
10
Tarisa Warinai
Illust. Saki Ukai
DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level


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DUNGEON DIVE
Aim for the Deepest Level

Character Introductions



Aikawa Kanami

A young man brought to another world. He's good at Dimension magic.



Lastiara Whoseyards

A Jewelculus made to bring about the resurrection of Saint Tiara.



Dia

A girl who's good at magic. She's currently acting as Apostle Sith.



Maria Disutrus

Kanami's slave and the child who burned down the house. She fused with Alty and gained power.



Snow Walker

A dragonewt who used to be apathetic about everything, but lately she's become a little more passionate.



Grim Rim Reaper

A grim reaper who was freed from her curse. She now serves as Kanami's healer.



Liner Hellvilleshine

A boy with a strong spirit of self-sacrifice. He serves as Kanami's knight.



Sera Radiant

A blue wolf semifer who swears loyalty to Lastiara. She doesn't like men.



Ragne Kyquora

One of the Seven Celestial Knights. She showed a strange fascination with magic gems during The Brawl.



Wyss Hylipröpe

A Jewelculus. She died entrusting her spirit to Kanami, Palinchron, and Liner.



Palinchron Regacy

One of the Seven Celestial Knights. He used many schemes to trap Kanami but was ultimately defeated.

Essence Thieves

The Guardians of the Dungeon with Lingering Attachments

Decimal Guardian:
The Thief of Fire's Essence
Alty



Floor 10

Vigesimal Guardian:
The Thief of Darkness's Essence
Tida Rands



Floor 20

Floor 30

Trigesimal Guardian:
The Thief of Earth's Essence
Lorwen Arrace



Floor 40

Quadragesimal Guardian:
The Thief of Wood's Essence
Ide



Floor 50

Floor 60

Floor 70

Quinquagesimal Guardian:
The Thief of Wind's Essence
Lorde Titee

Sexagesimal Guardian:
The Thief of Light's Essence
Nosfy Whoseyards

Floor 80

Septuagesimal Guardian:
The Thief of [redacted]'s Essence
[redacted] **Hellvilleshine**

Octogesimal Guardian:
The Thief of [redacted]'s Essence
Seldra [redacted]

Floor 90

Nonagesimal Guardian:
The Thief of [redacted]'s Essence
[redacted]

Centesimal Guardian:
The Thief of [redacted]'s Essence
[redacted]

The Deepest Part

▶The story so far

Aikawa Kanami was suddenly summoned to another world. In this gamelike world, he must head to the deepest part of the Dungeon, which is rumored to grant any wish. Even though Kanami has grown through meetings and partings with friends and has finally defeated his nemesis, Palinchron, he falls to the reverse side of the Dungeon's 66th floor. There, he meets the Thief of Wind's Essence, and he must act fast in order to save her.

Chapter 1: The Dungeon's Reverse Side—The Land of the Dead

On the day I settled the score with my old enemy, Palinchron Regacy, I was swallowed up by the World Restoration Array and fell down to the Dungeon's sixty-sixth floor. Beyond that floor was a recreation of the country of Viaysia, which had existed a thousand years ago, and it was there I had met the Guardian of the fiftieth floor, Lorde, the Thief of Wind's Essence. She'd told me that a year had passed since the battle with Palinchron, and I'd set out in haste to reach the surface.

Everything had been going smoothly—or so I'd thought.

I was not alone, as Liner Hellvilleshine was with me. Lorde refused to cooperate but had never actively interfered. Above all else, the three of us were able to laugh together. We'd been like a family, spending our days together, smiling around the same dinner table, working together in the city, and learning magic from each other.

But now I could see that it was all just a house of cards. Everything had begun to go haywire when Liner and I had summoned Nosfy, the Guardian of floor sixty, the Thief of Light's Essence. Although a newcomer in our lives, she knew a lot about what had happened a thousand years ago and was more qualified than Liner or me to be friends with Lorde. She was also very skilled at exposing hidden truths and had reminded Lorde that these familial days would not last forever.

It had really only been an instant before the whole thing had fallen apart from there. Although we'd started on the same path, it had begun to diverge as our goals and desires became incompatible. At the end of it all, Nosfy had stood in front of us as we headed toward the surface, declaring her hostility and wishing for us to

remain on floor sixty-six for Lorde's sake. Then, she'd defeated me and sent me back to where I'd started. I was facing Lorde, who had reached her limit, in the throne room of Viaysia Castle.

Lorde had told me exactly what the trial of the fiftieth floor would be. "This is the true state of this place. This is our truth. Count your sins with me, Kanami. Even if it takes a thousand years."

She'd stated her wish as she sat in the throne room, whose ceiling and walls had been destroyed by her own wind magic. The chamber had become battered by the constant storm, and she was drenched. Her breath was slightly tinged with white, as if her body had been cooled by the rain. White breath came in erratic bursts. Her face contorted as if she was having trouble breathing, and she inhaled and exhaled repeatedly. It was enough to make me realize that she needed immediate help.

Lorde wanted Liner Hellvilleshine to stay there as a replacement for her brother. But even with such a false family, it was hard to believe she could really be saved. And I'd made a promise to Mr. Reynand. We needed to bring her real brother, Ide, the Thief of Wood's Essence, down here from the surface as soon as possible.

I was in the storm-stricken throne room, my legs straining with the determination to flee. Lorde, who was facing me, must have seen it coming because she took the initiative.

"You will never be able to escape, Kanami. I did not return to this way of speaking for the sake of putting on airs. This was necessary in order to shift the timeline of this place. With Nosfy's help, as an expert in barriers, this place is being reconstructed from my memories."

At the top of the castle, I looked around the world behind the Dungeon's sixty-sixth floor. The