as they brushed her azure hair. She seemed dazzled by the boundless blue sea. It must have looked sparkling to her indeed...

Seeing her like this reminded me of a candle that had burned out. That was how little vitality I sensed in her.

She gently turned to look at me. “Kanami?”

The white bandages covering her whole body came into view. Her menu told me she didn’t have external wounds. No, it was something else that was inside her. Something else gnawing away at her. Under the Condition section of her menu, all that was written was “Draco-form.”

“Yep, it’s me. Damn, you’re all bandaged up.”

“Yeah. Lady Lastiara put the beatdown on me.”

“She beat me up too. I can relate.”

“I didn’t watch, but I heard about it,” she said languidly. “We’re both bloody wrecks.”

The tenacity she'd exhibited up until yesterday was totally gone. Perhaps her defeat at Lastiara's hands had sent her back to giving up on the world. I was a bit taken aback. Sure, she was always quick to throw in the towel, but for that insane level of fixation to vanish so easily? It didn't feel natural. I tried to reassess how to bring up what I was there to say.

She pointed at my upper arm. "Your bangle. It's gone?" She gave a strained smile. "You're not my Kanami anymore?"

"No."

"The world with you and me in it is no more?" she asked with a blank, detached expression.

"It's no more."

A pause. "I see."

This was close to how she had been the time I first met her, when she was doing a Dungeon assignment for her academy. She always paused for unnaturally long before speaking, and when she did speak, it was slowly and at her leisure.

"I heard that in your match against Elmirahd Siddark, you declared you were my fiancé...and that you turned it into a duel of honor and drove him off."

"Yeah, I remember. That's what happened."

"So does that mean you're marrying—"

"Sorry. It was just because I wanted to repudiate *him* as a person. I didn't do it in order to marry you, Snow."

"Right. Right, I figured... Heh heh heh. I thought as much."

It was a faint, enervated smile. An "I had a sliver of hope, but getting my expectations up hurts me so I didn't" smile.

"But thanks," she continued. "I think that'll have put him off a bit."

The way she phrased it, I got the feeling she was resigning herself to every woe again.

“So, are you quitting Epic Seeker, then? Are you leaving Laoravia?”

“I’ve got no reason to stay. I’ll be leaving the country before long.”

“I see.”

She seemed sad but unsurprised. She said nothing, the sound of the breeze rustling the curtains filling the room.

“So, what’ll *you* do, Snow?”

“Give up,” she replied immediately. She must have known I’d ask. “I don’t wanna do a thing anymore. It was me who should’ve given up... It was all a pipe dream. I was being an idiot all over again. I’m sorry, Kanami.”

I couldn’t bear to stand there and watch. Just like before...but this time, it was in a different way.

“You’re giving up again?”

“I can’t do it anymore. I’ve got no idea what to do to make things okay. And that scares me...so I just don’t care anymore. Anything’s fine.”

The longer she spoke, the hollower her eyes became. Before she lost all her strength, I gave her the reply I’d prepared beforehand.

“Well...I think it’s the noble House of Walker itself that’s tormenting you... Now that my memories are back, I can finally say that with absolute certainty. They’re the ones.”

What a roundabout path it had been to reach this point. I should have known from the start what the answer was, and yet look how long it had taken me.

“Snow...you shouldn’t remain in the Walker Clan.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do it...because I already failed.”

“You failed?”

“In the past, when I tried my hardest to run away, a lot of people I cherished lost their lives.”

I was finally going to hear why she had become so torpid directly from the horse’s mouth.

“I may be *the strongest*, so I always survive, but that’s not true for everybody else. They all died because of me.”

She spoke of their deaths matter-of-factly; I reckoned it was because if she let herself get too earnest, the weight of it would crush her.

“The Walker Clan’s got no intention of letting me, ‘the strongest,’ the ‘hero,’ escape their grasp. If I flee, they’ll use the cruelest methods to bring me back. I can’t shake the memories of those horrible days. They won’t go away...”

She made her hopes and troubles clear. She’d failed in the past. She’d learned the hard way that she couldn’t escape the House of Walker, so all this time, she’d been trying to find a way to live a quiet life within it. And as a result, she’d chosen to shift all of her Walker Clan woes onto her would-be husband—onto me.

“Every time I think about fleeing, my body shrinks in fear. I’ve got no choice but to live my life with the Walkers. But Palinchron, he introduced me to you, or the you without your memories. I figured that if I could be with you, then I didn’t mind Palinchron pulling the wool over my eyes. I figured that if we were together, I could go on living even if I stayed. That was what I thought... But in the end, it was all in vain. Heh heh heh...”

Her sad smile made me sad too. Watching her be vulnerable and divulge her true state of affairs was painful. I picked up where I’d left off earlier: the answer I’d prepared in advance.

“Snow, let’s run away, one more time.”

“One more time?”

“I get that you were traumatized last time, but still. Let’s make a break for it. This time, you’ll have me and Lastiara’s grou—”

“Do you mean Kanami the Hero is gonna abduct me?” she asked, her face blank.

It was the same thing she’d said at that ball we’d attended. Back then, she’d fully expected me to be the hero. But now, to my eyes, she harbored no such hopes. She was waiting for me to say no. And naturally, I did indeed shake my head, just as she’d seen coming. There were no convenient fairy-tale heroes out

there.

“No. No ‘abduction.’ But if you choose to flee of your own volition, I’ll help you.”

“Of my own volition? But why?”

“Don’t you see? Otherwise our relationship would become too one-sided. I want us to be on equal footing. If we’re not, I’ll be making a mistake. The same mistake...” I said, trembling.

The memory was fresh in my mind. I’d tried to rescue Maria unilaterally, and what had that ultimately led to? Nothing to anybody’s benefit. In fact, it had invited a great number of miseries upon us. The flashback played out in my head; I could see the spectacle again. The fiery purgatory that had capped off the Day of the Blessed Birth. I had lost so much within those raging flames...

Every cell in my body was screaming: *Do NOT let that happen again.*

She saw how I was quivering and extended a hand to me with a smile. “You don’t look so good yourself, Kanami. I knew it. We’re the same. You made a huge mistake and now you’re traumatized. And you can’t wrest yourself free of it either.” Her hand was also trembling. “You get it, don’t you, Kanami? The memories of your failures will never go away. Not till your dying day. No matter what you do, they’ll flit through your mind. Whenever you encounter a similar scenario, you’ll freeze to the spot. We’ll never be able to fight all out again.”

She wanted me to agree. She clearly thought that as two people who had both made mistakes grave enough to want to die over them, I’d understand. But I couldn’t afford to entertain that notion.

“You’re wrong! This isn’t trauma or whatever, Snow. When it comes to shit like this, it’s how you think about it! We can’t just lament the mistakes we made and cower in fear forever. We *learn* from our mistakes! We *can* make sure not to repeat them! Which is why what you should be doing is steeling your resolve and slipping free of the Walker Clan!”

My shouting took her aback. She hugged her shoulders. Her voice quavered as she gradually spoke louder and louder. “H-How could I possibly? I failed *three* whole times. I’m OBVIOUSLY just gonna fail again. Why can’t you understand?

Why? Why do you refuse to understand?! If I do it over again, I can be *sure* it'll end in failure! The folks in my hometown! The old-timers at Epic Seeker! The people who escaped with me! They all DIED! They ALL died! And they died BECAUSE OF ME! There's no WAY I could do it again!"

The same way I was faced with the memories of that purgatory, Snow was faced with the memories of her hell. The shivers, the fear, the cowering...it *would* make somebody want to give up on the whole wide world. Now that my memories were back, I could understand, if only a little bit, how she felt.

"I don't want anybody dying because of me. I don't want to be left all alone. If I'm gonna shoulder such a heavy burden, I'd rather stay here. I don't wanna do anything anymore..."

"Snow, if you don't want anyone to die, I promise you that I, at least, won't die on you."

"There are no assurances in this life. There's no such thing as somebody who won't die. That promise is meaningless."

"That might be true. But even so, giving up is a mistake... Can you really play pretend to yourself and live like that forever? Are you *really* okay with that?"

"I... That's..."

Giving up on what one really wanted was the easy way out. Throwing in the towel might even lead to being happier. Yet I didn't want to surrender. I'd retrieved my memories because I didn't want to live in some counterfeit world. I'd had my bangle destroyed *knowing* it'd take me farther away from a blissful existence. And I still thought that had been the right call to make.

"Snow, you can't get what you truly want confused."

Honestly, that was all I really wanted to say in the end. Even after losing my memories, that alone was what I'd remembered. That deep-seated drive strong enough to make itself known to Reaper. I exercised that unbending will to speak for her, however presumptuous it was to do. "Your *true* wish isn't to live with the Walkers. It's to escape them."

She grimaced. Bull's-eye. That had to be the *true* desire that she'd been trying not to think about. As long as she didn't think about it, she could get by without

having to suffer. It was the emotion she'd been running away from for years and years.

"I... I *know* that, okay?! You didn't have to *tell* me! I want OUT of here!" She balled her fists in rage. "I can't stand this place!"

A fire ignited inside the girl who'd given up on everything. No more of her usual pauses in between remarks; now she was putting everything she thought to words right away.

I knew from experience that this meant the iron was hot. And by "experience," I meant the lessons I'd learned from my own blunders. I wasn't going to make the mistake I'd made before. In order to get her to open her heart, I needed to open mine first.

"Then you've just gotta get serious and make that wish come true! This time, we refuse to let the Walkers or Palinchron or anybody else lead us astray! We act of our own volition and make our desires a reality, Snow!"

"But Kanami! What if we fail again?! If we get serious and fail anyway, we'll get hit with true sorrow. We'll taste true disappointment, true misery. And I don't want that... You can forget it!"

"Sure, but if you don't do anything, nothing will change! If you wanna run, then you've gotta make your move!"

"You don't know that! Things could change even if I don't do anything! Maybe somebody'll come save me! Like how you saved Fran back then! Like how you saved Lady Lastiara! That made me so jealous! I was green with envy! I've been so jealous of them, I could die! Why do *they* get a hero to swoop in while nobody's coming to save me?! I don't wanna stay in the stupid House of Walker! Of bloody course I don't! But nobody's EVER stepped in to save me! Nobody's ever come for me! Not one person!"

We were really going at it now. Standing there wasn't the Kanami who'd been so calculating, so full of excuses. And sitting there wasn't Snow, the spineless bootlicker. No, the two yelling their heads off were us without the masks.

"It's only normal for nobody to come save you!" I shouted. "Nobody came for me! That's how it ended up like it did for me!"

“How do you expect me to not get my hopes up when the guy who saved people was right there next to me?! I thought you’d be mine to have! I put my hopes in you! And when those hopes were betrayed, I was rewarded with sadness! It hurt so, so much! I can’t stand it anymore! Playing for keeps and suffering for it!”

“But if you don’t play for keeps, you’ll never *truly* be happy! You gonna be okay with the status quo forever?! Living in fear of the Walkers and walking on eggshells can’t be what you really want!”

“Look, I wanna be happy, same as anybody! But it’s just not gonna happen anymore. I’m a coward now. I fear suffering too much. I’ll always run in the other direction! My legs will freeze up of their own accord! My heart will always look away! I’m too scared to live life! I can’t do it the way everyone else can!”

Snow laid it all on the table, shouting her lungs out, cursing her fate with her hands balled into fists. Faced with the emotions she’d been running from, she scowled—and great big tears flowed, one after the other. Unable to hold in the trembling of her body, she bent at the knees.

“Look. See? This is what you get when you get me charged up... The tears just won’t stop coming...” she said as she wiped them away. “I didn’t wanna know about what I truly want. As long as I don’t acknowledge it, I can get by without suffering... This shit’s nothing but painful... It’s super painful...”

She couldn’t stop crying. She kept shivering, like a little kid.

“But it’s what you’re actually feeling. This whole time, you’ve *always* been crying,” I answered.

She’d been crying since the moment I’d met her.

“You’ve been waiting in standby, haven’t you? Waiting for somebody to whisk you away.”

“Yeah. I’ve been waiting for you, Kanami... In fact, I’ve probably been waiting since I became Snow Walker.”

Her teary eyes looked up at me, and I was the only thing reflected in them. Without me, she couldn’t go on living, or at least that’s what the obsession lurking there told me. Now that we were clashing, with our true feelings as our

weapons, the madness she'd kept hidden was resurfacing. But I couldn't tell her that madness was valid.

"I'll say it as many times as it takes, Snow. A hero who comes to save you unconditionally doesn't exist. Or at least, I'm not that guy. I'm just not..."

I had no choice but to refuse. No choice but to tell her I wasn't some hero.

"So it would seem. You're not a true hero...and you're not even *my* hero either..."

She accepted that fact now. After airing our true feelings and hurting each other in the process, she was finally able to acknowledge that I wasn't a hero. And that meant I could suggest my proposal at last.

"I wanna be not your *hero*, but your *partner*. I don't wanna one-sidedly rescue you, and that's it. I'll scratch your back, but you'll also scratch mine. I'm sure we can stand on equal terms, the two of us."

"Your partner?" she asked, as though hearing the words for the first time.

"Yep. I mean, that's how you introduced me to Elmirahd over there, right? You said we were partners. I think that's the best way for us to be. As partners, neither one of us does all the work helping the other. We stand side by side, supporting each other."

"Side by side...supporting each other..."

"If it's not as a hero but rather as your partner, then I won't leave your side. That I promise you. However the Walkers plan to get in the way, I'll be there for you till the end. So please, don't be afraid. Fight with your own power. Fight while keeping in mind what you truly want."

I didn't want Snow to view me as a hero. I hated the idea of her looking at me with the same eyes as the nobles at the ball who had tried to leverage me as a hero. That was the only requisite I asked of her as a partner. Now that she understood that, the way she viewed me had changed.

She wiped away her tears and said, "If we're partners, you'll stick by my side? Honest?"

"Honest."

“And you really won’t die on me?”

“I really won’t.”

“And if it’s as my partner, you’ll help me when I need help?”

“That’s the plan. But in exchange, don’t slack off on helping *me* out, okay?”

I kept answering confidently so as to ease her worries.

“Then... Then, if it’s as partners...”

She asked the question, her erstwhile wish, one more time.

“Would you, if I want, marry me?”

“Well...”

My heart started beating so fast it might explode. In the face of a request that went beyond the realm of partners, I could only shake my head. It was the one thing I couldn’t agree to.

She smiled, casting her eyes down. “I figured you’d turn me down for that one. Man, that’s disappointing for real. What a bitter feeling...”

But she was reacting totally differently compared to last time. She wasn’t shocked, and she didn’t freeze up. She smiled peacefully, an oh-so-refreshed smile, like she’d finally received her answer.

“I get it now. I finally get it. It was so obvious... Like Lady Lastiara said, I like you, Kanami. I seriously like you. And that was why I wanted to marry you so bad.”

It was my turn to freeze up. “Huh?”

Her confession of love was so sudden and straightforward that I was dumbstruck. Apparently, Lastiara had caused this, but I hadn’t heard a word about it from her. She’d told me she had convinced Snow, but she hadn’t told me how far she’d dug. That being said, I could easily imagine Lastiara having fun telling Snow about love stuff. I could sense the difficulty level of persuading Snow was ratcheting up past my tolerance level.

While I was flustered, Snow, by contrast, was calm and quiet to an extent never seen before.

“I now have a clear understanding of why, when Lady Lastiara said she’d be my hero, I wasn’t able to reply immediately. It was because I didn’t want it to be anyone besides you. I wanted *you* to be mine. To be my hero, not because you’re *the* hero, or because you’re convenient, but because you’re you. But...even after coming to realize I like you that way, I didn’t know what to do. I had no confidence whatsoever that things would turn out okay, so I figured I’d give up on it all. That way, when you left my side, I wouldn’t be so sad! If I forgot you and pretended nothing had happened, that would be easiest on me! That’s what I thought...but sure enough, it’s no good!”

No shred of Snow’s characteristic laziness and subservience were on display. She was blushing a little as she spoke, as any run-of-the-mill girl might. Of all the expressions I’d seen her make, this was the loveliest. I could tell my own face was turning red looking at her.

“I don’t wanna have to get serious, but I can’t hold these feelings in! I was laboring under a false assumption, but I finally *get* it! The reason I wanted you to stick by my side is that I *like* you! I love you, Kanami!” she confessed, smiling an innocent, genuine smile. It was like she’d been possessed.

After she’d professed her feelings so candidly, I couldn’t lie to her. I could never, even if the truth ended up wiping that smile off her face.

“Thanks, Snow. But uh, I—”

Her smile was still there. “It’s okay. I know you don’t see me that way. After what I did, it makes sense. I just tried to make you mine, whether you liked it or not. There’s no way you’d fall for me after I used those methods... Even a dummy like me understands that much.”



She calmly accepted the consequences of her actions and was reflecting on what she'd done wrong. Her body was still trembling.

"That being said, I want you to like me... You might not like me very much now, but I want you to tell me you'll like me one day. So I'm gonna go for it. I'll try, anyway. For the guy I like, I can do that."

That was a sentence I'd never thought I'd hear coming out of her mouth. She did her best to tamp down on her trembling, getting up on her own two feet.

"I'm not gonna deceive myself anymore... I'm gonna be *me*, and I'm gonna make my true desire a reality," she said, psyching herself up.

Taking her future into her own hands—she was putting into practice what I'd said in the lead-up to the Brawl.

"When I was a kid, I had a dream... In the beginning, all I wanted was to leave the dragonewt village and go adventuring in the big wide world. I was under the impression that if I attained glory, they'd allow me my independence. I had a hunch that if I became a hero, my life would change."

She reexamined the mistakes she'd neglected to acknowledge up until today, a refreshed look on her face.

"But none of that nonsense meant a thing. Far from giving me anything, it stole everything from me. I was the strongest. I was a hero. But I gained nothing and lost it all. The only life that awaited me was as a pet of the Walker Clan..."

In the past, she had managed to obtain glory. She'd even become a so-called hero. And she recognized it had been a mistake.

"I'm gonna give things another shot. I want out of here. I wanna be set free. I wanna reach the sky up above for no one's sake but my own—and I wanna venture far, far away! When I was a kid, that was truly all I ever wanted!"

Snow's eyes fell on the window with the white curtains. What she'd wanted wasn't glory or prestige. And she wasn't going to wait for some hero. To make her humbler desire come true, she looked at the vast, cloudless blue sky and grinned. Then, her placid eyes shifted to me.

"I finally caught on... Thank you, Kanami. You're not a hero, and you're not

mine to have. You're my crush..."

And thus, she and I came to understand each other at last. While the results were completely different from the original plan, Snow nevertheless decided to stand up on her own power and fight. She got out of bed and started walking—of her own accord.

"I'm gonna go say my goodbyes to the House of Walker!" Before she put a hand on the door, she turned to look at me, her pretty sky-blue hair fluttering. "You coming with?" She stared, her eyes clear and beautiful.

"Yep, let's go." I had no reason to turn down a request from my partner. Keeping her trembling form on its feet was my duty. I nodded, the same look on my face as on hers, and together we exited the room.

We'd finally been able to take a step toward the way out of the prison that Palinchron had devised. And that first step had been initiated by none other than Snow herself. With her own strength, she had proved able to save herself. She had the will and the strength to do it. Now all that was left was to prove it to the people around her.

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Snow and I charged full speed ahead toward the Valhuura ship housing the current head of the House of Walker. As the leader of one of the four great noble clans, Snow's "mother" could naturally be found on the top floor of a luxury ship. She was sitting elegantly in a chair placed at the center of the most lavish room in the hotel, with a good number of chamberlains and brawny sentries around her. Needless to say, the toughest fighters of the Walker Clan were also present.

We faced all those people as a group of two. And squaring off against the greatest enemy in all her life, Snow was smiling. She was doing her damnedest to hide the trembling as she stood opposite her "mother."

I was watching from behind, not unlike a knight. I'd assumed the stance whereby I could draw a sword from my inventory at any moment. Come what may, I'd protect her. That was why I was here.

The tension was thick, but Snow broke the silence, speaking clearly and

cutting to the chase without shying away. “Excuse me, mother. I’m going to leave the House of Walker.”

The head of the Walker Clan sighed, behaving as though Snow were some child throwing a tantrum. “*This* again, Ms. Snow?” She seemed unsurprised. She must have seen it coming when she saw Snow’s expression upon entering the room. However fictitiously, they were still mother and child, and it seemed their relationship was deep enough that they could more or less tell what the other was thinking. “And what will you do after fleeing the Clan? Have you forgotten that the last time you escaped and foisted everything on Glenn, you were still dragged back in the end?”

At those words, Snow’s breath caught. The trauma of her past failure had to be flashing through her head even now.

“It’s high time you grew up and faced your obligations, Ms. Snow,” the woman decreed in somber tones. “Make use of the power in your blood for the sake of the world, the nation, and the clan. Why won’t you understand that this will make your life a fulfilling one?”

She was telling her to remain a useful puppet. To continue to be their pet.

“I’ve... I’ve had enough of that!” Snow raised her voice and banished her shivers, lest she succumb to the Walker Clan’s pressure. “Tell all that to somebody who’s more put together than me! Because I can’t do it! Look at me. I’m a bit strong physically, and I have wings, but that’s it! I’m a weak person! I could never, ever carry out the duties of a noble family this great! I just can’t do it the way you nobles can!”

However pitifully she was painting herself, she was speaking the truth. And her unvarnished words caused the Walker head’s eyes to snap open.

“No matter how hard somebody like me tries in a place like this, it’ll never lead to a life of fulfillment for me! Every ounce of me knows that! And a life lived in misery is utterly pointless! The Walker Clan is so stifling, I can’t even breathe! I hate the nobility! I *hate* them! This isn’t where I belong!”

Snow’s “mother” swallowed her discomposure in an instant and spoke in domineering tones. “No. That is simply not the case. The House of Walker is the one and only dwelling for you. You’ll rue the day you leave us, Ms. Snow. I’m

saying this for your benefit. You *will* regret it."

"I... I've *been* living in regret! All this time! Adding a little bit more on top of all that won't change anything! That's why I'm *going* to escape, no matter how many attempts it takes! Even if I fail, I intend to try and try again! If I run, I'll regret it. If I give up, I'll regret it. The regret might not go away, but I'll show you! I'll keep on running regardless!"

Snow did not waver. She stuck to what she truly wanted, pushing past her own weakness of spirit, however unsightly and laughable it made her.

"How foolish. No matter how many times you do the same thing, the result will remain the same."

"I'll be that fool! I'll do it a million times if I have to! Don't underestimate just how pathetic I can be, mother! I will be *me*, even if that means being a fool who fails the same way over and over again! I'll run away until *you* throw in the towel, because *I'm* not giving up anymore!"

Hers was no ordinary shouting. It was verging on a magic energy-infused draco-roar at this point. The Walker Clan Head's expression shifted a tad. The people surrounding us flinched at the surge of power.

"I might have nothing to take pride in, but I'm still of draconic descent! Don't go thinking you can keep me caged forever! You're the ones who'll regret this and give up! YOU ARE!"

Those last remarks had turned from mere screams to full-on vibration magic, breaking all the furnishings in the room and rocking not just that chamber but the whole ship. The people encircling us had to fall back.

Snow and the matron of the Walker Clan glared at one another.

"Hff, hff..." Snow breathed heavily as the head of the clan quietly stared at her.

I couldn't read her expression. As the leader of one of the great noble houses, she didn't recoil in the face of Snow's immense might.

Having said her piece, Snow turned to me, concern written on her face. "Kanami...you don't mind keeping a wreck like me company?" It seemed all she

cared about was my reaction, as opposed to anything to do with the Walkers.

I didn't want to cast a shadow on her big moment, so I replied, "Course not. I mean, you did kinda say some of the worst lines I've heard, but honestly? I'm pretty sure I prefer you this way, Snow. For starters, you're way easier to understand than before. And it's just such a *you* thing, you know?"

"Heh heh heh... So you like me better this way... That makes me happy." Her smile wasn't the servile one of times past. It was genuine.

The head of the clan watched us converse, and at last she spoke, glaring at me. "So that knight is serving as your rock, is he?" It looked as though she'd calmly come to the conclusion that I was her true enemy. "I've no other recourse," she said. "We shall keep you at the House of Walker for the time being, Ms. Snow. And expect no mercy this time around. We'll have a little chat, and you will sit and listen until you cool your head."

"A little chat," she calls it.

She was going to attempt to capture Snow, and that was my cue to take the stage. I stood beside Snow and responded to the threat.

"Madame, do you plan to apprehend Snow here and now?"

"Don't say 'apprehend.' What will people think? I'll be discussing things with her as her mother, that's all."

"If you mean to capture her when she's unwilling, I'll call people. She might have lost her match, but Snow is still a participant in the Brawl. The Alliance will guarantee her freedom. Even if the Walker Clan and Laoravia are connected, that isn't true for the other four nations, is it? Granted, if you wish to fight against four other countries, I won't stop you."

"So you're utilizing the rules of the Brawl, I see. That *is* a bit of a thorn in my side."

She was backing down. It seemed her remarks earlier had been a test of how I'd respond. Of course, she didn't refrain from issuing further threats.

"However, the moment the Brawl is over, you will both be encircled by the elites of Laoravia. And even should you manage to escape them, that won't stay

the hand of the House of Walker. I'm sure Ms. Snow will fold to the might of the clan and return to the fold in short order. As her mother, I know these things."

"On the contrary, madame," I fired back immediately, "it's you lot who will fold to our might and give up on Snow. *I* know that for a fact."

My mounting resentment toward nobles had turned my words scathing.

She grimaced—finally, a crack in her facade. "Cocksure little runt. As is to be expected of the *hero* that prodigy, Palinchron, and the strongest, Mr. Glenn, chose, I suppose..."

"Please don't get the wrong idea. I'm not a hero. All I'm doing is siding with my friend. And playing favorites isn't something a hero would do, is it? I'm nothing more than her *partner*."

"You truly are an annoying one, child. How could someone like you possibly be anything but special?" she said, pouting. She heaved a vigorous sigh. "No matter. I shall leave Ms. Snow in your hands for now. But know that she is the Walker Clan's hero to have. Mark my words, we will ensure she returns. Do not forget that."

"I won't, madame. However, I do believe I'll be keeping her by my side till my final breath, so allow me to apologize in advance. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Curb your sarcasm, child. I see you don't much like me. Yet I can't say I dislike hero types such as you."

"Allow me to apologize again, as I very much dislike noble types such as you."

I admit it was at least a little because I was venting my antinoble grudge, but either way, I repudiated the head of the clan in no uncertain terms. At that, she let her shoulders droop and leaned back in her chair.

"Away with you."

We had no reason to defy her by sticking around, so we took our leave. But the moment we left the room, I heard her murmurs. She said it so quietly that only *Dimension* could pick it up.

"I won't give up. Mr. Will, Mr. Glenn...unlike you two, she truly is the strongest. She's the only hope I've found. She's *my* strongest fighter, *my*

hero...”

She sounded awfully obsessed with Snow. I recalled how Snow had acted earlier. While they were only related in the eyes of the law, they did exhibit *something* of a mother-daughter relationship.

As I walked Snow away from that room, our declaration of war against the House of Walker was now behind us. In that moment, one of the problems on Snow’s shoulders had been resolved, but we couldn’t let our guard down yet. I stayed vigilant through *Dimension* as we exited the high-end ship that was Walker Clan territory.

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“All... All right. Let’s bust this joint. You’ll help me, right, Kanami?”

The second we left the ship, Snow became weak-kneed and obsequious again, unsure how I’d respond. I smiled wryly, noting to myself how people don’t change in a day.

“Of course I’ll help you. If anybody tries to take you against your will, I’ll fight ’em off. I’m your comrade in arms, after all.”

“I wonder if Lady Lastiara will be willing to help me too. I’m not sure...”

“I’m not sure either. She’s capricious, that one.”

“R-Really? In that case, could you be the one to ask her? Maybe you could convince her. Heh heh heh...”

“I mean, I can ask her, but no guarantees...”

It seemed that Snow regarded Lastiara as one of the people who would step up to protect her. To see her cling to another person like that *again* was a bit exasperating.

When she heard my reaction, she made a point of holding her head up high and telling me she was standing on her own two feet.

“D-Don’t get me wrong. From now on, I don’t mind going it alone, okay? It doesn’t matter if I have a hero or not! I’ll show them I can escape their grasp this time! That said, I can’t lie, I’m still a little anxious. Where should we run to, I wonder? For the time being, anywhere’s fine, outside of Laoravia, but...”

Despite her trepidation, she was taking the initiative, willing to stride forward on her path. She was so ready to, in fact, that she seemed eager to leave Valhuura and flee beyond the country's borders right away.

"Hold on a sec, Snow. There are still loads of folks we need to talk to."

"Wait, what? After speaking that harshly to her, I wanna run from mother as quickly as possible. I'll be real with you, being in the same *country* as her scares me a ton..."

"Calm down. We're in Valhuura during the Brawl. Not even the clan can get too crazy about your defiance at the moment, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

She was fidgety and restless. Since she was breaking ground she wasn't accustomed to, she didn't know what she should do in times like these. At least, that was what it looked like to me.

"I'll ask Lastiara and her group to guard you, so relax... Being with them should soothe your nerves, right?"

"Sure, but won't being with them put us in Whoseyards's sights?"

"Don't draw the line there. To put it bluntly, I'm in loads of people's sights too."

"I might've guessed... Yeah, knew that already."

I did have my reservations. Maybe being at her side would make her situation worse instead of better. I proceeded to tell my depressed compatriot about my future plans.

"I'm gonna go talk to Maria a second. I'll wager that after we talk it out, she'll agree to have her bangle destroyed. Only, considering what happened with my bangle, chances are she'll counterattack. Mind helping me pin her down, Snow?"

"Gotcha. Now that you mention it, your sister does have a bangle of her own, doesn't she? Hm. It sounds like a pain, but I'll help you. I want you to like me."

She said she wanted me to *like* her like it was nothing. I averted my eyes a little in embarrassment.

“You’ll be a huge help. She’s strong, though, so be careful.”

“What? She’s strong?”

“In fact, if we’re unlucky, she might even be Lorwen-level strong. She’s harboring the power of a Guardian inside her, see. The Thief of Fire’s Essence, Alty.”

“The power of a Guardian? Wh-What should I do? I want you to like me, but I also kinda wanna pass if it’s a Guardian I’m fighting.”

“That’s okay; I don’t think you’ll have to fight. You can just remain on the sidelines, the same as when we Dungeon dived together. That’s enough to give me peace of mind.”

“Oh, really? In that case, I guess I’ll go with you, maybe.”

Our back-and-forth reminded me of our conversations from our Dungeon-diving days. Though Snow had decided to fight in earnest, it seemed her heart was still looking backward, not forward. But that was just fine. She was neither being too defeatist nor too obsessive to handle. This was the version of her I could look at with the greatest peace of mind.

“Cool, then it’s settled. Let’s head for Maria now. We’ll restore her memories by tomorrow, and then...”

“And then?”

My momentum was interrupted, my sentence along with it. Out of nowhere, a pocket of darkness was hanging over the way forward. And from that darkness came Reaper’s voice.

“By *tomorrow*, mister? Haste makes waste, don’t you know?” Reaper showed herself, obstructing our path with a smile on her face. “Let me start off by saying congrats, you two! You’re finally being upfront about how you feel. I’m jealous of you both.”

I didn’t feel like she was lying about that. She really did consider it a joyous occasion, and she truly was envious of us. I’d anticipated her appearance, but Snow hadn’t.

“R-Reaper? So you were around this whole time...”

“Yeah, I’ve been nearby, so I know the gist.” She turned to face me again. “You crossed an awfully dangerous bridge, huh, mister? I didn’t know you’d be that pushy when persuading Snow. Like, I couldn’t sense you were that passionate about it. Not even a little. I figured Snow wasn’t your favorite person, so...”

“Do I find her the easiest to deal with? No. But that could have been our last-ever heart-to-heart. Isn’t it natural that we expended every effort to hash things out so we don’t regret it later?”

“Huh...you did it so you don’t regret it later, eh?” Her smile vanished, replaced by a serious expression. “Tell me, big brother. Why are you trying to go where Maria is right now? Shouldn’t you give yourself time to get back in tip-top shape first? Look, you’re wobbling on your legs as we speak. Maria’s no pushover, you know? If you wanna ensure you win, you should get a good night’s rest and fight tomorrow.”

She did have a point. In order to advance through the Brawl, I had left myself running on fumes. I hadn’t slept a wink, I hadn’t drunk any water, and I hadn’t eaten anything, and on top of all that, I’d fought a fierce battle against Lastiara. If taking down Palinchron was my primary objective, there was no point stretching myself so thin right now. Both my power and Maria’s were going to be necessary to defeat him, yes, but it was foolish to push myself at this juncture if it meant hurting myself. Her reproof was eminently logical, and I worked up a sweat trying to talk my way out of it.

“Maria’s missing her memories, same as I was. And having gaps in your memory is a torturous thing. Take it from me. I know just how painful it can be. Given that, is it really weird if I wanna get her memories back to her as soon as I can?”

“It sure is. What if she beats you? That’d mean her memories would never ever come back her whole life! There’s no time limit you have to return them by, so if you’re really concerned about her well-being, you should raise your chances of success by going to see her when you’re in flawless condition. Going to see her *now* comes across as really contrived.”

A pause. “Thinking about it logically, you might be right. But as you know,

there are those times when the *heart* just can't accept the logical move. Think of how I *feel*. On an emotional level, I wanna help her get her memories back right *now*."

Even *I* felt that argument strained credulity. Needless to say, Reaper frowned. The darkness swirling behind her grew deeper and deeper, as if her suspicion of me was converting directly into shadow-stuff.

"You're definitely acting weird. I heard 'Siegfried Vizzita' was logical about everything, but now you're not making the least bit of sense. Why were you being so pushy about helping Snow out? Why are you heading to Maria when you're totally worn out? Spill it, mister!" Her darker-than-black eyes stared at me. Eyes that would not tolerate any lies.

"Th-That's..."

"Because you have things to do here even after you save Maria?" asked Reaper, right on the money. She had realized what I was actually after.

I knew I couldn't bullshit my way out of this anymore, so I gave up and nodded. "Yep, you got me."

"What have you even got to do? Once you save Maria, you've got no other obligations in Laoravia, right? You'll be able to go after Palinchron Regacy without a second thought, won't you?" Reaper frowned deeper and deeper.

"I've got things left to do."

"But you don't, though. So just go already. Go chase after Palinchron. Please, I'm begging you," she said hoarsely. I shook my head, and in response Reaper started full-on shouting, no longer able to hold it in. "Enough already! Just leave me and Lorwen alone!"

I stopped bothering to keep up appearances between us. "I can't leave you guys behind! How could I?!"

"Why not?! You've got bigger fish to fry, don't you?! You've got an enemy you can't let off scot-free, don't you?! So go after him! Don't you go anywhere near Lorwen!"

"No, I will go. I'll go see him because we're friends. I can't just abandon

him...”

“Friends shmends! What’re you planning to do?! Lorwen’s already got everything! He’s already defeated the ‘strongest hero,’ obtained glory, and stopped lying to himself! You don’t have a place in that picture!”

“I’m not gonna make the mistake I made with Alty. This time, I know I need to fight. I’m sure that’s the role of whoever faces off against a Guardian. And I refuse to shift that responsibility to anybody else. Never again!”

If I left everything to Reaper, it’d be Maria and Alty all over again. In the end, Lorwen would sacrifice whatever he had to to duel me.

“What’re you even *talking* about?! I don’t understand! I don’t understand what you’re saying, mister! If you see each other, Lorwen will fade away! Why’re you striving so hard to go see him if it’ll kill him?!”

“Lorwen’s waiting for me... That’s why.”

Reaper’s expression stiffened. For a moment, it was like time had stopped, but she recovered her smile right away. “Hee, hee hee. You’re right...Lorwen’s waiting for you. Exactly.” She was smiling, but the darkness in her expression ran deep, like she was going into despair mode. “I’ve been watching Lorwen this whole time, so I know. There’s no mistaking it. He’s only got eyes for you. He doesn’t know what he wants anymore, so he’s put his hopes and expectations in the hero who unsealed him.”

Reaper came to the same conclusion I had. Actually, there was no way anybody could get the wrong idea when it came to him. He’d voiced his own wish more pureheartedly than anyone. How many times had he said it? *“I wanna fight Aikawa Kanami in the finals of the Brawl.”*

“He’s waiting for you at the highest peak of Valhuura because he trusts you’ll give him the answer he seeks. Knowing him, he’ll keep waiting there forever. But that’s the very reason you can’t go see him!” She shook her head, in evident pain, the smile still on her face. “Betray him, mister,” she pleaded brazenly. “Betray him for that reason.”

She didn’t say it out of malice. It was all for his sake. That belief was what made her so troublesome.

“Betray his trust in you. Fall short of his expectations. That way, he won’t vanish. If anything, he might end up with a big new regret. And the more attachments he has, the more set he’ll be! I’ll be able to be with him forever and ever!”

Reaper retrieved her scythe from within the darkness. It was different from the one I’d seen her wielding when we first met. While the shape was the same, the tenebrous magic energy enshrouding it had swollen up many times over. It writhed ominously, as if to signify her current emotional state.

“I don’t wanna see Lorwen constantly on the cusp of disappearing! I don’t! That’s why I...”

She held the scythe out to the side to bar our way. Clearly, she was telling us to defeat her if we wanted to cross. I took my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from my inventory and assumed a battle stance myself. I had the resolve to do this. The resolve to oppose Reaper...

“Out of our way, Reaper. I’m going to revert Maria by tomorrow. And you can bet I’ll be seeing Lorwen too.”

“Even though I’m begging you on my hands and knees?! You’d *still* go see him?!”

“That’s right. That’s one plea I can’t comply with.”

“A minute ago, you told me you’d be heading for Palinchron! You liar!”

“You were lying too, weren’t you, Reaper?”

At that, Reaper knitted her brows in discomfort before shrugging it off and smiling again. “Hee, hee hee, hee hee hee. True. I was lying too, mister.”

Reaper’s “innocence” vanished without a trace, like a veteran sorceress. The girl before my eyes was no longer the toddler she’d once been. She looked calm and composed as she continued.

“Heh, looks like leaving the curse-link as insurance was a mistake. I thought I’d be able to read your emotions and actions through it, but that didn’t pan out. Also, I figured that if my not-so-pleasant thoughts about you made it through, you’d naturally want to distance yourself from me, but...you don’t let

somebody hating you get to you at all, huh? Sheesh...”

She revealed her behind-the-scenes scheming in the form of idle complaints, lamenting her failure in an exaggerated fashion. “Sigh. It’s not going my way, is it? It’s really not going my way...”

Yet she seemed less than cornered to me. If anything, a seasoned soul like her would have suspected it would turn out this way.

“But you know what? Ol’ Reaper’s got an idea.”

Those words clinched it; she still had an ace up her sleeve. She blended into the darkness behind her and disappeared. It was her teleportation ability. Then the shroud of darkness itself faded, leaving just me and Snow there.

“Sh-She’s gone? Kanami, are we gonna be okay after letting her run?”

“It’s fine. I’m pretty sure she’s heading for Epic Seeker HQ, where Maria is.”

“She’s after your sister?”

The reason I’d gone to see Snow first was to induce that very outcome. I was convinced that if I got Snow on my side first, Reaper would fly into action in order to use Maria against me. And I was also convinced that Maria would never go along with Reaper’s ploy. I could still remember our battle against the Thief of Fire’s Essence like it was yesterday. I hadn’t defeated Alty. Maria had. We were talking about the girl who had, in that purgatory, gouged out her own eyes, swearing she’d walk forward in life. I *knew* she wouldn’t get her true desire wrong.

“I’ll ask you again, Snow. Fight Reaper with me. I want you to help me as my partner.”

“Help you...as your partner...”

“You heard me. I’m not going to protect you without you reciprocating. I want you to protect me too.”

“That’s that equal footing thing you were talking about... I guess I’ve got no choice, then. All right. Let’s start there. That’ll be square one for us...”

It was a refreshing response from her. I’d been sure she would express reluctance again, so I was pleasantly surprised.

“You’re gung ho now, huh? A second ago with Maria, you sounded real flaky.”

“We haven’t known each other for long, but I think of Reaper as a friend. If possible, I wanna get to know her better. So...I’ll come too. I won’t run anymore.”

“I see.”

On an instinctual level, Snow understood that if she ran the other way, she and Reaper would never come to understand one another. That made her a lot better than how I used to be.

The newly dependable Snow walked ahead of me. “C’mon, Kanami, quick. Don’t you see? If we don’t hurry to Epic Seeker, your sister’s in danger. Can we maybe reach it through your *Connection* spell?”

“The portal I placed there dissolved a long time ago. It’s a no-go...but we’ll be okay. I’ve taken measures.”

“Huh? Measures?”

“Yep.”

I’d cut Reaper off at the pass. And I’d sent the agent I trusted most, at that. This wasn’t to say we had time to waste, though.

Snow and I rushed toward Epic Seeker, me swearing in my heart that this time, I’d save everybody.

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It didn’t take long for us to clear out of Valhuura and arrive at Epic Seeker in Laoravia. I don’t think we could have possibly gotten there faster, but the place was already ablaze, smoke billowing from the top floor of HQ where Maria’s room was located.

Just as we were about to enter the building, we heard a bang and witnessed a darkness-wreathed Reaper grab Maria and jump from the top floor window, followed by Lastiara, who was giving chase.

The battle had already begun.

I’d asked Lastiara to guard Maria. She must have intercepted Reaper, who

was intent on abducting her. The three of them were now running across the rooftops in the direction of the Epic Seeker training grounds, so Snow and I dashed in that direction as well. We split up, coordinating via our dimensional and vibration magic to block Reaper's escape route and box her inside the grounds.

Reaper lowered Maria to her feet and readied her sickle. Lastiara was in front of her, while I was behind her on the right, with Snow on the left. We had her surrounded in a triangle. And so, in a training range with no spectators, this side fight of the Brawl began.

Lastiara was closest to the enemy. "Give Mar-Mar back to us!"

"Back to you? Hee hee! Maria told you, she doesn't want your help! Removing her bangle by force is such a terrible thing to do, miss!"

"Urgh! Dammit, I shouldn't have spent all that time trying to remove the bangle! But it was Mar-Mar; I couldn't just beat the hell out of her like I did with Kanami!"

Lastiara tore her (newly) short hair in frustration. It sounded like Reaper had attacked while she'd been in the process of taking off Maria's bangle. As the two of them argued, I calmly used Analyze on Maria, who was cowering next to Reaper.

【STATUS】
NAME: Maria
HP: 107/159
MP: 832/855
CLASS: None
LEVEL 10
STR 7.69
VIT 7.23
DEX 5.99
AGI 4.45
INT 7.96
MAG 41.1

APT 4.13

CONDITION: Mind Taint 1.65, Memory Alteration 1.04, Memory Impairment 1.02, Cognitive Impairment 1.34, Darkness 1.33

【SKILLS】
INNATE SKILLS: None

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Hunting 0.68, Cooking 1.08, Fire Magic 3.53

Judging by the Condition section of her menu, she was in the same state I'd been in during my semifinals match. She probably saw anybody who approached as an enemy right now.

"Lastiara! Let's get hold of Maria first!"

"Kanami! You never told me Mar-Mar got this strong!"

"I told you, didn't I?! I told you there's a chance she can use a bit of Alty's power!"

"It's way more than a bit! Those flames are no joke!"

Apparently, Lastiara had eaten a fiery counterattack in the middle of removing the bangle. The hem of her clothes was singed, and her eyes were a tad teary.

"I mean, I didn't know she'd gotten that strong either!"

I'd known that at the end of the events on the Day of the Blessed Birth, Maria had had access to intel on her surroundings via the flames, like Alty had been capable of. But beyond that, I knew nothing. Looking at Lastiara's current state and her menu, it seemed Maria had used some impressive magic.

"Lady Lastiara," stammered Snow, "it's lovely weather, isn't it? Um, I'm sorry about the other day..."

It seemed she'd been waiting for her window to say her words of greeting.

Lastiara wasn't going to beat around the bush. "Are you our enemy or our

ally?!”

“I... I’m very much your ally, Lady Lastiara! It’s thanks to you that I’m a new woman! It’ll be my pleasure to lend you a hand! And I hate to quid pro quo it, but I do have a favor to ask later...”

“All right, I’ll hear you out! But right now, help us!”

“Certainly! I’ll do my best!” Snow brandished the large sword I’d handed her.

Reaper’s eyes narrowed. “You predicted what I’d do, eh, mister? You had Lastiara lie in wait for me because she can fend me off. If you’d sent the Apostle instead, I could have taken *her* hostage. There was a lot more I could’ve done.”

“Actually, he’s not here due to reasons outside my control...”

Dia was currently unconscious. And for a really dumb reason too. Of course, had he been awake, I probably wouldn’t have had him join the battle anyway. Against an enemy who could effortlessly teleport behind you like Reaper, our long-distance attack cannon was at a disadvantage. Even if Ms. Sera had been around to serve as transport, I still wouldn’t have wanted him in the fight.

“In any case, Reaper, you’re now facing three swordfighters who can cope with your absurd teleportation attacks. Stop trying to abscond with Maria.”

“So it would seem,” she replied. “But I bet you never predicted *this* little tidbit —I can tamper with Palinchron’s bangles. Hee hee, wonder why?”

She held a hand over Maria’s bangle, and its darkness grew denser. Maria’s magic energy undulated and swelled, magnifying her animosity to vicious proportions. I had an idea of how that trick of Reaper’s worked.

“I get it, more or less. It’s because you’ve got a curse-link with the Thief of Darkness’s Essence, Palinchron Regacy, right? And using the magic energy you receive from that, you can manipulate the bangle.”

Her mouth was agape. “Huh? How’d you...” She closed her mouth and glared. “If you get it, you know not to come any closer. I can sic Maria on you at any moment, you know?”

“Go ahead. Do it. But don’t be so sure it’ll go that easily for you. Maria won’t mistake what she truly wants, and that makes a world of difference. That’s the

reason I chose these conditions for the fight.”

“Interesting... And what if she doesn’t mistake what she wants? What’re you trying to say, hm?”

“I’m saying she won’t dance to another person’s tune.”

The determination to overcome all obstacles and see one’s will realized... That was more important than anything else. Without it, people became weak, no matter how mighty their abilities were. Take me and Snow for example; on paper, we were each a match for Lastiara, but because we hadn’t been true to what we wanted deep down, we’d been ignominiously defeated.

“In that case, I won’t dance to anyone’s tune either. I won’t mistake what I really want. You can count on that.”

“I know. It’s my fault you set your mind to all that. It’s my fault, because I thought nothing of leaving my curse-link with you unattended on that day. I’m not here to tell you your wish is untrue. I know that you want what you want from the bottom of your heart. But so long as you stick to that wish even though we all know it’ll lead to Lorwen suffering...I’ve got no choice but to fight.”

“Oh? My desire sticks in your throat that much, huh?”

“Lorwen wouldn’t be the only one to suffer. You would too. And as a friend to you both, I can’t stand by and watch.”

“If you are my friend, that is what you should do, big brother.”

“No, it’s because we’re friends that I can’t, Reaper.” No way was I backing down.

Reaper took note of the strength of my will and smiled. “Hee hee. Enough blather. In the end, you mean to stand in my way...don’t you, mister?”

Palpable darkness grew thicker and thicker from within Reaper’s body, and it swirled around the training grounds, suffusing the space as it went and morphing it into a field where she could manifest her power to the fullest extent.

“Can you really beat me? I wouldn’t be so sure. If you think you can make

anything go your way using your piddly ‘hero’ powers, you’re grossly mistaken! Hee hee hee!”

She floated at the center of the darkness, laughing at once cheerfully and mercilessly. She exuded the vibe of a witch who’d lived for thousands of years. But she was the Grim Rim Reaper, a spell-construct not even one year old. An excessively vast pool of human experience had been pumped into her. She was no longer in the realm of mere humans. She was well and truly a god of death now.

“I’m the Grim Rim Reaper! A spell created for the sole purpose of killing humans! I exist for no other reason than that! All living creatures are my prey! Spacespell: *Deny Entia!”*

The curse-link between us suddenly became thicker, and she was beginning to suck away my magic energy. I immediately closed the link, but her magic energy was burgeoning to boundless heights. Ours wasn’t her only curse-link. I could sense it through the *Dimension* I’d deployed using the meager amount of magic energy that had replenished within me—Reaper was absorbing magic energy from the denizens of Laoravia. And naturally, that included my allies.

“Wha?! My magic...” said Lastiara.

Snow was also losing her magic energy, but unlike Lastiara, she’d seen this coming, so she wasn’t as perturbed.

I had no doubt Reaper was stealing energy from people with lots of magic energy, like Maria and Dia, as well. She had essentially become the most supreme mage in all the Alliance.

“I dropped by all sorts of places in anticipation of this moment! I have access to unlimited magic energy now! This is the true power of the curse of the death god!”

Reaper could feel her mounting power, and it stirred her emotions to a fever pitch, making her awfully talkative. In her mind, victory was assured.

“My magic energy is inexhaustible! But what about *yours*, mister? Tell me, is it even up to ‘not enough’ level? It’s so bad it’s interfering with your body’s basic functions, isn’t it? But that’s not all!”

She clenched a fist, and that was all it took for black magic energy to spread and shroud the sky. The grounds were now devoid of all traces of light. The darkness was complete. If my *Wintermension* spell could change the world to "winter," then...

"Spacespell: *Nightmension!"*

This spell could change the world to "night."

"I didn't hold your curse-link in reserve just for the sake of monitoring you, you know! It was also because you're the only dimensional magic specialist who can teach me spells! But I've taken enough already! All of your magic is mine now!"

Wintermension was a difficult spell to construct. The average mage probably wouldn't be able to even understand it. Yet Reaper had, in the space of a few days, gotten a grasp of all of it and fully learned it. It was a lot like the pace at which babies learned stuff. Everything they saw was fresh in their eyes, and for that very reason, they absorbed it quickly. Reaper possessed both the sense for things a young person enjoyed and the experience of veterans. With those two gifts combined, she had reached archmage level in the blink of an eye.

"Within this darkness, all perception is how I will it! I'm unbeatable! Today, I'm gonna take you down! I'll be the one to defeat Lorwen's opponent in the finals tomorrow!"

Inwardly, she'd been prepared to take down Lorwen's finals opponent from the very start. This whole time, she'd been confident that she could beat whoever that opponent ended up being. That was why she hadn't been sweating much of anything.

She slipped inside the darkness and disappeared. After a moment's silence, I sensed a spike of palpable bloodlust from behind and swung my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. *TING!* From out of the blackness came her scythe. But the darkness was too thick for me to be able to perceive Reaper herself.

"Tch. I see you're still wrapped in a thin layer of dimensional magic, big brother. I'll just put you off until your energy's run dry!"

While I couldn't see her, I could still hear her. "Lastiara, Snow! She's coming

for you!”

“Bloodspell: *Will Linkar!* Blestspell: *Light!”*

“Shakespell: *Vibration!”*

But I hadn’t needed to warn them; they were already casting their trusty spells.

“Hee hee hee! Such incredible spells, you two,” she jeered. “To be so good at both the blade and magic? That’s just overpowered! But it’s all meaningless! I’m *made* of magic, so I can use his magic better than he can! Spellcast: *Riverent Night!”*

Given that Reaper had used *Nightmension*, which was equivalent to my *Wintermension*, it made perfect sense that she could use what I had to assume was the darkness equivalent of *Blizzardmension* too. That spell expanded to a range many times beyond what I could accomplish.

“When you cast this spell, you have constraints, but *I* can make it as wide and use it as long as I want!”

Reaper was right; I could only maintain it for a matter of seconds, but she kept expanding it without any effort. She then took the time to meddle with Snow’s and Lastiara’s spells. The darkness magic broke down the inner makeup of their own, causing them to fizzle. The three spells—*Will Linkar, Light,* and *Vibration*—dispersed.

“Ack! My bloodspell! My blestspell!”

“Sorry, Lastiara! But you’re gonna be fighting without those overpowered moves, thank you very much! You’re gonna fight like Lorwen, using only the blade, within the darkness, okay, miss?!”

But it wasn’t Lastiara that Reaper attacked. There was another *TING*, similar to the sound my sword and her scythe had made when we clashed earlier.

“Whoa! Your skin’s real hard, huh, Snow?! Your dragon scales can deflect even my sickle! But I’ve got the power to burn the world on my side! If you would, O sister of mine!”

The only source of light permitted to shine within the darkness burned bright.

“Burn, nixfire! At the mercy of the threads of the world serpent. *Agni Blaze*!”

A line of blazing white in a world of jet black. I’d heard it cast before—Maria had just fired a spell that Alty had used. The sharp flames tore through space, rending the darkness as they sliced the air.

“Urgh! So fast!” groaned Snow from a small distance away. “But...there!”

From what she’d said, I could tell it hadn’t hit her. Maybe it had been easy to visually detect the fire within the darkness.

I turned to the companion who could use light magic. “Lastiara! Can you pull a win with one of your spells?!”

“I’m trying a bunch of things, but not for the time being!”

“Hee hee! I daresay only a high-order dimension mage can defend against my magic! But you’re out of magic energy, aren’t you, mister?! I told you to wait till tomorrow, didn’t I?!”

“Yeah, well, by tomorrow, you would’ve made off with both Snow and Maria anyway!”

“I totally would have! Lemme see... Oh, I know! Maybe I would’ve sent you a letter saying a little something like, ‘*If you want your allies back, come to the Dhruv Dragon’s castle ruins when you’re due for the finals!*’”

“I’m sure!”

Thanks to the curse-link she and I had shared until today, we could read each other to an insane extent. When we were fighting with our emotions unleashed, we could intuit each other’s schemes aggravatingly easily.

As she spoke, she sent a slash my way, and I only barely managed to block that great sickle in time with my sword. Our blades crossed, and we shouted.

“Get some shut-eye, big brother! I insist! You haven’t slept for days, so I’ll put you to bed until after the Brawl’s over!”

“How nice of you to offer, but I dunno—I feel like if I leave it to you, it won’t be the kinda sleep I wake up from!”

“But, I mean, your magic energy’s gonna dry up any second now. How’re you

gonna fend off my attacks without using dimensional spells? How're you gonna defend yourself when you don't got Lastiara's feel for combat or Snow's tough skin, hm?!"

"That's—"

"Look, your energy's running empty as we speak!"

The more we crossed blades, the more energy I lost. Now that the meager amount I'd replenished after my fight with Lastiara was gone, I was well and truly drained, and my faint dimensional spell dissolved. I could no longer see anything in the darkness. I could no longer perceive anything. It was so pitch-black that it was as though I had my eyes shut.

That situation reminded me of something that Lorwen had told me several days prior. He'd said my heart and my body were disconnected, and that that mind-body dissonance was impeding my ability to learn his super technique. But I remembered now. I'd taken my memories back and synced up my heart and body once more. That was why I was wise to it now. I understood it well: the Responsiveness skill that was the arcanum of the Arrace School, and the way it truly worked.

"That's what Lorwen taught me to do!" I replied, activating the skill.

Just like he'd said, I already had everything I needed to do it. I was furnished with high enough powers of observation and imitation. The only thing I was lacking was the harmony of body and mind, and ironically, it was Palinchron's bangle that had provided me with the opportunity to acquire Responsiveness.

I'd unmistakably used the skill during my mindless rampage. During the match, I hadn't relied on my dimensional magic, instead exerting my physical prowess down to my last ounce of stamina, causing Palinchron's curse to make me employ Responsiveness. And I still remembered the feel of the technique; my body only had to use a move once.

It was easy for me after that. All I had to do was reenact it. Basically, I was perceiving the world not through my five senses, but through my heart's intuition. I suspected it was a "sense" that was particular to this world, with its magic energy. It was the power to detect the flow of the magic energy that suffused this world—this world's *essence,* which was to say, the natural laws

underpinning it. That was the true character of Responsiveness.

Within the deep darkness, I closed my eyes and released all of my magic. That skill was all I needed. I concentrated on detecting magic energy through my skin, not with magic. By grasping the flow of magic energy, I could also comprehend the movements of the living things acting on that flow. And what I felt through my skin was a vicious scythe slash coming for me from behind. I dodged it by the skin of my teeth. The sickle attacks kept coming, but I dodged and I dodged and I dodged again.

“What the?!”

She must have detected that my spell had died away. But not only was I not frozen in fear of attacks I couldn’t see, I was moving expertly.

“D-Don’t tell me...”

Reaper knew Lorwen better than anybody, so she caught on right away. I smiled faintly.

“It’s just like whenever I fight Lorwen! You can’t be serious, mister!”

I smirked boastfully. *I’ve reached the same heights Lorwen has!*

That got her angry. “Urgh! Fine, then! Maria! Box him in with your fire!”

While Reaper’s attacks no longer posed a threat, Maria’s did. Even so, I wasn’t worried. I was confident I could talk her down. On that fateful day, I’d renewed my resolve. And she’d made an oath before her closest friend. I had faith that, together, we could overcome even Palinchron’s bangle.

“Maria! Can you hear my voice?!”

Her body twitched. I kept shouting to the girl who, thanks to her status conditions, was totally in the dark.

“If you can hear me, answer me, Maria!”

“B-Brother?!” she shouted, searching for the source of my voice.

“No! I’m not your brother! Please, you’ve gotta recall my name! And call for me by that name! You already know it, don’t you?!”

“Your name?”

I was trying to get her to summon her memories of that day. She didn't have to recall them all completely. I just wanted her to relive the emotions of that day, even if only a little.

"Y-You're not my brother? Then who are... Your name... Sieg? No, I know your name... I know your real name. It's on the tip of my tongue...but by acknowledging it, I..."

She trembled. She was going through what I'd had to. Extricating oneself from the comfortable world of lies meant turning away from the life of bliss all around her. And walking away from that was far from an easy decision.

"Ow! My head! It can't be... That can't be!"

She'd begun to doubt her memories but still wasn't quite there yet.

"Maria! I told you the truth about me! And you said you could trust me now! So I believe in you! If you give up here, you'll even be giving the lie to what you told Alty back then! Tell me, is that okay with you?!"

"A-Alty? My...friend?"

"Alty! Didn't you say you'd always be watching?! You're one with Maria now, aren't you?! What do *you* think about this situation?! You understand how Maria feels more than anybody. Are you gonna sit by and do nothing while she's deluded by false memories?! Do you think this is what Maria *really* wants?!"

Maria wailed. "Urgh, ugh... Waaaaaaaagh!"

Hellfire erupted from her body, the pillar of flame swelling to enormous proportions. Thanks to the light it provided, I could faintly make out her tear-streaked face. The blaze was casting the only light in the darkness. She was cradling her pain-racked head as she glared at Reaper. I could tell that even if her memories weren't back, her past will and emotions had been resurrected.

"I... I won't get it wrong anymore! I won't let anyone lead me astray anymore! Reaper, are you *deceiving* me?!"

Reaper stopped fighting me and approached Maria, though the blazing fire prevented me from getting too close to them.

“Hot, hot, hot! But how?! Is the Thief of Fire’s Essence rejecting the Essence of Darkness?! I... I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

Fretful and frustrated, Reaper tried to send darkness-element energy into Maria, but the flames burned it all away. Left with no other choice, she tried persuading her.

“Maria, I’m your little sister! Don’t let him trick you! That boy over there? He *is* our big brother! You can remember the memories you made with him, can’t you?”

“My memories with him? I do have some. Memories of when we were kids... I remember when I made him play with me. I remember mom and dad. I remember our family! I have lots of memories!”

“Yep, those are the ones! You really telling me those are fake?! You can remember those moments, yet you doubt they happened?”

But that had the opposite effect.

“I have happy memories, yes. I get that they’re *there*. But these memories... The fact that I remember my ‘family’ doesn’t make sense.”

Within the purgatorial flames, she showed a ghastly smile. An expression that said that giving up that life was rougher on her than death itself, but she was prepared to do it anyway.

“Huh? What do you mean, it doesn’t make sense?”

“Not erasing my fire magic experience ‘in case push comes to shove’ was a mistake. My fire magic works off burning memories as fuel, and as a result, I lost my memories of my family. I remember that fact through my experience with fire magic. That’s how I know that, by all rights, I *shouldn’t* have memories of my family.”

“Hey,” stammered Reaper, “no one ever told me that!”

“My old memories are gone now, sure, but that doesn’t mean it’s okay to plant fake ones! I know that lies have never saved anybody! That, I know for a fact! That’s right—I’m not gonna get things wrong again!”

The path that she needed to believe in—her true desire—was indelibly

ingrained in her body, whether or not she had lost her memories. One could tamper with somebody's emotions and memories as much as they pleased, but the fire burning at the depths of their soul could never be extinguished. Maria was living proof of that.

Realizing that the tide was turning, Reaper sent even more magic energy her way. "Fine! I'll bend your will through the bangle—"

"By all means, go ahead and try. I'm used to that sensation. *At the mercy of threads and oneiric reeling!*"

Maria was now crafting an even mightier fire spell. It asked a steep price of her. I had gone through something similar, so I could tell. It was the one she activated by burning her past away.

"If I burn all of these fake memories, I can ensure you'll never lead me astray again! I'll have one left to me—my vow to believe in not 'Sieg' or 'Master,' but Mr. Kanami! That's the only thing I need to go on living!"

She was livid that her will had been distorted by an outside hand, completing her incantation in her fury. It was an incantation that burned up her past, but this was the one time it was helping her rather than hurting her.

"Swallow my self! Flamespell: *Midgard Blaze!"*

From her left shoulder crept a fire serpent emitting brutal quantities of heat. She pointed her left hand at Reaper.

"There's no such person as a convenient, doting big brother! I don't have a brother!"

Her left arm ignited, scorching away the clothing past her shoulder and charring her skin before melting her bangle. The fire snake shot out of her arm, losing none of its force or speed as it raced through the darkness. It attacked Reaper as it scattered flames all around the training grounds. Reaper fled within the darkness to try and evade it, but the fire ate away at the darkness itself.

"See that, Reaper?" I said. "You tell me, did Maria get things wrong?"

Reaper crawled out from the darkness. She'd dodged the blaze by a hair's breadth, but the residual heat alone had set her right arm alight.

“Khh, urghhh!”

The intensity of Maria’s fire magic was absolutely insane. It was burning Reaper’s body, which was made of magic, and her very existence with it. Even though she should be immaterial on account of me having her in my sights, the flames wouldn’t disappear.

I used the light cast by the fire as my guide and approached. “Maria!”

She came running toward me. “Mr. Kanami!”

At long last, we were together again—and this time, in the truest sense.



We'd effectively been apart throughout the handful of days since the Day of the Blessed Birth, but it felt like we'd been apart for years and years.

"It was all... It was all just a dream, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was just a dream."

"My brother...or no, my whole family is dead...and I can't even remember them. But that doesn't mean I'm okay with mistaking somebody else for family! I could never tolerate false memories! I promised my best friend, Alty, that I'd be moving forward for a change! I swore it on my eyes!"

Fire erupted from her body, much like Alty before her. It turned into countless butterflies, setting fire to every part of the grounds. Bit by bit, the conflagration was illuminating the world of shadow that Reaper had constructed, allowing me to get a faint view of Lastiara's and Snow's positions.

"*Firefly Haze.* With this, I can see your face nice and clear, Mr. Kanami."

It wasn't just the rest of us who regained our sight. So did Maria. Her eyes were prosthetic, but she was capable of gathering information about her surroundings through fire.

"Now's not the time for celebration," she continued. "We have to deal with Reaper first. Don't worry. No matter where she hides, our fire will burn everything away."

She concentrated and started formulating yet more fire magic. Unsurprisingly, darkness gathered at her back while she was incanting and defenseless, the sickle reaching for her from within it. I deflected it with my sword.

"Ugh! Outta my way, mister!"

"She's weaving a spell because she trusts me to protect her! How could I let you lay a finger on her?!"

Our blades were crossed; at this rate, I couldn't know when peril might befall Maria. It was time for safety precautions.

"Lastiara, come over here! Defend Maria, like the first time!"

"The first time?!"

“You remember! Back in the Dungeon!”

“Oh! Right! Can I hold her in a princess carry?!”

“Ask *her* that!”

Lastiara used the firelight to run up to Maria.

“Flamespell: *Flay Blaze*,” Maria incanted. “Please, Ms. Lastiara. After this, let’s talk a whole lot more. There’s a lot I’d like to apologize to you for.”

She let loose a sphere of flames into the sky, extending her hands to Lastiara.

“Oh, nice! Mar-Mar’s being all vulnerable with me!”

Lastiara gleefully grabbed Maria and started running across the grounds. The blob of darkness containing Reaper tried to give chase but couldn’t catch up. Lastiara was too fast. The light Maria was creating was weakening the darkness, and it could no longer reach the speeds necessary to catch them.

Snow leaped into the fray, hammering the weakened blob of shadow with a full-powered blow. “*Impulse Break!”*

There was a clang in the darkness as Snow’s great blade and Reaper’s large sickle clashed. Taking the brunt of Snow’s full body-weight attack from right above, Reaper was blown away by the impact, removing her from her hiding place in the darkness and revealing her for all to see. Since I could see her, she was now immaterial, and Snow’s sword fell to the ground.

“Urgh! What a waste!” said Reaper. “All that magic energy’s scattering!”

She distanced herself from Snow and quickly started gathering darkness again. She tried to use it to envelop the flames that were hindering her shadow field, but all that did was illuminate the darkness, causing it to disappear.

“I can’t interfere with the magic of the Thief of Fire’s Essence?! The level gap between our magic is too wide?!”

Reaper was losing hope, her confidence that she was the most powerful of mages slipping away and her darkness weakening in proportion to that. Meanwhile, Maria, who was under Lastiara’s protection, was generating yet more fire with a relieved expression.

Snow and I stood in front of them to protect them. Our defense was rock solid as I thrust my sword out.

“Reaper, you’ve lost your vision advantage. Plus, it’s four against one. Give up already!”

“Give up? Would *you* give up if I told you to? I feel the same way you do, mister! I could never give up! Not till the very end!”

“Then this is the end. So long as I have Lorwen’s technique, you won’t be beating me!”

“It’s not over yet! If I can take *you* down, I can still pull a win! You’re the party’s core member, but you’re the most weakened out of all of them right now, so I’ve got a shot!”

“If that’s what you think, bring it, Reaper!”

“Big brother!”

She gathered all the remaining darkness throughout the grounds for her final gamble, and I braced against her impending onslaught with one sword. One was enough. Lorwen himself only ever used one at a time.

Reaper charged forward, together with the darkness. For her opening gambit, she made the darkness wrap around me. My field of vision was totally blocked; I couldn’t see her anymore. And as was the established strategy at this point, she came at me with a slash from behind.

Just like Lorwen would, I stooped to dodge, then counterattacked with my sword skills. She blocked me with the scythe’s handle—she was used to combat with Lorwen, after all. Then she sank back into the darkness without batting an eye.

Her distinctive surprise scythe attack happened again, but I had Lorwen’s god-tier technique to aid me against her. *Clank, clank, clank*. Within the darkness, our blades crossed time and time again, dozens of sparks flying. But the battle was already decided.

It was simple. The fact of the matter was that Reaper could not beat Lorwen. That was all there was to it. Victory was ours.

My sword cleaved her right leg mercilessly. I sensed her stagger, sensed the anguished look on her face. My eyes were still closed, but as she began to collapse, I stabbed her left leg, pinning her to the ground. “Spellcast: *Ice.”*

For a finishing move, I transmitted the ice spell through my sword. When it came to a base-level spell like this one, I could cast it using the magic energy that replenished naturally during combat. It was the same trick I’d used in the battle against Tida: solidifying an immaterial opponent and giving them form.

I opened my eyes and looked at her. She was face-up on the floor, wounds all over her body, in no state to move.

“Dammit... You fight dirty, big brother...”

She glared at me, tears in her eyes. That was the moment she accepted defeat. It was also the moment I knew I’d stepped up in time and saved Maria. I stood motionless at the center of the training grounds, breathing a sigh of relief. It was sinking in now; I’d taken another step to putting this *trial* behind me.

◆◆◆◆◆

We had won the side fight. Reaper had lost her right leg, and her left leg was pinned to the ground with ice and a sword. Her right arm, meanwhile, was flame-scorched, and I’d used my ice magic to restrain her left arm for good measure. Lastiara, for her part, had used holy magic to paralyze her from head to toe. While Reaper’s lost leg was gradually regenerating through her magic energy, she was in gruesome shape.

“I win, Reaper. If you try fighting, I’ll have Maria burn you even more.”

“I’d really rather you didn’t. I can’t nullify those flames, so I’d die crispy.”

She wasn’t resisting. She must have understood she couldn’t possibly turn the tables. Not in that position.

Sword still in hand, I sat down next to her. All of today’s fights were now behind me, so the tension in my body was easing up.

“A thousand years ago,” started Reaper, “I spent my final night like this, only with Lorwen.”

What an abrupt change of topic. Not knowing what to say, I kept listening.

“Lorwen was strong enough to kill me if he wanted to, but...when he saw me, he stayed his blade. He was so kind... He was my first-ever friend. He humored me till the end...”

It was a soliloquy of sorts. She didn’t want me to chime in. She just wanted me to know.

“The Grim Rim Reaper wants to have fun with Lorwen forever. That’s why I decided on my own will that I need to protect him...”

If she was going to share her wish, it was only right I do likewise. “I hear you, but even so, I’m going to fulfill my promise to him. I want to help him find happiness. Because I’m fond of the guy.”

“I adore Lorwen too. I want to help him find happiness...but not if it leads to him *dying!* That’s what I...hate the thought of...”

“I’m sorry, Reaper. My policy is always the same. Everybody should be able to live their life following their heart’s desire...but that isn’t where Lorwen’s at right now. Instead, he’s chasing after a dream that was foisted on him. He’s getting what he wants all wrong. And I can’t just stand by and watch.”

“You can’t know that for sure! You can’t *know* that that isn’t what he really wants!”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not. I really don’t think Lorwen’s desire is for silly shit like glory or being the hero. I just can’t see that being the case.”

I had once obtained the beginnings of glory myself, but all it had done was torment me. Snow had attained full-on glory, but it had pounded her into the very pit of despair. How could I abandon Lorwen to such a fate when I knew what it wrought?

“But mister, what if it doesn’t matter if it’s what he really wants? He might be satisfied with that anyway! Maybe there’s a way he can be happy without having to vanish! Is that too much to ask for?!”

I shook my head. “Reaper. Remember my words to you.”

“Your words?” She had to recall what I meant by that. There was no way she

didn’t.

“I kept shouting from the pit of my soul, ‘Don’t play with people’s fates...’”

“Yeah, that was so loud and annoying. You also shouted not to tolerate ‘his’ lies.”

“Yep. And what came after that was ‘Don’t get what you want...’”

“‘...mixed up,’ right?” By repeating the words, she relaxed her body little by little. “Then what’ll become of *my* wish?”

“Do you still wanna be with Lorwen even if it means that, deep down, he’d be suffering? Leading a life based on a lie can only lead to suffering for both of you. You’ll never find happiness that way. You can put off the true solution, sure, but it’ll all come crumbling down in the end.”

The cracks that formed when one lied to oneself would eventually invite ruin. I knew that from experience. Reaper listened without saying a word in reply. She’d grown up on my emotions, so no one empathized with me more than her.

“Lorwen wants to work through his attachments and disappear. Tida and Alty felt the same way as well. All Guardians do, most likely,” I said, trying to get her to give up.

“I already know that. It’s because I know that things won’t go as I’d like...”

She looked up at the dimming sky above, glowering so that the tears wouldn’t spill over. I looked up too. Just like during the dragon quest, we gazed up at the sky, the two of us, our lines of sight tracing parallel lines, never intersecting. I didn’t know what to say anymore, and it seemed Reaper didn’t either.

Seeing that I wasn’t baring my fangs, she gave an ironic smile. “Hee hee. You’re so soft, mister. If you kill me now, it’ll solve all your problems.”

“You know as well as I do that if I did that, Lorwen would become the next thorn in my side.”

“If I can’t get my way, I’m honestly happy with that outcome. That’s how determined I am.”

I sighed. “You’re a real pest, you know that?”

“Yep. Just like you, mister.”

Indeed. She and I were similar. Looking at her, I could almost swear I was looking at a daughter of mine or something.

“I won’t try to convince you anymore. I’m leaving the rest to Lorwen. I’ll bring you to the finals match tomorrow and that’ll be the end of it.”

“Hmm...that does sound like my only chance to turn this around... I’ve got no choice but to ask Lorwen directly. I’ll beg him not to die...with all my heart.”

But I was almost certain that plea would be fruitless. Reaper understood it too; otherwise, she wouldn’t have chosen to fight us instead of asking him.

With that, our conversation was over. We continued looking up in silence.

Lastiara saw that we didn’t mean to fight, and sheathed her sword. “Wait, does that mean you’ve failed to convince Reapy? You said you were going to convince everybody.”

“I’m sorry. Looks like Reaper was beyond me.”

A pause. “All right, gotcha. So what do we do now? I’m pretty sure this significantly changes our plans.”

“We’ll let Lorwen persuade her. Let’s keep watch over her and bring her to the finals tomorrow, and then the Brawl will end.”

“Hold on, you’re really taking her there? Isn’t that dangerous? Wouldn’t that open you up for a two-on-one battle?”

“It’s okay. If that happens, it’ll be a two-on-one with me and Lorwen against her. Lorwen’s obsessed with a one-on-one duel with me. He’s the only one who can persuade Reaper now. Bringing her’s the only choice I’ve got.”

“Weird way to have faith in somebody... Oh well, not that I’m gonna stop you.”

She seemed a little envious, though, of the peculiar bond that Lorwen and I shared and the circumstances of our upcoming match.

“That said, Kanami, in exchange—”

“Yeah. You guys watch us fight from the stands. Thanks.”

“If something happens, we’ll cut into the proceedings. We’re not gonna budge on that.”

“I know.”

“Do you actually, though?”

Lastiara gauged my expression with suspicion. As our faces and eyes grew closer, my heart rate went up. I understood why too. I knew because a whole lot that had been gone was now back inside me.

But it wasn’t an emotion I needed at the moment. I bottled that pesky feeling up and calmly stared back into her eyes with a serious expression, conveying to her that I meant business. She heaved an exasperated sigh.

“Hmm. Mar-Mar,” she said, addressing the girl standing a small distance away. “Looks like our troubles will last a little while longer. I’m gonna go call my comrades, so could you watch Kanami and Reapy for me?”

“Ah, sure. Leave it to me.”



“If Reaper tries anything funny, you can burn her, but don’t kill her outright. Oh, and you watch too, okay, Snow?”

Snow straightened her posture. “Yes ma’am! Understood, ma’am!”

“Snow... You know what, let’s have a nice chat about that weird formal speech of yours later.”

With that, Lastiara took her leave of the training grounds, leaving the rest of us there with Reaper, who was gazing up at the night sky with a dead-tired look on her face as Snow followed Lastiara’s orders and kept watch, with Maria prepared to shoot her fire magic at a moment’s notice.

Once upon a time, these three had lived under Epic Seeker’s roof alongside me. The situation reminded me of those days. I even recalled the time they had all knitted scarves together. But things had changed a hell of a lot since then. We couldn’t go back. Not that I had any desire to return to those days anyway, of course. At the same time, I didn’t think it was necessary to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

As I reminisced, I remembered that little promise.

“Snow.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“We’ve got time to kill. Could you go get your knitting tools? The ones you used to make those scarves.”

“Wait, wha? What’re you talking about?”

“Nothing, just thought we could knit some scarves, you know?”

“Uh, Kanami? Did you hit your head? You’re gonna be fighting Lorwen Arrace tomorrow, which means you need to get at least a little rest in. In fact, just go to bed. Reaper ain’t moving anytime soon.”

“I’ll hit the hay once Lastiara’s back with everyone. It’s just, I remember our promise, so...please?”

“Promise?”

“Yeah, I remember now. And now that I do, I’ve gotta knit one...”

Snow and Maria were looking at me like I had two heads, but Reaper was chuckling wryly.

"Heh. Hee hee."

It seemed she was the only one who remembered that trifling pledge I'd made.

Reluctantly, Snow went to get the knitting tools, but only after Lastiara's group arrived. I made use of my absurd dexterity and completed a scarf in no time. Seeing my finished product, Reaper smiled, and I did too. Gone was the antagonism between us. While I ultimately hadn't been able to convince her, I didn't think it had all been meaningless either. When we smiled at each other, a little of how she felt came through to me, no curse-link required.

We had a true bit of fellowship. That was why she was behaving herself. She was open to going to the finals alongside me. In the end, she and I must have been feeling the same way on a deep psychological level about our mutual friend.

And then, Reaper and I closed our eyes at the same time and fell asleep. It had been a very, *very* long day, but there were no foes around to worry about. I could get some shut-eye without concern; my trustworthy comrades were watching over me. It was my first time going to sleep since the Brawl began, and it was the last respite I'd get in the lead-up to the finals.

The only variable left was Lorwen. My blade instructor, my good friend, and one of the Dungeon's Guardians. If I could save him, all my battles in Laoravia would be over. But that was far easier said than done, given he was the greatest swordfighter there was. Of that, I could be sure. In order to beat him, I had to grasp everything there was to grasp about him. And I had to surpass every limit.

To that end, as I fell asleep, I recalled the time I'd spent training with him and the days I'd spent alongside him. Unless I was mistaken, he and I truly were friends. We'd even called each other as much in the past. And for that very reason, I absolutely had to defeat him. I had to save him by beating him. Hence, I kept reflecting back, eyes closed. I reflected on the Lorwen I knew and the way that young man lived his life.

Chapter 2: Beginnings of a Dream

My oldest memory? That pointlessly huge, desolate old mansion. The residence was pitch-black and there was dust everywhere. The ceiling invariably played host to numerous cobwebs, and walking the corridors was accompanied by the kind of creaking where you couldn't be sure the floor wouldn't give out under you. And the smell...oh, the smell. It reeked of wildlife, bad enough to make your nose curl. The mansion's walls had crumbled in places, and peering into the darkness revealed an abundance of moss. An estate unfit for human habitation.

That was where I traced the origins of my story. For some reason, I'd been gripping a straight sword about as long as I was tall, dragging it around with me as I paced around the building day after day. Why was I pacing like that? I couldn't remember. Nor did I know what series of events had led me there. It was all such a distant memory. There was very little I could recall, but even so, I could be sure of one thing: the mansion was my home. I was Lorwen Arrace of the House of Arrace, and I had a sword in my hands.

Using that sword, I trained every single day because I'd heard that anyone born to the noble House of Arrace always learned the blade. Who was it who told me that again? I got the feeling it was my mother.

Believing in that family tradition, I swung my sword over and over again, day after day, from the time I was a mere not-so-able-bodied kid. I would swing it from morning until late into the night, never resting. In the pouring rain, I swung it. As the winds did rage, I swung it. Under the scorching sun, I swung it. In the freezing cold, I swung it. On days I suffered from a fever or fits of the shivers, I swung it. Always alone, always swinging.

The blade was my everything. I'd known that if I descended the mountain, there were kids my age to be with. I'd known that mansions far more handsome than this dilapidated hovel were there too. And I'd known, even at my very young age, that those were all Arrace Clan estates. I'd also known that I wasn't

allowed to show myself to the kids playing there.

I'm pretty sure I faithfully followed that Arrace Clan directive. I never uttered a peep in protest as I aimed my efforts at becoming what the clan dearly desired: the strongest swordfighter. And that was because I believed that if I could just climb the ranks as a swordsman and obtain *glory* and *prestige*, they'd have to acknowledge my worth. I'd been convinced that I could stroll right into the splendid-looking mansion at the base of the mountain as a noble myself and be with the kids, who seemed to be having so much fun playing together.

And that was how the story of Lorwen Arrace began.

I wonder if that run-down mansion's still around.

A thousand years had passed. I knew there was no way it could be, but still, I thought about it. Nostalgia. Another lingering attachment. Even if the House of Arrace saw me in unsympathetic terms, to me, the clan was everything. The world had rejected me, and I'd been unable to form a connection with anybody else, so the clan was extremely dear to me. All I had in my head was the clan and the blade. And to respect my parents' last request, I grew into a young man who worked hard so that the clan could further thrive and flourish.

In accordance with clan rules, I became a worthy swordmaster who used no magic. All things considered, I think I did a good job sticking it out. For a kid who had been discarded and forced to live alone in a dilapidated home, I got pretty damn strong, if I do say so myself. The boy who did nothing but train by swinging his sword one day found himself working on the battlefield. Was it because I was innately talented, or because I'd trained way too hard? Honestly, it was probably both, but in any case, I was good at swinging a blade around. I was able to slay the enemy before they could get going, whether they were a monster or a person.

It didn't take long for me to see how strong I was. I did everything I could on the battlefield, wanting my feats to be recognized. I sallied forth to cut down the enemy, fully expecting to be seen as the hero that way. And if I could become the hero, then *this* time... This time, the House of Arrace would have to commend me.

I lived my days rending one enemy after another. To be honest, my memories

of those battlefields were the haziest, maybe because things were so repetitive back then. No matter where the battle took place, all my memories were tinged with dark red. I just killed and killed and killed and killed, and my face and clothes were always covered in blood.

Before long, the combatants feared me as “the Reaper.” I don’t really remember how famous I got. I had a hunch I was reasonably high status. If I was remembering right, I’d even been called upon by the state and had served as the imperial guard of Her Grace the Saint. Given my sordid origins, that was quite the promotion...except that none of it *felt* real. I’d saved the lives of the royals countless times, and I’d even beheaded a dragon as huge as a mountain in one blow. Once, I’d slaughtered an army of over ten thousand by myself. And I knew I must have taken the heads of over a hundred famous generals. But I never *felt* like the hero. Nobody ever praised me or said I was amazing. The most they ever said was that I’d done as expected, with that stiff look on their faces.

It wasn’t lost on me. They weren’t calling me the hero. They were calling me a monster. Not once had I ever attended a nobles’ ball. Any time I met somebody’s eyes, they’d turn pale and avert their gaze. Time and time again, they sent me to dangerous battlefields just to get rid of me for a while. And I never even thought about refusing orders; I craved more feathers in my cap. I wasn’t the brightest, and like an idiot, I sought only glory and prestige. If I could just grab hold of glory, then surely they’d acknowledge me, praise me. Surely all my efforts would be rewarded. I believed that, so I kept on fighting, friendless and alone.

I was always so, so alone. The only people around to give me any company were corpses. No enemy could beat me, so I took their lives in droves. And the comrades who swore to fight alongside me never survived long on my battlefields. Every one of the people I wanted to protect was taken hostage and died. Yes. They died, one and all...and all because of me.

Naturally, rumors started flying that consorting with me meant signing one’s death warrant. So no matter how many military exploits I put in my ledger, no one applauded me. They simply sent me to the next battlefield without giving me any reward. I’m sure both the enemy and my “allies” wanted me dead. I

vividly remembered the fear in the eyes of those nobles in the castle.

At all the most perilous battlegrounds, I was there, stained bloodred and standing alone atop the mountains of corpses I'd built. Once, upon seeing me like that, an ally went mad and attacked me. I'll never forget it...the first ally I ever killed...

No one treated me as anything but a monster. There was no respect, only fear. No praise, only discrimination. Was I *ever* accepted as a respectable noble? Was I ever allowed into their circle? I couldn't remember.

That was the story of my past life. After that, I'd become a *real* monster. A real monster who, in search of glory and prestige, did nothing but slay enemies. Lorwen Arrace, the Reaper who frequently appeared in the wars a thousand years ago. Oh, he was strong, all right. Strong enough to be called unparalleled in all the world. The way he moved, he could show up at the center of the enemy regiment out of nowhere like so much mist and start chopping off all their heads before they even took note of his presence. These weren't tactics of war. No, at that point, Lorwen Arrace was just a natural disaster.

Against the Reaper in the army of the south, the northern army played the strongest card in their hand. They sent the legendary mage, the one they called the Founder, to end me. Needless to say, they weren't so thoughtless and rash as to have the Founder face a swordsman like me head-on. She cast a spell in the form of an assassin whose sole purpose was to take my life. And the name of that spell was the Grim Rim Reaper. She was the Founder's magnum opus, and just like me, her abilities were focused on nothing but killing. Furthermore, she took the form of a very young girl. One with a mind of her own.

To be honest, I didn't see what made her different from any kid on the block. And when she appeared before me, she said, "Hee hee hee! Let's *play*, Lorwen!"

She invited me to play with her. She saw me and smiled innocently. She never once averted her gaze, and fear never tinged her eyes. Much to my surprise, she survived combat against me and came to challenge me many, many times.

"Wha?! Lorwen, how are you not dead after *that* attack?! How can you see behind you?!"

Always taken aback by each of the sword techniques I displayed against her, she would reply all bubbly and innocent. I distinctly remembered the events that happened from that point onward. Thanks to her, the memories were no longer dyed in such dark red. That was how happy she made me. It was like she'd given the world a fresh coat of paint.

"Wow, Lorwen! You're the first to ever deflect my scythe!"

She praised me. She viewed me with open respect. And she was cheerful and lighthearted enough that it was like talking to a friend.

"Hee hee hee! You're so strong! That's my archenemy for ya!"

The more I fought and talked to Reaper, the more my heart pumped to life, and the more a fire was lit inside my long-cold body. Shivers went down my spine, a smile cracking my frozen expression. While sparing her brought me neither glory nor prestige, I just couldn't bring myself to kill her. I identified with her, in a weird way that only us deathbringer monsters could identify with each other, and it was a connection I valued.

At some point, I started going easy on her. I tried talking to her so many times, in case we could settle things amicably, but she never paid attention to my attempts; she always said that killing me was her duty. These fights to the death were the totality of the spell-construct, the Grim Rim Reaper's way of life, and also the way she communicated. Once I understood that, I figured I'd engage with her in her way. I kept battling her, always drawing things out by ending the fights in ties and forgoing food and sleep. It was probably because mortal combat was also the only thing in *my* life, the blade my only means of communication. As embarrassing as it was, I let the fighting between us continue day after day like I was play fighting with a friend. But those were the only moments when I managed to forget I was a member of the Arrace Clan. I felt so light, so unburdened. I could forget my responsibilities and everything else and *play* as a little boy with the little girl before my eyes.

Our "play" continued for a long time. Even as the end of the world drew near, we kept at it. We lost track of time, fighting and fighting and fighting until the land itself swallowed us up.

◆◆◆◆◆

“—wen! Mr. Lorwen!”

Someone shook me by the shoulders as I sat in my chair, and the dream I’d been having dissipated. I got the feeling it had been very nostalgic, but I couldn’t remember it well. Lately, my dreams had all been that way.

“Hm? What is it?”

I opened my eyes and turned to see a young man in an extravagant cape. His name was Glenn Walker—the hero who held the title of the strongest person in the Dungeon Alliance. At a glance, he seemed like a timid and gentle man, but he was in fact a redoubtable and vicious force that could be called a living arsenal of assassination methods. It was a mode of strength I didn’t particularly prefer, but it was certainly true that when it came to fighting other people as opposed to monsters, he was powerful enough to be called “the strongest.”

He flashed me a wry smile. “To think you’re able to take a nap at a time like this... Mr. Lorwen...”

I scanned my surroundings. There wasn’t much in the way of furniture or decoration, but it was a nice room that was pretty spacious. Sadly, the packed crowd of boorish louts really spoiled the room’s ambience. They had swords at their waists and were glaring at me with stern looks on their mugs. I could tell that they were all concentrating so that they could join forces and cut me down if I made any funny moves. Not that they were enough to be a match for me. That number was missing a few zeroes.

“I’m used to this sorta thing. It’s no biggie.” I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair again.

Glenn sighed. “Ha ha... I expected no less of you. Guess I was right; my being here feels sort of pointless...”

There was, in fact, no point in Glenn keeping an eye on me, but it couldn’t be helped. I was a finalist in the tournament, but at the same time, I was under arrest as a monster, and Glenn had been the only opponent who had put up a decent fight against me. It only made sense for the managers of the Brawl to want him to watch over me until the finals commenced.

“It’s not pointless. Your being here’s a big help. I can kill some time this way.”

“So, I’m good for killing time, huh? Oh, by the way, while you were asleep, Liner Hellvilleshine came. I can’t let you two meet, so I politely asked him to leave, but he seemed rather worried. Would you mind if I ask how you know each other?”

The kid I’d saved a few days back had apparently come to see me. How conscientious of him. I didn’t feel like seeing him again, though. I’d already taught him what I could and left him what I wanted to. Now he was Team Kanami’s problem.

“He’s my number two disciple of the blade. He’s still green now, but I’m sure he’ll be strong one day.”

“Really? I’m a bit jealous. He got to learn your techniques from you.”

“It wasn’t much. I just taught him the right frame of mind, that’s all,” I said lightheartedly.

The air around Glenn suddenly changed. “Anybody would be jealous, not just me. You’re the strongest in the Alliance, after all. You mustn’t forget that.”

The words hit me with a slight pang of sadness. I’d defeated him in our match, taking his title of “the strongest” in the process. That bit was fine. That wasn’t what bothered him. Far from it—he’d been meaning to cede the title to me from the moment he laid eyes on me. He’d even come to me before the match to tell me I was worthier of the title than him. The problem lay in what happened after the match. The Alliance’s treatment of me had changed on a dime, and I’d gone from a no-name sword-slinger to *the hero* in their eyes. You could say the world he lived in had been turned upside down.

On my way back from the arena, I’d been surrounded by a small army of total strangers. Once I finally managed to pull away from them, nobles had rushed to where I was lodging, approaching me for all sorts of stuff. I was dragged to a ball at the center area, where they thoroughly grilled me on my background, identity, and parentage. Next, they started talking about medals, accolades and peerages, rounding things out by asking about my life plans for the next few years. As I wasn’t part of any group, they were more than curious about who I’d get on with and what faction I’d join. They were all quick to sing my praises, but for some reason, it didn’t make me happy in the least.

However, I met all their brownnosing with a forced smile. I figured I had to behave in a manner befitting the man who had defeated Glenn Walker. If young Liner, who was used to these sorts of balls, hadn't gone with me, I probably wouldn't have been able to even break free from the siege of nobles.

After extricating myself with Liner's help, I went back to my room with a dead look in my eyes. I soon realized those eyes were the same as Kanami's used to be. The nobles' ball, a mark of one's prestige, was a different animal from what I'd pictured in my head. I could almost cry over how ungainly the *hero* I was striving to become actually was. Maybe Kanami had known that before it had dawned on me. He must have started taking exception to the "hero" concept the day he went to that ball with Snow, after it all hit home for him.

Snow must have been aware of that truth too. Otherwise, she wouldn't have wanted to foist the hero position on somebody other than herself. I'd learned my lesson: the image of the hero in my head was a total illusion. I'd thought that if I could cross the proper glory threshold, a fun life full of fun things would be awaiting me. I'd thought that if I could become the hero, it would make me happier. I'd thought that if I could live among nobles as one of them, I could make lots of friends. But reality was too harsh for that. And I couldn't even run from that "glory." Because once someone obtained it, it tagged them like a shadow whether they wanted it to or not. Far from a ticket to happiness, it was a veritable curse. I acknowledged that.

I met Glenn's expectations of me by acknowledging aloud that I was the hero now. "Yep, that's right. I *am* none other than the strongest in the Alliance. Sorry if I was being weirdly humble; I know it can come across as a bit sarcastic..."

I suddenly found myself wanting to hear Kanami and Snow. I just wanted to be with them and enjoy a pleasant chat, like we used to at Epic Seeker all the time. I wanted to talk to my friends, who must have gone through the same thing as me.

"Glenn, am I actually going to be allowed into the finals?" I muttered, the words coming out of my mouth unbidden. I knew the chances were slim, but still, I hoped. I hoped that once the finals began, somebody would be standing there to save me.

“It’s okay. You might be a monster, but that doesn’t matter. I’ll make sure you can participate, even if I, Glenn Walker, pay for it with my life.”

“Sorry I’m causing you all this trouble... I shouldn’t have acted without consideration.”

During my match with Fenrir Arrace, which had directly followed my round with Glenn, I had declared that I was a monster. I knew that ever since then, Glenn had been making the rounds patching things up for me.

“Considering both sides’ positions, it can’t be helped. You said what you said for Mr. Fenrir’s sake, didn’t you? He’s the head of the House of Arrace and the current Blademaster, after all. You wanted his defeat to be at the hands of his forefather and not some no-name swordsman, right? I definitely understand wanting to defend the good name of one’s clan.”

“I didn’t do it to protect the good name of my clan, though...”

In our match, I’d absolutely crushed my own descendant, Fenrir Arrace. While he’d been known as the Blademaster here in the Alliance, the epoch barrier was thick. The Blademaster from an era of peace and the Reaper from an era of savagery: the gap between us was evident. And no gap was bigger than the way the House of Arrace had changed over time. Compared to the clan I was familiar with, it was a different beast in the same skin. The continuity of the bloodline, I didn’t question, but the clan’s traditions and the swords being passed down through the generations were all so different. They might have *seemed* similar, but they were something else entirely.

The House of Arrace that I knew was never so praiseworthy. In other words, the clan that I’d tried to protect a millennium ago was no longer anywhere to be found. That fact filled me with despair, and I was assailed by a horrid sense of isolation. Naturally, not one ounce of me wanted to protect the House of Arrace. Not even close. All I’d wanted to do was *flee*. Flee from the cheers and applause I was getting, the sight of Fenrir on his knees before my eyes.

“I... I only said that because I couldn’t endure all the applause. It wasn’t for him...”

A pause. “Even so, Mr. Fenrir is grateful you did that. And even if he isn’t, you did, in fact, safeguard the reputation of the clan. He’s actually helping to get

you into the finals as we speak," he told me with a smile.

"Fenrir Arrace is helping me?"

"It looks like the old man's thinking what I am, more or less."

It seemed they each understood how the other was feeling, and Glenn definitely considered Fenrir dependable. His expression reverted to a serious one.

"We have one wish. All we want is for Lorwen Arrace, inheritor of our titles of 'the strongest' and 'the Blademaster,' to fight Aikawa Kanami."

The expectations the two had placed on me were a bit heavy, but their wish was my wish too.

"Yep. I wanna fight him," I said, meaning it from the bottom of my heart. I was the one who wanted my match against Kanami to happen the most.

After seeing my expression, Glenn hastened to cheer me up. "You don't need to worry, Mr. Lorwen. You *will* be there for the finals tomorrow. And so will Kanami. I guarantee it, because that's what everyone wants."

"Thanks, Glenn."

Thanks to him, I felt a bit easier. I turned my gaze to the nearby window. The pure-white curtains were swaying in the breeze. The soft wind stroked my bangs. It felt nice. Even nicer, the clear skies out the window looked gorgeous. As the beauty of this world a thousand years after my time soothed my soul, I counted all the things I'd lost. These past few days had been truly heady. While I'd come closer to my lifelong goal of becoming the hero, I'd stepped on the threshold of the glory I'd dreamed of and felt only despair, and I'd learned that the House of Arrace I had dutifully served no longer existed. It was quite the shock.

On the other hand, I also got the feeling that I was closer to my true path. I figured that if I used the process of elimination, I could pinpoint what it was I truly desired. My answers were close. I could practically *taste* it. But I wanted to see them before I reached the finish line. I wanted to see Reaper. To see Kanami. Maybe it was indulgent of me, but I wanted us to get closer to the true path as a trio, and I wanted my life to end with the three of us smiling and

laughing.

Would the two of them come to see me at the finals tomorrow? I doubted Reaper would. She was angry with me. And now that Kanami had his memories back, he would be putting me on the back burner...

That's so sad.

If the two didn't come to see me, I would end up fading into nothingness without any familiar faces around, and that would feel so lonely, having to face the end by myself *again*. It would make all my effort up until now intolerably meaningless.

So please, I'm begging you guys. Please, Reaper...please, Kanami...I'm waiting here. Waiting for you both. And I'm sure I've been *waiting for you since forever ago. Ever since I paced around inside that beat-up old mansion... Lorwen Arrace has been waiting all this time for some friends to come visit.*

Chapter 3: The Finals of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball

In the darkness, I heard a voice by my ear. Then something cold struck me on the cheek. I'd been kicking back and relaxing within that oh-so-comfy darkness, but unable to ignore this outside stimulus, I snapped back to consciousness.

Shaking off the sludge of drowsiness, I opened my eyes, and the instant I did, the light of the sun poured into them from the skies above. I moved my head a little, shifting my gaze, to find those rustic training grounds. Apparently, I'd been dozing at the center of the grounds.

I brushed aside the blanket somebody must have placed over me at some point and got up. I felt refreshed. In fact, a sense of liberation far beyond that spread through my brain. Gone were the mud and heavy weights bogging down the flow of my thoughts. My head felt clearer, the cobwebs in every corner now absent. And using that perfectly cleaned-out noggin of mine, I went about absorbing information on my present state. My horrendous sleepiness was a thing of the past, and that awful ague had stopped too. My limbs, which had felt so hard to move, as if stakes had been driven through them, were now light as a feather. The fact that my body was moving as my brain signals told it to? I could almost *cry*. While I couldn't say I was in perfect form, it was day and night compared to before.

My HP and MP had fully replenished, and my status conditions had cleared up too. I had no bangle and no limiters on my thoughts. *I'm back, baby.*

I had to tell everybody, so I scanned my surroundings. The first person I found was Reaper lying on the floor next to me.

"Morning, mister. Though actually, it's already midday."

"Hey, Reaper. Morning."

It seemed Reaper was the one who had woken me up, swinging her frozen left arm.

“Already match time?” I asked.

“Yep. The finals start in a bit. You versus Lorwen.”

The sun was right overhead. It was close to noon, and I knew the match was scheduled for early afternoon. I got to my feet in a hurry—I could hardly afford to get there late.

I surveyed the grounds so as to grasp the situation beyond Reaper...and what a weird sight it was. Lastiara, Dia, Maria, Snow, and Ms. Sera were all there. But they were all wordlessly keeping each other in check with pointed stares. The mood in the air was odd.

“Uh, is it just me or did things get tense in a single night? Did something happen, Reaper?”

“Don’t ask me. I was sleeping too.” She and I were both shaking in our boots.

Lastiara was the only one to manage a response. “It’s, well... Dia and Mar-Mar got off on the wrong foot...but it’s nothing serious, so don’t worry about it. First things first, go bring the Brawl to an end.”

“Wait, what? For real?”

The friction between them took me by surprise. Then the two in question replied with smiles on their faces.

“Oh no, far from it,” said Maria. “I’m acting as normal as can be. I’m the same as always.”

“Yeah,” said Dia, “I’m normal too. Nothing about that dumbass over there bothers me, no sir. You don’t gotta worry about nothing.”

Yeah, no, there’s nothing “normal” about this. Obviously, they’d gotten into some sort of tiff. The day before, I’d detected no antagonism between the two. Clearly, I’d let my guard down a little.

Lastiara half smiled. “That’s the gist of it. You two Brawl pals go on without us for the time being. We’ll come too, in a bit.”

“Uh, like...I can’t in good conscience leave when there’s a standoff happening. No way I could leave. I’m too scared of what might happen after the Brawl ends...”

My body was starting to tremble from the trauma. Leaving a situation like this to fester had never yielded a good result. Last night's rest was supposed to have cured my ailments, but now a cold sweat was trickling down my back. A bad case of the shakes assaulted me once again, and my limbs had those metaphorical wooden stakes driven through them once more.

Upon seeing me like that, Maria and Dia got flustered.

"No, it's... We're okay. Really! Dia and I just got in a bit of a scuffle, that's all. And don't get the wrong idea; it was more of a playground spat than anything!"

"Uh, yeah! What she said! We were just being stubborn, that's all! Right, Maria?!"

"Right, Dia!"

They put on smiles and joined hands. It came across a tad forced, but they were telling me that their hostility wasn't verging on murderous.

But wait, hold on. I let my guard down last time and look where it got me.

There was a chance that once I returned from my match, I'd find Laoravia turned into a sea of fire thanks to these two. In fact, in my estimation, the chances were good. I could pretty much safely assume that would come to pass. I had no doubt in my mind about it and was seriously distressed.

Should I change my plans for the finals?

Lastiara whacked me upside the head. "Quit all the hand-wringing. Stop worrying your little head and go already. If something does happen, Snow, Ms. Sera, and I are here. You believe in us, don't you?"

Clearly, she was fed up with me for tottering on the verge of madness over this. She gave me an intensely serious look, thereby telling me that the situation was different from before and that I need to trust her.

I yielded to her sheer dependability. "All right. I will."

"Cool, see you later. We'll go hit the stands after we calm Mar-Mar and Dia down. You two hit the waiting room sooner rather than later."

Then she turned and started scolding Maria and Dia. Relieved to see that, I said, "Come on, Reaper, let's go."

“Yep, I’m coming! Only, the ice encasing this arm kinda makes it hard to walk. I’ve got no sensation in my hand and stuff. The finals are starting in a jiffy, so could you, like, remove this already?”

“No can do. Now behave and follow me.”

“Tch!”

She pouted, following me with her carbonized right arm and frozen left arm dangling as she went. The leg I’d dismembered had fully recovered in less than a day, so she had no trouble walking. If she resisted, I could easily deal with her now that I’d made my comeback. Moreover, she had the presence of mind to understand that she couldn’t beat me. Not after I’d obtained the Responsiveness skill.

After I wrapped her arms with cloth I’d taken out of my inventory, we exited the Epic Seeker grounds and headed north for Valhuura. We traveled down the highway, crossed the river that marked the border between nations, and boarded the huge fleet of ships. On the way there, we overheard the gossip of people who were also walking the path. They were all discussing the Brawl, which was to be expected, given they were headed in the direction of the venue for the finals. I listened in on what they were saying, a muffler wrapped around my face to hide my identity. Reaper, who was walking next to me, was keeping an ear out as well. We heard a pair of young adventurers talking.

“The Brawl finals are on us at last, huh? Man, there have been so many upsets in this year’s matches. Talk about electrifying. Especially in the south area!”

“Yeah, that Lorwen guy’s matches were something else! I mean, he basically beat all of the best bets for first place! And almost unscathed, at that.”

“He beat both the strongest, Glenn Walker, and the Blademaster, Fenrir Arrace. I hear they’re already treating the dude like both the Blademaster and the strongest in the Alliance.”

It was hardly surprising that Lorwen was the participant who’d drawn the most eyes in the Brawl. Unlike us, he’d fought famous names one after the other and won decisively. That was a big factor.

“Heh heh,” said Reaper proudly.

I might have been wearing the same proud expression she was.

“Thing is, Lorwen declared during the match that he’s a monster. And a Dungeon Guardian too.”

“Yeah, I was in the stands in the south area, so I heard him say it with my own ears. He made no bones about it. My seat was far, though, so I couldn’t tell what bit of him was monstrous in any way...”

“Huh. Maybe he just calls himself a monster?”

“Nah, I think he really is one. The Brawl admins seemed pretty panicked when they crowded around him. And there are more rumors saying he really is a monster than otherwise.”

“If it’s true, that’s nuts. Could it be? Is a *monster* gonna take the tournament?”

“No, man, that’s why people’re expecting so much out of the hero in the north area. Name’s Kanami, I think? My lodging’s pretty far from the north area so I haven’t really gotten a good look at him...”

Reaper poked and prodded my cheek. It felt cold, so I wished she’d quit it.

“That’s that airheaded hero, right? If I recall correctly, his full name’s Aikawa Kanami. I haven’t seen the north area matches, but the name’s rare enough that I remember it.”

“So most of the spectators are putting their hopes in that newfangled hero putting the kibosh on the strongest monster, I guess. And the tourney staff have to focus on making things fair, so they must be hoping he beats the monster too.”

“Yeah, probably. If Lorwen really is a monster...they’ll be in a bind if it wins the Brawl.”

“The cheering’s gonna be one-sided. Precious few are gonna be caught dead cheering for the guy they’re saying is a monster. The Alliance countries are centered around the Dungeon. There are too many whose friends or family have been killed by monsters. You’d need some brass balls to cheer for a monster in that environment.”

The more she heard them talk, the quieter Reaper, who'd been larking it up, became. She seemed disgruntled by the unfair treatment Lorwen was getting just because he was a monster.

The pair of men walked farther away from us, but the voices of many other people who were looking forward to the match reached our ears. Everybody who passed us by was wondering about the outcome of the finals. I could tell just what a popular topic this year's Brawl was and how amped it had made the public. Evidently, a final match featuring two mostly unheard-of contestants was unprecedented.

"Obviously, Kanami's gonna win. He's the hero of our one and only Laoravia, ain't he?"

"Yeah, we're talking the guy who slew a dragon like it was nothing. He's a match for Lorwen."

"If it's the hero versus a monster, then I suppose I'll have to be boring and root for the hero. Even though they're both young and hot..."

"The swordsman's crazy strong, but the hero's no slouch. I spectated the matches in the north, and take it from me, he's even stronger than Brawl champions of the past."

Almost all of their conversations cast Lorwen as the enemy monster to slay. And me as the convenient hero to do the job. That made Reaper a bit sad.

"Looks like you're gonna get more cheers than he is, mister."

"So it would seem."

"After everything's said and done, is it all in vain 'cause he's a monster?"

"Nah, I don't think so. They might be making a fuss over him being a monster, but from what I can hear, they still respect him as a swordsman who beat the strongest and the Blademaster," I said, having calmly analyzed the chatter.

"Yeah...you're right..." she said, but her expression was sullen and depressed.

As we listened to the gossip of the people passing by, we finally reached Valhuura's central ship, which had the honor of being the largest in the fleet. It also had a distinctive shape. There was a huge gate that looked like the

entrance to a castle, with dozens of towerlike structures looming all around. Unlike many of the other ships, you could tell that this was not a refurbished battleship, but rather a theater ship at heart.

We entered the huge theater ship, the interior of which was built like a preeminent noble's mansion. The grand hall at the entrance could accommodate thousands of people, and countless opulent chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling. It reminded me of the ball I had gone to with Snow.

Ignoring the unpleasant feelings that thought summoned, I continued walking, calling out to the staff for guidance and heading to the fighters' waiting room. Along the way, I overheard a never-ending stream of rumors about Lorwen. Nobles lined up in the lavishly decorated corridor, judging me and Lorwen based on their own assumptions. They all acknowledged our strength, but as close as that came to the glory that Lorwen was always talking about, it never felt good.

We arrived at the waiting room and spent the remaining time in silence before the official announced the start of the match. I took Reaper's hand and walked down the corridor leading to what would likely be the last arena. Then I left the girl next to me with some final remarks. We'd overheard all sorts of people. Rumors were flying, and others had placed a world of expectations onto us. That much was clear, but...

"Listen here, Reaper. It doesn't matter to us whether Lorwen's a monster or a hero or the strongest. None of that matters."

A pause. "Wait, what?"

"While I feel bad for the spectators, this battle won't be for anybody else's sake. It's for you, me, and Lorwen. We'll be fighting for the three of us and no one else."

Another pause. "Okay."

"Let's go tell him the path you and I hit upon."

She was taken aback by my sudden remarks, but she understood what I'd said and nodded in a subdued way. She and I shared the same sentiment and we walked the same road together. We strode to where Lorwen awaited us, past

the dark corridor and onto the battlefield of the Brawl finals. The final arena.

At that instant, the scorching sunlight hit us, and the cheers rained down on us like a torrential downpour. A massive throng of countless spectators greeted my eyes, and all of them had been anticipating our arrival with bated breath.

It was a wide arena. A sturdy-looking barrier had been set up under the clear skies, over a battlefield that was about three times the size of the previous ones. The spectators' section was over three times as large. In addition to the regular seating stood the seat-spires, which were definitely distinctive. You could tell the space had been designed to allow as many people as possible to see the match.

In the center of the arena, right in front of our eyes, there he was. He was probably looking forward to us coming the most out of any of the people here. A young swordsman surrounded by armed guards, looking up at the sky...

He turned toward us as we entered. His soft chestnut hair swayed, and his blue-black eyes, marked by dark rings, caught us in their sights. His pupils suddenly shrank, and his lips curled. He'd been waiting alone at the summit of Valhuura.

And he'd been waiting for a long, long time.

How long? Had he been waiting since the Brawl began? Or maybe since the day he and I met? No, he'd been waiting since the ancient past, over a thousand years ago. Perhaps he'd been waiting ever since becoming the strongest swordfighter.

No. No, I didn't think any of those were correct.

I was pretty sure he'd been waiting since...

◆◆◆◆◆

The strapping young swordsman's name was Lorwen Arrace. He was the Guardian known as the Thief of Earth's Essence, and now that he had secured the titles of "the strongest" and the Blademaster as well, he stood at the very peak of glory and prestige. To add more titles on top of that, he was also my blade instructor and my friend.

The moment my gaze met his, the presenter's announcement resounded. He was gripping his mic, shouting, "And entering the arena on the opposite side is the hero, Aikawa Kanami! Over the past few days, the rumors about him have been flying without end! He started as the guildmaster of Epic Seeker and became a dragon-slaying knight and the fiancé of Walker Clan scion Lady Snow! What's more, word has it he's currently *running off together* with the Apostle, Her Grace Sith, as well as the princess of Whoseyards, Lady Lastiara! And yet for some reason, he's entered the arena with Reaper, who's supposed to be on Lorwen's team!"

The north area presenter was only ever this cheeky with *me*. I was really hoping they would give me somebody else for the finals, but reality was a harsh mistress. After throwing him a sharp look, I started walking toward the center of the arena. Lorwen broke free of the heavy contingent of guards and walked toward the center himself.

A whole lot had happened before we could reach this point, but I talked to him casually, as if meeting a friend for the first time in a while. "See, Lorwen? Didn't run off on you, did I?"

"Kanami...you came...and Reaper too," he said, in tones both cheerful and apologetic.

I tossed him the scarf I'd been holding. The muffler I had made. "Here, your scarf. The one I promised you."

"My scarf? Oh, right... Now that you mention it, I remember you promised. You're so upright and honest, Kanami. I mean that..." He wrapped it around his right shoulder. "Thanks."

"I remembered yesterday. And promises need keeping."

I would fulfill my promise to him no matter what. And to show him that, I drew my sword. When he saw my stance, he put it all together.

"Your mind and body are one. Guess you've got your memories back too, huh?"

He'd come to understand it all not by checking to see whether the bangle was there, but by my bearing and demeanor.

“All right then, what’s the real Kanami planning to do with me?”

“Come what may, Aikawa Kanami will always be your good friend,” I replied as a matter of course. “And I can’t stand by while a good friend suffers. Let’s fight, Lorwen. That way, you’ll learn the true path. Your attachments will be dispelled and our promise will be realized.”

I refused to make the same mistake I had made with Alty. I hadn’t even treated her as a person. My weak heart had invited that bitter outcome. But not this time. This time, I would see Lorwen off as his friend, not his enemy. To that end, I vigorously swung my sword to the side. The stroke was even faster than when Lorwen had instructed me back in the Dungeon; it communicated to him that I was in tip-top shape and even stronger now, and that I was standing there as the formidable opponent he’d been craving.

Lorwen’s mouth gaped. The one before his eyes, the one he’d been putting his hopes in, was *exceeding* those hopes. His expression was a blend of astonishment and admiration, like a little kid watching a Saturday morning superhero show. And his expression also contained the nostalgia and fondness of an adult watching the superhero show they had liked as a child. He was dumbfounded in the face of joy that went beyond his expectations.

After a moment or two, he closed his mouth and digested how moved he felt. He smiled with his whole face and cast down his eyes a tad before muttering, “I see.” Then he lifted his head again. His expression was earnest, serious. “So my fears were needless in the end. I’m sorry, Kanami. Honest. When I heard about Palinchron Regacy, my heart wavered. I thought that if your memories returned, you’d prioritize vengeance. I mean, that’s how awful what he did to you was. And yet despite that...”

Lorwen drew his own blade. I could tell that the sentiment had reached his heart.

He flashed me a pugnacious, can’t-wait-to-fight smile and said, “Despite all that, you’d still indulge me in a fight anyway.”

He approached me, and I did likewise. But then, a shadow cut in between us. It was Reaper. The sight of her trembling and shaking her head, unable to sit by and watch, made Lorwen smile. It was a kindly smile, like a parent gazing at

their child—but at the same time, the shadow of death was upon his face as well.

“Watch us, Reaper. ’Cause at long last, I’m gonna attain what I’ve been chasing all these years.”

“Lorwen...” she said hoarsely.

“Don’t give me those sad eyes. Would ya mind seeing me off with a smile?”

“Hey, so, uh, tell me, Lorwen...do you really wanna leave this life? Do you really not wanna live on? You do know how much in this world we have yet to see, don’t you?!”

“What’re you talking about? I’m already dead, Reaper.”

The rift between Lorwen and Reaper was deep. She had understood that before she’d even said a word. That was why she hadn’t wanted to come here. She’d been trying to save him without actually interacting with him.

She was quivering, but still, she hung it all on her last hope. “But you’re here now, aren’t you? So, like, you can afford to be a bit more self-indulgent—”

“I am being self-indulgent right now. I’m trying to accept my heart’s desire—the true answer to it all—from my best friend, which is pretty self-indulgent for a walking corpse, I think.”

“That’s not what I mean! When you get that ‘answer’ or whatever, you’re gonna *vanish*, Lorwen! Nothing’ll be tying you to life anymore! How can you be okay with Lorwen Arrace no longer existing?! With things ending this way?!”

Lorwen remained calm in the face of her shouting. Calmer than even I was expecting; he exhibited none of the restlessness of the day he had ambushed us.

“Yep. I want this to be my last hurrah. Don’t go getting the wrong idea, Reaper. I understand now. The *heroes* of this era taught me the truth. The ‘strongest hero’ Glenn Walker taught me that the dream I’d aimed for was an illusion. The Blademaster hero Fenrir Arrace taught me that the Arrace Clan no longer exists as I knew it.”

While Snow, Lastiara’s group, and I were fighting our own Brawl battles,

Lorwen had been blazing through the ranks on his own romp. What he'd just said made that clear. By beating Mr. Glenn, he had learned about the current state of the nobility, and by fighting his descendant Fenrir Arrace, he had ascertained the fate of his own clan. A clan that he knew had no place for him. That was why the look on his face was so similar to mine.

"There's no man by the name of Lorwen Arrace here to begin with. There's no such guy, Reaper. Way before I even met you, on the day I agreed to the pact to become the Thief of Earth's Essence, Lorwen Arrace disappeared from this world. What you see before you is just a nameless corpse animated by lingering attachments. I'm nothing more than a monster."

As his friend, that truth was a bit sad, but the truth it remained. Lorwen had, under his own strength, come closer to the answer that was right for him.

"It's not enough, though," he continued. "Glenn taught me about the future, and Fenrir the present. But I still don't have the thing that's most important to a Guardian like me."

He wasn't all the way there yet. His attachments weren't gone. His gaze shifted from Reaper to me.

"Kanami has the answer regarding my *past*. I trust that he'll teach me what's tethering me here."

He sought one person's opinion, and I, of course, intended to oblige him. I returned his nod, but Reaper alone continued to shake her head.

"You can't, Lorwen! Say what you want, but I...I..."

"During this final match, I'm gonna vanish. No matter what happens, I *will* disappear today." He caressed the shivering Reaper's head before walking past her. He'd taken another step forward, alone on his path toward figuring out what his *true* wish was.

"R-Right..." said Reaper as she sobbed. "I knew it... I knew it all along..."

Lorwen was unhesitating. He was staring at me and only me, with a gaze so intense that one might be led to believe he did, in fact, know what he truly desired. And since Reaper understood that, she knew there was simply no stopping him. The answer he sought was now within his grasp. All he had to do

was reach out a little farther and it would all be over. He wasn't about to let Reaper stop him.

"It's just no use... Not anymore..."

"End of the road, Reaper. I'm sorry. We had some good times together, but it looks like they're over now."

"Augh!"

Reaper turned around and clenched her fists—only to relax them right away. Her will to fight had overflowed for a fleeting moment, but even if she stopped the match, she'd only be turning both me and Lorwen against her. Against not one but *two* wielders of the Responsiveness skill, she knew that no matter how much magic energy she could muster, she didn't stand a chance. All she could do was weep. She covered her face with her hands and fell to her knees.

Seeing her lose her will to fight, I addressed the presenter. "Once the match starts, please take Reaper and go someplace safe. Otherwise, you'll be in danger."

"Uh, yes, right..." Faced with the girl's grief and sorrow, he agreed readily. While he might not have been privy to the details, he had clearly surmised that Reaper no longer had any desire to participate in the match. "Then I take it you two will be fighting one-on-one. Please decide your ruleset."

He took Reaper by the hand and dragged her away. Only Lorwen and I darkened the center of the arena now. While my heart went out to Reaper, I could hardly start the match on a dour note. It was time to choose our ruleset. Of course, even just that discussion was equivalent to a final goodbye. For our last moments together, I wanted to part ways with a smile. So he and I spoke casually, as we always did.

"I think I wanna try the knocking-the-weapon ruleset," I suggested.

"Hold up, dude. These are the *finals* we're talking about. Ain't a no-holds-barred death match what's called for here?"

"But we need to do the whole master-and-pupil blade-fight thing..."

"Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I did say something to that effect, huh?"

he muttered.

“I remember it word for word. You said you wanted a showdown between master and pupil during the Brawl final. You said the Arrace School of the blade would make an elegant showing and the beautiful sword clash would captivate the people.”

“Your incredible memory’s as useful as always. All right, how about a death match ruleset, but we do the knocking-the-weapon thing first? Let’s get ’em all hyped up by doing the match in stages.”

“Guess that sounds good...though when it’s a fight between dudes who know each other, there’s no air of tension or excitement to those rules.”

“Good point. Thanks to us throwing our hats in, the tail end of the tourney’s turned into a bunch of acquaintances duking it out.”

We smiled as we spoke. We wanted to convey to the girl who was crying nearby that there was nothing sad about this, and that neither of us had regrets. Since our conversation had reached a pause, the presenter cut in.

“Er, are you not betting anything? Personally, I was very much looking forward to what you would wager, considering you two know each other. For example, maybe Mr. Lorwen wants Mr. Kanami’s lady for himself and they fight over her? Just spitballing,” he said tactlessly, a gleeful look on his face.

Today would be the day I got back at him for what he’d said during all my matches.

“Please don’t be that way. Neither of us is going to bet anything. Up till now, I was feeling too rough to give you a piece of my mind, but let me tell you—”

“Hold on, Kanami. I’ve actually got something to bet ya.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s stake our swords. Whoever loses gives the winner their sword.”

“Our swords? I mean, I don’t mind, but...”

“And this is the sword I’ll be putting down.” From one of the two scabbards at his waist, he pulled his blade.

【CORRUPTED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN】
Attack Power 2

It was the sword that Dia had given me, which I had then given to Lorwen. It had been mended by Mr. Alibers. The melted blade had been adjusted with raycrystal, and a crystal design had been added to the hilt. Only, perhaps due to the forced nature of the restoration, the blade hadn't recovered its sharpness.

"You wanna bet *that*? It was mine to begin with. Well, actually, it was Dia's, but..."

"It's me and Alibers's magnum opus. And I spent a pretty penny on it. If you beat me, I'll return it to you free of charge."

"It's not like I *asked* you to get it repaired." I sighed. "Fine. I'll beat you and you'll give it back to me."

I ended up wagering my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword in return.

"What kinda bet is that?" said the presenter. "Th-That's so boring!"

"Just announce to the crowd that those are the rules, Mr. Emcee Man. If you say anything out of line, I *will* freeze your ass solid." I froze the tip of his hair using *Wintermension: Frost* to make my point.

"Ack. I suppose I have no choice. When someone of your caliber threatens an ordinary citizen like me, I cannot disobey. I must say, I loathe my own powerlessness..." He seemed chagrined from the bottom of his heart.

"Enough already! Just do it." At this rate, I could see myself unleashing some full-on ice magic at him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the ruleset for this match has been decided! Our finalists are staking their swords on a death match! As both bosom friends and master and disciple, the two have vowed to clash using their blades—and to give it their all!"

The presenter's voice reverberated through the spacious arena by way of his magical mic. The crowd roared in response. From catching what some spectators were saying, I realized how much they were looking forward to this

battle between the Blademaster and his disciple. Amid the maelstrom of expectations, a gratified Lorwen smiled.

"Music to my ears. We're gonna stake our swords on this. That's what I like to hear! Good stuff, that introduction."

The cheers snowballed like a booming avalanche. Some were screaming particularly loudly. I had no idea how they had gotten front-row seats, but Lastiara and company were there, Snow and Maria cheering me on like no tomorrow.

"Get 'em, Kanami! Win and help me escape! Crush him good! It's for my sake too!"

"You can do it, Mr. Kanami! I believe you can win the day, just like you did with me!"

Upon seeing them cheer, the presenter became red in the face. Then his expression turned more gleeful than it had been all day. "Me oh my! While Mr. Kanami let us down, our audience is picking up the slack! Believe it or not, folks, the Walker Clan scion, Lady Snow, and Team Lastiara are in the front seats, cheering Mr. Kanami on *in harmony!* What could have happened to unite these contestants who fought so bitterly during their match?! But that's not all! We have yet another girl now! Though I must say, this one's awfully young! She's a bit *too* young, Mr. Kanami! I know you love your womanizing, good sir, but let's calm down a *little!* Ah, but what's this? I don't see the Hellvilleshine scion, Franrühle, among them! Could it be?! Did he *discard* her after you-know-what happened?! Well there's a hero for you! That sheer lack of principles— Argh! Who turned down the heat?!"

"How many times, old man?! Why've you gotta be so mouthy with me?!"

I had activated a full-blown casting of *Wintermension: Frost*, and the presenter covered his frozen lips with his hands and staggered. Naturally, the stands erupted with laughter. I blushed and averted my eyes—a meaningless act since there were spectators no matter where I looked. The cheering never abated in that time, and Lastiara's group was especially vociferous.

Dia was pouting at Maria and Snow. "Look here, you two. You're still in my bad books. Don't get carried away, got it?"

Maria replied with an unruffled look on her face, “Is that right? Well I don’t particularly care if I’m in your bad books or not, so...”

Snow, on the other hand, got in a flap. “Eek! I... I’m sorry, Your Grace! I got a bit carried away...”

“Don’t call me that. These days, I go by Dia.”

“Ah, of course! Lady Dia!”

Judging by her fawning, Snow desperately wanted Dia to protect her too. I got the feeling that while we’d gotten past a crisis point, Snow’s personality had taken a dip in the process.

“Heh heh, heh heh heh... Please save me, Lady Lastiara.” The fact that she instantly beseeched Lastiara for help already spoke poorly of her.

Meanwhile, Lastiara was munching away, doing a magnificent job ignoring Snow. “Mmm, this is good. What is this, Serry?”

“It’s an Eltraliew speciality, milady. I heard good reviews, so I took the liberty of securing some.”

“Wait, huh?! You’re willing to be my hero, aren’t you, Lady Lastiara?!”

“Nah, sorry. You slept on that onetime offer and now the deal’s off the table. Too bad, so sad.”

“No, you’re... You’re kidding me!”

“We’re allies. We’re in equal standing, so I’m not gonna babysit you. Didn’t Kanami give you his whole spiel? Oh, but more importantly, all that formal speech: let’s drop it, shall we?”

“Urgh... I thought *you* would be there to coddle me, at least.”

“Yeah, that’s a no go. Kanami told me to quit that sort of thing. Besides, I’m pretty tuckered out myself, so you’ll understand if I wanna take a breather. I’m *really* exhausted after that match with a certain somebody who legit wanted me dead. Heh heh!”

“I’m so sorry about that... Augh, it’s no use! Kanami, come back! Quick!” Snow was quick to throw in the towel. The vow she’d made the day before lay

in tatters.

"Also," said Dia, "that's *my* sword. What's it doing in that Guardian schmuck's hands?"

"Oh, that Guardian's an Arrace Clan descendant, apparently. And the sword's connected to the Arraces, right? Let it slide, Dia."

"He's an Arrace too? I see... All right, guess it can't be helped."

The sight of the girls chatting among themselves got me emotional, though for some reason, the individual topics of conversation struck me as more than a little frightening. I wanted them on friendly terms if possible... It was a scary feeling, the powder keg fuse always being lit like that.

"That sword... It's weird. I remember melting it. I wonder when it got repaired."

"I'm sorry, what?! The hell did you do to my sword, Maria?!"

"What, was that your sword? What a relief. I thought I'd destroyed Mr. Kanami's sword."

"Why you!"

All right, time to go nip this in the bud. I was truly afraid a fight might break out at any second. Plus, it seemed Lorwen could hear them too; he had a hand over his mouth as he stifled his laughter. I was mortified. My friends were embarrassing me.

I did have other people I knew cheering me on. Everyone in Epic Seeker had come to spectate in support of their guildmaster. Then again, one of them was shouting stuff that had nothing to do with me per se.

"Look! Look at them there swords! They're both my swords! Boy, look at the shine on my master's Crescent Pectolazri! And Lorwen's mithril ain't too shabby either! Talk about picturesque!"

It was Mr. Alibers, the Epic Seeker blacksmith. I'd had him mend a lot of my weapons and forge me some trusty blades too.

"That guy's my guildmaster!" shouted the youngest girl in the guild. "I'm with him! How do ya like that?! Badass, right?! The master of Epic Seeker's the

strongest guy around!”

If I recalled correctly, she was the first person I had fought in the process of becoming guildmaster. Mr. Vohlzark was standing next to her.

“Calm down, you’re embarrassing me,” he said.

Needless to say, Ms. Tayly was right there with them. She was gazing with tender, affectionate eyes at...a section of the stands; certainly not at me. She was smiling at Snow, who was hanging her head, her true self undisguised.

There were other distinct characters among the audience as well—the divers and adventurers who’d gathered to give our match a look-see. The people with confidence in their own prowess were glaring at us belligerently, while those who’d come to study and steal our swordsmanship techniques for themselves wore serious expressions. There were even the divers who’d tried to kill me during my early days. I wondered if they remembered me. To my eyes, it looked like the leader of the group blanched after seeing my face.

That wasn’t all. A great many nobles were watching us with appraising eyes. Some of them were just here to enjoy the match, but the majority were here to —you guessed it—advance their own interests. I’d met a number of them at that ball. If memory served, that guy over there was Korner of the Talua Clan, and that was Kyne of the Cofelt Clan. I recognized a whole bunch of faces.

Moreover, foreign dignitaries who’d attended the cathedral on the Day of the Blessed Birth were surveying me avidly, their guards likewise watching intently so as to ascertain the extent of my abilities.

Obviously, the Seven Celestial Knights were in attendance as well. Ms. Franrühle was there, an apologetic look on her face. Sitting in the stands instead of continuing to look for her little brother Liner probably wasn’t what she wanted to be doing.

Liner, meanwhile, was hiding behind a pillar in a corner of the arena. I didn’t sense a homicidal amount of enmity coming from him, but he was glaring at me and Lorwen with a grim expression.

Since this was a tournament representing all five allied nations, there were many people from other countries as well. That included the one and only Mr.

Krowe, a swordsman who had helped me when I was working at the pub. Surprisingly, the manager and the place's poster girl waitress, Ms. Lyeen, were with him. They were cheering me on with smiles on their faces, even after I'd disappeared without a word to them. The din of the crowd was too loud for him to hear me, so I gave the manager a nod of thanks. I was keen to run over and apologize in person at some point.

Other Brawl participants hadn't failed to show up either. Elmirahd was in the stands alongside other nobles. He was staring at me and Lorwen, eyes sparkling like a little kid's. Also in attendance were the fierce fighters who'd battled Lastiara and Lorwen, not to mention the academy students who had told me they were my fans. For some reason, even the receptionist who'd enrolled me and Lorwen was there, having joined the audience as part of my fan club. I was beyond embarrassed.

Dang...there really are all sorts of people here, and they're all shouting one thing or another...

Before today, their cheering had done nothing but irritate me, but now it was strangely pleasant. The ear-rattling racket was as loud as a torrential downpour, but it felt as refreshing as a grassland breeze. My heart was beating faster and I was getting overcome by emotion. I was finally experiencing the true charm of the Brawl. Big festivals were great, and being able to share that experience with so many people made it tons more fun. Despite the deafening cacophony of their cheering, I smiled, at which Lorwen smiled too.

"Heh. Bit of a gap in who's getting cheered for, eh? The only eyes on me are seedy merc types'. Meanwhile they're yelling their lungs out cheering for ya."

"Not true, dude. You've got it all wrong, Lorwen."

"Wait, whaddya mean?"

Like he'd said, there were few who were cheering for Lorwen the monster. While some were just hungering for a juicy match, almost none were cheering for *him* specifically. The operative word being *almost.*

"You'll see soon enough."

"I will, will I? Good, then. As long as I get the answers I seek, that's just fine."

It wasn’t the kind of thing you outright told a guy. I gripped my sword tightly and locked eyes with him. The distance between us closed even more. When we were within sword range of each other, he looked up at the sky.

“This is the end... For how long I’ve lived, it seems so short...” he said, looking back.

What was he reminiscing about? The man had reached this battlefield after a millennium had passed. What was going through his mind was unfathomable, as I wasn’t able to see eons into the future.

Lorwen etched the clear skies into his mind and muttered what he had resolved to do. It was his declaration, his oath as the Thief of Earth’s Essence.

“Today’s the day. Here, I vanish.”

With that, he casually held his blade at the ready. As his disciple, I assumed the very same stance before looking at his menu for one final check.

【TRIGESIMAL GUARDIAN】Thief of Earth’s Essence

The man standing before my eyes was Lorwen Arrace. If I had to sum him up in three words, he was *the strongest swordfighter.*

With the last prematch check of the contestants now over, the Brawl between me and Lorwen was happening, at long last...

It was upon us.

When he saw us facing each other and assuming our battle stances, the presenter, who was watching from afar, shouted, “Now, then! May the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball finals match...BEGIN!”

At his cue, Lorwen and I sprang into action.

◆◆◆◆◆

At the emcee’s announcement, our swords flashed. This was not mere gleaming in the sunlight as we swung and clashed. Our blades practically *became* glints of light. My Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword streaked blue, and Lorwen’s Mithril Sword streaked red, the hues of the respective ores of our

blades touching for a fleeting moment and coming apart before the sound even reached our eardrums. And the moment the swords came apart, the twin streaks would clash again, and again, and again.

Even as I did battle, our little light show reminded me of a starry night sky. Time had condensed to a frightening point, and I tracked the blade's trajectory and nothing else. He and I were in another world now. Another world within this foreign world. It was like watching the stars move a trillion times faster in the black expanse of space above. One wrong move and I'd be sliced in two. Death hung over me in wait, but nobody was coming to rescue me. My sword was all I could believe in. We were now in the beautiful, enchanting realm of the blade. And in that moment, I would've been happy gazing at that world forever and ever.

But I knew this world unto ourselves wouldn't last for long. There was too wide a gap between our respective Swordplay skills. I'd never pull even against him unless I employed magic. Even so, I wanted to see it. I wanted to *feel* the dancing of his sword with all my heart and soul, challenging him with nothing but body and blade. I never forgot the thrill of my first fight against Ms. Sera. The sheer beauty of honed blade dancing struck and surprised me. And even more unforgettable was the awe that I felt during my first fight against Lorwen. The breathtaking sublimity of swordsmanship that had reached the very pinnacle of achievement. I wanted to taste that sensation one last time. This was the world I'd dreamed of when I was a kid. My heart pounded with aspiration and admiration even as the sword fight unfolded.

Yet as might be expected, Lorwen's blade bore down on mine more and more. He pressed the advantage, and I had no choice but to fall back. I leaped away like a bounding beast and distanced myself quite a bit. Lorwen didn't pursue me, instead addressing me with a quizzical look.

"What's wrong, Kanami? Use your magic. You're not gonna beat me with just your sword."

I knew that. But once Lorwen disappeared, I'd be the number one swordfighter in the world. Or more accurately, I'd have no choice. After this battle ended, I'd never again be able to catch another glimpse of that swordfighters' world. In other words, never again could I be the admirer as

opposed to the admired. But it was time to put the warm-up behind me.

"I already knew that would be the case, but man, I can't get a hit in with just my sword... All right, Teach, fine. I'll stop holding back."

Lorwen smiled with an exasperated expression. "Bro, why were you holding back to begin with? Usually *I'd* be the one holding back..."

"Gotta go through the stages of hype, right? It's your fault for having so few skills in your arsenal."

"You've got a point; I can't use magic. So, Kanami, are you gonna use dimensional magic again?"

"No..."

It was time to get to the core of things. I'd no longer be able to view that beautiful world from the outside. I wasn't going to be *watching* it. I was going to become *part* of it.

My forelocks floated up gently. I could feel my sensory organs increasing by one, unshackled by common sense. My Responsiveness skill was activating.

"I'm gonna use the arcanum of the Arrace School, the Responsiveness skill."

I now perceived things not through magic but through my skin. I understood the trick behind this skill thanks to my experience with the bangle controlling me like a puppet. The heart of the skill lay in unifying my mind and body, and *acknowledging* the world around me. Acknowledging that this wasn't the world I knew, and that different rules applied here, like the existence of monsters and magic energy. No more averting my eyes from the fact that I was in another world. And as a result, I grasped a portion of the laws that governed this world in my hands.

Lorwen was delighted to see it. "Excellent," he said, his expression one of childlike glee. "Now we're talking, favored disciple! Fantastic work reaching this level. You and I are finally on the same plane. We're the same now! So let's let our swords do all the talking! Let's give it everything we've got—no excuses, no holding back! That's the only way a sword fight lights a fire in people!"

He was even happier than I was that I'd reached his level. Judging by his

expression, it was like I'd finally freed him from the loneliness of plumbing the pitch-black reaches of space. Reacting to my activation of the skill, Lorwen amplified the power of his Responsiveness. His chestnut hair started swaying, even though there was no wind.

"Here I come, Teach!"

"Come at me, my pupil!"

Once again, the distance between us closed. I couldn't tell you which one of us dashed first; before I knew it, our blades were clashing anew. Just like before, our slashes were flickering glimmers, but this time the fight wasn't one-sided. He and I gave as good as we got, jostling each other on equal footing. Thanks to Responsiveness, I could now keep up with his movements.

In terms of combat at sword range, Responsiveness was definitely superior to *Dimension*. With *Dimension*, I reacted only after processing the motion happening within its range of effect. With Responsiveness, I reacted instantly, without the processing downtime. The difference in reaction time was massive. If *Dimension* was the perception power for mages, Responsiveness was very much the perception power for swordfighters.

The clashing continued, the sword strikes so fast that they traced thin lines flitting about my field of vision. At times, the attack would come at me from outside my view, but I blocked those without having to see them with my eyes, and the same was true for Lorwen. The strengths of our Responsiveness were more or less equal; neither was considerably inferior to the other. That meant that a different factor would decide this match—the Swordplay skill. We were staking this battle on our sword prowess. That was the fight he wanted, so in order to meet his expectations, I racked my brain for everything I knew about the blade. I pictured the swordfighters I'd met in this world, and I dug up any tidbits regarding swords that I'd learned in my world too, blending together all the information inside me and turning it over in my mind before regurgitating it.

Sorry, Teach, but my sword skills aren't beholden to the Arrace School. I've got my own way of swinging a blade.

"Huh?!" Lorwen blanched.

Until that moment, it had been a battle of Arrace School swordsmanship, but

all of a sudden I'd started pulling different moves on him. Just to be different, I'd attacked him with a sword slash that was from an inferior school, Dia's less-than-stellar sword skills, knowledge I'd picked up at the pub regarding the sword techniques of this world, techniques stolen from other divers, Tida's brute-force swinging... My sword style was a combination and elevation of my varied Dungeon experiences. Yet Lorwen blocked all my attacks perfectly.

Ms. Sera's unique sword techniques, Ragne's methods of attack, Hopes's methods of defense, the Hellvilleshine methods of combat, and the knightly moves representing Pelsiona... I attacked with a sword style that was a combination and elevation of all I'd experienced regarding knightly fighting methods. But Lorwen deftly dodged it all.

The combat essentials I learned at Epic Seeker alongside Mr. Vohlzark and the others, the wide variety of sword styles exhibited by Elmirahd and the other Brawl participants, Snow's muscle-reliant moves, Lastiara's elegant sword performances. I attacked with a sword style that was a combination and elevation of all my experiences in Laoravia.

Needless to say, Lorwen deflected my efforts with a smile.

Finally, I added my Earth knowledge to my experiences in this world and tried hitting him with a sword style that was a combination and elevation of absolutely everything inside me. Yet Lorwen overcame it all with ease.

Though I groaned, a smile was pasted on my face. I'd pulled out my every move, and my sword had failed to even graze him. But oddly, I felt more happy than chagrined, even though this was no time to be smiling. I'd thought my barrel of tricks was endless, but I'd scraped the bottom with nothing to show for it, and I'd no longer be able to take him by surprise. I had no choice but to simply surpass him in sheer sword skill.

Of course, there was no swordfighter in the whole world who could make that a taller order than the one before my eyes. The battle unfolding was slowly but surely tending in Lorwen's favor. I did my damnedest to withstand his onslaught. Within range of each other's swords, our eyes locked, and Lorwen grinned. Since we were teacher and student, I knew that he was planning to change it up as a thank-you for showing him that cavalcade of sword

techniques. What was once a head-on sword fight was suddenly something less typical. Responsiveness was telling me that he was trying to catch me unawares. Sure enough, he mixed countless feints into his attacks—so many it made my head spin. I could tell they were just feints through Responsiveness. But unfortunately, it was because I had that inkling that my body froze up. There were just too many feints to contend with.

Lorwen's gaze fell on my throat. Through that sharp gaze of his, I could sense his imminent intention to strike me there, but that was, of course, a feint. After all, he could fight perfectly fine without the use of his eyes, and besides, he had no need to focus his attention on the place he'd be striking to begin with. I would not be led astray; I didn't undo my stance.

He shifted his hands slightly to the left. By the playbook, that stance was leading to a rightward slash. I shifted my own stance slightly in response. Upon seeing that, he then shifted his center of gravity a little bit back. Perhaps he understood I would have blocked the attack, choosing to gain some distance to start again. Normally, the optimal move was to close the distance against a retreating opponent, but I refrained from doing so. If we had been ordinary people fighting, we wouldn't have been able to grasp such minor shifts in each other's balance, but Lorwen and I could tell. That was why I understood that even this was just another feint, so I couldn't actually press in on him. Naturally, he did not, in fact, fall back. The way he'd shifted his center of gravity had been a trap meant to lure me in closer.

Sensing I wasn't moving, he shifted his weight even more, swaying subtly right and left in irregular intervals and thereby steadily throwing me off my stance. As he did so, he'd occasionally throw in a sudden, unthinking, frighteningly fast slash. And it all took place over a span of time so minute that I couldn't even afford to blink. This was nuts.

It was now a battle of feints; the frequency with which our blades clashed was visibly lower. I was pulling this or that maneuver countless times a second, but maybe from the spectators' perspective, it looked as though I was just messing around. At the center of the arena, he and I continually hopped around like some kind of joint tap dance. The lightning-fast streaks our blades traced gave the battlefield a touch of color, and the sparks that flew from time to time

made for vivid stage lighting.

I'd heard that prescribed sword forms were related to dance, and our fight was showing that to be true. The highest-level exchange of sword blows in the world must, in the eyes of a third party, seem like a dance of divine beauty. The audience who'd once cheered so boisterously grew more and more speechless at the sight, spellbound by this battle that was so beyond them that it might as well have been taking place among the stars. Soon, they could only gasp. It appeared that the emotion I had once experienced was what the crowd was feeling now, and that made me a wee bit glad to see. Festivals like these really were nice. People could share in the emotions they inspired. That was all it took to get the heart racing so very fast.

I felt the urge to shout it from the rooftops: *Look; this is me! And that's Lorwen!*

At last, the seemingly endless battle of feints drew to a close. Lorwen had me beat in terms of sheer sword skill, but it seemed I had him beat in regard to deception and tactics. I didn't fall for any of his feints no matter how much time passed, so Lorwen opened some distance and spoke with a frustrated expression.

"Damn, just can't seem to get ya! But that's how I like it! I expect no less of you! All right, I know what to go for now!"

With those words, the battle was cranked up to the next stage. And this time, the blade of his sword... This time, it could *extend.*

I dodged it by the skin of my teeth, blood now dripping from my cheek. Thanks to his Magic Power Materialization skill, Lorwen's sword could stretch just long enough to reach the edge of the arena. But the very next instant, that magic-energy blade disappeared—the guy didn't possess much of that energy. It seemed he was expecting a protracted battle, so he economized by extending the blade for split seconds at a time. Now the distance factor, so important in normal sword fights, no longer mattered. No matter where in the arena I was positioned, I'd always be vulnerable to a deadly strike, and I couldn't distance myself in order to take a breather either. It was time I followed suit. For indeed, this didn't spell the end of our master-pupil showdown.

I activated my own take on Magic Energy Materialization: Magic Power Freezing. While Lorwen's energy sword was transparent like crystal, my ice sword gleamed pale blue. Our respective blades reached the barrier at the edge of the arena. On this battlefield, advancing and retreating had lost all meaning, so we started fighting by making full use of the breadth of the arena.

Lorwen's energy blade kicked up a cloud of dust upon gashing the ground, its tip leaving a scratch on the faraway barrier. As I vaulted to the side to avoid the swing, I fired off a sideways swipe attack, slicing through the dust in the air and leaving a straight-line dent in the barrier on the far side. That instant, his energy blade dispersed in midair, leaving crystalline dust in its wake. Meanwhile, my frost blade dispersed in midair, leaving behind ice crystal dust. The next instant after that, we both fashioned new blades using our energy and attacked, only for those swords to vanish in the blink of an eye once again.

This repeated over and over, filling the air inside the barrier with a mist of crystal and ice. Bit by bit, the battlefield was turning into a kaleidoscope of sorts as the crystal mist reflected the sunlight in rainbow colors. The effect cast geometric patterns on the barrier, dyeing it a wondrous tapestry of hues. Our magic energy was reshaping our world, and in the midst of it all, he and I never stopped in our tracks, unleashing blade after blade with all our might and etching slash marks into the barrier at speeds past the eye's ability to track. Those marks we were leaving served as proof that we were fighting. We made dozens and dozens of them in the blink of an eye, and in the space of a single breath, hundreds and hundreds of afterglow streaks twinkled. By the time either of us took a single step, we had already etched thousands of slash trails. Yet neither side was winning.

I suspected that had I battled Lorwen before this match, I wouldn't have been able to put up this much of a fight. However, Lorwen was gradually getting truly serious in order to enliven the fight. No...he was doing it for my sake. It was in a dimension mage's nature to learn and become stronger. I had that to thank for having gotten this far. While I didn't have a moment to spare on looking at my menu, I could tell that the number by the skill was increasing at an alarming rate. Likewise, now that Lorwen had a worthy opponent in me, even though he had reached the highest heights, I knew he must be making even more

progress. And I was following at his heels.

In the past, Lorwen had traveled this path alone. And once nobody could possibly follow alongside him anymore, he had ended up halting in his tracks. But he was frozen in place no more. A thousand years later, his lot had changed. I was here for him, and he was no longer all alone, no matter how strong he became. He was essentially teaching me the blade and polishing his own prowess at the same time. It seemed that was enough to make him overjoyed.

In his glee, he shouted his unvarnished, pure, and innocent feelings for all to hear, like an unembarrassed little kid. “Yes! I’m going all out! I’m fighting at full strength! Thank you for being able to keep up with me, Kanami! Look, everyone! Look at me go! This is who Lorwen is! Please, sear the battles of the one and only Lorwen Arrace into your memories! Kanami, you’re observing everything I’ve got, and you’re responding with your own sword and remembering it all! I couldn’t be happier! I’m so, so happy!”

The sword fight continued throughout, the lingering particles of ice and crystal fluttering in the air before piling up on the ground. Before we knew it, the sandy ground was dyed a thin coat of white. As he stepped on that dust, Lorwen repositioned himself away from me and ceased attacking. I ceased as well; it seemed he had something to say.

“That said, at this rate we’re not getting anywhere. I could keep at it till the crack of dawn but it’d be a tad tedious. It’s not suitable for the final dance of this ball. Besides, if this magic-energy fight goes on, I’ll be the one crying uncle.”

“Yeah, that was what I was going for. If I could run you outta magic energy, I’d gain a slight advantage over you.”

“I won’t let you do that, Kanami. I aim to settle this before you can.”

Still far from where I stood, he brandished his sword. This was different from the casual forms he’d been using thus far; for the first time, the stance he took was stuffier, starchier. The sword in his right hand, he held by the left side of his waist—a stance optimized for a sideways slash. Yet he neither sheathed the sword nor shifted his body all that much lower.

“Kanami, allow me to carve, in this place, the realm reached only by foolish men... This is my final technique.”

He'd already used both of his arcane techniques, Responsiveness and Magic Energy Materialization. As far as I knew, he had nothing else to draw on. And yet the alarm bells ringing in my head while looking at that stance were the loudest I'd ever heard in my life. I activated Responsiveness to the maximum degree, standing ready lest I failed to notice any of what would happen next.

Then, he incanted. *"I leave you behind, world."*

With that, the world around him *distorted.* But how? Lorwen was a swordsman, not a mage. Even though he incanted, the magic energy inside him didn't stir in the least. That meant that something that wasn't magic energy was causing the space around him to warp and bend. And that space-contortion was expanding even now, spreading throughout the arena. Reality pulsed like a pounding heartbeat, driving away the crystals in the vicinity like some kind of ripple force. I felt a sense of *taboo*—it was like the laws of the world were being rewritten before my eyes. Like Lorwen was committing a terrifying violation.

Thanks to Responsiveness, I caught a glimpse of the truth behind that sensation. This was an incantation that encroached upon the very roots of the world. He was afflicting the world itself—he was jacking its *essence*, which was to say, the logic and rules underpinning it. And the price that incantation incurred? At a guess, it was Lorwen's own life.

"*You're the one who rejected me first, world. That is why I shall live by the blade."*

I had come through my battle against Alty with a deeper understanding of incantation, so I understood. I sadly understood. The move he was about to unleash against me was his life itself. In all likelihood, this was the end the Arraces faced. The end of Lorwen the swordsman. It was the state that all swordfighters strove toward, the ultimate beyond. It involved swinging the sword in the most ideal of ways. That was all there was to it.

His sword streaked. "Spellcast: *Fon A Wraith."*

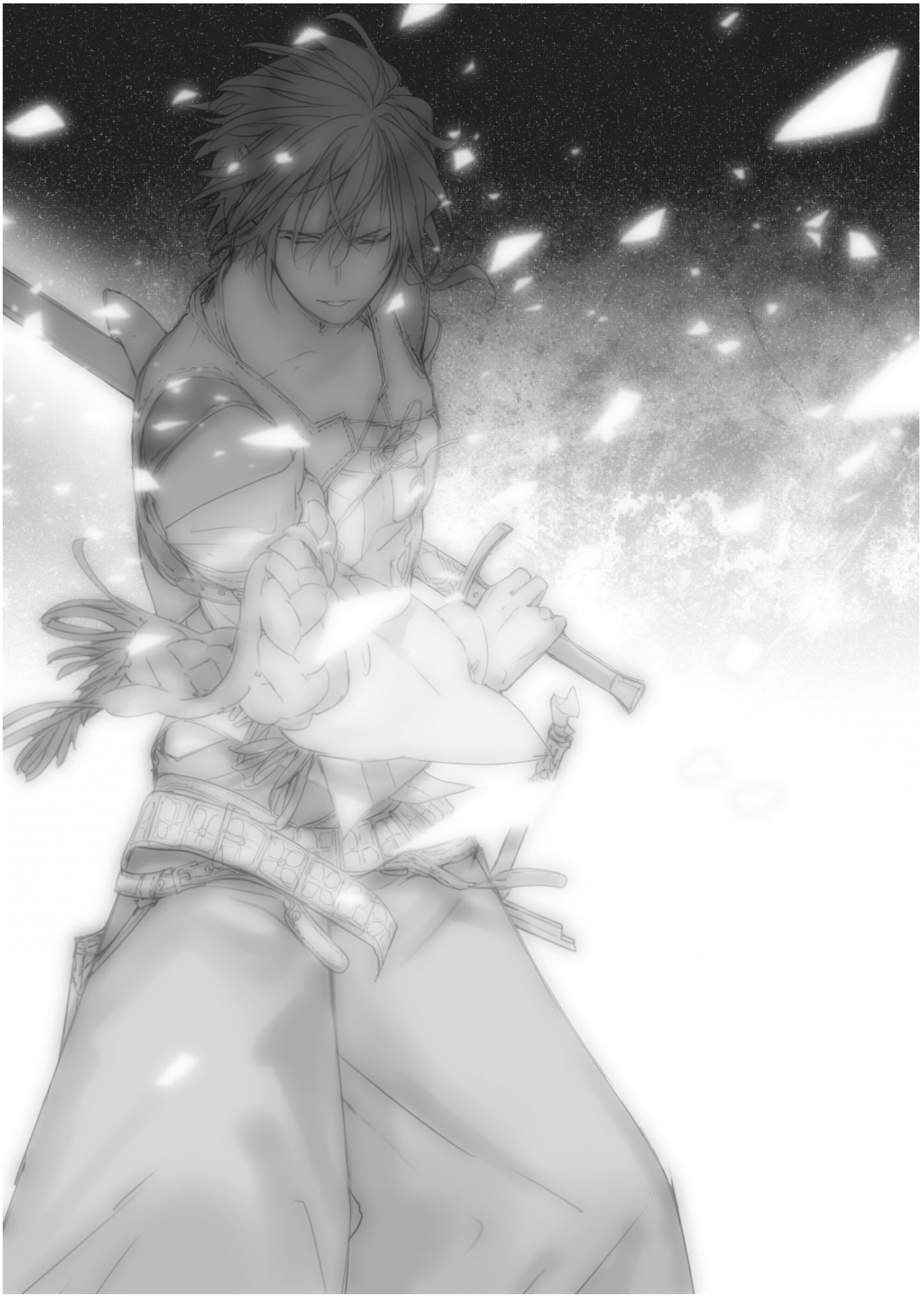
The instant I heard those words, the technique was complete. The last thing my eyes saw was the moment Lorwen's right arm disappeared. His sword strike vanished from the world, much as though he'd punched a hole into a parallel dimension. In other words, this swing was so perfect that it didn't even leave an

afterglow.

I knew of something that resembled this phenomenon. Lorwen's blade had disappeared into another dimension—it was a lot like whenever I reached a hand into my inventory. But no, that wasn't entirely accurate. Responsiveness told me the correct answer like a flash of instinct. Lorwen had, in fact, just used dimensional magic, albeit to a limited extent. Without using any magic energy, he'd reached the level of being able to cast a spell with nothing but sheer physical prowess.

Hit with that spell, flashes of memories ran through my head. I didn't know exactly what was going on, but it felt like my dimension-element magic energy was resonating with the spell Lorwen had cast, and as a result, it was bringing back memories that weren't my own. I saw a dilapidated mansion and its courtyard. I saw a young man with chestnut hair all alone swinging a blade over and over and over again. I called out to the solitary swordsman, because I'd seen his fate. I'd seen where all that training would lead him. I couldn't afford not to lure him, even though I knew it would result in his ruin. I had no choice but to drag him down into the Thief of Earth's Essence. This was the ultimate end of emotions tinged with sorrow and resignation. These distant, blurry memories...

The flashback ran on, but I instantly forgot all of it. I wasn't the owner of those memories, after all. And so they disappeared without a trace, as though they'd never been there to begin with. But that momentary flash of memories caused me to assume the optimal defensive stance. Experience that wasn't mine made my body move on a subconscious level. My body moved before I knew it. And likewise, it all ended before I knew it.



The unavoidable attack disarmed me, sending my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword flying through the air.

My defensive stance had been flawless. I'd been focusing all my attention and preparing for the attack. If you asked me, I'd have been able to see it coming within a hundred-millionth of a second. And yet Lorwen's swing made a mockery of my determination, snatching the sword right from my hand. Whatever happened slipped past my powers of perception. He'd attacked from outside my field of awareness, which was the most ideal move to beat the swordsman named Aikawa Kanami. If I couldn't see it happen, I couldn't even learn from it.

My sword fell from above, sticking into the crystal-covered ground. That was the moment when our knock-the-weapon sword duel came to a close. A moment of silence followed, as if time had frozen. Then the audience cheered when they saw my sword.

The presenter, who was watching the match from outside the barrier, shouted in response, "Is... Is that the match, folks?! One second, we're watching the greatest of sword fights, and the next second, what should come to be in our arena but a world more fantastical than any spell?! And following the clashing of two streaks of light, the moment we're led to think they're taking a breather, Mr. Kanami's blade is sent flying!"

But nobody was more shocked than I was. Lorwen had just called that technique a spell.

"Wh-What was that—"

"It was my magic... I never said I can't use magic, ya know. It's true I don't care for it, though."

"That was magic? For real?"

He hadn't used any magic energy. I was sure of it. And that meant that he'd reached those heights through his body alone.

"That's what it ends up turning into, apparently. I'm not a huge fan of calling it 'magic' myself, but the Founder who gave birth to magic called it that, and I've gotta call it what it is."

This was a different animal from the magic I'd learned about in this world. Sure, this world ignored the physical laws that bound mine, but magic still conformed to its own set of rules. And one of those rules was that spells were crafted using magic energy. But that assumption had been turned on its head. Lorwen had paid the cost through his incantation. Could it be that as long as a price was paid, magic energy wasn't necessary? Or maybe magic energy was just one form of payment?

There I was, dwelling on it despite being in the middle of a match. And I asked my opponent about its workings without reservation. "How the hell... How do you do it without magic energy?"

"All I did was swing my sword as Responsiveness and my training-tempered body told me. This is the end point a swordfighter can reach. The final destination of the art of the blade," he said proudly and somewhat pretentiously.

I understood his words, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. Perhaps he didn't have the most accurate grasp of that spell himself. There was a chance he didn't think about it on a deeper level than *if you plug away at it, you can do it.*

I chose not to pursue it and just glowered at him—first, I'd take him to task for concealing that third secret technique from me. "Lorwen. You didn't tell me about that little trick when we were in the Dungeon together."

"Aww, c'mon. There was nothing to say; it's just swinging the sword really fast. I did teach you the basics of the sideways strike, didn't I? Anybody can do it if they put their mind to it. It ain't like I *hid* it from you."

"Oh, really? But you did fancy catching me off guard with it during the match, didn't you?"

"Urgh... That I can't deny..."

Lorwen averted his eyes. As always, he was so kidlike in his sense of honesty. It was perfectly acceptable for a fighter to hide their moves. Besides, these were the secret techniques of a proud school of the blade. Transmitting any of those secrets to one pupil was more than enough, and yet he was all disconcerted.

“I was joking, man,” I clarified. “In any case, it looks like I just lost the duel to that move. That was some truly fantastic swordplay. You win. Sucks for me, but you can hold on to the title of Blademaster.”

“Ha ha, as if you ever wanted that title to begin with. Come off it.”

This marked the end of our prematch exhibition. It was time for the true battle to begin. I screamed at the top of my lungs so that my voice could reach every corner. “That settles it! I acknowledge that Lorwen Arrace beat me at knocking the weapon! In a battle of blades, I, Aikawa Kanami, cannot beat him! He’s the strongest Blademaster in all the land! In all of history!”

The audience was abuzz. Most of them had come to see the moment when I, the hero, surpassed Lorwen to become both the Blademaster and the undisputed strongest. The fact that I’d given up on that title so easily must have left them less than satisfied. Yet since I was the one who had made those remarks, no one could rightly complain.

Gradually, the people in the stands began to accept him, whispering among themselves that Lorwen was indeed the current Blademaster. Although word had it that he was, in fact, a monster, they were definitely recognizing that his sword skills were the real deal. People who had dabbled in the blade before praised Lorwen as their fellow, and those who had made their coin Dungeon diving were clearly excited by the prospect of having him join their parties. Even those in power commented that they had no choice but to admit that no swordfighter was stronger than him.

Little by little—and I do mean little by little—Lorwen’s name was increasingly being shouted among all the cheering. And in the end, a voice repeatedly shouting his name welled up from somewhere in the stadium. That passion was contagious; it spread throughout the stands, and gradually, the entire arena came to praise “Blademaster Lorwen.” The cheers poured down on him, and Lorwen basked in it like the light of the sun. The Blademaster who’d defeated his worthiest challenger was rewarded with thunderous applause. And what could one call that spectacle but the pinnacle of glory and prestige? The putative desire that Lorwen had been talking about for so long had come true. But despite all that glory, he remained the same as always. He even looked a little forlorn and lonely. He smiled calmly, then crossly, and finally, wryly.

“I knew it. This ain’t it.”

“See? You were barking up the wrong tree, Lorwen.”

It was a foregone conclusion. Lorwen himself had been on the cusp of reaching that truth since before the finals. I’d pointed it out, and he’d admitted it. The end. He had no more room to argue with ifs or maybes—glory wasn’t what he truly desired, and that was a fact. Somebody else had pushed that desire on him. It was never his own ambition.

“All right, then, what *is* my true desire?” he asked with a serious expression. “Do tell, Kanami.”

That question lay at the heart of our fight. I replied with the same look on my face as him. “Let’s carry on. You’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

Just like before, it wasn’t anything that could be expressed in mere words.

“I’ll see for myself, huh? Very well, my friend. Guess we carry on fighting, then. And this time, it’ll be a proper no-holds-barred death match.” That punched a hole in the peace; those words lit the tinderbox fuse.

“It’s true that in a battle of blades, I’m no match for you just now...but don’t go thinking this match is over. You haven’t beaten me yet.”

“Yep, I know. Don’t hold back, Kanami. Fight me with everything you’ve got. Otherwise the match won’t be exciting enough.”

“Don’t mind if I do. I’m going to show you my true mettle, not as a swordsman or as the hero, but as Aikawa Kanami, Dungeon diver.”

“Then I’ll respond in kind. I’m gonna give it my all as Lorwen the swordsman.”

He gripped his sword tight, the ardor he emanated as sharp as any edge. I didn’t bother looking at my fallen sword, instead focusing every ounce of attention on the magic energy in our bodies.

“It... It seems the fight rages on, folks!” announced the presenter. “They did decide on a death match ruleset, so that poses no issue! Mr. Kanami might have admitted defeat as his student in the blade, but he hasn’t conceded the match outright! I heard that he gained fame as the guildmaster of Epic Seeker not through his swordsmanship, but through his ice and detection magic! That is to

say, he hasn’t shown his stuff quite yet! Now then, can Kanami the Hero surpass Blademaster Lorwen?!”

That roused the crowd even more. The cheers for Lorwen were turning into cheers for me; their “hero” had yet to cut loose. How laughable, their fickleness. I didn’t want this inane “glory” bullshit, and I’d rather blow chunks than be their stupid hero. I sneered at them all with an expression unbecoming of a knight or a swordfighter, much less the hero.

“Let’s do this, Lorwen. It’s my turn to show you my field of expertise.”

Unarmed, I crafted my magic. I paid the stands no more mind, my thoughts set on a single question—how to defeat the man before my eyes.

“Spellcast: *Freeze.*”

First, I converted the magic energy in my body into cold air, which crawled across the whitened ground, lowering the temperature of the arena. Energy so thick it was visible swirled around me, and I could see my breath as the world gradually succumbed to winter’s grip. I fetched not a sword but a large mantle from my inventory, and clad myself in the baggy, loose-fitting, filthy cloak.

Any way you sliced it, I was no longer a swordsman. I checked my menu one last time.

【STATUS】
NAME: AIKAWA KANAMI
HP: 293/293
MP: 632/751-100
CLASS: Diver
LEVEL 17
STR 9.72
VIT 10.91
DEX 13.09
AGI 16.72
INT 14.45
MAG 38.17
APT 7.00

CONDITION: Confusion 7.22

【SKILLS】

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.12, Ice Magic 2.56+1.10

ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.55, Dimensional Magic 5.23+0.10, Responsiveness 1.82, Thought Streams 1.45, Knitting 1.07

???: ???

???: ???

Somebody with stats like those should never have been fighting fairly to begin with. Hunting monsters by any means, fair or foul—that was how I was meant to fight. Sneaking in hits using magic was where I truly shined.

Meet the one who aims for the deepest level. Meet Aikawa Kanami, Dungeon diver.

"*The winter world robs the wanderer of all,"* I incanted.

And with that, the world began to freeze over.

"You using sheer cold on me? Chilling the air with your magic energy?" asked Lorwen, brandishing his sword in a state of high alert.

While he didn't know much of anything about magic, I figured Responsiveness had to be clueing him in to the sort of magic I was working. He understood instantly that *Freeze* was a spell for lowering the temperature.

I kept on polishing the spell while he stood and watched, my MP ticking down before my eyes. I was expending excessive amounts against a single opponent, but there was no such thing as overkill against Lorwen, and I was releasing enough energy to kill an ordinary person precisely because I knew that. I could only put up a fight against him by aiming for his life. Otherwise I'd be battling at less than my full potential. Burning through a whole load of magic energy from a zone of safety and clinching the battle before they could get too close. Gathering information, making preemptive moves, and killing the enemy without letting them do anything—the absolute basics of being a combat mage.

“Cold magic... Not sure I know the ins and outs, but I reckon it ain’t the kinda thing I can let happen!”

The temperature was showing no sign of stabilizing, so Lorwen sprang into action. Using Magic Energy Materialization, he lengthened his blade and fired a slash at me while I was busy with my spell. I wrenched myself out of the way and fell back, although his Magic Energy Materialization made retreating kind of pointless. Then again, it did take a modicum of time for the blade to stretch places, and it was to buy me those precious split seconds that I continued to distance myself. I wasn’t counterattacking, so Lorwen fired off slash after slash. I managed to handle the onslaught through not only Responsiveness, courtesy of my swordsman side, but also *Dimension*, courtesy of my mage side.

“Spellcast: *Dimension: Calculash!* Spellcast: *Wintermension!*”

I tracked the trajectory of Lorwen’s blade via my dimensional magic, dodging it and dodging it like I could predict the future. Then I grabbed a bunch of pouches and flasks and things from my inventory, placing them where I anticipated his blade would cross. Sure enough, Lorwen’s sword cut through those objects, inadvertently spilling their contents all over the ground. And what had been in them? Water. It was the bucket loads of water I’d brought with me to deal with the heat of the zone around Floor 23 in the Dungeon, and I kept taking more of it out of my inventory to soak the field of battle.

“Water? Oh, I get it.”

After a moment’s thought, he cottoned on to my intentions, likely because he’d seen me use *Wintermension: Frost* to freeze a fountain when I’d battled Liner. I continued gaining distance on Lorwen while increasing the number of puddles on the ground. I wasn’t going to attack until victory was assured, and my first priority was adding to the arena’s water content and moisture. I took a water barrel out of my inventory and smashed it open.

“It’d be a shame to waste the finals arena! I’m gonna use the whole battleground, Lorwen!” I used more magic energy on the water.

“Good!” he replied merrily. “No holding back on me!”

I didn’t plan to; I went ahead and constructed a fresh ice spell without hesitation. It was a first-time spell, but I was confident it would work. It was

inspired by the domain-ruling spells that I'd seen Reaper and Alty cast. This magic wasn't meant to boost me. Rather, it was meant to hamper the enemy, and that was the image I had in my head as I crafted my domain.

"Spellcast: *World of Winter!*"

The water flowing from the broken barrel spiked up as a pillar of ice, which grew countless spreading branches and scattered ice particles all around. The ice tree caused the temperature inside the arena to drop precipitously.

"So you made the field itself your ally, huh? But that won't be enough to beat me!" He attempted to close the distance as he deflected the ice particles in the air and avoided the puddles on the ground.

"Oh, it will. You rely on your sword, and there's lots you can't cut. I just need to weaponize that."

Not even he could cut the cold away. Unable to stop the temperature from dropping, a large quantity of ice particles were sticking to his body. Just like in an RPG, the swordfighter's defense against magic was lacking, but his physical prowess was peak. I scattered more water and more cold as I ran, and he was in hot pursuit, swinging his blade all the while. I retrieved a replacement sword and a lengthy, freshly bought whip from my inventory before crafting some off-the-cuff magic. "Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge Whip*."

While diverting Lorwen's slash using the sword in my left hand, I swung the whip in my right. He managed to dodge, but it did take him aback.

"An ice whip?!"

I messily swung the whip all over the place, attacking indiscriminately. It was counterintuitive, but against an opponent who could use Responsiveness, aiming my attacks made them easier for my opponent to dodge. That meant I needed to attack in such a way that even I didn't know where my blows would land. If I was lucky enough for the whip to graze him, I could peel his skin by freezing the wound.

"You honestly thought I'd fight using only swords when I know that's a losing battle?! I ain't no hero, and I'm not some honor bound swordsman either! I'm a diver, and I fight dirty!" I cried.

“Ha ha, talk about an unworthy pupil!”

He dodged all the whip attacks by tracking them with his eyes. A few seconds later, he devised a new Arrace School sword technique on the spot, which could counter the whip. He clearly perceived the whip’s trajectory and easily sliced it in two. No matter—I had replacement whips. I didn’t fear losing any of my swords, spears, axes, hammers, throwing knives, or bows and arrows. I didn’t need to. That was a forte of Dungeon diver Aikawa Kanami. Making use of a wide variety of weapons, I bought time and got every drop of water out of my inventory. I’d packed enough water to survive for days and days in the Dungeon, and it was enough to fill a pond and then some. Yet it still wasn’t enough.

“Just a little more!”

Using not Responsiveness but *Dimension*, I was always striving for a certain *number*. It was the only thing I needed to count not by instinct, but by using my knowledge of math and science.

“What’s that mean, ‘just a little more’?!”

“Just a little more and it’s checkmate!”

Lorwen smiled gleefully. “Can’t have that! I’ll just give you no time to do anything!”

“Augh! Spellcast: *Blizzardmension!* Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge!*”

Honest to a fault, Lorwen believed what I said and closed in on me excitedly. Paying the ice particles in the air no mind, he drew closer and stretched out his blade. I discarded the whip I was hardly experienced in using and intercepted him with a sword and my most powerful spell. It was just like when I’d frozen Raggie’s sword in the past. The instant our swords locked, I transmitted the cold and froze his energy blade solid.

Suddenly unable to expand or retract via Magic Energy Materialization, Lorwen was astonished and delighted. “Ohhh! So that’s how that goes!”

“Yep, that’s how that goes!”

Grasping the principle behind my trick, he responded by breaking off the tip

of the frozen sword. His body had dealt with the problem before the surprise even registered. His ability to roll with the punches was out of this world, and his handling of my whip was only Exhibit A. I'd leveled up enough to understand why—I had his Responsiveness skill to blame for all this. It was what accelerated his capacity to cope, and by extension, his growth rate.

"I'll just stop coming into contact with the sword!" Lorwen announced.

"That'd be helping me out big time!"

Now wary of the freezing effect, Lorwen's force of impact weakened a tiny bit. Truly, it was only by a teensy-weensy bit, and to him, fighting while avoiding sword-on-sword contact was no big handicap. I had no doubt that in next to no time, he'd be able to devise an Arrace School technique mode tailored to fighting the *Ice Flamberge*.

But that little bit was enough. I just needed a little more time. The humidity and temperature were already sufficient. I could tell that the battlefield, sealed off by the best barrier in the Alliance, was becoming the world I desired more and more. The dip in temperature, the greater moisture—the preconditions for the world of my design could only happen here, in this place, at this time. A world different from the world showed to me through his swordsmanship, but I nevertheless believed it would be comparable to it.

As I endured Lorwen's ferocious attacks, I put the finishing touches on the spell I'd been constructing. My ice magic acted upon the air above and tinkered with the temperature, the water in the air gradually freezing. This could work. It was theoretically possible on a battlefield at most hundreds of meters in diameter. This was not *Blizzardmension*, which emitted an absurd amount of cold for only an instant. Instead, I was building a world of omnipresent winter. *World of Winter* was the next step in *Wintermension*'s evolution.

At last, the moisture in the air crystallized and began to fall to the ground. Snow over the arena. White gradually filled my field of vision; it was an illusory landscape that wouldn't last past today, but no one could argue that the world hadn't turned to winter.

"T-Tiarlay?" said Lorwen in amazement, taking some of the white crystalline precipitation in his hands. Tiarlay was "snow" made of magic energy.

“No, it’s just snow. Never seen any?”

“I mean, yeah, I guess, but...I can’t believe it. Who could’ve guessed I’d see any in a place like this... Usually you only see snow in the northern reaches of the continent.”

“Glad to hear it. So, this world’s got snow too, huh? Everybody’s always going on about tiarlay...I thought maybe snow didn’t exist in this world.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen some before. Takes me back... This really takes me back, man...” He gazed upon the falling powder lovingly. He took the scarf off his arm and put it around his neck, pointing his sword my way. “This is your most powerful spell?”

“Uh-huh. You lose, Lorwen.”

“I’ll bite! Allow me to cut that confidence to ribbons head-on. My Arrace sword bears a blade that can rend all magic.”

He was clearly having fun. While I was focusing on trying to hit him the sneaky way, he was still intent on fighting me head-on. I loved how honest and scrupulous he was. He hadn’t lost his pride as a human, and he was tackling me head-on as a human would. He was dazzling, radiant.

I loved the guy.

“The battlefield’s on my side. I can even beat you at a sword duel now.” I picked up my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword from the ground and lengthened its blade using Magic Power Freezing. Returning the other sword to my inventory, I moved to close the distance, confident that victory was mine. We’d chatted enough; it was time for the battle to resume.

Lorwen likewise tried to extend his sword in my direction, but his arm stopped on the way to me, the magic energy composing the blade cracking and creaking as it solidified. We hadn’t even touched swords and yet his had frozen anyway. Such was the power of *World of Winter*. My freezing magic could be activated anytime and anywhere within its range, so my sword alone extended the whole way, leaving him with no choice but to fight defensively.

Puzzled though he was, he quickly laughed it off. The look on his face screamed, *I’m beating you without Magic Energy Materialization.* Employing a

distinctive gait, he managed to forge forward as he brushed aside my sword.

I could not let that stand either. I'd already laid the perfect trap. "*The winter world speeds up,"* I said, incanting as my heart directed.

The temperature of the world dropped even lower, gentle winds blowing amid the heavy snowfall. The now-dense white piled up between us, taking away our view of one another. Yet Lorwen, grasping my position through Responsiveness, forged ahead regardless. Just as expected. The below-freezing air was gnawing away at him, a mass of ice crystals sticking to his skin.

"*Winter robs the wanderer of all."*

The cold crept in, sucking the body heat away from Lorwen's legs all at once. I wasn't hindering his movement via *Blizzardmension*'s direct control over vibration. No, I was simply cooling him down. The end result, however, was the same. In the midst of extreme cold, all living things invariably slowed down. Lorwen felt something was amiss with his legs and stopped in his tracks.

"Wha?! This is..."

It seemed Responsiveness had clued him into what I was preparing and its effects.

"It's too late. Even if you understand it, you can't defend against it," I warned him.

"Nah, this is weak sauce. I can still..." Lorwen mustered his strength in his shivering legs and started running through the snow. But it was a vicious cycle. The more he ran, the more snow stuck to him. It was the same as my battle against Tida—the more I'd fought, the more its shadow-liquid had adhered to me.

"First, I take your legs."

I poured in magic energy and manipulated the snow that was stuck to him, intensifying the cold, and his body cooled down more and more. He was already well past the point a human would be physically able to move. Yet he continued to fight, and as a human, at that. As a fellow human, he pushed past all human limits, running through the blizzard as he shouted.

“KANAMIIIII!!!”

No letting my guard down. I took a whip out of my inventory and attacked from outside his sword’s reach. He dodged the attack from his blind spot, but the haphazardly undulating whip swung at him over and over, until at last, he managed to “block” it with the flat of his sword.

If his body hadn’t been freezing over, he would have been able to respond using Arrace techniques. If his field of vision had been a little clearer, he might have been able to evade the attack in other ways. If his body temperature had been normal, he would have been able to cope with the situation with a clearer mind. But *World of Winter* would not allow for any of that, and a sword couldn’t fully block the attack of a bendy whip. As a result, the tip stuck to his body, if only for a fleeting moment. The impact of the strike wasn’t all that great, but when the ice whip left his skin, it peeled a bit of it off.

He faltered. “Urgh!”

Next, I swung my sword. Though he couldn’t lengthen his blade, mine was still effectively extendable. In fact, this world of cold only made my sword sharper. Lorwen sensed the attack through Responsiveness and retreated, narrowly avoiding the slash. I followed up with an ice whip strike; just like with a sword, the length could be adjusted using Magic Power Freezing. Lorwen was unassailable when it came to the blade, but he couldn’t fully dodge the whip’s random swings, and he got nicked more than once. The damage was light enough that peeling some skin off was all it did, but while the blows were hardly decisive, I stayed the course, keeping my distance as I froze his legs and chipped away at him little by little. Lorwen’s face betrayed how flustered this tactic was making him.

“So cold... It’s eating away at my stamina...and look at all this blood!”

A shadow of doubt was cast on the physical prowess that seemed so limitless. His body temperature had dipped even lower due to the blood loss, and his body was growing truly numb. The high-speed clashing in the early stages of the battle was now a distant memory. A wintertide world that could freeze even one’s breath was no place for Lorwen the Swordsman to thrive. My whip flayed his skin, causing him to bleed in even more places, and his weakened body

received more and more sword gashes as well.

Yet the light in his eyes never died. Still he searched for a road to victory. Still he moved, despite being wounded all over, never letting any of my hits be decisive. I gasped. Nobody would think someone could possibly turn the tables in this situation. But this was Lorwen we were talking about. I had a strange sort of faith in him. Faith that he, of all people, *could* do it, which was why I played it safe and kept my distance until the very end. We continued looking for openings of attack as we traded blows.

Through *Dimension*, I picked up on Lorwen muttering something.

"...leave...behind..."

He must have been going for that unavoidable slash from before. But I was confident that, in these conditions, I could defend myself against it. In order to do so, I wove a new spell, while Lorwen continued incanting as he staggered. His next stroke would probably be his last. If I could just survive this, victory was mine.

His incantation ended, his sword glinted, and then, in that instant... "Argh!" he cried, startled and distressed.

He stuck his sword into the ground. This form of suffering was different from feeling faint due to a lower inner body temperature, and of course, it was different from falling to his knees from all the punishment he'd taken. The kind of anguish overwhelming him was a different beast, one whose identity I knew thanks to *Dimension*. Lorwen's skin was gradually hardening, with crystals beginning to sprout from under the slashes and gashes. From the roots to the tips, his hair was shifting from chestnut to white, and his pupils were changing shape. I intuited that this must be the "monsterification" he'd spoken of before. Little by little, his humanity was fading away, despite how desperately he was resisting his slow transformation.

I wasn't the only witness to his metamorphosis. Naturally, the crowd was more than a little shaken at the sight. Moments ago, they had been extolling him as the Blademaster, but seeing him turn into a monster with their own eyes changed the script. What bubbled up first was instinctive fear. The cheering died down, replaced by anxious murmuring. Some even low-key shrieked when

they saw him monsterify. Their words of criticism ramped up until reaching a scathing crescendo as they castigated Lorwen the monster; many were even calling for him to be disqualified or killed.

I turned my attention to the presenter and tournament organizers, who seemed too befuddled to do anything anytime soon. So I weakened *World of Winter* and closed the distance between me and Lorwen—I refused to let this match get called off.

“Lorwen! Over here!”

“Ka...na...miiii!!!” he shouted, warped pupils glaring my way after hearing me call his name and seeing me come closer.

All I could do to preempt the match being called off was play-act a stirring climax, purposely abandoning my position a safe distance away and bringing it back to a sword fight.

He reflexively swung his sword, and I blocked the blow with mine; sparks of pure white flashed over the stage made silvery by all the crystals. My Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword emitted a blue glow while Lorwen’s Mithril Sword emitted a red glow. The twin streaks of light clashed over and over again, tracing a dreamlike work of art in the air. Unlike last time, however, Lorwen wasn’t pushing me back. Hindered by all his handicaps, he was the one on the back foot now. The atmosphere in the stands started changing again. The moment they realized that I had the upper hand, the booing subsided. Then they roared with wild enthusiasm, every eye trained on us lest they miss the deciding blow. Everybody wanted me to take down the monster, and my name filled every corner of the arena.

“Mr. Kanami has deployed his ice magic,” said the presenter, “and now he’s driving Mr. Lorwen back against the wall in close-quarters combat, which was the latter’s specialty! This is what the hero Aikawa Kanami is made of! Now, *this* is Lady Snow’s knight! Watch as he governs this jaw-dropping world of winter! He truly is a *knight of snow!*”

Clearly, this guy really, really wanted to associate me with a lady. What garbage was he spewing now? Yet his crowd work proved stupendously effective; the spectators were all shouting “Kanami the hero! Kanami the hero!”

“Kill the monster, Kanami, hero of Laoravia!”

“The Snow Knight’s gonna take down that Dungeon guardian!”

“We’re almost there! We’ll be witnessing a moment for the history books in no time!”

“That’s the dragon-slaying hero for ya!”

I wasn’t exactly pleased to be hearing all the self-indulgent cheering, but it did serve my purpose at the moment. I rode the wave and continued driving Lorwen back. Swinging his sword deftly while simultaneously resisting his monsterification was next to impossible, even for him. His blows had no sharpness to them. He and I were so close that our faces almost touched and our swords crossed. Now was the time to tell him. The stage was fully set, and now our voices would reach him. Both my voice and *theirs.*

“Lorwen, strain your ears!”

“Urgh! Wh-Whaddya want now?!”

The whole arena was on the same page, everybody calling my name, so inflated were their hopes and expectations for the hero Kanami’s victory. And that was the very reason *their* voices could be heard. The voices that *didn’t* go with the vast, vast majority. They came from a corner of the stands, unswayed by the widespread fervor for the hero. They were simply concerned for their friend. This was *genuine* cheering.

“Teach!”

We’d heard these kids’ voices before.

“You can do it, Teach!”

“Don’t give in, Lorwen!”

“I believe in you, Teach! You’ll find a way to win!”

They were the orphans he’d taught the blade. They were there, in their corner of the stands, alongside the adults looking after them. Their cheers stood out against the tsunami of cheering for the hero. It took courage to root for the monster in such an atmosphere. Just by being a monster, Lorwen had incurred the enmity of so many of those present. Despite that, the kids cried

out his name with abandon, screaming at the top of their lungs so as not to get drowned out. There was no self-interest or misunderstanding at play. They weren't cheering for the monster or the Dungeon Guardian. They weren't cheering for the Blademaster or the strongest. They were cheering for local nice guy Lorwen Arrace.

"Please don't die, mister!"

"Use your super move, Teach! The one you told us about!"

"You said no one could beat you at the blade, didn't you?! I won't forgive you if you lose!"

Astonished to his core, Lorwen mustered his strength and deflected my sword before backing up. I spread my arms out and shouted. "You can hear 'em loud and clear now, can't ya?!"

There was no way he could mishear or fail to hear them now, given how strongly the rest of the stands were against him.

"Y-Yeah...I can!"

The pulsing of the power in his body became calmer, the ferocious, monsterlike frenzy he'd been fighting gradually subsiding. Lorwen looked at the children with a very affectionate expression. This time, I refused to let him lose sight of what was important. The night of the dragon quest. All his Brawl matches. When everyone was brownnosing him as the hero. All those times, Lorwen had never seen those children. The pursuit of glory had blinded him to what he actually cared about. But now that he'd lost the hero card thanks to his monsterification, he'd finally come upon it again. It was what he truly needed. His heart's desire.

"The kids are cheering for the likes of *me...* Even after seeing the state I'm in..."

Lorwen shifted his gaze away from me completely, staring at the young pupils cheering him on. Meanwhile, his body was still monsterifying. Crystals were creeping out of his wounds, as if to exhort him not to give up. I stood by watchfully. Now it was all up to Lorwen and how he came to grips with things. But I was confident—I'd seen it before, after all. I'd seen him slowly weaken

over time, and I very much remembered what conditions had caused it. The moment he'd weakened as a mighty Guardian was the time he'd taught me and the kids the art of the blade. I'd never been the only one who could sever his ties to this world. Those kids were able to as well. Lorwen had such tunnel vision for me, but it had been misguided. If he'd heard but one of the kids who'd accepted him for who he was cheering him on from a place of sincerity, I knew that would be all it took to clear away his lingering attachments. That was all Lorwen Arrace had ever required in order to feel satisfied. But due to how strong he was, he'd taken quite the circuitous detour to get to this point.

"Yeah, you're right... This was what I needed all along..."

He acknowledged that his life had been one big detour. After attaining "glory," he understood that. He'd learned that all an excess of dazzling light had ever done was rob him of what was important to him. And when he heard the kids' voices, it dawned on him. He realized that his true desire had already been fulfilled.

He flashed their corner of the stands a smile before facing me again and gripping his sword tighter. He poured all his strength into his swing and cast me off, shouting "I am who I am! I'm Lorwen Arrace!"

As if driven away by all the shouting, the crystals forming on his body turned into particles of magic energy—tiarlay—and dispersed. His hair changed color as if aflame, becoming chestnut brown once more, and his pupils reverted to their original shape. The monster was turning back into Lorwen Arrace, swordsman.

Actually, no. It wasn't a total reversion—he was clearly more powerful than before. I didn't need Responsiveness or *Dimension* to tell me that; simply glancing at him revealed that fact. Just like with me, Lorwen's formerly riven mind and body were now as one. He was no longer mistaken about what he wanted, and he wasn't dancing to anyone's tune.

Still covered in wounds, his body didn't have enough blood or heat left. Now that he had severed what tied him here, his power as a Guardian was beginning to fade. He still couldn't use Magic Energy Materialization, and his five senses, which enabled him to use Responsiveness, were on the verge of stupefaction.

He was unsteady on his feet, frozen to the bone, barely able to even move. And yet despite all that, Lorwen's current state must have been, in his eyes, him at his strongest. The look on his face was so sunny that I couldn't help but think that the most powerful Blademaster in history was operating in the best condition of his life. He spoke with contentment, as though all his long-standing demons were now behind him.

"Yeah...what I needed was never some storm of applause..." Lorwen scanned his surroundings with a jovial expression, reaffirming where he stood. "Just one of the little kids' voices cheering me on was all it took to make me happy..."

He stood there, soaking in what each one was shouting. This was the "true path" I'd wanted to show him, and this was the Lorwen I'd wanted to see. And now that he had his answer, he pointed his sword at me. There was neither hesitation nor panic there. His swordsman mien was more beautiful than anybody else's, and I was upfront about how much I admired him. "They're not the only ones rooting for you. You've got another fan of yours standing right here, Lorwen."

There was one more humble voice cheering him on to add to the modest pile. He smiled joyfully, like a little kid himself. "Thank you."

His gratitude had layers of meaning. He gave thanks to everything that had led him to this day, slowly driving his body forward one step at a time. The contours of his form were swaying, wavering. With his lingering attachments now gone, his Guardian might was weakening, and what little magic energy he possessed was going up like so much smoke.

"Now that I have my answer, my ties to this life are disappearing..."

Yet he pressed on regardless. Clearly, he had zero intention of going *gently* into that good night. He would fight as a swordsman—and as the orphans' cherished instructor—to the end. Spurred on by their innocent cheering, he was trying to live up to their expectations. He'd fight till he died.

"Finally! At long, long last, I'm finally dead!"

He was starting to disappear in earnest, and he was losing both power and speed, but I didn't let my guard down. How could I, when he was without a doubt the strongest he'd ever been?

Lorwen stepped within sword range and, burning through the last of his torch fuel, he swung his blade. I took it head-on.

“My body’s all cold! My consciousness is drifting away! So, this is death, huh?! This is my *life’s mission!* Might as well give my life for it!”

His footsteps kicked up the translucent crystals scattered on the ground.

“This feels so nice! As we speak, I’m achieving my own true wish for my own satisfaction! If it’s for kids cheering me on, I’ll give up my very life without a second thought! Dying didn’t feel this nice the first time around! It wasn’t enough! Only after dying *again* am I able to understand the true meaning of a life’s mission!”

As our blades were crossed, I experienced all that was Lorwen. I was there to hear him, to grant his wish.

“What I wanted was never titles like ‘the hero’ or ‘the strongest,’ or for the House of Arrace to thrive! I never needed silly shit like glory! A more modest ray of light was more than enough!”

We both put every ounce of strength into our blades. The same slash of steel, clashing from the same angle of attack. The force of the impact sent us both backward.

“Thank you, Kanami. I have my answer. I truly know what I wanted all this time...”

His physical form was flickering in a state of flux. He was beginning to turn incorporeal as the stuff that made him continued to fluctuate. He didn’t have much time left.

Sensing the battle was ending, he recited his incantation, this time successfully. “*I leave you behind, world.*”

Lorwen poured the whole of his life into the incantation, intent on leaving his mark on it all. He was going to try putting on one last show through his greatest technique.

“This is the end, Kanami. And because it’s the end, as a teacher of the blade, I can’t lose here! I need to live up to the kids’ expectations, and yours too, so it’s

time I give this everything I've got!"

"Of course, Lorwen. These are the finals of the Brawl! No holding back! That's the only way the fight can light a fire in people, right?!"

"You're the one who rejected me first, world. That is why I shall live by the blade!"

"The world of winter speeds up. Winter robs the wanderer of all!"

Our incantations overlapped, and the world warped around us. A power to go beyond the rules underpinning the world resided in Lorwen's sword. He was going to exert himself to his utmost and unleash the greatest sword swing of his life.

In order to defend against it, I'd have to exert myself to the limit and craft the greatest spell of my life. The spell would be a combination of everything in my arsenal, from *Ice* to *Freeze* to *Dimension* to *Form* to *Connection* to Swordplay to Martial Arts to Magic Power Freezing to Thought Streams to Responsiveness.

First, I generated countless bubbles of dimensional magic through *Form*, filling them with *Dimension*, *Connection*, and Magic Power Freezing. A *Snowmension* filled with the flotilla of spell-bubbles slipped in through the cover of the blizzard. Needless to say, I also mixed in a not inconsiderable number of decoy *Form* bubbles as well. Pure white encroached upon the world awash in *Snowmension*. The mass of snow formed a veritable wall blocking his vision, though he swung his sword without a moment's pause.

"Spellcast: *Fon A Wraith!*"

"Unleashing all spells! Spellcast: *Wintermension: Niflheim!!!*"

Our spells were complete. Instantly, Lorwen's unavoidable blow cut its way to me. The rending slash concluded before I could even recognize it was happening. However, what that blade hit wasn't my body. All he'd cut was one of the *Snowmension*s. The deluge of *Form* bubbles made the blizzard world warm and distorted beyond recognition. At this rate, he'd never be able to grasp my position, no matter how hard he tried to perceive the world around him through Responsiveness, which had lost track of me. And still...

"It ain't over yet!" howled Lorwen. "It ain't over, Kanamiii!!!"

He proceeded to use his ultimate move, *Fon A Wraith,* over and over again: slashes I couldn't see coming, cutting through space they shouldn't be able to reach. The next object to get sliced instead of me was an ice mirror I'd composed using *Form* and Magic Power Freezing to present a misleading false image of me. The unavoidable slash missed twice, but far from discouraged, Lorwen just kept slashing away, firing one *Fon A Wraith* after the other in a boisterous dance, as if to say he fully expected this much resistance from an opponent of my caliber.

Without a sound, the snow and mirrors burst with each hit. Many mirrors broke, their ice shards scattering. The person-shaped snow sculpture I had prepared was sliced clean in half as well, and all the floating bubbles burst in an instant. The undetectable slashes were countless in number, rending my winter-world to pieces.

With the cold eating away at his body, he must have lost all feeling in his limbs by now, and his consciousness had to be hazy at best. Even so, in his bid to get his blade to reach me, he swung and swung and swung again, in a nigh-on insane and yet somehow *heartfelt* onslaught. It looked like he was having a blast. He was currently living out the most fulfilling moment of his life; he was in such high spirits you could tell at a glance.

However, as is always the case, even the happiest times must come to an end, and this showdown was coming to a close. A *Form* bubble filled with *Connection*, the pinnacle of spatial distortion magic, popped behind Lorwen, forming a gateway in an instant. I waited for that instant to pass through the *Connection* portal I'd previously set up nearby. Through that masterful gambit, I managed to take his back.

Since he'd lost my position within the blizzard, Lorwen couldn't react in time. As a result, my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword thrust right behind his heart. Everything in the arena stood still, as if time had stopped. He was taken aback, but then he understood. He realized that while his own sword had failed to reach me, mine had reached him. He undid his stance, stopped moving, and acknowledged it.

"Ha ha. Guess I lose, huh?"

At that very moment, the world of winter cleared up, the enormous quantity of snow and *Snowmension*s popping out of existence and exposing the scene to the light of the sun, which ushered in the loudest cheering of these past five days. It was the sight the crowd had been dearly hoping to see—the snapshot in time where the hero slew the monster and claimed victory. The cheering was truly out of this world, as if the spectators were screaming every ounce of air out of their lungs. Meanwhile, Lorwen muttered very much under his breath.

“Come to think of it, this is my first-ever loss...” He turned to look at me. “If only I could’ve lost a fight sooner. My life would’ve been different. I trained a little *too* much. Before I knew it, I’d reached such heights that nobody could understand me anymore. Nobody could reach me... Boy was I an idiot,” he said with a smile. “But right at the very end, you entered my life. You found me. And the kids, they came to see my story out. I’m so happy, man...”

Lorwen was in a precarious position. I’d seen this before. It was similar to when Alty had disappeared.

“Lorwen...”

It was similar, but that wasn’t to say it was exactly the same. While he was starting to fade away, compared to Alty’s final moments, his presence wasn’t as diluted. He was soliloquizing about how fulfilled he was because he was trying to force the matter and disappear already. As his friend, I could tell. It was clear to see that in reality, his lingering attachments numbered more than one, and that was made obvious now that the first of them was gone and he’d attained his answer. He had one such attachment left to work through, but he was doing his best to die regardless.

I wanted to call out to him, to stop him, but before I could utter a word, *Dimension* detected the glint of a deadly blade. The glow of this blade wasn’t his red or my blue. No, this one was black. I saw it fly his way in a merciless arc, yet I let it go. And then, the tip of a scythe emerged from Lorwen’s chest. His heart punctured, copious blood gushed from his mouth.

Darkness crept out of his back, and a weeping, black-haired girl arose from the shadow-stuff. She couldn’t accept this conclusion, and I could hardly blame her. After all, she, too, was refusing to get her desires twisted.

In other words, the battle wasn’t over yet. And it wouldn’t end as long as Reaper, Lorwen and I all still had things to get off our chests.

Chapter 4: You Came All the Way to Floor 30 for Me, Friend. And So, the Sword Chooses You as Its Master.

Dark red blood gushed from Lorwen's mouth, and the spectators gasped and shrieked.

"Enough!" said Reaper. "I can't take it! Don't leave me, Lorwen! Don't leave me all alone!"

Since people were perceiving her, her body became intangible, and her big black scythe did too, leaving the hole in Lorwen's heart to spurt blood.

"Don't strand me with strangers! Without you around, I'll be the only one who knows the past a thousand years ago! You'll be making me the only one!"

She held the bleeding swordsman in place even as she shouted and wept. She was throwing a tantrum like a child—no, a baby. There wasn't a shred of the experienced mage's gravitas she'd exhibited the day before.

Lorwen coughed up more blood, shaking from the pain. "Gaughh! I should've...known..."

Yet he was quite firm of step. His strength was, until moments ago, on the verge of fading into nothingness, but it came roaring back, the outline of his body no longer fuzzy in the least. It seemed he was somehow filled with more vitality than *before* he'd gotten a gaping hole in his heart.

"Phew!" she said, relieved. "Lorwen, now...now you'll become that *half-monster* thing that guy was talking about, right?!"

"You wish! This goes beyond *half monster*! Try *instant death*, dumbass! Urgh..."

His blood turned into crystals upon contact with the air. His monsterification had resumed, the metamorphosis accompanied by a bizarre chorus of noises. It was as though he was not being *allowed* to die as a human being. I could sense the malice of this world in it.

“No, we can do this! We’ll make it! We’ll just forget this match ever happened! If you become a monster and run away, you’ll lose your prestige and everything else, and your tethers will remain!”

“No, Reaper, you’re wrong. That stuff’s got nothing to do with it. All I wanted was for someone to remember me... No, my wish is smaller than that. I just wanted to show off for the kids to see. That’s it. And that wish has been granted now. It’s been granted!”

“But... But look, Lorwen! Your strength’s returned! After I interrupted, you stopped being on the verge of vanishing!”

It was true that Reaper puncturing his heart had made his power return and stopped him from being able to disappear. She was just wrong about why.

“Yeah, no duh. After seeing you pull such a stupid stunt, there’s no way I could vanish. As much as I hate to admit it, I’ve got one other attachment! There’s still one left!”

“Huh? Another attachment?”

I’d known it from the start. If he hadn’t had more than one, he would have disappeared after teaching me and those kids the blade. He was so close to disappearing but hadn’t yet due to that one last regret to work through. And I reckoned Lorwen had known it from the beginning as well. He just hadn’t admitted it to himself. But he wasn’t making that mistake anymore. No more overlooking the truth.

“You’re my last tether, Reaper.”

He faced her and attempted to stroke her cheek, but his hand passed right through. He grimaced with distress, balling his fists.

Reaper froze in place. “Huh? Wha?”

“I wanna protect you even more than you wanna protect me. You’re my number one friend, Reaper...”

“Number one friend?!”

“But it’s a wish I can never realize. I can’t make it happen... Just by being near you, your drive to kill starts torturing you. Besides...I myself am a danger to

others. Who knows when I'll go berserk and hurt everybody?"

He knew about her killing urges. That was why he had tried to hide all sorts of emotions and disappear from her world in some way or other. But now he'd realized that concealing his emotions was counterproductive and he was trying his damnedest to tell her how he truly felt. It was a first. He'd never been real with her, always hurling insults her way. He'd only ever divulged his concern for her when he and I were alone.

"D-Don't go calling me your friend after all this time, Lorwen! You never called me a friend before, and *now* you do?!"

"That's the reason I decided to disappear! I figured I oughta act like the dead man I am and vanish without causing anybody any trouble!"

"Why, though? I don't understand. Why've you gotta disappear? Why've I gotta be left all alone? Tell me! Why are you doing this?!"

"I'm dead and you're alive. That's the difference, Reaper. You may be made of magic, but you're alive! And if I disappear, you'll be freed of your curse at last! The Grim Rim Reaper will finally be allowed to live her life!"

Lorwen's heart was overflowing with love for Reaper. I understood how he felt very well. It was how I felt about my sister.

"So please, I'm begging you, see me off with a smile. I'm asking you as your friend..."

Reaper trembled. "How can you call me your friend?! That's hitting below the belt, wording it like that! You and mister both play so dirty!"

She couldn't readily agree to such a request. Her tears poured, not just of sorrow but also great joy. Joy that he'd called her his friend. She'd always craved friends, and finally, the person who was most important to her had called her his number one friend. Yet that friend's request was a harsh pill to swallow for the girl who was so young emotionally. As his best friend, she wanted to help him, but if she did, he would be no more. That dilemma left her unable to move. She lamented that even though she'd pierced his heart, fully prepared to die for it, she *still* couldn't change her fate.

Lorwen held her trembling body to his chest in a comforting embrace. That

was to say, he held his arms out just before they would phase through her and made it look as though he was hugging her, all to console her. Then he turned to me, his body still turning more and more crystalline.

“I’m sorry, Kanami. You heard all that. I apologize for making you do this, but it looks like I’ve gotta bug you a bit more.”

“That’s okay; I assumed this would happen before I got here. I’ve got enough juice left in the tank.”

This finals match wasn’t just between me and Lorwen. I’d been bracing myself for it after being unable to dissuade Reaper yesterday. After all, she was a child at heart, and she would continue to be self-centered and willful to the very end. As her friends, Lorwen and I would hear her out. I’d had a hunch it would play out this way, which was why I’d conserved my MP by fighting Lorwen using mostly what was in my inventory. Of course, Lorwen’s *Fon A Wraith* attacks had knocked those plans off course a little, but in any case, I could still fight.

“If I turn into a monster, I’ll lose all rationality and try to destroy everything until my body collapses. I’m real sorry that idiot’s making you do this...” he muttered.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure this was unavoidable. If you ask me, this was all set in stone the moment you and Reaper met. At least, that’s the feeling I get...”

Whatever road he went down, Lorwen Arrace was always going to die by Reaper’s hand. That was just how much emotion was packed into the pair from the moment they had appeared on the thirtieth floor.

“Yeah, you might be right...”

Though he couldn’t actually touch her head, he “caressed” her affectionately. Then he replaced the peaceful look on his face with a steely expression, removing his kind hands from her and slowly moving away.

“Please, Kanami,” he said as he took his distance, “protect Reaper from my mindless monster self—or no, from *all* who would do her harm in this world. If you do that, I should lose all of my tethers for good and be able to fade away...”

As she tottered, Reaper extended a trembling hand toward Lorwen, but he shook his head and kept on walking. I moved unhurriedly, taking Lorwen’s place

by Reaper, and nodded.

“Thank you,” he continued. “I’m worried sick about her. The little dummy’s the first friend I ever made. In fact, I think of her as more than a friend. She’s like a sister to me. But there’s doubt in my mind, concern that because of her origins, she’s got a whole lot of misfortune and ordeals waiting for her. Yet she’s so callow and easily duped. After I disappear, there’ll be nobody left to protect her. And that made me so anxious...”

“No need to worry, Lorwen. I’ll protect her. I won’t let anybody take her.”

“Heh. You serious? You’d even make an enemy out of the state to help her? Do you have the strength to do that?”

I’d been asked that before. I was used to it now, so I replied without hesitation. “Yeah, I’ll be okay. You know what, why don’t we stop beating around the bush? She’ll take us at our word.”

In the dead-quiet arena, my words traveled far. At this critical moment, Lorwen was still minding the eyes of the crowd. He was currently playing the role of villain atop the proverbial dais of this enormous theater ship. He smiled. “You’re being awful cold there, buddy. The end’s upon us, so what’s a little bit more playtime between friends? This might as well be my last will, ya know?”

“Well, if time runs out while we’re chatting, don’t come crying to me. Your ‘last will’ will become pretty lame at that point.”

We traded these easygoing quips with smiles on our faces. We were being as flippant as when we had decided on the ruleset, both wanting to part ways with a smile.

Then, as he distanced himself even more, he spoke as if to the sky above. “All right, fine. I’ll stop being coy.”

All the while, blood continued to spill from his heart, turning the ground from white to crimson. That bright-red blood immediately coagulated, changing color again upon transforming into the pillars of crystal. More such pillars were growing from everywhere on his body. There wasn’t much time left.

“Allow me to test whether I can entrust Reaper to you,” he continued. “Consider this the Trigesimal Trial. Sorry you ceded the title of Blademaster to

me, but...what you have to do is...”

He was calling it a trial, just like Alty before him. Crystal twined around his Mithril Sword. The pillars all over his body started morphing into a third arm, and he unsheathed the Corrupted Blade of the Arrace Clan at his waist. He pointed both swords my way. “Surpass the Blademaster. Surpass the strongest. Surpass the hero. Surpass Responsiveness! Surpass *me*: Lorwen!!!”

“D-Damn bro. Demanding much?” I stammered back.

“Oh, and protect not only Reaper but everybody here from me. I mean, knowing you, you can probably manage that. I believe in you.”

“Everybody here, huh? I’m surprised just how much faith my friend’s got in me...”

“I do have faith in you,” he said, looking straight at me. “That’s why I can say this with a smile. Kanami, show me your power. Flaunt your strength. If you do, I’ll be able to trust you with Reaper in good conscience. This time, I know my wish will be granted to perfection, and I’ll be able to fulfill my role as a Guardian too. We’ll tie absolutely everything with a neat, no-regrets bow!”

In the face of his unwavering confidence in me, I had no choice but to rise to the challenge. “Got it. I’ll undertake the Trigesimal Trial.”

“Than...k you...Kanami...”

Lorwen spoke through the blood pouring from his mouth. His monsterification was proceeding apace, and his store of magic energy was growing. This was the magic energy not of Lorwen my fellow human, but the Thief of Earth’s Essence—the monster. The undulation of his energy affected not only his body, but the whole arena. Shoots of crystal began sprouting from under the snow-white ground, an assortment of mineral flowers blooming.

“Ha ha ha! Now then, let’s enjoy my last will! Guess I’ll show off just a little bit more!”

All of the pillars on his body turned into separate crystal-arms for a total of eight. His hair shifted from chestnut to white, his eyes turning crystal clear. The battlefield likewise transformed; the ground was brimming with crystalline blooms in a rainbow of colors, making for a fairy tale fever dream of a flower

garden that was claiming more and more ground.

“Sorry, everyone, but that’s it for our opening act! From this point forward, the battle between me and Kanami—the Guardian of Floor 30 and the challenger who reached me—will begin! I can’t guarantee the safety of you spectators, so do watch out! Everyone who’s putting their life on the line to keep watching, don’t you dare blink, because now is when the *true* finals of the Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball actually begins!”

The arena was fast approaching what Floor 30 looked like. His world of crystal was spreading on top of my world of winter, and the barrier was creaking. The torrent of his overflowing magic energy was all it took to rock the massive theater ship *Valhuura.*

The shaking was nigh earthquake level; the audience’s shrieks grew louder. Lorwen’s declaration had caused a commotion, and since they could sense this transformation was extraordinary, the stands were beginning to turn unruly and out of control. This affair had intensified past the scope of a mere big-ticket fighting tournament. That said, Lorwen did call the upcoming battle “the finals.” The way I saw it, he must have wanted a friend to fell him during the match.

“This place—yes, this very theater-ship *Valhuura*—is the thirtieth floor! The floor of Lorwen, Thief of Earth’s Essence! Forgive the hasty construction, and for borrowing this place without permission, but think of this ship as the thirtieth floor of the Dungeon! Now, it’s time for the Trigesimal Trial! The fI*na*ls s*t*art no*W*!”

In addition to losing his form as a human, he was losing his humanlike speech. His monster form reminded me of a spider, and his voice was strangely muffled and low in tone. Soon, he had completely transformed into the Thief of Earth’s Essence. And with that declaration, he started walking. I too strode forth, with Reaper at my back.

Before we got too close, while Lorwen’s human mind was still in him, I shouted, “Here I come, my friend!”

“*I’m rIGht HeRe, KaNami, mY friEnD!”*

Lorwen’s face was covered in stone, turning into a not-face much like Tida’s. He responded to me by moving his crystal mouth, which brought with it the

crunching sound of stone on stone. His eight crystal arms reached out to attack me, and I responded with all my might. Thus did I reach the thirtieth floor, in a sense, for the first time.

The Trigesimal Trial had begun.

◆◆◆◆◆

We dashed, crushing some of the crystal flowers underfoot. I swung my sword to overpower the monsterified Lorwen. There was no vestige of his old appearance. He was hanging on to a semblance of humanity, albeit barely, but with those eight arms of his, he reminded me of a spider. Crystal pillars sprouted from his entire body, and his skin was covered with a unique sort of mineral. The mineral shielding covering his legs was particularly thick, almost like armor.

Our swords locked, but now that he was a monster, the blade was no longer his sole means of attack. The other six unarmed appendages reached for me, flailing wildly in their bid to flatten me. The simplest calculations now took me four times as much work, but all the same, I continuously dodged them without much difficulty.

If there was any method to the madness of his flailing, I couldn’t see it. He was merely swinging at random, intent on destroying the foreign element before his eyes. Compared to the masterful swordsmanship Lorwen had displayed moments earlier, there was a night-and-day difference in finesse. I slipped through all eight arms and plunged my sword into his torso, which was punctuated by the distinctive crunch of stone.



My Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword bounced right off. While it made a tear in his clothes, it didn't leave so much as a dent in the crystal underneath. This was the blade that had sliced through the crystal in the Dungeon, meaning the hide of the Thief of Earth's Essence was leagues harder than even that. I fell back, and how did Lorwen respond? Not with his swords or by giving chase. No, he cast a spell. He held one arm above his head, and earth-element magic energy crawled along the ground. His energy permeated the ground beneath the snow, and a sorcery I'd never seen was being crafted. I couldn't interfere with it via *Wintermension*. It was like with Alty—there were never any gaps to exploit in spells cast by Guardians.

"*Ka...ahh...spellcast: ohh... Foniaaaaaaa!!!*"

The voice leaking out of his throat was like a mix of percussion instruments, its range difficult for the human ear to detect. His throat had become so hard that it was losing its function as a vocal organ. Then, various minerals sprouted from the ground at his feet like a pinholder. Amethyst, sapphire, pearl, topaz, emerald—a swarm of shining and colorful, if misshapen, jewel swords came for me, determined to make skewered meat of me.

I jumped to the side to avoid them. I'd never seen the spell before, so it had caught me off guard, but it had taken time to construct. I could move after he activated it and still have plenty of time to dodge. It was so sluggish it was almost presumptuous to compare it to Lorwen's light-speed swordsmanship.

The problem was that I wasn't the only one subjected to his magic.

"Urgh! Lorwen, he's...he's attacking me too!" shouted Reaper sorrowfully nearby.

Like me, she'd been leaping out of the way. Since she could also use *Dimension*, her ability to evade was pretty high up there, but she couldn't hide her shock that Lorwen's magic had been fired in her direction as well.

I had a duty to protect her. In the event that she couldn't withstand his magical offensive, I'd have to step in to defend her.

"I... I..." she stammered. Not knowing what to do, she fled to where his magic couldn't reach her, effectively being driven off. I was relieved to see she was in

the safe zone.

I then released all the ice magic I'd cast on her, since she'd lost her desire to attack thanks to Lorwen's remarks. Besides, I couldn't spare the magic energy on her anymore.

The throng of gem swords Lorwen had generated were stretching high into the sky, and several of them stabbed the sky barrier, cracking it. Moreover, he started incanting in order to activate a large-scale spell. His battle strategy had completely changed; he hadn't taken a single step away from his starting spot. This was the combat style of a mage, not a swordsman.

I was about to dash toward him, eager to finish things, but then...

"Mr. Kanami! Please wait!" shouted the presenter from the side, using his magic mic from his place of refuge outside the barrier. "Management has concluded that Mr. Lorwen's no longer of sound mind and that he's completely monsterified! This is no longer a competition! There's no need for you to fight it alone! Starting now, we'll handle this using the combined forces of the Alliance!"

I shouted to be heard over his magnified voice, not just for his ears but for everyone's. "It's not over yet! Our finals match isn't over yet! Please don't enter the fray!"

Looking closely, I saw all the soldiers and knights lining up outside the barrier. They could be commanded to storm the battlefield at a moment's notice.

"We can't justify treating Mr. Lorwen as a legitimate participant anymore! His form is far removed from the proper form of a *person* as established by the Church of Levahn! We've already decided to eliminate him from the Alliance as a monster!"

"Don't go bellyaching just cuz he's changed forms a bit! You lot oughta focus on keeping the crowd safe!"

"But we cannot allow such a thing! People are already—"

Several soldiers were trying to come in through one of the entrance gates. Whether they were rushing in because it was demanded of them or because they wanted to make names for themselves, I couldn't tell you, but even from a

distance, I could see that they were champing at the bit to slay Lorwen.

"Tch!" I headed toward them, and as I dashed, I felt a sharp blast of bloodlust from behind. I grasped precisely what was going on not through Responsiveness but through *Dimension*.

Each of Lorwen's eight arms was now gripping a crystal sword. Still incanting his impending whopper of a spell, he brutishly hurled several of them. Their target wasn't me, but the fresh foreign elements that had entered the barrier—the soldiers.

"Spellcast: *Wintermension: Frost!*"

Fortunately, there were a number of puddles on the ground. I transmitted my magic energy through the water to create a wall of ice, making the wall rounded to deflect the crystal swords that flew its way. But Lorwen simply generated even more crystal swords, tossing them one after the other. I couldn't divert all of them using just the ice wall.

Jumping into the line of fire at full speed, I deflected the flying swords with my own, stopping the final one with my bare hand. The soldiers behind me looked pale. I couldn't blame them for that; from the moment they'd entered the barrier, a blitz of blades had started whizzing in their direction at hard-to-track speeds. But while they were white as ghosts, there wasn't a scratch on them.

I breathed a sigh of relief. If even one person got hurt, I'd be breaking my promise to Lorwen. And if I broke my promise, I could never overcome the Trigesimal Trial.

Tossing aside the crystal blade in my bloodied hand, I balled it into a fist. "Don't just waltz in like that, please! Otherwise, your lives are forfeit!"

The frigid winds of *Wintermension* buffeted them, and they froze up.

"If you'll excuse me!"

I violently grabbed their bodies and flexed my brute strength to fling them back toward the entrance gate, and they tumbled through the corridor. At a glance, they might have gotten a bit dinged up in the process, but since it was me and not Lorwen who had done it, I figured I was safe.

“This is our fight!” I screamed. “We’re fighting in the finals of the Brawl right now! You’re really gonna be so *rude* as to barge in on our match?! You onlookers just need to stay in your seats and watch! Mr. Emcee, sir, have I said anything wrong?!”

“No, you’re too right, Mr. Kanami!”

If I got more intruders, I wouldn’t be able to protect them all by myself. That was just how strong the Guardian was. I had to implore everybody to help me out by staying put.

“We’re still duking it out in this here arena—no, this *theater!* And Valhuura is bearing witness! Didn’t you all come to see the finals?! Doesn’t Valhuura welcome one and all, criminal or otherwise, to throw their hats in the ring? And now you’re telling me you wanna end our match without the say-so of the fighters themselves?! These are the *finals!* Don’t be such wet blankets! Please let us end our match properly! In fact, it’s incumbent on you to allow it! You agree with me, don’t you, people?!” I cried, appealing to the shaken spectators.

After hearing me make my case, the crowd was abuzz. Just as I was about to shout at them more, hoping to power past their apprehensions, a pompous, affected voice rang out—but it wasn’t the emcee this time. This voice sounded so familiar.

“He’s absolutely right! A fight belongs to its fighters! And above all, it’d be a crying shame to end the match here! Kanami beat me, and he declared he’ll surpass the Blademaster, surpass the strongest, surpass the hero! Let me tell you, I’d rather die than pass up the chance to watch this! I’m sure he’ll be just like the hero of a storybook—no, he’ll be even *stronger* than one. He’ll defeat the monster, just you wait!”

“L-Lord Elmirahd Siddark?!”

Elmirahd had swiped the mic from the presenter’s hands to address all in attendance. And he’d said what I most wanted everyone to hear. It seemed he’d grasped how I felt faster than anyone else, taking action to help us press on with the finals.

His speech went from in-your-face to a more polite, even tone. “Esteemed ladies and gentlemen, you’ve no need to worry. As a guildmaster, I promise that

whatever attacks might hit the stands, Supreme shall take responsibility for everyone's defense. I vow that nobody will receive so much as a scratch on their person. So the finals must go on. I won't let them end. I refuse to."

Elmirahd was the eldest son of one of the most influential noble clans, and well-known throughout the Alliance. After his remarks, the mood in the venue changed. I'd been of the opinion for a while now that he was better suited to inspiring people like he'd just done rather than combat. His unyielding pride and determination coupled with his handsome looks and melodious voice could move hearts and minds. He had lit a fire in the noisy, discomposed crowd. The feeling Elmirahd had given voice to, the sentiment that it would be a damn shame to miss out on this match, spread through the stands.

Another voice, loud enough to rival the magic mic, rang out. "L-Listen, everyone! Please let Kanami and Lorwen Arrace fight to the last! We of Epic Seeker are in agreement with Supreme! R-Right? We are, right?!"

It was Snow's vibration magic.

"Snow! Of course we are!" shouted Ms. Tayly.

The members of Epic Seeker all stood up in a show of solidarity.

"You heard her. Can't have ya forgetting our guild. Our master's fighting his hardest out there. We'd be remiss not to back him up."

They all expressed their support of my position for everyone to hear. It could be argued that this place, this hour, this very match was granting the folks at Epic Seeker their long-held dream. They'd been on the lookout for someone fitting the "hero" role for quite some time. That was why they were yelling that the fight must continue with a passion more fiery than anyone else. The guild members were all holding their respective weapons at the ready, insisting at high volume that they'd protect the audience. Their zeal was the spark that ignited the stadium.

I rode that excitement, calling out to the presenter, or rather, to the people in the back who were deciding whether or not to press on with the tournament.

"The folks in those guilds will keep you safe! So please, give me a little bit more time! Please!"

“B-But, Mr. Kanami,” said the presenter on their behalf, “it appears the barrier isn’t going to hold much longer! At this rate—”

The incantation Lorwen had been weaving at the center was now over. He incanted with a voice like metal, “Spellcast: *Amond...Fonia!”*

Within the barrier, his magic energy swelled and expanded, and gemstone swords came sprouting from the ground, in incomparably greater numbers than before. The countless gem swords pierced the sky, and I dodged and weaved my way through them. From the side of the gem swords, freshly formed blades extended to attack me.

I evaded the weapons coming at me from all directions by the skin of my teeth, but the barrier couldn’t do the same. When the super spell struck, it shattered like glass. What the presenter had feared was now a reality. The solidified magic energy of the barrier came apart in shards that flew through the sky, threatening to rain down on the audience.

But I just watched, not an ounce of concern in my mind. A firestorm was suddenly generated above the stands, its flames swallowing up all the shards and burning them to nothing. It was Maria’s magic. She’d been quiet this whole time, but it turned out she’d been weaving a spell in anticipation of the situation.

Thanks to her, most of the fragments disappeared before hitting the floor. The few that made it past were deflected by the brave warriors who wanted the finals to continue, among them the Seven Celestial Knights. They did a fantastic job ensuring the audience came to no harm, and a new barrier would be immediately erected. Soon, it would be as if the current barrier had never collapsed.

“Blestspell: *Inbirable Field!”*

“Blestspell: *Inbirable Field!”*

Dia and Lastiara were in the front row emitting white light, reconstructing the barrier and making it thick enough to hold off all of the gem swords stretching from above. The two of them working together resulted in magic that surpassed the barrier the tournament management had prepared.

Maria, who was next to them, muttered in a low voice that only I could hear, “If some shards do wind up flying toward the stands, I’ll burn them all away. Please fight without reservation, Mr. Kanami.”

The top powerhouses among the Brawl participants were substantiating our guarantees of the spectators’ safety. The crowd erupted at the sight of one super spell after the other, and more and more folks were saying they wanted to see the finals through to the end.

Elmirahd smiled and laughed. “Oho! Looks like it’s more than just my guild that wants to see this battle continue! As far as I can tell, the elites who made it some way into the Brawl, not to mention the Apostle and the princess and the knights of Whoseyards, are helping us keep it going as well! If you still have misgivings even with this many of the best of the best pitching in, how can I take that except as a slight against us? Now then, I wonder what the ladies and gentlemen from management will say?!”

It was a nasty tactic but the most effective thing to say. The tournament organizers, who were waiting in the back, accepted his words, though not before some hand-wringing.

“Th-The fight will continue!” shouted the presenter. “The show must go on, right?! We’ve got no other choice, do we?! I mean, I myself want them to fight it out! I want to see the finals! Mr. Kanami, we won’t let anyone interfere anymore! Please, fight your heart out! The Brawl isn’t over yet!”

He’d cheered me on in his most buddy-buddy tone all day, but now, for the first and only time, that felt nice and comforting.

“You heard him!” shouted Elmirahd. “We’ve attained the official go-ahead for the fight! Now, Kanami, all you need to do is win! Win like the hero would! Be more gallant and bold than any hero! Surpass the concept and fight! Fight and show me what a *true* hero’s like!”

“Elmirahd, Don’t let me hear the word ‘hero’ come out of your mouth one more time! I was gonna fight anyway!” I yelled back.

The stands were alive with excitement once again, engulfed by a wild enthusiasm. It looked like this unusual situation was starting to get them pumped up. Spurred on by their audible passion, I dashed for Lorwen, who was

at the center of the arena crafting another spell, and came at him with a slash.

"...sh...rystal!"

He stopped constructing the spell midway through and unleashed it in a spontaneous discharge. Seeds of sparkling crystal scattered from his body and attached to the ground and pillars. The seeds immediately sprouted, and the crystal plants undulated and grew like living creatures. They tangled around the pillars, turning the battlefield into a veritable spiderweb.

I closed in on Lorwen as I dodged the crystal vines, aiming for places where his skin had not yet crystallized and swinging with every intention of dismembering him, only for his eight arms to stop my blade. He was letting sheer quantity speak for itself, swiping randomly using all eight swords and trying to cut me into pieces. *Trying* being the operative word—he was just too slow.

Don't get me wrong, after turning into a monster, his attacks had become downright ferocious. An onslaught from all directions that fast and hard could only be described as deadly. Any boss monster belonging to any floor numerically below the thirtieth wouldn't last a second against it.

But compared to when he was human, it felt like a game of patty-cake. While they did pose a threat, the attacks didn't feel as though they were coming from a zone that was beyond my reach. Put bluntly, his swordsmanship had become less than skilled. Just like Tida before him, it was pure aggression that relied on sheer speed and muscle. Not a trace remained of the skill with the blade that had captivated all the spectators; he was clearly weaker now. The mastery he'd cultivated as Lorwen Arrace—no, as a human being—was disappearing. Before his monsterification, he'd countered any and all of the moves I'd tried on him. He'd even invented a new technique on the spot to best me.

But that was no longer the case. He was just letting me do him in without coming up with a well-considered countermeasure. He was merely going berserk, hoping his vast magic energy and physical strength did the trick. That made slipping through his attacks child's play. I thrust my sword into a gap in his crystal armor.

"Ahh, gahh, ahhhhh!!!"

His screams sounded like two coins rubbing against each other. The blood spilling from his wound turned into crystal. I figured it would encase my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword, so I hurriedly pulled it out. Crystal soon covered the wound, and the bleeding stopped, leaving me with no choice but to search for another gap to attack. I slashed and slashed at the uncrystallized parts of his skin, and each time, the wound hardened, any formerly noncrystal parts vanishing.

My rush against Lorwen was amping up the crowd even more. I alone, as the one who was fighting, knew that I wasn't actually overwhelming him. After enough of my strikes, his entire body had fully hardened, and there were no more weak spots.

Now a juggernaut of crystal, he attacked, his moves bereft of technique or tactics. He was the picture of a mindless, raging monster. But with his entire body covered in gemstone armor, his suicide charges were proving effective. Whenever his random flailing left him open, I slammed my sword into his crystal body with all my might.

CLANK. CLANK. CLANK.

I was dealing no damage. No matter how open Lorwen's long, sweeping strokes made him, I no longer had an effective means of exploiting those openings. I now knew that this impregnable defense was the true strength of the Thief of Earth's Essence. It was just a hunch, but I reckoned that entity couldn't be wounded by any mineral in this world. That was one of the essential laws this world operated by, or at least, that was what I surmised.

Thinking about the spells I'd witnessed thus far, the most destructive and devastating one sprang to mind, and I crafted it. "Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge: Impulse!"*

Back when I'd found myself unable to destroy the raycrystal in the Dungeon, Snow had managed it by adding in her vibration magic, so I mimicked that magic now. I covered my sword in cold, turning it outward at precisely the moment the slash connected. The image in my head was no longer restraining the vibration, it was *releasing* it.

Like the effect Snow's magic had on her targets, I made the stone vibrate

from the outside. But to no avail. While I was an expert at quelling vibrations with my magic energy, I was crushingly terrible at making things vibrate *more*. Lorwen took the *Ice Flamberge: Impulse* attack to the gut but swung his blade at me, unperturbed. I was forced to magnify the cold and try to freeze him over. Unfortunately, neither intensifying nor subduing vibrations had any effect on his stone body.

"Damn! Spellcast: *Ice Flamberge!"*

He didn't take a defensive stance. He didn't even flinch, swinging at me with abandon. Though I blocked a crystal arm with the flat of my sword, I was knocked into the air by his absurd brawn. As I hurtled across the arena, I pointed my hands toward the ground and worked my magic on a puddle.

"Spellcast: *Midgard Freeze!"*

The puddle turned into ice in the shape of a serpent, whose maw attacked Lorwen from underfoot. It bit into his torso and lifted him up, but he grabbed it with his hard and powerful arms and crushed it to bits. Ice magic just wasn't doing anything—but he was in midair now. I adjusted my stance and leaped up, using the suspended crystal branches as footholds to get above him. Aiming at his defenseless form, I brought down my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword with every bit of strength in me.

"Break! BREAAAAAK!"

I slammed him into the ground. At the same time, *Midgard Freeze* totally shattered, its ice shards glistening in the air. I saw that Lorwen had gotten up below, bathed in that breathtaking diamond dust. There wasn't a scratch on him. He wasn't taking damage from slashes, and he wasn't taking damage from blunt force impacts either. Utterly unscathed, he waited for me while I was up in the air and defenseless.

"M-Magic Power Freezing!"

I stretched my blade to the ground to pivot away and change where I was going to land, avoiding being filled with holes by his eight swords by a hair's breadth.

I straightened up and gritted my teeth. I'd landed a critical hit, and I'd tried

everything I could think of to add to the attack power using magic energy, but Lorwen hadn't taken any damage. It felt like I was playing an RPG and seeing nothing but zeroes after attacking. His sky-high defense was nullifying all attacks. So what now?

It didn't take me long to find the answer. Or no, I didn't *find* it. I already had the answer. It was the same as when I'd fought Reaper—Lorwen had already told me the answer. All that was left was to replicate it. It was probably what the Trigesimal Trial was meant to teach, and the trial wouldn't end until I learned my lesson, as Lorwen wouldn't feel safe leaving things to me before then.

As I dodged his attacks, I incanted, *"I... I leave you behind, world!"*

Remember. Remember everything that happened from the moment I met Lorwen. *Remember his words, his facial expressions, his mannerisms and habits, his feelings, his wishes*...

If I could understand all of those things, then surely the incantation would be successful. Lorwen would continue to live as part of me, and I could even pay the price for the spell.

"*You're the one who rejected me first, world. That is why I shall live by the blade*—damn!"

It didn't work. This was different from my fight with Alty. It wasn't *my* incantation, so it didn't ring true, and I was nowhere close to reproducing the spell. I knew that *Fon A Wraith* fired a sword slash from outside the realm of awareness. Could I maybe substitute *Form* and *Connection* for it*?* I had no doubt that dimensional magic was a necessary ingredient.

I contemplated dozens of alternative patterns and combinations, but I didn't feel like any of them would do the trick. It was doubtful the spell could even be recreated using magic energy to begin with. I'd just wasted magic energy on a spell I'd failed to craft, and Lorwen summarily attacked me, charging as he incanted his own spell.

"*...quo...lalax!"*

I easily dodged the crystal sword, but at that very moment, half of the eight

swords ruptured, exploding into buckshot that attacked me from the side. Thanks to *Dimension*, I was able to predict the effect of the spell before the crystal broke into pieces. I used Magic Power Freezing to widen my blade, making it a makeshift shield to deflect the bullets. The ice shield shattered in an instant, and it wasn't able to deflect all of it, but I was able to minimize the damage.

I eyed my injuries as I checked my menu.

【STATUS】
HP: 262/293
MP: 189/751-100

I could keep going. I probably wouldn't be taking too much damage so long as I had magic energy left to use. Lorwen was so lacking in any decisive blow that I felt confident about that. But the ability he'd gained in exchange was tremendous. It would cause me to lose the match in due time, like a slow-acting poison. I had to find a way to complete that incantation, and quickly. I had to become the inheritor of Lorwen's blade and show him that I could protect Reaper in his stead.

But the more flustered I got, the farther off victory seemed. Lorwen kept bum-rushing me, swinging his swords randomly and casting spell after spell.

"*...oh, glint! Earth Way... Quo...den!*"

He unleashed a wide variety of earth-element magic. The crystals captured light and reflected it internally. The light was gathered via magic energy and then released at singular points. I created a film of ice particles to attenuate the magic light rays, leaping out of the way. When I landed, the ground underneath me shook as violently as a huge earthquake. The battlefield itself was moving thanks to his earth magic, the crystal sand beneath my snow wriggling like it was possessed.

But there was even more magic than that. A spell shooting rock bullets. Magic that made a tsunami of the sand. A spell that animated the crystal into a moving monster. A spell that restricted the opponent's freedom of movement

with a sand whirlpool. A spell that caused crystal swords to rain down from the sky. If I hadn't deployed *World of Winter* earlier, I'd have bitten the dust five spells ago.

By knowing the effects of each spell before it activated, reading where they would go through Responsiveness, and fleeing to the least dangerous spot on the battlefield over and over, I managed to make it through alive. But no matter how ably I dodged those attacks, I couldn't do anything about my flagging stamina and impending exhaustion, and my magic energy wasn't infinite either. Meanwhile, Lorwen's physical strength and magic energy were showing no sign of losing steam. He was always at full power. It looked like a bottomless amount of magic energy was gushing out from within him. Sure, you'd never expect a boss in an RPG to just run out of steam, but come on. This was plain unfair.

"Hff, hff, hff!" I was panting as I pushed through Lorwen's tireless onslaught. I wanted to fight from a greater distance away if possible. I would have liked to jump ship, escape to the river, and use more of the terrain to my advantage. Unfortunately, if I strayed too far, Lorwen would shift his attention elsewhere, and he'd mindlessly start targeting other people. I couldn't have that. I was sweating profusely, and I smelled blood on my breath. I was approaching the limit of my stamina.

【STATUS】
HP: 260/293
MP: 79/751-100

If my MP ran out, I'd have to dip into my life force in order to cast spells. And if I was driven into that much of a corner, I could be sure that Lastiara would jump into action. She was watching from the sidelines because she could, through her skills, directly see how I was doing. But at this rate, I wouldn't be able to overcome the trial, and Lorwen would be treated as a monster by the people of the Alliance.

The realist in me could see that that destiny was approaching. Little by little, feelings of resignation were nibbling at my heart. If I strained myself too much and someone got hurt, that would only make Lorwen sadder. I understood that

much. It would definitely be *safer* if everyone started working together to fight him as soon as possible. I wouldn't be getting the best ending, but it would be the next-best outcome.

Besides, the whole idea of me passing this trial of his was just his one-sided hope. Nothing guaranteed that I was necessarily even *able* to pass it. And if I couldn't, Lorwen would just laugh it off with a "Ha ha. Guess I was a bit unreasonable, huh?" I understood that full well too. If I calmed down and thought about it rationally, I'd see it made a lot of sense to just give up without fighting on and running on fumes.

That was a valid conclusion... It was...

"Wh-Why yooooouuuu! FUCK OFF WITH THAT!" I swore as I deflected his eight blades.

My fatigue was mounting, my arms leaden and heavy. My focus was waning as well, and little by little, Lorwen's arms were getting the better of me. Was it a valid conclusion? My gut was screaming otherwise. I didn't want to lose. I didn't want to give in or compromise. I wanted to live up to his expectations. I wanted to overcome the Trigesimal Trial and do Lorwen the favor of erasing his attachments completely. We were almost at the end. I was convinced. Using *that* spell, I could cut him. But with so little left to the match, I'd failed at reproducing the incantation.

As I gritted my teeth in frustration, Lorwen continued to attack me mercilessly. And after a long, long battle, I'd finally reached my time limit.

【STATUS】
HP: 260/293
MP: 2/751-100

I was all out of magic energy.

"Urgh!"

I was at my limit physically as well. I was tripping over myself, throwing my stance off, and Lorwen's crystal swords came for me. Unable to keep up my

dimensional magic, I could no longer fully read the trajectory of his swings, and Responsiveness was telling me that it would be tough to evade them all unharmed. Getting wounded would spell the end of the Trigesimal Trial. It would end with me unable to overcome a single thing, and I couldn't stand the thought.

It was then that it happened.

"*I leave you behind, world.*"

A clump of darkness crossed in front of me. A black blade poked out of it to fend off the crystal swords. Reaper, the rightful third participant of this match officially speaking, had entered the fray. And that incantation was definitely Lorwen's. But it rang truer for her than it did for me. She wrapped her body in darkness, deftly switching between detectable and undetectable by the people around her, and exerting her charred right arm and frostbitten left arm to wield her scythe and fight.

"Mister, you're not even gonna *think* about giving up on my watch!" she shouted as she swung her sickle forcefully.

Lorwen was blown back, opening some distance between him and me. Reaper used the time that had bought to cast off her shadow shroud and turn around. Her cheeks and nose were flushed red; she'd been crying her eyes out.

"R-Reaper?"

While her face was streaked with tears, the look in her eyes betrayed an uncommon determination. These were the eyes of someone with the resolve to accept their own death, but her purpose was even greater than that. These were the eyes of someone prepared to accept the death of one important to them.

"I know Lorwen like the back of my hand!" she shouted as she sniffled. "I'll be the one to incant the spell! All you need to do is swing your sword! Fight him to the very end with your blade!"

A heat flared in the back of my neck, the emblem she'd created there glowing. Through our curse-link, a whole host of things were streaming into me. I wasn't stealing her magic energy; she was pouring it into me of her own

volition.

【STATUS】
HP: 260/293
MP: 582/751-100

My body was now overflowing with magic energy. This was different from my cold brand—hers was hot, and it was flowing into me. Needless to say, her emotions and memories were mixed in too.

“I’m his friend too! We’re friends too, so let’s grant Lorwen’s wish *together!* That’s what I truly want, deep, deep, deep down!” she cried.

Reaper’s life up until now flowed into me. The days she’d spent alongside Lorwen. All the emotions she’d felt. The new wish she’d decided on. I gained an understanding of her heart, and it felt like it was on the verge of getting torn to shreds by her grief. It was so sad that just empathizing with her brought tears to my eyes. Yet she was still taking Lorwen’s words to heart, taking up her scythe, while the tears were still streaming. Just like Lorwen and Snow, she was rising up on her own two feet after years and years of suffering.

“Sorry, Reaper... I was about to make the wrong choice again. Looks like I keep needing your help to realize stuff...”

In the back of my mind, I’d resigned myself to not needing any help from Reaper. I’d gotten a big head, thinking I could beat him by myself. But that was misguided. There was no rule that to protect Reaper, I couldn’t call on her help directly. If anything, it was impossible to protect her without her cooperation.

“You’re right... There’s no need for me to be the only one to understand him. There are three fighters in this match. Let’s do this together, Reaper!”

My will to fight had been fading, but her emotions brought me back from the brink. I stood by her side and gripped my sword tighter.

“Lorwen! I’m not gonna just sit and let him protect me all day! I can fight too!” Reaper cried.

The darkness of *Nightmension* flowed out from her body. Her world of

shadow now joined my world of winter and Lorwen's world of crystal. We didn't have to exchange words for me to know where Reaper's sights were aimed, and I had faith that she understood me too. The power of the Grim Rim Reaper's curse-link had turned us into a pair of battle-forged brothers-in-arms.

"Let's do this, Reaper!"

"Let's, big brother!"

I jumped forward from head-on while Reaper slipped into the darkness. The moment Lorwen and I locked swords, she attacked from behind, and Lorwen couldn't respond to sneak attacks from behind. The sickle smacked into him, and Lorwen stumbled, whereupon I hit him with a lightning-fast sword strike, slamming an *Ice Flamberge* loaded up with generous amounts of magic energy down on him.

He roared as he ate our vicious blows, unleashing an attack on his new enemy. But in the face of our functional telepathy, that proved pointless. Reaper was always lurking in his blind spot and striking whenever and wherever he was open. I kept fighting him head-on so that Reaper could attack at her full potential. Whenever I was in trouble, she came to my rescue. Whenever she was in danger, I came to hers. The monster called the Thief of Earth's Essence had no recourse against Lorwen's two best friends.

"This is what I can do, Lorwen!" she shouted. "This is the Grim Rim Reaper! Look how strong I've become! And I won't be selfish anymore either! So you don't need to keep worrying about me!"

In the space of a few days, she'd truly become a force to be reckoned with. Since she'd taken all her fighting technique from me, she was comparable to Lastiara in terms of her combat capabilities. Of course, she wasn't just stronger physically; her heart had become stronger as well. Reaper was now able to accept the painful reality that she had rejected the day before. That wasn't like the flimsy "growth" she'd gained from using her curse-link. By experiencing the worry and woe she had, she'd grown in a much truer sense.

Reaper and I continued scoring hits all over Lorwen's body, but that alone wouldn't be enough to defeat him. After all, the body of the Thief of Earth's Essence was unbreakable. Another of her powerful blows from behind sent

Lorwen flying.

“Mister!”

I nodded. There was no need to speak; I understood. And now, I could do it. It was beyond my abilities working alone, but with our powers combined, we could do it!

“Yeah, it’s our only hope! But my knowledge of Lorwen’s not gonna cut it, so tell me what you know about him!”

“Right!”

She didn’t put the rest into words. She didn’t need to. We had something more reliable than speech on our side. Through our curse-link, she conveyed to me the Lorwen that she knew. Scenes from the past flashed through my mind. These were Reaper’s memories. Lorwen had been feared by his enemies and “allies” alike. He’d been fighting in the war, surrounded by many but alone in the ways that mattered. The fact that one of him was worth a whole army of soldiers was the root of his misfortune.

And then, Reaper had been created. The enemy had cast the curse of the Reaper just to curb a single swordsman, and that plan had proved a great success. Only, it had succeeded in a way no one had expected. Reaper had called out to Lorwen to play together, and Lorwen had been baffled, interacting with a child for the first time ever. That was when their paths had crossed, marking the start of two innocent playmates’ time together.

“So that’s...Lorwen Arrace...”

The Lorwen that Reaper knew was miserable. The circumstances of his birth, his talent, and his sword skills had served to isolate him. He’d lived a life of desperate want. In accordance with the precepts of his clan, he’d done nothing but practice the blade, believing that in doing so, he would be accepted as a member of the House of Arrace and know happiness.

Yet the path that awaited him at the end of his nonstop training was a wretched one. Tossed into a brutal war, he was treated like a monster day in and day out, exploited like a tool to be used and forced to fight even after death. His was a life one could say was rejected by the world. He lived and died

by the sword, never furnished with true connections with anyone, never accepted by anyone, and never able to come to a mutual understanding with anyone. That was the significance behind that incantation of his, and it was it now within my fingertips to grasp.

"The Lorwen you knew looked so happy," said Reaper. "Ah...so he's been wanting to pass his sword down to someone..."

At the same time she'd shown me her Lorwen, I'd shown her Lorwen as *I* knew him. The man who'd looked so satisfied after teaching me and those kids the blade. The one who'd been so proud to show off the level of swordsmanship he'd reached. His efforts had finally borne fruit, proving that his life had meaning. Reaper and I were beginning to piece together the full picture of Lorwen's life, one that neither of us could have reached alone. But we could get there together. We could see that full picture.

We'd now gathered all the fragments of the incantation.

"*I leave you behind, world...*"

"*I leave you behind, world...*"

We incanted together, and we started paying the price together. But it still wasn't enough. Even sharing the cost between two people, we couldn't reach the level of Lorwen's incantation. That was how dense his life energy was. But we both thought it was fine. We weren't ever going to reproduce the spell perfectly; in fact, we didn't want to. And that was because we wanted to *change* Lorwen's life. In that moment, Reaper's heart aligned with my own.

"*We will take up the blade that you rejected, world!*"

"*We will take up the blade that you rejected, world!*"

We'd put our own twist on the incantation that was a condensation of Lorwen's life, as if to admonish the world that no matter what life Lorwen followed, he would have friends. Then I swung my sword, with nothing in my head but the sentiment that I wanted to be at my friend's side. That was the end point of our blade. The ultimate sword strike in our eyes. And we could hardly call that spell *Fon A Wraith* anymore. The spell crafted through our love for him was similar to but different from Lorwen's spell. As such, the name of

the spell was...

“*Dimension A Wraith!*”

“*Dimension A Wraith!*”

Reaper opened a path using dimensional magic, and I swung my sword through that path. My blade traveled contrary to the laws of the world, unmoored by concepts like time and distance. With a sound not unlike the crashing of a chandelier, our blade surpassed the physical laws, the “essence” possessed by the Thief of Earth’s Essence.

The body of the Thief of Earth’s Essence is absolutely unbreakable.

I smashed that law itself. The undetectable, unavoidable blow struck true, shattering Lorwen’s eight arms. The slash, which ran diagonally down from his shoulder, reduced the thick crystal armor protecting his torso to pieces as well.

The gemstone that constituted the Thief of Earth’s Essence lay in ruins. The masklike crystal hiding Lorwen’s face also crumbled away, revealing his merry smile. He was happy I had struck him with that sure-hit technique. With the crystal removed by our spell, Lorwen regained his senses a little. The relit ember of his mind induced him to protect the Corrupted Blade of the Arrace Clan and the Mithril Sword.

Though he’d been rent asunder and was bleeding copiously, he held his ground, resheathing the Corrupted Blade of the Arrace Clan in the scabbard at his waist, and brandishing the Mithril Sword with his flesh-and-blood arms. He intended to fight with a single blade this time. That was how he’d always fought, after all.



“Ah, ahh... I... *I leave you behind, world!”*

He wasn’t holding back in the least. That was why he was having so much fun right now.

“You’re the one who rejected me first, world. That’s why I shall live by the blade!”

He was crafting the unavoidable blow that demanded his life as payment.

“Spellcast: *Fon A Wraith!*”

He sent everything our way, and we responded in kind with our second *Dimension A Wraith.*

“Spellcast: *Dimension A Wraith!”*

“Spellcast: *Dimension A Wraith!”*

Our blades crossed. This was the world of supreme-speed swordsmanship now. The world nobody else could reach. The pinnacle of the art of the blade. The world that had once belonged only to Lorwen Arrace.

The blue of my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword was hot on the heels of the red of his Mithril Sword. Now at the close, our two streaks of light danced anew.

“Lorwen!”

“Kanamiii!”

Fon A Wraith and *Dimension A Wraith* vied for supremacy. We were incapable of seeing each other’s sword swings coming, but still our swords clashed countless times in the blink of an eye. In the arena, atop the field of crystal flowers, in the proxy of Floor 30 created by the Thief of Earth’s Essence... That was where Lorwen and I were trading blows like once upon a time. During the knocking-the-weapon portion of our battle, I’d learned the hard way that I couldn’t beat him at the blade, yet now I was fighting with no magic. I was stronger because I’d met Lorwen. I had become *much* stronger. And I wanted to tell him that.

Our swords met a mind-boggling number of times, Reaper shouting her heart

out behind us. The voices of the spectators felt so, so far away, but Reaper's voice I could hear loud and clear.

"Beat him, mister! Show him that he doesn't gotta worry about me anymore!"

Her encouragement filled me with energy. Reaper was no help in our sword duel; she entrusted everything to me through our link. I wasn't talking about just magic energy—her determination, her emotions, they buoyed me. I wasn't the only one fighting; Reaper was there with me. We were fighting together. I couldn't lose now. For Reaper's sake, for Lorwen's sake, and for my own sake...

"I can't lose! I WON'T LOSE!"

At that moment, *Dimension A Wraith* surpassed *Fon A Wraith*. The slash that crossed beyond mere physics smashed Lorwen's Mithril Sword. Its function fulfilled, that sword gleamed its last gleam of red before falling to the crystal flower bed. Lorwen watched it happen with a smile. I could tell his own defeat delighted him immensely.

He looked up at the sky above, still grinning, a look of reassurance on his face as he murmured, "What a relief."

That was proof that I'd overcome the Trigesimal Trial. Proof the tether holding him here had gone at last. His attachments no longer binding him, he incanted with the same satisfied expression Alty had worn.

"*The dead lost their dreams. Corpses they became, the world they wandered... But that's over now. Since people live not by missions thrust upon them, but in search of light in their souls... So long as the ray of light shining on the soul remains, it'll all be worthwhile...*"

Lorwen's strength diminished in the extreme, and the blood he shed turned into particles of magic energy. The Floor 30 proxy that he'd developed also collapsed. Its crystal flowers and pillars and everything else faded into a pale light that dissolved in midair. It was like something out of a fantastical dream. It was solemn and beautiful, like a ritual to bid farewell to ancestral spirits.

"This is goodbye, Kanami," he said, smiling.

"Goodbye, Lorwen."

We spoke no more than that. Everything that needed to be said, we'd already said through our swords. Then, Lorwen turned to face the spectators. Smiling, he waved to the children in their corner of the stadium. They were all in tears. Though they were quite young, they must have sensed that this was the end for him.

"You were so cool!" shouted one of them.

"You were so strong!" cried another.

He heard their many words of praise, and then he bowed to the whole stadium, expressing to everyone in attendance his immense gratitude. He thanked them for being able to participate in the Brawl, for allowing him to finish the match, and for watching him to the end. His sheer sincerity dumbfounded them: *Lorwen Arrace might have been a monster, but looking back, the match he'd shown us was the greatest of all.* None of the humans had gotten hurt, and in one corner of the audience, there was a group of children screaming his praises. He'd staked his very life on livening up the finals.

That fact alone remained, and the people in the stands hadn't failed to pick up on it. Little by little, they started applauding. The number of voices joining the children's in praising Lorwen, swordsman extraordinaire, gradually increased. Bit by bit, their impression of him shifted from fear to admiration. A few seconds later, it had turned into a mighty din of wild cheering. The greatest finals in history had come to an end, and everyone applauded Lorwen Arrace, the man who'd made it possible. Cheers poured down like the slanting rays of the evening sun.

"They don't hold a candle to the kids' cheers, but...that thunderous applause ain't bad either..." Lorwen raised his hands up in the air and basked in it. Then he walked toward his companion. "Reaper..."

"Lorwen..."

"You remember the day we first tried to kill each other? Lasted a while, huh? Playtime's over for us now. I'm vanishing, and you're not. You win our match."

"Th-That wasn't a real game! You're the one who taught me it's not play unless it's fun for both sides!"

“And I did have fun too. I’m so glad I met you, Reaper. You’re my number one friend. Since the day we met, we’ve been playing the whole time. Those days were so peaceful, so tranquil, so fun... Thank you for treating a corpse like me to a good time.”

“Lorwen!” she said, unable to hold back the tears. Beset by a jumble of emotions, she couldn’t find any words to say.

“Do me a solid this time, Reaper. See me off with a smile.”

With a wry grin, he extended his left hand to the crying child, reaching out to stroke her head. He shouldn’t have been able to; she was in intangible mode. But he *was* able to.

She trembled with a start, looking up at Lorwen’s hand, clearly not understanding what had just happened. However, as Lorwen’s gentle palm continued to caress her, it dawned on her: even though Lowen was perceiving her, she hadn’t become intangible after all. This was probably a first for her.

I remembered both the information I had found at the library and what Reaper had told me. My Responsiveness and Thought Streams skills provided me with the reason. Now that the kill-Lorwen curse had been fulfilled, Reaper had been set free from her own curse of physical absence.

“Hee, hee hee...”

She giggled through her tears. She wasn’t forcing a laugh. She was genuinely happy that she could feel Lorwen’s warmth. Her smile was heartfelt, and she saw him off with a smile. “See you, my friend!”

Lorwen smiled right back. “That was good... That was a great goodbye, my friend...” he said hoarsely.

And with that, nothing was left to keep Lorwen Arrace in this world. The majority of his body turned into light particles... He was at his limit. For his final act, he looked up at the sky one more time, staring at the blue with a sparkle in his eyes, and then he muttered to no one in particular, “That...made it...all...worth...while...”



Then he vanished, turning entirely into light particles and melting into the sky.

【TITLE UNLOCKED: One Who Wanders the Land】
+0.50 to Earth Magic.

In addition to the notification, I heard the clank of metal. A sword was stuck in the ground where Lorwen had disappeared. It was sublimely beautiful, adorned with a crystal aesthetic: the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan that I'd given him. It had transformed in appearance, with magic gems studding the guard, and it was sticking out of the ground majestically. I used Analyze to check its name.

【LORWEN, TREASURED BLADE OF THE ARRACE CLAN】

It was named Lorwen. The sword that was born of the Arrace Clan had been named Lorwen. He himself had vanished, but one trace of the might he'd exhibited during the finals of the Brawl remained. None of the spectators would ever forget the way that awe-inspiring sword glimmered.

Then there was the little girl who'd taken a step toward adulthood. And more than anyone, I myself stood as living proof of the man who had wandered the land as a blade.

◆◆◆◆◆

The presenter shouted the results of the match to the stadium. "We...We've affirmed that Mr. Lorwen has died...or no, that he's disappeared! As the Blademaster, he showed us all the height of swordsmanship, but Mr. Kanami took him on and surpassed him! I don't imagine there's anyone who doesn't accept this victory as solidly his! So that'll be enough, right?! It's over, right, Mr. Kanami, sir?! The Firstmoon Allies General Knights Ball goes to Aikawa Kanamiiiiii!!!"

The cheers celebrating Lorwen didn't abate, but the cheering for me intensified.

“Now then, I’d like to head inside to interview our victor! The awards ceremony will be after the interview, so please, ladies and gentlemen, don’t go anywhere!”

I watched the presenter, who had escaped to the stands, dash to enter the barrier. Reaper was motionless, still reeling from Lorwen’s farewell.

“You okay, Reaper?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just out of magic energy. How about you, mister?”

“I’m at my limit both magic energy-and staminawise. I feel really weak right now.”

I’d pushed past my limits to squeeze out the strength to swing my sword and cast my spells, and now I was sore from head to toe. Despite that, I didn’t dispel *Dimension*, leaving it at minimum capacity. I’d been caught off guard after winning a battle so many times I didn’t want to count, so I used *Dimension* to probe the stadium. Beyond the audience’s cheers, I could see that various people were starting to take action to further their designs.

“Looks like now’s no time to be bitching and moaning. We’re up to our necks in grown-ups acting real funny...” Picking up on my unease, Reaper had likewise started scanning the vicinity for enemies with *Dimension*.

“Yeah, let’s beat it. First, let’s call everybody here.”

Through my Thought Streams, I counted the number of foes while simultaneously contemplating how to escape. First, we had the Walker Clan, whom I’d antagonized just the day before. They doubtless meant me harm. Then there were the Seven Celestial Knights of Whoseyards, who were probably our enemies as long as Lastiara and Dia were with us. There was a weirdly large number of folks who had to do with Whoseyards in the venue.

Among the knights and priests of that nation was a man named Pheydelt, who had been in charge during the Festival of the Blessed Birth. He was another person to be wary of. Also troublesome were all the adventurers who were confident enough to try capturing the fugitives of Lastiara’s group to cash in their bounties, and I would be best served assuming a handful of guilds would become enemies as well, if and when Vart or Whoseyards knocked on their

doors. And I most likely ought to be on my toes around the Epic Seeker folks who were acquaintances of Palinchron; I couldn't discount the possibility of counterplots based on his instructions, especially considering Rayle Thenks had been present during my brainwashing process.

As I analyzed the threats in the stands, *Dimension* detected a shockingly tremendous swell in magic energy. Since it hadn't originated within the stadium, I'd been slow to sense it.

There he was, standing in place atop the spired outer wall surrounding the arena. He was drawing a magic circle on the rampart, reinforcing it with a bounty of magic gems. The moment I laid my eyes on it, every one of those gems burst open, and Liner Hellvilleshine flew into the air, propelled by the wind that had been compressed inside the gems. The might of those winds augmented his jumping ability, turning him into a human cannonball.

"*Ix Wynd!*" he incanted, adding his own spell on top of it all. The wind spell that allowed him to fly about freely was converted into yet more propulsive power, reaching absolutely lethal speeds. It was like he was strapped to a fighter jet; pain had to be stabbing him everywhere, but he kept glaring our way without so much as a grimace. Wait, where was he glaring?

"Reaper! Duck!"

"Huh?!"

I thought that if anyone, he'd attack either me or Lastiara, but he wasn't looking at either of us. Since I didn't know his target, I extended my sword via Magic Power Freezing to protect Reaper.

In response, Liner lengthened his own blade. He wasn't using the Magic Energy Materialization skill. If I had to say, it wasn't unlike my Magic Power Freezing technique, because he was using wind-element magic energy to stretch out his blade. If I were to give the skill a name, it would have been something along the lines of Magic Energy Windblade-ification. Liner's sword, Rukh Bringer, sliced through the barrier with ease, allowing him access inside. He landed in a spot situated away from where Reaper and I were, unleashing more wind magic at the same time.

"*Wynd!*"

He'd broken his fall using that spell, bouncing up like a rubber ball. Then he took the sword. He wasn't after us. He was after Lorwen, the Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan—the Guardian's magic gem.

"Hold on, Liner!" I stammered. "Give that sword back! It's dangerous!"

"Mr. Lorwen said he'd teach me the blade! So I'll be taking this in exchange for everything he never got to teach me!"

Still propelled by his wind magic, he fled in the opposite direction from which he'd entered, slicing open another tear in the barrier and barreling into a corner of the stands.

One of the spectators chuckled. "Heh heh heh, that's a knight of Hellvilleshine for you... It's a disgrace those barbarians got the jump on us twice, but now we're evening the score!"

The man was where Liner had bounded to, and I'd seen him before at the grand cathedral of Whoseyards. It was Pheydelt. He'd been behind the plan to effectively kill Lastiara, and he was getting in our way now, of all times. Perhaps he was the puppetmaster manipulating the younger man.

"Liner!" I shouted as I moved to whip my pain-racked body into action. Then I thought twice. I couldn't leave Reaper alone in this situation. We were both in a state of total exhaustion, so splitting up our fighting power wouldn't be very wise. Even more to the point, if I flew into action, we'd no longer be able to carry out the escape plan that I'd hammered out with Lastiara beforehand.

While I stood there indecisively, the situation was shifting dynamically. I could barely believe it when Dia, who was in the stands, ran down the aisle in pursuit of Liner without a moment's hesitation.

"Hey, you! Over there! That's mine and Sieg's! Don't run off with it! *Flame Arrow!*"

It wasn't the fearsome, searing laser that was his previous *Flame Arrow*; this iteration of the fire spell accounted for the normal citizens in the area. Liner jumped out of the way, but Snow and Lastiara were lying in wait where he ended up. It seemed they'd started running when Dia had. Surrounded by my friends and allies, Liner seethed.

“You wanna fight, huh, ‘goddess among us’?!” he barked, glaring at Lastiara. His animosity toward her was especially intense. Yet she had zero animosity for him whatsoever. In fact, she looked more troubled than anything else.

“Actually, I, uh, just figured I had to follow Dia and Snow when they suddenly bolted. I don’t particularly want to fight, so...”

Apparently, Lastiara was helping out simply because she’d been unable to stop Dia from rushing off, even though the plan had been for her to take everyone into the barrier to join back up with me.

“Me, I’m, uh...I’m just here for...brownie points?” offered Snow.

Snow, Snow, Snow. What’re you saying*, buddy?*

I spotted Ms. Sera and Maria a bit farther away. They too were on the move. From the look of it, even though they knew they needed to be regrouping with me, they couldn’t leave Dia to his rampaging. Things were going terribly wrong. Thanks to Liner’s surprise attack, chaos was beginning to engulf the stands. In addition, each individual group of people was starting to act behind the veil of secrecy, working to further their respective agendas. If somebody picked a fight, there was a chance it would devolve into a free-for-all, and I wanted to avert that possibility.

The presenter was of the same mind as me. “Wait, hold on, wait, please stop! You absolutely mustn’t fight in the stands! Yes, the Brawl may be over, but surely you remember fights between any and all spectators and/or participants remain forbidden until they leave the Huura?! The tournament sentries will be the ones to capture that young boy knight, so kindly refrain from any such activities!”

Liner had broken the rules, and the presenter announced that he would be dealt with accordingly. The sentries who had been waiting in the stands sprang into action, but the contingent of knights from Whoseyards blocked their way, preventing them from getting closer to Liner.

“I truly apologize for our mid-tournament breach of decorum!” shouted Pheydelt. “But this is the avid wish of the Church of Levahn! I implore you, please let that young knight, Liner Hellvilleshine, pass! The senate of Whoseyards proper has directed us to secure the Guardian Lorwen Arrace’s

magic gem, so if you have any objections, I'd like you to direct them there!"

"The senate?! Even so, what's against the rules is against the rules! You won't get away with doing as you please! Uh, they won't, right?!" Though this development had certainly taken him by surprise, the presenter didn't cave. In the face of the authority of a world power, however, he had to check with his superiors.

I looked in on Brawl management through *Dimension*, and they were confused and dismayed. On the one hand, they wanted to avoid conflicts between their group and the nations of the Alliance wherever possible. On the other hand, overlooking flagrant rules violations had implications for Brawls to come. After a moment of hesitation, their answer was no.

"I... I knew it! No matter the organization, political power has no sway in Valhuura! Ladies and gentlemen of the Guard, please apprehend that knight! We'll arrest any who threaten to run riot as well!"

That decision came as a relief. The worst-case scenario had been avoided. Yet neither Pheydelt nor his knights let that perturb them. They had probably intended to carry out their orders regardless, permission be damned. Clearly, Lorwen's magic gem was just that important to the mainland senate of Whoseyards. The sentries sidled up to the Whoseyards knights, and in conjunction with that, Lastiara's group made to press in on Liner. He watched them come for him with an unruffled look.

"You can glare at me all you like, but...are you lot sure you've got that sorta time?"

He pointed at the knights near Lastiara using his sword. Among them were some who were clearly much stronger than their fellows.

Lastiara groaned. "Ack! The Celestials are here too!"

Three of the Celestial Knights were mixed in with the contingent that Pheydelt set into motion. Ms. Pelsiona, the Head Knight, was at the front, accompanied by the magic specialist and the gray-haired knight I had come across during the fight at the cathedral.

The gray-haired one, Mr. Hopes, laughed. "Ha ha! Guess it's cause of how

suddenly everything's happening, but they got us surrounded. Wonder if they'll let us be? Seeing as we're working to grant *another* fervent wish of Whoseyards. Hey, Head Knight, I don't recognize any o' these guys. Who *are* these people?"

"The mainland must've dispatched them. They've got nothing to do with the Celestial Knights. Our priority is taking back our lady and Her Grace the Apostle. For now, focus on blending in with the crowd and snatching them."

"You got it. If we can knock those two unconscious, that's mission complete for us. Nice and simple."

"Hold on, wait!" stammered Lastiara, visibly vexed. "I'll humor you guys later, so time out!"

Mr. Hopes just laughed louder. "Ha ha ha! I dunno, you seem pretty vulnerable at the moment, so this old man's thinking if we attack now, we can make something happen, you feel me?"

"Ugh! You're as irritating as ever, Hopes!"

"Yeah, I know. A talentless old-timer like me can't help but fight dirty. Forgive me, milady."

The Celestials drew their swords. Their targets, Lastiara and Dia, braced themselves for battle. Worse yet, that wasn't the only problem that had arisen in the stands. Snow was the active target of a different faction altogether. Taking advantage of the confusion, Glenn and the Walker Clan head were now standing in front of her.

"Mother...Glenn..."

"Ms. Snow. Wherever your trusty knight is, he isn't by your side," her so-called mother replied. "Heh heh. We simply *had* to make use of this state of affairs, you'll agree. You belong to me, little lady. You are, without a doubt, mine to have." She bade the Walker Clan elites waiting in the wings to unsheathe their blades.

All in all, my allies hadn't managed to encircle Liner, instead getting encircled themselves. Seeing that, Liner decided to leave his foes to those other forces and abscond.

“Good...now I can just take the sword and run—”

A wind blade flew into the ground where he was standing.

“Not so fast! What on earth do you think you’re doing, mister?!” shouted the caster of that spell. It was Franrühle Hellvilleshine.

“Please don’t come my way, sister! The Celestial Knights are supposed to be going after the Living Goddess, right?! How many times do I need to tell you not to let your personal feelings overtake your job?! If you just read the room, you’d understand what’s going on, wouldn’t you?! I’m on a separate mission I received from the senate!”

But Franrühle stood her ground, blocking his escape route and standing firm and imposing. “I do understand! That’s why I’m here! I’m standing here not as one of the Celestial Knights, but as Franrühle Hellvilleshine! Liner, you haven’t told me one goshdarn thing! If you mean to go on ahead, don’t hide behind your mission! Persuade me using your own words! Otherwise, I won’t overlook your two-faced behavior!”

“Urgh! Why’ve you always gotta be such a blockhead...”

Another girl made her move while the siblings bickered. “You’re wide open! You’re always so soft on people in your circle!” Raggie’s Magic Energy Materialization-lengthened blade deftly struck the hilt of the sword Liner had been holding, knocking it out of his hands to be subsequently swiped up by her.

“Ms. Ragne?!” he stammered. “Dammit! You’re as sneaky as ever! You’re one of the Celestial Knights too, for heaven’s sake!”

“Nah, see, I defied orders in the past, so they left me out of the recapture operation over there. Right now, I’m just little ol’ Ragne Kyquora, friend of Franny. If you want me to give this back, it’s time you speak with your sister, Liner.”

“What, here?! Now?!”

The flash points that Liner’s attack had created were igniting, swords being unsheathed one after another in the seating area where such quarrels were forbidden. There were so many that the venue sentries didn’t know where to start. Amid that fracas, Raggie was staring at the steel of Lorwen, Treasured

Blade of the Arrace Clan.

“So this is the magic sword of the Thief of Earth’s Essence, huh? Wow...”

I’d never seen that look on her face before. One glance and I could tell that the sword’s magnificence had her spellbound. She was caressing the tip with her finger, with an expression like she’d just met the person of her dreams. My Responsiveness skill was blaring in my head like a klaxon, screaming that this absolutely could not stand. I was fine handing the magic gem to anybody besides her, but my intuition insisted that come what may, I couldn’t allow Ragne Kyquora to have it.

Spurred by that premonition, I decided to act. I couldn’t just stand there and watch in any case. Not after the situation had gotten this messy. I had no choice but to move and defend Reaper at the same time.

“Reaper, we’re moving! Let’s help the gang out for the time being!”

“O-Okay!”

We headed for the hole that Liner had torn into the barrier, but a melodious voice stopped us in our tracks.

“You don’t need to do that. Let me pay back the debt I owe you, Kanami. It’s your turn to rest,” said the hunk with the blond locks—Elmirahd Siddark. Yet again, he’d inferred my intentions. “*Water Wire.”*

Still in the stands, he fired a water spell without reservation. A cord of water wound its way toward Raggie, who was too enchanted by the sword to react quickly. While she was able to dodge the water, she didn’t notice Elmirahd approaching from behind before it was too late, and he caught her unawares like she had done to Liner, snatching the sword away from her.

“Augh!” shouted Liner. “He took it from *you*, Ms. Ragne!”

Yet he couldn’t move on account of his sister and her apparent readiness to die staving him off.

“No, I... You don’t understand,” said Raggie, looking for an excuse. “That was just...”

Elmirahd shrugged. “Where’s the elegance, knight of Whoseyards? You do

realize this is unprecedented, don't you? Did you lot maybe not watch the match? Kanami the hero and Lorwen the Blademaster staked their swords on their battle, and the hero won. And so, this blade is Kanami's now. That you would steal the victor's spoils has left me deeply unimpressed."

The Whoseyards knights attacked the calm and composed Elmirahd from behind, but he used his sword and magic to dodge them with graceful ease, almost dancing through the stands before joining back up with the members of his guild, Supreme. A standoff began between the knights of Whoseyards and the knights of Laoravia.

"Well, well, I see now how badly the fine folks of Whoseyards want this sword... You're so enamored that the *senate on the mainland* saw fit to make a move. Yet if I remember correctly, this doesn't belong to Whoseyards. Lorwen Arrace bestowed it upon Aikawa Kanami, both of whom are denizens of Laoravia. Hmm... It's funny; I can't think of one reason to cede this to Whoseyards."

With that, he distanced himself from his opponents and headed for Snow.

"Lord Siddark, what are you *doing?*" the head of the Walker Clan asked as Elmirahd was on the move. "You need to focus solely on taking back your fiancée."

"No, I'm afraid you're incorrect, Honored Head of the Walker Clan. In order to take back my fiancée, I would have had to defeat that there hero, but much to my chagrin, he bested me in a public duel. At the very least, I can't lay a hand on the hero or my fiancée until such time as the Brawl is over and we've left Valhuura. It would be far too unseemly."

He brazenly passed through the Walker Clan siege and stood beside Snow, who was bewildered, unable to fully comprehend his intentions.

"Needless to say," he continued, ignoring how baffled everyone was, "*I* haven't earned this beauty of a sword either. I suppose that for now, I can but use it to curry favor with my betrothed."

With that, he handed the sword to Snow. Liner and Pheydelt, who were held up in the distance, gasped.

Snow took the sword. “Th-Thank you...El...”

“Don’t mention it. I’m just trying to preserve the sanctity of the duel. Now, go return it to its rightful bearer by your own hand. That’s what’ll make for a fitting end to this event.”

She nodded in agreement, lifting the sword up and shouting, “Lady Diaaaa! I have the sword! I’m the one who took it back! Me, Snow!”

“Are you stupid, Snow?! I obviously saw the whole thing from beginning to end! *He’s* the one who got it back! The snooty snob over there!”

“Wait, huh?! Are you telling me I can’t take the credit?!”

Elmirahd sighed. “No, Snow, don’t report it to *her...*”

He’d immaculately set the stage for her, and she’d ruined his lay-up. Still, thanks to him, Dia and the rest no longer had a reason to rush off now that they could concentrate on escaping.

“Thank you, Elmirahd!” I said. “You’re the best! And you can bet I’ll return the favor one of these days!”

He turned at the waist to face me and smiled. As I thanked the stars for my strange friendship with him, I issued instructions to my scattered allies.

“Snow! Come over here with the sword! Dia, Lastiara! Let’s regroup for the time being!”

Snow nodded and attempted to bring the sword to me, but naturally, the fierce fighters of the Walker Clan blocked her path.

“Do you honestly believe you can get there?!”

Elmirahd stepped before them. “Heh. You have that backward, Honored Head. Do you people honestly believe you can reach Snow? Supreme has decided to admonish the Walker Clan for taking advantage of this chaos and losing their right minds. As another noble house, we cannot overlook such infamy.”

A great many of the guild’s elites cut in, joining their guildmaster.

“You who’re a great noble house in name only—you think you rival the

Walker Clan?! Mr. Glenn, what are you doing standing there?! Capture Ms. Snow already!”

The large cadre of fighters waited behind the head of the clan, as she’d ordered their representative, Glenn Walker, former holder of the title “the strongest,” to do the deed. Yet Mr. Glenn didn’t even look at her. Instead, he bowed his head to Elmirahd.

“Lord Siddark, you have my thanks. I welcome this development.” Then, he spoke to the aging man standing next to him: Fenrir Arrace. If not for Lorwen, he would still be the one they called the Blademaster. “It seems Ms. Snow will be okay, so please, Mr. Fenrir, the Apostle is all yours, just as planned.”

“Yep, be back soon.”

“I think I’ll give Lasty a hand.”

With that, Mr. Glenn and Fenrir Arrace stepped away.

“Mr. Glenn?! I knew it! You’re—”

Mr. Glenn shook free of the Walker Clan head and dashed toward Lastiara’s position. Fenrir Arrace, meanwhile, headed for Dia’s position.

Fenrir stood beside Dia. “Hey there, Sithy. I see you’re being dumb as always.”

“The Arrace old-timer... You gonna get in my way again?”

“No, not this time. Back at the cathedral, I didn’t really know what was going on with you, so I tried to stop you, but...this time, I get the picture. And I won’t lose sight of what I oughta do.”

He drew his sword in Dia’s defense, pointing it at the foes who would capture him. His aura of intimidation was overwhelming. Here he was, past the age he should be swinging a sword, yet he’d given Lorwen a run for his money. The knights encircling them shuddered in fear, loosening their siege in the face of a single old man.

“Blademaster, sir...or rather, Lord Arrace...I don’t believe it. You would hinder Whoseyards?”

“After our match, my esteemed ancestor requested this of me, you see. Besides, I’m rather partial to the little lady on a personal level. Now I’m going to

assist Aikawa Kanami and his allies with all my might.”

Several knights entered Fenrir’s range of attack. True to his word, he counterattacked without holding back, and the blades in their hands were sliced in two at a speed so blistering that only Lorwen or I could possibly have blocked it. Holding his sword pointing toward his opponent’s eyes, he abjured, “My name is Fenrir Arrace. As current head of the Arrace Clan, I am the blade that cleaveth magic. As a proud descendant of Blademaster Lorwen, I do stand before ye. E’en should ten thousand men of valor come face me, ye shall not pass.”

Unlike Lorwen’s, his oaths had an august, regal air to them. In the face of his sheer gravitas, many of the knights drew back in trepidation. Then, not far off, Mr. Glenn reached Lastiara.

“So, Glenn, what’s the deal?” asked Lastiara bluntly.

“I’ve handed Kanami my title of ‘the strongest,’ and Ms. Snow seems to be in safe hands as well, so I’ve got nothing else to do. Let me back you up, Lasty.”

“All right, cool! Then fight the Celestial Knights over there and all our pursuers from Whoseyards, thanks!”

“Ha ha, you never change. Don’t worry, I’ll do as you ask. I’ll take responsibility and hold them all back for you.”

With a wry smile, Glenn retrieved his weapons from inside the breast of his clothes. He was a dagger wielder, a rarity in the Alliance. Holding a handful of daggers with strings attached to them, he assumed a distinctive battle stance.

“Appearances aside, they did call me the strongest for a time. I can do that much with aplomb.” *That much*, he said. Referring to all of the Whoseyards knights there as a whole. His eyes still on those surrounding them, he said one last thing to Lastiara. “In exchange, could I ask you to look after Ms. Snow from now on?”

“’Kay, got it.”

Lastiara left it all to Mr. Glenn and made to leave. The Celestial Knights moved to stop her, of course, but Mr. Glenn’s dagger throws thwarted their attempt. Lastiara made a giant leap away, but only after checking to see that the battle

had started. As she bounded across the spectator stands, she called out to her comrades, “Dia! Snow! Grab on! I’ll fling you!”

She wrapped Dia in her right arm, then grabbed Snow by the neck before leaping over the heads of a sea of people. Noting they were now safe, I called out to Maria and Ms. Sera, who’d been surveying goings-on from afar.

“Ms. Sera, come here and bring Maria with you!”

“Yes, I think I will!”

She shifted into her wolf form and dashed through the stands with Maria on her back. All of my allies had now joined me in the arena. The sight of Lastiara and Ms. Sera leaving so many soldiers in their dust reminded me of when we’d whisked Lastiara away from the cathedral. Back then, I’d had few real friends. I’d been so pressed for help that I’d had no choice but to rely on a shady bastard like Palinchron. Moreover, the strongest and the Blademaster, Mr. Glenn and Fenrir Arrace, had been on the opposing side. But not so today. Today, I was surrounded by nothing but trusted friends.

Before long, Lastiara landed next to me with Snow and Dia in tow, soon followed by Ms. Sera carrying Maria. Naturally, more than a few knights and soldiers tried to enter the arena after them, but even more of my friends—the folks from Epic Seeker—acted like a wall and prevented their passage, commanded by Submaster Rayle Thenks.

After Mr. Rayle gave the members their instructions, he turned to address me. “Looks like you’ve overcome the trials, son. The trials of the Thief of Earth’s Essence *and* the Thief of Darkness’s Essence...”

A pause. “Yes,” I answered curtly.

When Palinchron had cast his spells on me, this man had been there. He was probably the one with the deepest connection to Palinchron out of anyone here. Yet that same man now bore the kindest look in his eyes out of anyone here, staring at me and Maria as he confessed his inner sentiments.

“To be frank, I didn’t think you two had what it took. I reckoned that while you had talent, your hearts were weak. I thought that if given a comfortable world of convenience, you’d choose the easy life. Or no...maybe I was just

hoping that was the case."

"No, you're right. My heart *is* weak. I'm sure that on my own power, I wouldn't have been able to break free. You're one of the people I have to thank for my coming this far." I bowed.

That took him aback. "Do you bear no grudge against me?"

He'd perhaps come here knowing that I might kill him then and there. He might even have accepted that end.

"I'd be lying if I said I don't resent you. That said, you're different from Palinchron. Even when you had me restrained, you were concerned about my physical well-being. And after I lost my memories, you worked very hard for my sake. I remember it well. You definitely wanted me and Maria to be happy."

"Ha, ha ha. That could all have been an act, you know?"

"That's okay. At the end of the day, when all is said and done, Epic Seeker needs you. If I knock you out now, the guild I put so much effort into making famous would collapse."

That, I could be absolutely sure of. After all, not only was their guildmaster inexperienced, the two submasters besides Mr. Rayle were the entirely unmotivated Snow...and *Palinchron.* It was thanks to Mr. Rayle that the guild was functioning as well as it was. I respected and admired him from the bottom of my heart.

"I can't hold a candle to ya," he blurted under his breath. Then he set himself to fulfilling his oath to me, a serious look on his face. "You've defeated the Thief of Earth's Essence, and how. And you have the magic gem that serves as proof as well. I'll tell you everything I know, just as promised."

I figured he wasn't trying to deceive me. Neither he nor Palinchron lied when it came to quid pro quo deals like these, so I listened to him, a serious look on my face too.

"If you're looking to chase after him, then you'll have to search for him on the continent to the west—the mainland. Palinchron was plotting to foster you as a spark for conflict. Since he's the secretive sort, I can't say I know too much, but I'm pretty sure that the more he fuels a fire, the happier he is. If you intend to

pursue him, do be careful.”

Mr. Rayle was ostensibly in with Palinchron, yet he was wishing me well on my journeys as though he was on our side.

“You are friends with Palinchron, right, Mr. Rayle?”

“That’s right, I am, so don’t swallow what I’m saying wholesale. I’ll be happy if you just put it in a corner of your mind.”

“Why’s a good guy like you with a bastard like—”

“Our lives are linked at this point. He’s a fiendish, nasty, no-good liar...but he’s also my friend...despite his shortcomings.”

They must have had quite a history together from an early age, one I wasn’t privy to. I had no choice but to take that as my answer; I’d gotten my reward already, so it was time to end this conversation. All that was left was to tie up the loose ends regarding my life in Laoravia. I faced the guild members who were protecting me and gave them my final goodbye.

“Everybody, listen up, please! As your guildmaster, I make the following declaration! At this moment in time, Snow Walker and I hereby announce our departure from the guild!”

As selfish as it was of me, I had to make that declaration nonetheless. I’d only been a part of Epic Seeker due to my false memories, and in effect, that meant I’d been lying to them, however unintentionally. The true me wasn’t the type to ever be spending his days in a guild.

“I leave everything guild-related to Mr. Rayle, Ms. Tayly, and Mr. Vohlzark! You three will make an ideal trio of submasters. As for the guildmaster, you’ll go back to not having one. Probably forever. A hero who’s worthy of being your guildmaster doesn’t exist, no matter how hard you look. I’d bet you anything they don’t!”

I braced myself for jeers and boos, but their reactions were quite placid. Mr. Vohlzark was the first to respond.

“Don’t look so down in the dumps, master. You never *wanted* to be guildmaster, right? You were just hoodwinked by Palinchron. Even we know

that much now. Palinchron's the one at fault, for the most part, so don't worry about us. Just go."

It looked as though they'd seen this coming. Apparently, the guild members understood the situation after hearing my screams in the semifinals. They were wearing the same look Mr. Vohlzark was. They proceeded to leave me with their own words of parting, each one of them referring to me as "master" to the end...

"See ya, master. Don't fret it; all of the promising young candidates our scumbag of a submaster brought in left the guild eventually. We all figured you would too, honestly."

"Take care of the cutest of our submasters for us, okay, master? If you make her cry, you'll have to answer to me. Also, if you ever return to Laoravia, make sure to pay us at Epic Seeker a visit. This time around, I'll manage to get a scratch on ya, just you wait."

"Did you hear how much you bitched and moaned? Yeah, you're no ideal hero. You've got no real place here. That's how the cookie crumbles, right? But thanks anyway. The days you were around weren't bad. And you got to dream a little about being the sorta hero we've been looking for."

The folks of Epic Seeker were a strange lot even when they were saying goodbye. They all admitted that while they'd looked up to a hero figure like me, they knew there was no way somebody of my caliber would stay with them forever. Every one of them saw me off with a lovely look on their face, and that was all it took to put me on the verge of tears.

I likewise bade them goodbye with a smile. "I owe you guys so much! Please continue to work for the people, Epic Seeker!" I said as I crafted a spell. I poured my remaining magic energy into the air, causing it to snow.

Upon seeing me get covered in flecks of white, the presenter, who was held in place by the massive crowd, shouted, "Hold on, what? Mr. Kanami, don't tell me you plan to flee?! What about the interview?! The award ceremony?! There're still so many commemorative events for you to attend!"

"Uh...sorry, but I'm not doing any of that."

“You’re joking! Without you and your associates around, we’ll be down a champion, a runner-up, *and* the semifinalists!”

“Well, uh, it pains me to hear that, but...”

“You’re killing me here! It’s a lethal blow to management!”

While I was engaging in my final back-and-forth with the presenter, everybody who’d been duking it out in the stands entered the arena as well. I made a declaration to the Walker Clan and its agents as they approached.

“Accept my apologies—I’m taking Snow with me! She said she wants to be out in the world, and I want to make that happen for her!”

Snow, who was beside me, bowed her head. “I’ll see you later, everyone. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me!”

It wasn’t the Walker Clan she bowed to. It was the Epic Seeker gang. Ms. Tayly spoke for the whole guild when she said, “Take care, Snow.”

In the back, Mr. Vohlzark was waving wordlessly with his back turned. Snow waved back with a big smile as the members gave her a warm and genial goodbye.

My next declaration was for the Whoseyards people’s ears.

“I’m taking Lastiara and Dia with me too, of course! They’re not your tools or your puppets! They’re my friends!”

The Celestial Knights acknowledged that the former strongest, Mr. Glenn, had them beat, so they’d stopped trying. In fact, Raggie was waving at us with a very sunny expression, the little scamp. Their hearts hadn’t been in their work. The only people who didn’t know when to give up were Pheydelt and the others who’d come here on orders from their nation’s senate. I could hear them shouting and clamoring in the distance, but because of Fenrir Arrace and Mr. Glenn, they couldn’t so much as enter the arena.

Lastly, I addressed the Celestial Knight, who was a moderate distance away. “Liner! We’re going after Palinchron! If you still want your vengeance, come chase us on the mainland! Let’s settle things there!”

Locked in place the whole time due to his sister’s interference, Liner had a

bitter look on his face.

All right, I've got nothing else to say, really. Just words of thanks.

I made it snow, generating a largish *Connection* portal within the blizzard. Then, as I opened the gateway, I shouted for all the spectators to hear, loud enough to rival the magic mic's volume. "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention! Goodbye, everyone, and thank you so much for all your support!"

The crowd erupted in echoing cheers. They'd enjoyed watching the postmatch scuffles too, and it appeared the conclusion to this year's unprecedented Brawl had left them satisfied. Amid the most thunderous applause of the day, we disappeared into the snow.

"Let's meet again one day!!!" I shouted.

With that, we passed through the *Connection* door, and so I, Reaper, Lastiara, Dia, Maria, Snow, and Ms. Sera vanished from Valhuura. Needless to say, the door itself also vanished, preventing anyone from chasing us. Our escape was a total success.

Thus did our long and lengthy Brawl conclude, and I'd cleared some more of the Dungeon's trials on top of that. Moreover, this wasn't any old victory. We weren't missing a single person...and best of all, we'd all overcome the challenge with smiles on our faces. What sweeter victory could there be?

Chapter 5: Epilogue

Located at the southern end of the Dungeon Alliance, Greeard was the only one of the five nations that bordered the sea. Having escaped the grand theater-ship *Valhuura* through *Connection*, we visited one of Greeard's many ports. A considerable number of boats were floating on the pitch-black sea in neat lines, rocking as the waves splashed against them. It was a night of deep quiet. Now that the Brawl was over, I had no doubt people were boisterously celebrating on the river, and that thought made this place feel all the more peaceful.

Lastiara's voice resounded in the silence. "So? What'll it be? You'll give us the boat now, right?"

I was standing behind her, and we were currently speaking with a port merchant. Since we were talking in a dark and quiet port, if I didn't know better I'd think he was engaged in smuggling.

Actually, I guess he might legit be a smuggler.

I turned to look at one of the ships floating behind me. It wasn't that big, but such an excess of magic gems adorned it that I could tell how high-class it was at a glance. Our goal at present was to procure that vessel. As our first move after fleeing to Greeard, we'd intended to board any old voyage out of there, but a visibly adventure-high Lastiara had suggested we buy our own ship, arguing that if we were naive enough to take to the sea on an established voyage, we'd be asking for tons of pursuers.

She had a point, and it wasn't a bad idea to have a ship in case it would serve us in the future. If installing a *Connection* portal aboard a ship proved possible, exploring the Dungeon during sea transit would be a cinch. I'd thought Lastiara simply wanted to have her own boat, but in the end, the whole party agreed it made sense, so we'd hidden in Greeard until the middle of the night in order to buy one in a not-so-normal way.

Now that I think about it, yeah, he's definitely a smuggler.

The merchant who owned the ship looked at the contents of Lastiara's open coin bag and gulped. "Uh, wow, I'm surprised. How on earth did you manage that so fast?"

"We earned a bit of scratch. You told me you'd let me have it if I paid for it on the spot, right? We're offering twice the market price with extra on top. No reason to say no, surely?"

Her tone was a tad threatening, but we were between a rock and a hard place, so I wasn't going to object to her methods. I was totally exhausted from how Lastiara had made me "earn a bit of scratch." I never could have guessed that after Lorwen's match, I'd be forced to hit a casino and told to use Responsiveness there.

"Sure, that won't be an issue, but let me warn you, seven people won't be enough to manage that ship."

"It's *because* there are only seven of us that we picked it. It's the kind where as long as you have the magic energy, it'll work, right?"

"Yes, that's true, but you should understand this thing's not fuel efficient. We're talking the magic energy of hundreds of mages for one voyage. That's why it's so dirt cheap."

The merchant had decided that we were customers he'd like to keep because of the extra money we were paying, so he was honest about the ship being a dud. But Lastiara gleefully jumped at the offer; she'd been staring like a little kid craving a shiny new toy at this dusty jalopy that was only useful in specific circumstances, and it was far too late to reverse course now. I'd have liked a safer ship powered mainly by wind rather than one that could explode at any moment, but there was no stopping her momentum.

As far as I could see via *Dimension*, the ship's construction was nothing short of impressive, but at the same time, there were more sources of fire that could easily burst than on a normal vessel. The usage of high-cost magic gems made things convenient, yes, but they came with their risks too. And when the four bombs on legs that were Dia, Lastiara, Maria, and Snow boarded that magic gem-laden liner... Let's just say I couldn't help feeling a bit antsy. It reminded me of that high-end house that had gone up in flames, and I was determined to

avoid a similar fate here. I wouldn't repeat my past mistakes. Unlike that terrible day, I had skills I could rely on, and I was sure we could make this work. Granted, I got the feeling my highest-level skill, Responsiveness, was telling me that that was too much to hope for, but even so, I inwardly vowed over and over again that I would never give in to fate.

"Cool, so it's a deal," said Lastiara. "That's your cue, Dia. Go, go, go."

She was making Dia head over after hearing that magic energy was needed. He obliged, drawing closer to the ship.

"Er, so do I just touch the boat and send magic energy into it?"

"Yep. Please do. You're the one with the most out of all of us."

"Gotcha. All right, here goes."

Dia's colossal amounts of magic energy poured into the ship, the aftershock causing the waves to billow and roll, and the ship began to glow.

"Wh-What the—?!" The merchant was this close to shrieking. Dia's magic energy was so vast that its wave surge alone was enough to make an ordinary person fall on their backside, but the man maintained his merchant's pride and managed to keep from squealing.

"See?" said Lastiara, indicating the ship now filled with energy at full capacity. "We'll be okay."

The merchant was speechless. Everything beggared belief, from the small fortune she'd handed him to the sheer amount of magic energy our petite mage had just emitted. He was having trouble processing it all. Lastiara interpreted his state of blank amazement as a sign that the deal was done.

"Kanami, Reapy, were you able to read the documents?" she asked us, just about ready to dash off into the blue yonder.

"Reaper and I both finished reading them. I know the specs of the ship now too. We can probably hack it, the seven of us."

"Yeah, I get the gist!" said Reaper. "Looks fun!"

While Lastiara was talking with the merchant, Reaper and I were reading through the thick infobooks. Dimensional mages could use *Dimension* to speed-

read, which came in handy in situations like these.

“Sweet, okay! The *Connection* portal’s aboard and the supplies are too! All preparations are complete! Here, your money!” Lastiara forced the bag of coins into the merchant’s hands and headed for the ship with a spring in her step. “All right, everybody, come aboard!”

“Uh, right!” said Ms. Sera and Snow, who acceded to Lastiara’s feverish enthusiasm.

It was the middle of the night. Couldn’t they be quiet about it? And why board the ship from the side like that when there was a perfectly good ladder? While grumbling about my friends’ questionable manners in my heart, I gave the merchant a proper bow and took my time boarding—using the ladder, of course.

After everyone had gathered on the deck, Lastiara declared, “Now then, let’s call this ship the *Living Legend!* Sounds good, right?!”

“The *Living Legend*?”

Talk about bombastic. If you asked me, a blustery name like that wasn’t suited for a ship that we’d be riding to different countries in the days to come. But in the face of Lastiara’s cheery smile, I missed my chance to object. Snow was applauding hammily while Ms. Sera’s eyes were shooting daggers at me.

“You knave. Do you have anything to say about milady’s sense for naming things?” she demanded.

“No, no complaints here...”

Upon reflection, I was in no position to be castigating anybody’s tastes, since I’d been giving my own spells similarly corny names. I ignored Lastiara as she leaned intrepidly over the prow, focusing on preparing the ship for departure.

“Reaper, I’m sure you’ll know what I’m talking about—could you go fire up the auxiliary power generators a sec? I’ll be here raising the anchor and unfurling the sails and stuff.”

“’Kay, got it. Back in a second.”

Reaper deployed her own *Dimension* and walked into the ship with

confidence. The *Living Legend* was built with a large quantity of magic gems and didn't need to rely on the wind or waves to move. Reaper had learned that when she'd read through the materials.

I did my part, climbing the mast and unfurling the sails. This ship wasn't a full-fledged sailing vessel, so it didn't have many sails, but it was still difficult for an amateur like me. By the time Reaper returned, I still wasn't finished preparing the ship. She and I, having memorized all of the materials, gave each other instructions, and after some time, we finally managed to get the ship good and ready. Little by little, the *Living Legend* started cutting through the water.

"Whoa, it's moving! It's moving! Wow!" said Lastiara. "So, this is a ship, huh?! No hero tale can go without one!"

"Wowee, big sister!" said Reaper. "It's moving across the water!"

They were the most amped up, Reaper's excitement second only to Lastiara's. Maybe they'd never seen the sea before.

"It's finally chugging along, huh? Wait, are we safe to go in this direction, though?"

"It'll be fine, Kanami. When it comes to this kinda thing, good enough's good enough!"

Classic Lastiara—she had no plan. It probably stemmed from a self-confidence backed by her general feel for things, but I could be sure that despite all that, the risks were considerable. I had no choice but to call Reaper over and unfurl a sea chart on the deck.

"Reaper, let's navigate using *Dimension* for the time being. If we take turns, we should at least be able to avoid wrecking the thing."

There was no other way but to brute-force a resolution to the problem with magic. If we steered along the shore, we'd most likely be able to manage it even with our lack of navigational skills.

We continually changed the direction of the ship while consulting with Reaper, eventually managing to calculate a course to the mainland and succeeding in stabilizing the voyage, after which we sat at a large table at the center of the deck for a nice breather.

Lastiara, Dia, Maria, Snow, Reaper, and Ms. Sera. I had so many allies I could count on. Up until now, I'd only ever scraped together parties of, at most, three people, which was all the more reason my current party of seven could only be described as a spectacular sight. I looked around at everyone's faces.

"Guys, our eyes are on the mainland. I feel like hunting down Palinchron there," I remarked concisely as leader of the group.

I was planning on using our time in transit to do some more Dungeon diving, but we'd be focusing on searching for Palinchron for the most part. Deep down, I wanted to rush to the deepest level this very second for my sister's sake, but the lout known as Palinchron would make ample use of any such impatience on my part, so I couldn't risk getting my priorities wrong anymore.

When my comrades heard Palinchron's name, they each reacted in their own way.

"We can't leave Palinchron to his own devices. He's got the magic gem of the Guardian Tida inside him."

A Guardian's magic gem. The higher-ups of Whoseyards had been so desperate to obtain one, and the gem harbored enough power to be worth those efforts. Judging from the changes in Palinchron's and Maria's stats, there could be no doubt about that. Palinchron had gained the power of a Guardian himself. Just the thought of him getting up to something somewhere we couldn't see was massively anxiety-inducing.

"No," I replied, "I'm sure that's just what I'm telling myself. In reality, I'm after him for petty revenge. I can't let him get the last laugh, so I wanna settle the score."

On the Day of the Blessed Birth, I'd fought against him and lost. This time, however, I *would* beat him. I was confident I would. The trials I'd overcome had made me stronger, and I'd learned so much from Alty, the Thief of Fire's Essence, and Lorwen, the Thief of Earth's Essence. The lessons they'd taught me had become my newfound strength.

"We'll end up having to battle him, I'm sure. And for that fight..." Plus, I had my friends. I didn't have to fight alone. I'd learned that lesson the hard way. "I want everyone to lend me their strength. I'd like you all to lend me your aid."

I earnestly asked for their help, not least in order to avoid making that mistake again.

“Yeah, no duh,” said Lastiara. “If you’d wanted to go it alone, I’d have been pissed at you.”

“I can’t let him off the hook either!” said Dia. “I’ll get him back for that wound. You can count on it!”

“Allow me to accompany you, Mr. Kanami,” said Maria with a peaceful smile. “I promised I wouldn’t leave your side no matter what.”

“Supporting each other’s what partners do, right?” said Snow, recalling yesterday’s promise. “Besides, Palinchron’s my enemy too.”

“That guy looks like a real bad person,” said Reaper. “If I feel like it, I’ll help too.”

“I’ll do it for milady’s sake,” said Ms. Sera quietly. “I’ll follow your orders for the time being.”

After watching them speak their hearts, the truth of it finally felt real. I could finally say it with my head held high: in this stupidly huge world, I was no longer all alone.

“Thanks, guys,” I found myself saying. It came out so naturally. And those words of thanks contained a confluence of sentiments. I wasn’t just happy that they were on board. There were more complicated emotions to it, and at the same time, simpler feelings as well.

Just then, as if to represent my heart’s current state, rays of light started shining onto the night sea. A new dawn. We’d spent so much time negotiating and making our preparations for departure that morning had come before we knew it, the white sun rising above the horizon and the golden daybreak illuminating the now glistening waves.

“Let’s go, everyone!” I shouted with the dawn. “It’s a straight shot to the mainland!”

And so I set sail, pushing forward on a fresh new journey alongside my companions. I would live my life in this world not as Siegfried Vizzita, but as

Aikawa Kanami, and with me were allies to depend on. RPG player that I was, I had to call this the ultimate endgame party.

The *Living Legend* ventured toward the horizon, drawing a white line through the shining, gold sea. Our destination: the mainland. And I got the feeling that the *true* adventures of Aikawa Kanami, the boy who stumbled into another world, had only just begun.

Chapter 6: End of a Dream

A dream, this was.

The dream that the young man dreamed the moment he crossed over, attended by his two best friends. After the battle, as he turned into particles and faded away, amid the brilliant white light, the chestnut-haired young man, Lorwen Arrace, saw these visions. The continuation of a dream from before.

◆◆◆◆◆

The chestnut-haired boy invited his friends to a deserted, run-down mansion, and many children came to visit, running around the estate. These were not the children of nobles, but the children of commoners you could find anywhere. In the end, the boy was never able to enter the rich kids' circle, but it seemed he'd made friends who were more wonderful than they would've been anyway.

The children were now playing pretend. Imitating knights, they simulated a sword fight using twigs, laughing and smiling as they swung their "blades" and vied for the top spot. The chestnut-haired boy was the most skilled of them, and that could come as no surprise, seeing as he swung his sword nonstop, day in and day out. If he couldn't be number one here, his efforts would be in vain. When the children saw the boy's prowess, they praised him in undisguised amazement. Their remarks were always very simple. A "That's amazing!" or "You've worked so hard."

The boy took pride in it, overjoyed his rigorous daily training hadn't been a waste of time. And among those praising him were the two with black hair, the two he was proud to call his best friends. There they were, there to see him. And that made the boy happier than anything else. He was so happy he could hardly bear it. He'd lived for this. For that was indeed the reason he'd swung his sword all this time. It was for *them*.

The boy played for hours and hours. He had so much fun playing that he lost track of time. But all things must come to an end, and the more fun one had, the shorter the time. Night fell upon the world, and one by one, his friends

started heading home, until finally, he had to part ways with his two black-haired best friends as well. But the boy had nothing left to do. His wish was fulfilled, his efforts rewarded, and he was utterly content. That was why he was able to say goodbye with the biggest smile of his life. He'd been lucky enough for what he thought was the best goodbye there could be.

After parting ways with his two best friends, the boy was left all alone in the dilapidated mansion once again. Alone in this world that was coming to an end. Black was dyeing all that he knew. The forest and sky disappeared. The shabby mansion was vanishing, its creaking hallways and cobweb-covered rooms fading to nothing. The furniture, the family crest, the sword, everything was becoming no more. Everything. It was the end, and it was now. Yet after all was said and done, the boy looked satisfied. Even all by himself, he had a blissful smile. He no longer swung his sword well into night like a boy possessed, no longer envied the nobles in their stately mansions. The boy had realized his true desire and worked through his lingering attachments. He didn't fear the end.

As the world crumbled around him, he crawled into all that remained: that old bed. Then, exhausted from all the play, he closed his eyes, smiling as he fell asleep. That smile was proof that the life he'd lived hadn't been pointless. After a thousand years, the chestnut-haired boy, Lorwen Arrace, had found his prize.

At long last, he could sleep peacefully.

After that long, lengthy battle, at long last...

He could rest in peace.



Afterword

And so ends the Laoravia/Brawl arc. In addition, we've cleared Floor 30 of the Dungeon as well. You heard me. No matter what anyone might try to tell you, that boss fight happened *on the thirtieth floor of the Dungeon.* So the title *DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level* is *not* false advertising. That was a real Dungeon-y story I just wrote. Phew-ee, working our way through the Dungeon is loads of fun, isn't it?!

All right, enough joking. Allow me to express how sorry I am. To those of you who bought the books due to the promises made by the overly blunt title, I can but apologize. It truly *is* a problem that I barely touched on the Dungeon for two volumes in a row. That being said, I think that in exchange, I was able to depict the boss fight pretty satisfactorily. The grand finals following match after match after match—this tournament was a veritable whirlwind of battles. I don't think volume 7 will have any such matches. The main focus will be Dungeon diving again. There will be other developments too, like sea voyage stuff and mainland stuff, but the story will center mostly around this party of seven exploring the Dungeon. Not only is that a large party, but our heroines will grow quite rapidly too. Past Floor 30, we'll be progressing through the Dungeon in unprecedented ways. Let's just say it'll be a different beast than the two-person Dungeon diving of volume 4. Look forward to it!

Every volume, I'm always just talking about the next one, aren't I? I don't want people thinking my afterwords are nothing but me teasing the next volume and expressing my thoughts on the illustrations, so I figured I'd bring up my hobby this time around too. I'm sure some of you who are in the know might have picked up on this already, but this series uses not only RPG mechanics but also TCG mechanics here and there.

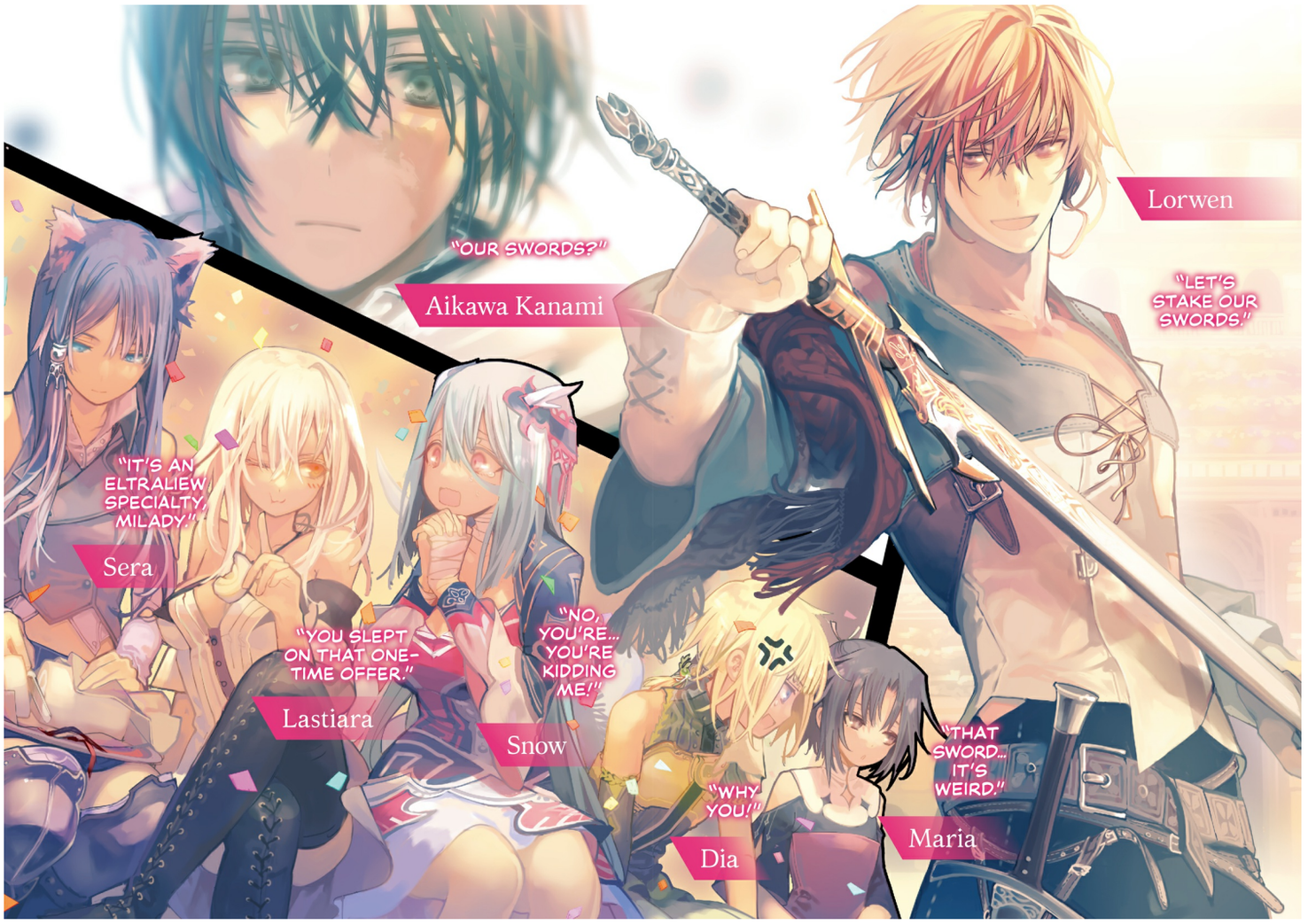
I love card games. Recently, there's been a rise in types of card games, and they're even getting anime treatments and online clients, so I'm happy as a clam. And whenever I see special effects in online card games that can't be done in physical card games, I seriously think to myself, *Man, the future is now,*

huh? For example, an effect like “deals 1 damage to a random character” can only be done quickly and fairly through an online game that leans on the computer to crunch numbers. To name another example, recently, an online card game introduced the effect, “As long as your deck doesn’t contain two or more of a single card...” Boy was I surprised to see that. It surprised me in a bunch of ways, actually.

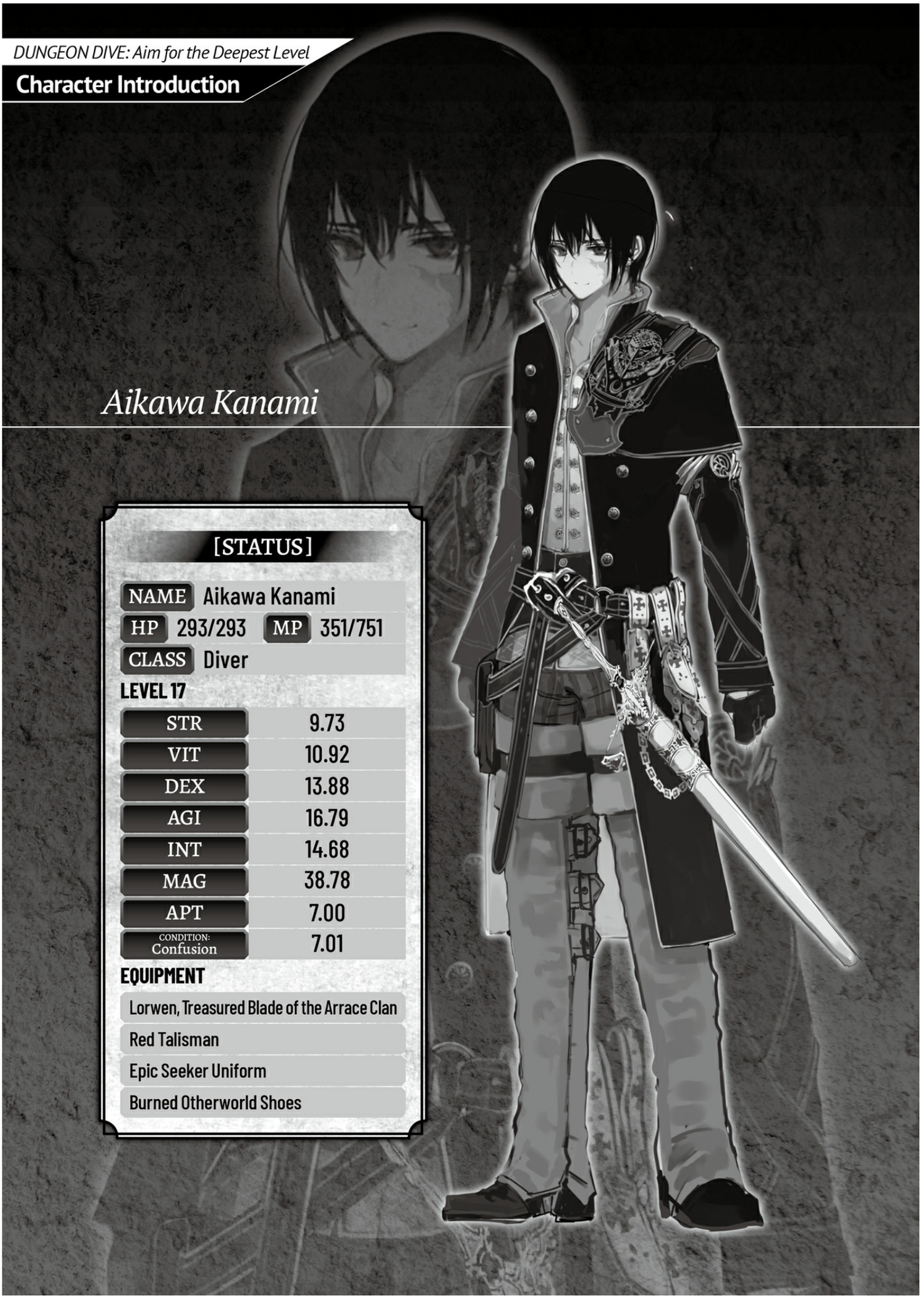
Now, I don’t have much room left, so it’s time for the usual round of thank-yous, especially for the illustrations. Thanks to Ukai-san for making a cover with such an amazing composition. Lorwen and Kanami’s positioning is just great, don’t you think? And the other illustrations too—I made so many demands for the art, and I received all sorts of winners. Looks like it was worth tweeting, “If I only get one illustration, I wanna see *this* scene,” over the years.

Of course, I also need to give my deep and sincere thanks to the people who picked up this novel, those who supported the web version, and the many I owe for helping in the making of this print version. See you in volume 7!


I WOULD SWING IT FROM MORNING UNTIL LATE INTO THE NIGHT, NEVER RESTING.
IN THE POURING RAIN, I SWUNG IT. AS THE WINDS DID RAGE, I SWUNG IT.
UNDER THE SCORCHING SUN, I SWUNG IT. IN THE FREEZING COLD, I SWUNG IT.
ON DAYS I SUFFERED FROM FEVERS OR FITS OF THE SHIVERS, I SWUNG IT.
ALWAYS ALONE, ALWAYS SWINGING. THE BLADE WAS MY EVERYTHING.


"OUR SWORDS?"
Aikawa Kanami
Lorwen
"LET'S STAKE OUR SWORDS."
"IT'S AN ELTRALIEW SPECIALTY, MILADY."
Sera
"YOU SLEPT ON THAT ONE-TIME OFFER."
Lastiara
"NO, YOU'RE... YOU'RE KIDDING ME!"
Snow
"WHY YOU!"
Dia
"THAT SWORD... IT'S WEIRD."
Maria

Character Introduction



Aikawa Kanami

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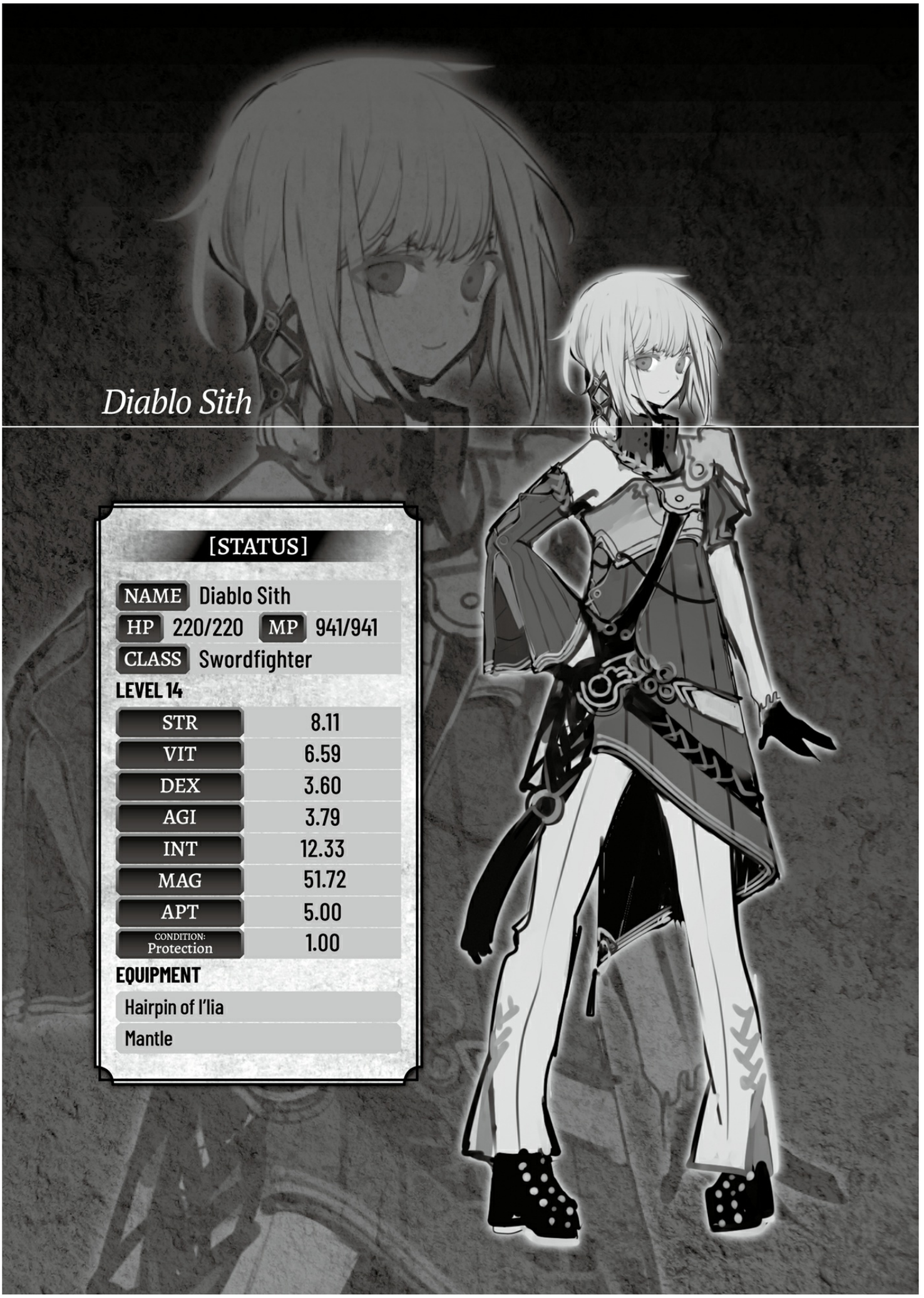
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HP	293/293
MP	351/751
CLASS	Diver

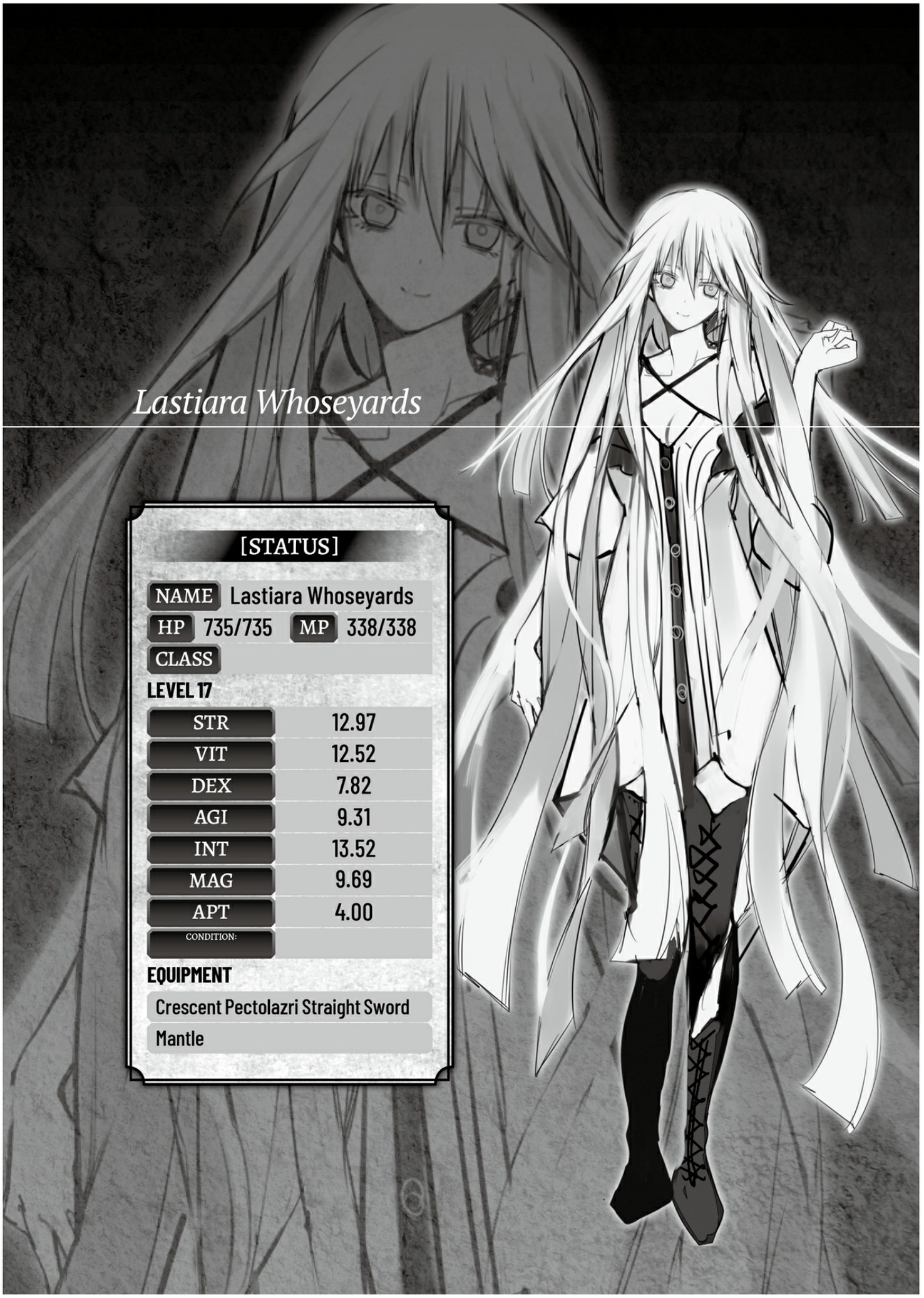
LEVEL 17

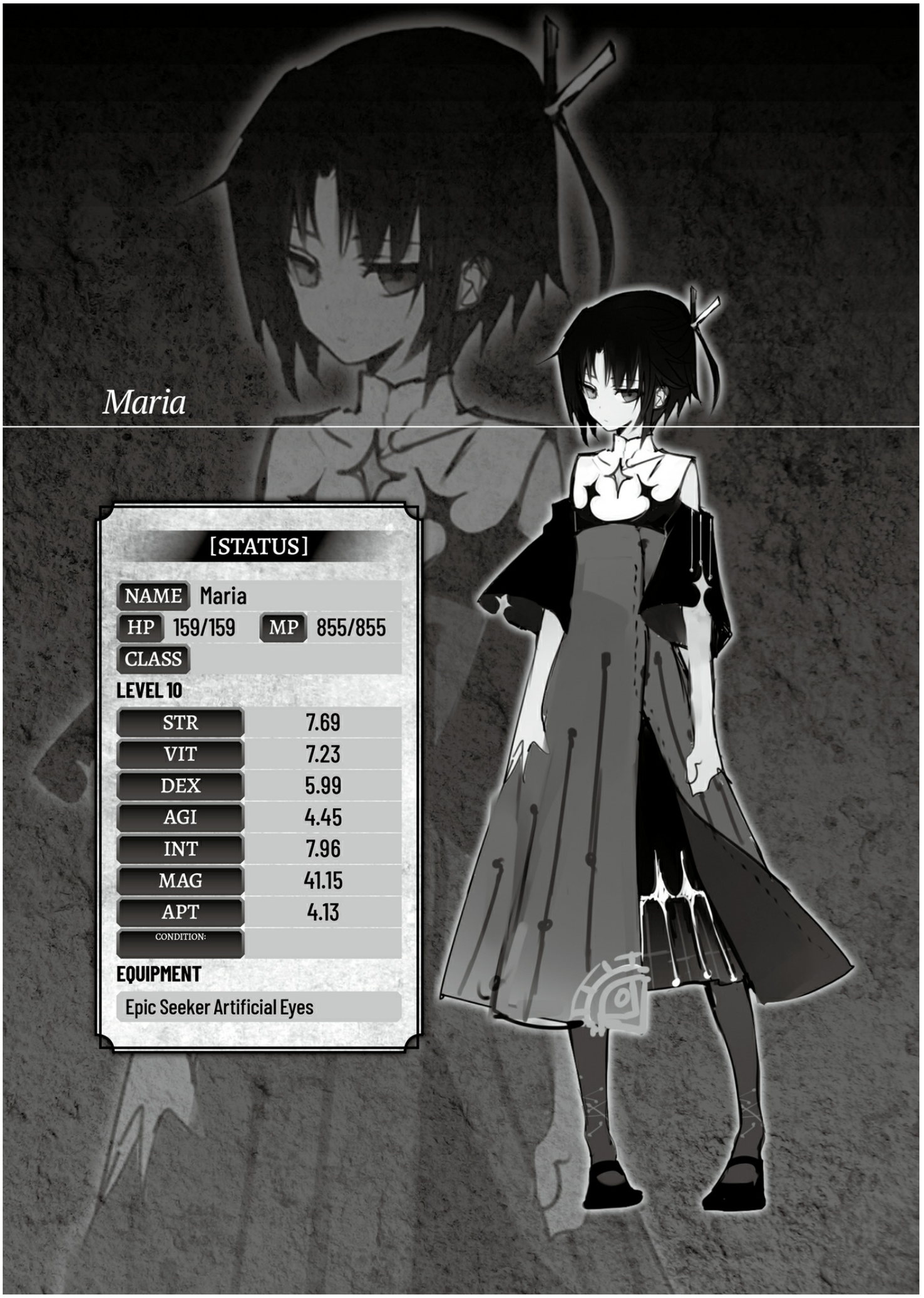
STR	9.73
VIT	10.92
DEX	13.88
AGI	16.79
INT	14.68
MAG	38.78
APT	7.00
CONDITION: Confusion	7.01

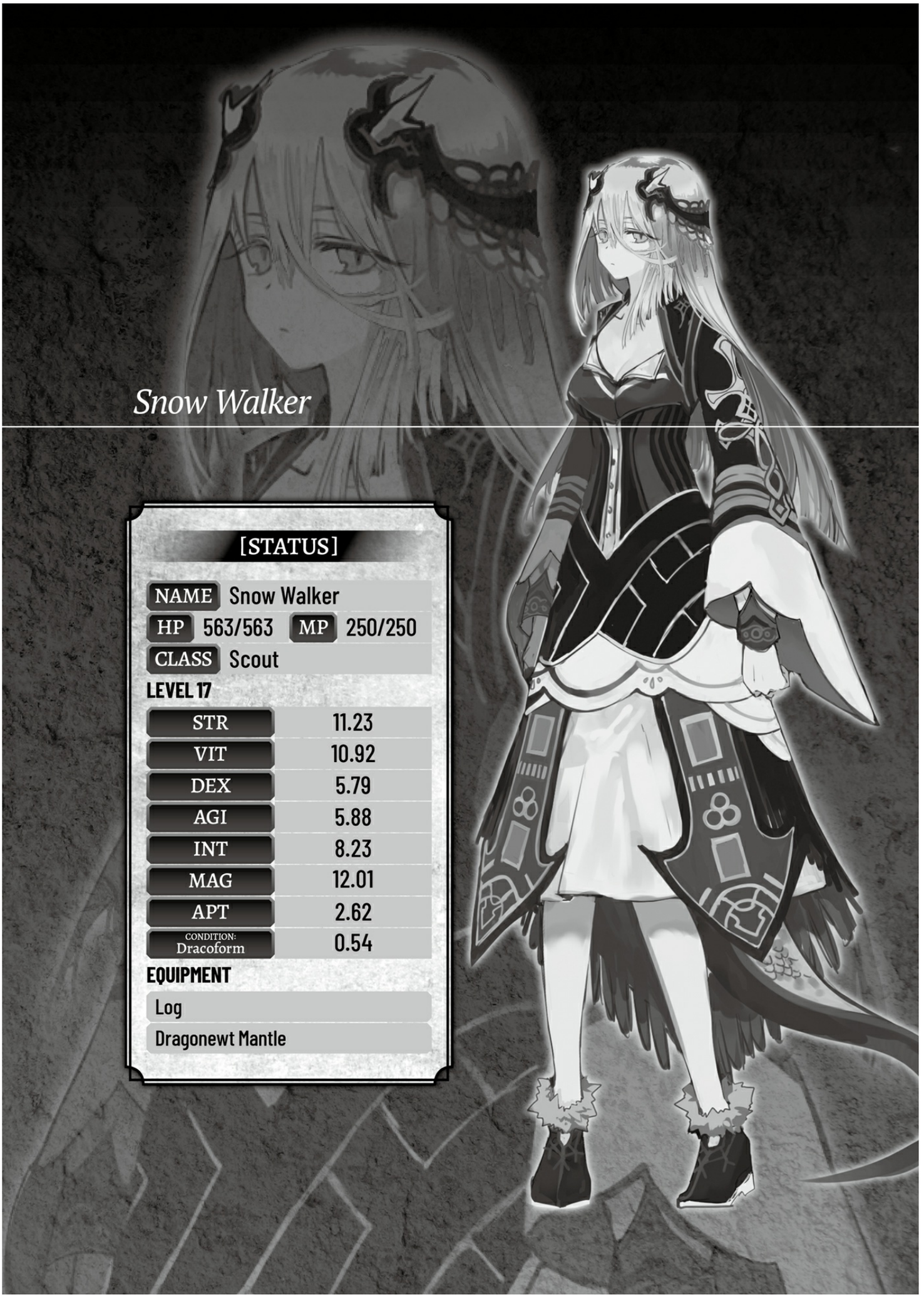
EQUIPMENT

- Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan
- Red Talisman
- Epic Seeker Uniform
- Burned Otherworld Shoes

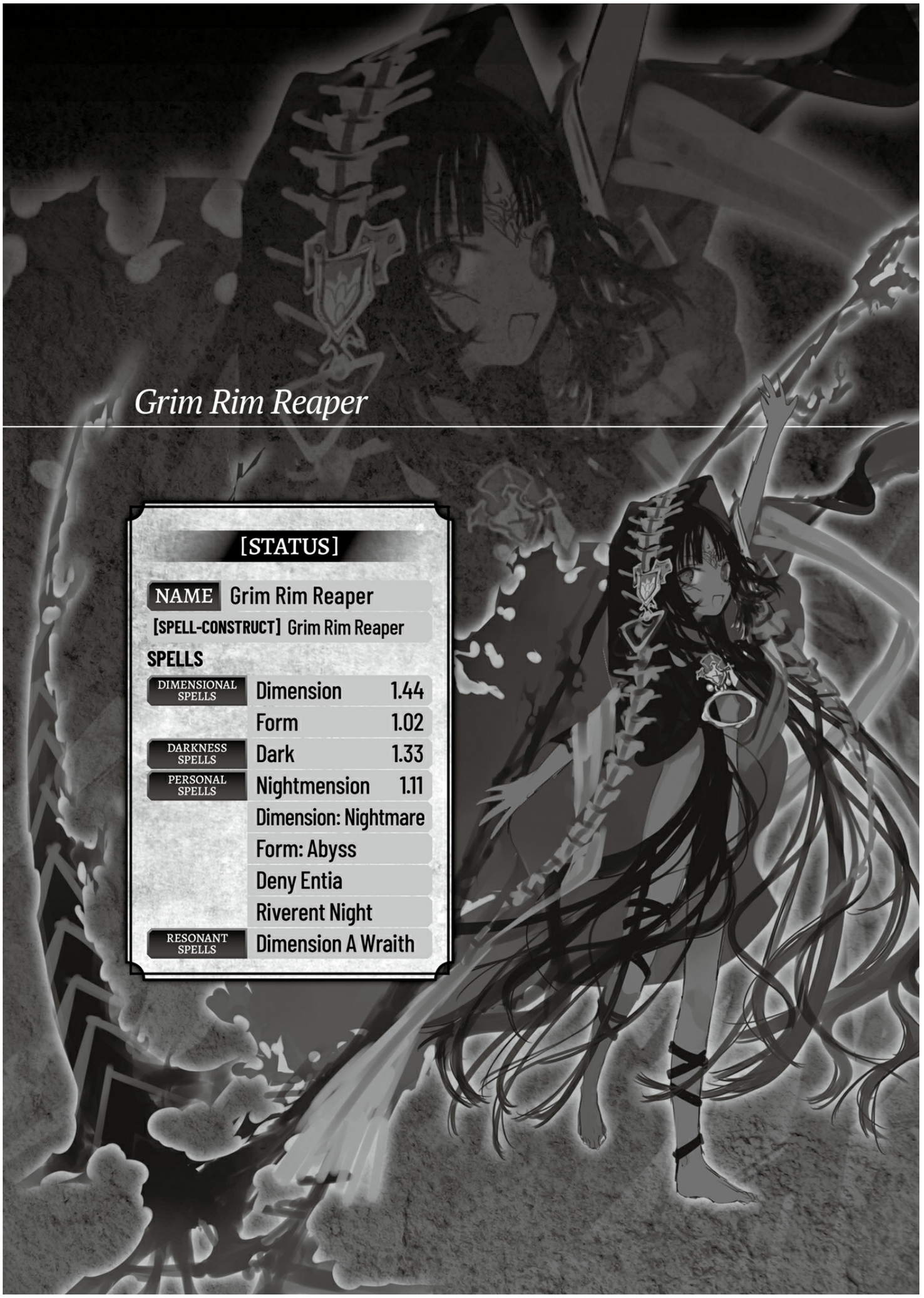

Diablo Sith
[STATUS]
NAME Diablo Sith
HP 220/220 MP 941/941
CLASS Swordfighter
LEVEL 14
STR 8.11
VIT 6.59
DEX 3.60
AGI 3.79
INT 12.33
MAG 51.72
APT 5.00
CONDITION: Protection 1.00
EQUIPMENT
Hairpin of I'lia
Mantle


Lastiara Whoseyards
[STATUS]
NAME Lastiara Whoseyards
HP 735/735
MP 338/338
CLASS
LEVEL 17
STR 12.97
VIT 12.52
DEX 7.82
AGI 9.31
INT 13.52
MAG 9.69
APT 4.00
CONDITION:
EQUIPMENT
Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword
Mantle


Maria
[STATUS]
NAME Maria
HP 159/159
MP 855/855
CLASS
LEVEL 10
STR 7.69
VIT 7.23
DEX 5.99
AGI 4.45
INT 7.96
MAG 41.15
APT 4.13
CONDITION:
EQUIPMENT
Epic Seeker Artificial Eyes


Snow Walker
[STATUS]
NAME Snow Walker
HP 563/563
MP 250/250
CLASS Scout
LEVEL 17
STR 11.23
VIT 10.92
DEX 5.79
AGI 5.88
INT 8.23
MAG 12.01
APT 2.62
CONDITION: Dracoform 0.54
EQUIPMENT
Log
Dragonewt Mantle


Lorwen Arrace
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[TRIGESIMAL GUARDIAN] Thief of Earth's Essence
SPELLS
SPELLS Fon A Wraith 1.55


Grim Rim Reaper
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[SPELL-CONSTRUCT] Grim Rim Reaper
SPELLS
DIMENSIONAL SPELLS
Dimension 1.44
Form 1.02
DARKNESS SPELLS
Dark 1.33
PERSONAL SPELLS
Nightmension 1.11
Dimension: Nightmare
Form: Abyss
Deny Entia
Riverent Night
RESONANT SPELLS
Dimension A Wraith

Bonus Short Stories

The Otherworld Heroines' Otherworld Massages, Part 1

Just a little while longer and the guild tasks would be over with. I'd put sorting through the paperwork I'd been handed on my first day behind me, but we still received periodic jobs from the government. When it was stuff like patrolling the town, it was pretty easy, but sometimes the commission had us chasing down criminals on the outskirts, which was a tall order. It must have been because while I was blasting through countless quests, word was going around about my *Dimension* spell, though of course, part of it was simply that Epic Seeker had gained that much more clout too.

Today, Lorwen and I apprehended a kidnapper who'd taken to their heels. After listening to various members' status reports in my office, I expanded *Dimension* to check in on Lorwen, who was being flattered with attention by the rescued children. He was beginning to fade away, and my heart felt a little warmer and fuzzier. All in a day's work.

I returned to my room to be greeted by a familiar voice.

"Hello, brother."

"Hiya, Maria," I replied, sitting down on one of the furnished chairs as I vented the feelings that had accumulated inside with a long sigh.

"You seem exhausted," she said worriedly.

"Huh? Oh, no, that's just guild work for ya. It's decently tiring."

While I was maintaining a stoic face in front of the world, the second it was just me and her, I ended up off guard. I moderately regretted giving my beloved little sister cause for concern.

"Sorry, Kanami. I'm just so useless..."

Just as I predicted, she started laying into herself.

“You’re not useless. Not in a million years. It’s because you’re here waiting that I’m keeping at it.” That was no lie either.

Maria shook her head. “If there’s anything I can do... Actually, could you please come here a second?”

She patted the bed. While a bit puzzled, I sat myself down next to her without hesitation. We’d been sleeping in the same bed for about a week now, so merely sitting on the same bed inspired no hesitation whatsoever.

“Good, now lie down, please...”

“What? Why?”

She was trying to push me down vigorously, and however close we were, I was still resistant.

“I would like to try giving you a nice massage. That is all I can do as a sister for my hardworking brother.”

Hold up, a massage? As in, she’s gonna rub my muscles for me? Is that...really something siblings our age should be doing on the same bed?

A little doubt and shyness flowed out from deep in my heart, but right as I was about to decline, she cut me off at the pass.

“Please. Let me do this for you,” she pleaded, looking me straight in the eyes.

When I saw the look on her face, my body relaxed and I swallowed my “no.” Upon second thought, massages between family members were a common enough sight in households in modern Japan. It wasn’t that weird. And above all, maybe this request was just Maria trying to find where she belonged, and who was I to turn her down? I couldn’t anymore.

“O-Okay. So, uh, yeah, please do, I guess.”

She proceeded to push me right down.

Damn, has she always been this strong?

“Okay. I’ll do my best.”

And that was how the massage commenced. Maria got on top of my lower back (I was lying face down) and pressed her thumbs into me. Lightly at first,

then gradually stronger and stronger, she slowly worked her way up from my lower back to my shoulders. Maria's body was sticking weirdly close to me; I could feel her breath on the back of my ear. I felt like her choice of posture was odd, but I also got the feeling it had been this way when my sister gave me a massage a long time ago, so I didn't say anything.

That said, I didn't think my muscles were really loosening up. The tactile sensation of Maria's body on mine as she attacked my back made me feel strangely awkward. Every time Maria moved, her soft buttocks rubbed against my back, and her springy thighs squeezed my sides hard. Just as I was starting to wonder if this was what massages were always like, her voice sounded in my ear.

"Ah, come to think of it...I have other stuff to use too. Ms. Tayly was kind enough to give me these. She got me plenty of incense for the sake of my blind self, and also..."

Blind though she was, she nimbly reached for the nearby table and took something in hand. I craned my neck to look.

"Huh? Are those herbs for moxibustion?"

"Good eye. In addition to incense, I received an herb called flamestasis."

My intuition, informed by the shape and the smell, was right on the money. Apparently, in this world, they practiced a form of moxibustion by mixing and grinding an herb called flamestasis.

"All right, let's give this a shot."

"Wait, are you taking off my shirt?"

"Yes."

"Hrnn?"

She stripped my upper body clothing off like it was perfectly natural, then placed one moxa-reminiscent clump on my back after the other. I felt heat on my back, and...*magic energy.* I was lying face down so I couldn't see it, but she was working magic on me. There could be no doubt.

"Wait, Maria...did you just cast a spell?"

Maria replied a little delightedly, “I’ve been keeping it a secret, but I had Ms. Tayly teach me, and now I can use super basic fire magic. She even told me I’m a natural at it.”

For some reason, the sight of her smiling atop my back gave me the chills. Despite how hot my back was from the moxibustion, the chills exceeded that heat by a wide margin.

“Oh, hey, wow. That’s really cool. But you know, let’s practice good fire safety, shall we?! Fire’s dangerous! Be *real* careful, okay, Maria?!”

Why was I reacting like this? I had chills that wouldn’t go away and a bad feeling stuck in the pit of my stomach, not to mention my cold sweat. Taken together, I felt like throwing up.

“Right, I’ll be careful,” she said, leaving it at that. “Now then, allow me to show you the fire spell I’ve been practicing.”

The fire she was so proud of lighted the moxa on my back one by one, the temperature of my skin gradually rising.

So this is moxibustion...or is it? It’s kind of warm...or rather, it’s actually hot. Or maybe not hot *so much as...painful! Ow!*

Heat like a thousand-year grudge, burning my back! “Uh, Maria? You sure that’s how it’s meant to be used?”

“Huh? Is something off? I thought it was going smoothly...”

“If it’s going smoothly, then never mind.”

So is moxibustion just this hot? I underestimated the pain.

Thanks to my level grinding, my body had become pretty strong and sturdy here, yet I still felt faint from the sheer heat. Moxibustion was something else. It felt like some impish fire sprite who loved Maria and hated me was taking advantage of this opportunity for a spot of no-holds-barred mischief at my expense, but I lay there and endured in silence. Maria was humming along as she went, she was so full of cheer; for her sake, I’d bear with anything. But while I’d decided to persevere—it was hot. What was hot was hot. And it was *really* hot. It was actually crazy hot. It was more than hot; the pain was starting

to get brutal.

Hard to believe this is good for me. Though maybe it's like foot pressure point massages where it's good for you because *it hurts.*

Maria was still humming along. "I'll give you a massage while we're at it. How does it feel? Does it feel good, Kanami?"

"Uh...yeah. It feels nice and warm, kind of?"

"Glad to hear it! I'll put some more elbow into it, then!"

She hummed as heat that felt like it would peel the skin off my back assailed me—and I kept on bearing it, telling myself that this was good for me, and repeating the mantra in my mind that since Maria was working hard for me, I couldn't rain on her parade.

That day, Maria's massage-adjacent whatever-it-was continued late into the night.

◆◆◆◆◆

The next morning, I left our bedroom, careful not to wake up the contented Maria sleeping next to me, and stepped into my office, my face pallid. Snow was there, a smile on her face.

"Ah, Kanami! Tee hee. Um, so Vohlzark was telling me there's this sound wave massage technique that can only be done by people who can use elementless magic, and I was thinking—"

"M-Massage?" I said, terrified.

And that night, I learned that my fear had been valid indeed.

To be continued.

Bathtime for the Girl Knights

The Brawl was the largest festival in the Alliance, and the participating fighters were promised services proportionate with that scale. Luxury liners from all over the world moored in Valhuura, and within a guest cabin that was a top pick even among all the high-end ships there, a certain group of knights was

making a racket. Ragne, one of the three beauties called “maidens of war” throughout the tournament, was running around touching the expensive furnishings with her hands. It was behavior unbecoming of a knight, but the other two—Pelsiona and Franrühle—knew her destitute past, and they watched her go with grudgingly tolerant looks in their eyes. If anything, they viewed such a frank and upfront reaction as a breath of fresh air.

“Wowee, am I wrong or is this amazing? I mean, look at the ridiculous sheen on the furniture—it’s *glowing*. Oh, whoa, they’ve even got a shower with a ley line attached! It’s so big, and pretty too! Wait, uh, how do you actually work it, though? Uhh, is this for the hot water? Ah! No!”

She’d entered the room with the baths and applied some light magic energy to the magic machinery, but not knowing which activation key was the correct one, she’d ended up dumping cold water on her head.

Franrühle’s eyes lit up and she barged into the room. “Ms. Ragne! I know all about these things! Let’s not waste this opportunity! What say we enjoy some communal bathing?!” She immediately cast off her clothing, exposing her unblemished, alabaster-white skin.

“Wait, huh?”

“Come now! I’ll explain everything thoroughly and carefully!”

Ragne couldn’t have expected *that.* “Damn you’re quick to disrobe! Shyness isn’t, like, in you, huh?!”

Sure, after the past few days, she figured she could call Franrühle a friend, but not a buck-naked-in-front-of-her-eyes kind of friend.

“Oh I’m not the type to fret if it’s just us girls!”

“Sure, but, like, aren’t nobles supposed to be modest and reserv—”

“I’m not the type to fret over *that* kind of thing either! You may be my senior when it comes to work, but *I’m* more experienced when it comes to this sort of thing, so I’ll do you a kindness and teach you plenty!”

Ragne knew where this was going. She knew the girl’s personality in and out. It was hard not to when she left nothing to the imagination, both

psychologically *and* physically. In other words, she was an extreme busybody who always charged headlong into situations. And she'd lost the plaything she usually had at her side (her brother). In other words...

"Is this the part where you run me ragged in place of Liner?" *I'm her next plaything?* Ragne got the feeling that if she didn't call for help right this instant, she'd be in for a tiresome ride. "Head Knight! Maaaaaa'am!"

"Hrn. I'm coming in too. It's a rare chance to mingle with my subordinates of the same sex, so I shan't restrain myself."

For some reason, the Head Knight was following Franrühle's lead and stripping. After removing her hair clip, the femininity she always kept so muted was now front and center. Due to her tall stature and deep voice, Pelsiona was often mistaken for a man by those around her, but in actuality, she possessed a voluptuous physique capable of captivating many a man. Like Franrühle, she was not lacking in a woman's charms in the slightest.

Now caught between the two, Ragne's confidence in herself as a cute girl was starting to wane. "Hold on, what?"

The image of nobles in her head was starting to crumble. She'd thought highborn girls would be more modest, more discreet.

"That's swell, Head Knight! Let's bathe together!" said Franrühle.

"Sure. Ragne, you enter too. I order you to."

Ragne was only getting more perplexed. What could she conclude except that the refinement of nobles counterintuitively meant they thought nothing of baring their skin before a commoner?

"Uh, sure?"

Figuring that saying no wouldn't be *normal*, Ragne aimed to be normal and obliged them. Franrühle and Pelsiona entered the spacious bathing room in the nude, chatting idly like it was a matter of course. Ragne was still puzzled by this turn of events, but she shed her clothes and bared her petite, short body before following them.

"Ragne, your soft, wimpy body has always rather bothered me. Follow my

example and train your muscles."

"I expected no less of *your* body, Head Knight!" said Franrühle. "It's so very beautiful! The way you're slim but still have visible muscles is perfection!"

"Hrm. It seems you just *get* it, Fran. I pride myself on having built a perfect physique marrying both speed and power."

"I'll have to pass on that for myself, though. That musculature is what girls want on guys; it's not the kind we fair maidens should be putting on. Heh heh heh, I now understand just why you're such a popular lady knight."

"Hold on a moment. I'm talking about the strength a knight needs to acquire, not *that*..."

That day, Ragne experienced what could be called the greatest humiliation of her life under the pretext of naked coworker bonding. After the two of them pointed out how immature her body was for her age, she ended up crying. She now knew that Pelsiona had a habit of sizing up other people's muscles, and that Franrühle simply had some screws loose in her head, and she swore to herself that next time around, she'd take a page out of Liner's book and get herself a separate room.

Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 6

I truly had nothing. What did I bring with me into this world, you may ask? Just about nothing, apart from the clothes on my back and the stuff in my pockets. I'd had no money, nothing to eat, nowhere to live, no documentation of my birth or existence, and none of the other stuff somebody needed to live a normal life.

But that was no longer the case. I had a job now, albeit one that was more like a side hustle. And with a job came an income. Finally, I was living like a human being, not worrying about my next meal. And today would be another day of putting forth my best efforts for my patron, the good Lady Karamia Arrace.

"Kanami, could you get me a drink?"

"Yes, right away."

In one of the courtyards of Eltraliew Academy—a space only high-ranking nobles were allowed to enter—I used a magic gem pot to make hot tea for my patron, who was sitting at a table and studying hard, and poured it into a cup for her.

"Lady Karamia, ma'am, this is tea imported from the mainland." From behind, I gently placed it within reach of her, so as not to disturb her studies.

"You work as fast as ever. You really are a deft hand, Kanami. I'm a little surprised by how butler-like you've become over the past month."

Every move she made was predicated on a cool and collected composure, yet she pulled an expression I rarely saw on her face as she sipped from the cup she'd been provided. If you asked me, I wasn't being as deft as she said. All I was doing was getting what I *could* do over with as quickly as possible without making any blunders. Except, come to think of it, I did get the feeling that after coming to this world, the way my body moved felt smoother...

"In the past, I've done this sort of thing for work before, so that's why. I think I'm just used to it."

Once again, she looked surprised. “In the past? Wow, is that right? Can’t say I expected that.”

It must have been thanks to my experience serving customers in part-time jobs back on Earth. In any case, Karamia remembered to report the most important information to me.

“Ah, about the research and development expenses we discussed. I’ll increase your funding. Make sure to use those deft hands of yours to make lots and lots of new products. I look forward to the fruits of our partnership.”

Karamia was currently my employer cum sponsor funding the magic tools I was creating. Her resources left nothing to be desired, and I experienced no inconvenience regarding money after coming under her employ. Three square meals a day, I got to sleep on a futon, and no more going without textbooks or decent clothes. It was glorious. An ordinary life was so glorious. Was it any wonder I’d start calling the girl who’d tried to kill me *Lady* Karamia now that I had all this? I didn’t care if I had to call her that for the rest of my days.

“Thank you very much. I’ll work even harder for you, Lady Karamia.”

She averted her eyes a little. “Good. Please work diligently for my sake, same as always.”

And so ended our everyday lunch break. This had been my work-and-school life for the past month or so. After my duel with her, I’d signed the contract, and this was the sort of existence it had afforded me. Behind us, my friends were watching me work from their corner of the courtyard—the same friends as always.

“C’mon, not *again*. What am I looking at, Ms. Annius?”

“Watch carefully, little Liner. That’s what they call a gigolo. I can’t believe he actually bagged a girl from the highest clique. This is the best. It was worth giving him that advice.”

“He’s whoring himself out? It’s true he’s got a bit of a womanizing streak. I hate him.”

I’m not “whoring myself out.” *I’m* working. *This is my part-time hustle. My job.*

For reasons that eluded me, I was subjected to unfounded slander on a daily basis. But I had to grin and bear it for now. If I took the bait, I'd be right where my friends wanted me. For one, Annius was clearly waiting there in case she got to witness some fun mishap, but I no longer had any obligation to entertain her. I could strike out on my own without having to rely on Annius's good graces.

"What are you looking at, Kanami?" asked my employer, noticing that I was focusing my attention on something behind her.

"S-Sorry, ma'am."

"Do concentrate when you're at work. You've signed the contract to be my butler. You'll look at *me* and you'll work for *my* sake."

"Of course. I'll keep you safe, I promise. That's my job, after all."

"That's right. That is your job."

With that, she suddenly got to her feet and zipped out of the courtyard. I followed close behind. Afternoon classes were starting.

After class was out, it was time for school administrative activities, which were entrusted solely to Lady Karamia, the student council president. Once she was done with that, it was time for self-study and voluntary practice. To be frank, her schedule was too jam-packed for a girl her age, containing duels with the challengers who used the Elt-Order system to fight her. Due to her position, there were times she couldn't decline such requests. To put it bluntly, it was unreasonable to expect her to make time for duels when she was already this busy. It made me understand a little better why she'd wanted to rip me a new one a month ago.

In order to lighten her burden a little, I took a step forward and provoked her. "Entrust this to me, if you please. There's no need for you to waste your time," I said—a line straight out of some manga. I was willing to act on her behalf regarding the ten or so duels on her docket.

"Thank you, Kanami. I leave it to you."

She knew more about my financial situation than anyone else, and she ceded the duel to me with a smile, watching over me from behind. Even though I was acting as a substitute, if I won, I'd receive the Elt-Order payout. I could earn

extra income from dueling in addition to my main job.

Being a butler was the best. Lady Karamia was the best. It made me want to follow her for the rest of my life. I used my fat wallet to make the magic tools I needed to beat back the mid-level students asking for duels, despite the fact that I was Level 1. And after every victory, my patron praised her butler. She was a competent employer who made sure to show her appreciation for her subordinates.

“Impressive, as always. I believed in you, Kanami.”

“I’m not worthy of those words.”

I offered a butler bow, to which she chuckled. This happened every time. Gone was any trace of the days we used to be at each other’s throats, and another day of butlering was drawing to an end. She, however, stopped me before I could bid her good night, which was unusual.

“Oh, by the way, Kanami, I’m thinking of using the holidays to return to my house for a spell. Would you care to tag along as my butler? I know you probably want to focus on developing magic tools, but my grandfather expressed an interest in you, so...”

“The holidays?”

“Is it a no-go?”

Honestly, I didn’t think I had much time to spare. My magic tool development had reached new heights, and soon I’d complete equipment that would allow me to Dungeon dive. On the other hand, Lady Karamia’s grandfather was the one and only Blademaster. The fact that he was interested in me was too good to pass up. Even better, what if I could get him to teach me the blade a little? That’d be huge. I figured that the biggest problem on my plate regarding the Dungeon was close-quarters combat. If I solved that issue, I could level-grind safely in the Dungeon. Given that, maybe paying the Karamia estate a visit wasn’t a bad idea.

“No, I’d be happy to come, if you’ll have me.”

“Okay, good. Look forward to the holidays, Kanami. See you.” She ran off in a hurry.

Another day of butlering well butlered, I thought to myself. Then I heard whispering from behind again.

“What do you think, Liner? That idiot hasn’t figured it out yet, has he?”

“Doesn’t look like it, no. I’ll be honest, holding in the laughter was rough.”

Now that my patron was gone, I could complain to my friends who were being pointlessly high-level, self-concealing ninjas. “You two have been awful chatty today.”

“Can you blame us? You’re so entertaining, Kanami.”

“What she said. Let me be blunt—you’re a stress reliever in this otherwise shitty school life. Watching you repairs my broken soul.”

The fact that they viewed me like some sort of clown made me knit my brow. “What’s so entertaining? All I’m doing is normal-ass butler stuff.”

“I mean, c’mon,” said Annius. “If you go on like this, you’ll be with the House of Arrace forever, if you catch my meaning. It’s a laugh and a half!”

“Wha?” *Forever, as in...*

“You really underestimate how possessive noble girls are,” said Liner. “Their ilk always tries to obtain what they want by any means necessary. My sister’s the same, so I know it when I see it.”

“You do remember Karamia had like a million hangers-on, right? And yet now she’s alone with you all the time. You never thought anything of that?”

Now that she mentioned it, it had been just the two of us today too. In the beginning, she’d had a legion of lady’s maids and an entourage of coattail-kissers, but now... It *was* strange.

So, wait, does that mean what I think it does? Over the past month, she’s begun to, like, like *me? For real? No, no way. No way something that stupid could be true. Our social statuses are too different. When she hired me, she made sure to remind me I was just a friend to her.*

Plus, she’d done nothing over the past month to make me think she liked me. Well, if I had to pick one moment, there was that one time. The time she’d said “I wanna be a ruler” with childlike innocent eyes and I’d watched her wax on

about her plans to rule the school until the next morning. *“Kanami, you’re the first person to ever actually listen to me all the way through,”* she’d said contentedly.

When I told Annius about that episode, she drew back a step in shock. “H-How many bases have you cleared in a single month?! No wonder she always got red in the face and looked away...and no wonder she’d invite you to her home! So, this is how a pro seduces girls, huh? How frightening.”

It seemed that nugget of info had only solidified her suspicions.

“I see,” said Liner. “I thought that her goal was to keep you as a butler for the rest of your life like a pet, but now that it’s come to this, you’re on a slippery slope. She even introduced you to the Blademaster, so you’ve got a ticket to the top now.”

Only after hearing their reactions did it dawn on me that I’d reached a point of no return. And what happened over the holidays confirmed it, as she would introduce me to her extremely famous grandfather as her “lover.”

At the Pub, Part 3: The Brawl

The largest festival in the Alliance was being held on a fleet of boats lined up on the Huura River. The deck was filled to the brim with visitors, all enjoying the entertainment on offer amid the interconnected fleet. The cheers and excitement were especially intense in the arena set up on board one ship. Needless to say, the Brawl was the principal part of this festival and the place where the most people gathered.

The audience who had finished watching the semifinals in the south area were just now leaving. As the crowds migrated to adjoining ships, they shared their impressions of the match. Among them were two men of muscle—the manager of a certain pub and Krowe, a swordsman who'd lost in the preliminary rounds—briefly touching on their own impressions of the fight before discussing what to do.

"It's over now. So then, boss, what'll you do next?"

"Hrm. There ain't anything I'm itching to do, really. I mean, in the end, the kid you said beat you never showed up."

They had watched the matches of the Lorwen-Reaper team to see the girl with the brown skin and black hair who'd taken the preliminaries, but she had never actually appeared in those fights.

"In her place, we got that absolute monster. What *is* he?"

The young man who'd chaperoned her during the preliminaries had been the one to appear. Lorwen the Swordsman. Just recalling how his matches had played out made Krowe turn white in the face.

"He's gotta be the one to take the tourney," said the manager, singing his praises unreservedly. "After seeing him in action? I just can't imagine how he could possibly lose."

But his praise was born more of fearful awe than admiration. That was how epic and magnificent those fights had been.

"You hang out at Valhuura every year, so I believe it, coming from you. If you

ask me, something weird's going on there."

Sure, Lorwen only started fighting after sufficiently ascertaining his opponent's strength, but still, it was always a total curb stomp. Figuring there was no way Lorwen could lose in the finals, the two were starting to lose interest in the Brawl. Their thoughts on the tournament could be summed up as "something's up with that swordsman" and "he's strong."

"Hey, I don't just 'hang out' here every year. Don't make it sound like I'm skipping out on the pub for my jollies. Lyeen always takes off every year, so I'm forced to come along, that's all."

"But you do enjoy it, don't ya? Gets ya all amped up, remembering when you were a fighter."

"That goes for anybody who watches a match. It's stimulating."

Every year, it wasn't only Lyeen, poster girl of the pub, but also the manager who turned out to watch the fights. He told everyone it was just because a familiar face from the pub was participating, but everyone knew he was only there because he liked watching the matches.

Krowe smiled wryly as he followed the manager. They were thinking of spending the night resting at their lodging since there were no more matches that day when it happened. Lyeen came running toward them from afar, her ponytail swinging.

"Boss! Mr. Krowe!" It was rare for her to shout this loud without caring about how it looked.

"Hm? What's the matter?" asked Krowe. "Didn't ya tell us you were gonna tour the north area with your friend?"

"About that! So, don't freak out, okay? I saw something you won't *believe!"* she said, talking as she was still catching her breath.

"We're not the ones freaking out. Catch your breath and then tell us."

Lyeen did so, breathing deeply in and out, in and out before continuing. "So, listen to this. You remember the black-haired kid who was with us about a month ago? Sieg. You both remember him?"

“I do,” said the manager. “I remember him. That real polite newbie, right?”

Krowe was next to reply. “You mean the guy who, as soon as we learned was wanted, up and disappeared, right? The guy who was so talented I wanted him in my party.”

Their opinion of him was high. So much so that they’d discussed his talents deep into the night before.

“Looks like he’s entered the tourney,” said Lyeen. “In fact, he just won the north area semifinals.”

“I’m sorry, *what?!*” they both replied.

That reaction was only natural. The boy they knew as Sieg was a diver who, a month or so ago, had barely escaped the very first floor of the Dungeon, with a severe burn to show for it. The image of him in their heads was one of a latently talented but down-on-his-luck kid. Not exactly the kind you’d want to see in the Brawl, where even the most experienced Dungeon divers found it difficult to so much as earn the right to participate. They’d both tried their hand at the Brawl before, so they found what Lyeen told them hard to believe.

“I swear it’s true! I saw him!”

“But you remember, don’t you? This is the kid who fled to the pub after barely escaping the Dungeon alive a month ago?”

“But he won the match! And he was incredibly strong too! He was so fast I could hardly track him!”

Lyeen explained what had happened during the match in halting speech, still all keyed up. Krowe and the manager had no choice but to check the Brawl materials they had on them—they’d known Lyeen for a long time and she was no liar or teller of tall tales. Yet Sieg’s name wasn’t listed.

“Uh...I don’t see his name here.”

“About that! It was kinda like he had amnesia or something! Or that was the vibe! He’s going by ‘Aikawa Kanami’ now! So Sieg was only ever an alias after all!”

She’d suspected “Sieg” had been using an alias, and so had the other two, so

they couldn't say she was wrong on account of his name. Sometimes people were dead ringers for each other, so Krowe had to see the kid with his own eyes.

"Okay, okay," said Krowe. "Let's go watch his match tomorrow and see for ourselves."

"I'm telling you, it's true! He really was there! Honest!"

The manager, meanwhile, was just looking up at the sky, a rare smile on his face. "The bastard's done it..." The hunch he'd harbored when he'd picked "Sieg" up off the streets had been confirmed.

"Boss, you need to go see for yourself too! It really was Sieg!"

"I will, I will. I'm gonna go see him."

And so it was decided that all three of them would go to watch the Brawl finals.

◆◆◆◆◆

"He looked at us! Just now! He totally looked at us!"

The finals. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and "Sieg" stepped into the arena to the deafening din of cheering.

"Look at him," the manager gasped.

The clothes the boy was wearing were incomparably more extravagant than when they'd first met. According to the presenter's comments, it seemed the kid was the master of a guild in a neighboring country, and a dragon slayer at that—news that left them astonished. What the hell had he gotten up to in a month's time?

Lyeen stood up, shouting in high spirits. "He bowed at us! He looked us in the eyes! There's no doubt about it, it's him!"

The other two had to admit it. They'd never forgotten his face.

"Boss," said Krowe, trembling. "You remember?"

"Yeah. Now that you mention, I do recall you saying you'd team up with the newbie and take the Brawl."

“No, not that! I’m saying, do you remember the lad’s abilities?! Remember how we were saying back in the pub that he could hack it in the Brawl?!”

“Ha ha, I know. But who could’ve guessed in a million years that’s exactly what would happen?”

They never could have imagined it would take one measly month. That was why Krowe was shivering.

The manager, who’d low-key seen this coming, watched the boy calmly. “Well, coming here to cheer him on certainly paid off, no mistake there.”

Krowe recalled what a fierce spectacle yesterday’s match had been. “Boss, ya think the laddie’s got what it takes to beat that insane Lorwen Arrace guy?”

“It ain’t about if he can win or not. There’s only one thing we oughta do.”

“You’re right. Ha ha, no need to overthink things!”

This was the Brawl. A match was starting. And before their eyes stood the waiter boy. He’d once been part of the pub family. They’d chatted with him before, smiled and laughed with him before. What else was there to do?

“Listen, sonny!” screamed Krowe. “We’re rooting for you!”

“Let’s see how far you can go, newbie!” said the manager.

“You can do it, Sieg!”

The presenter announced the start of the match, and so began the finals for young Sieg—no, for young Aikawa Kanami, watched intently by so many of the folks he’d met in this world...

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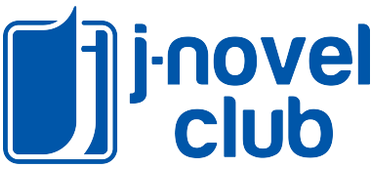
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 7

by Tarisa Warinai

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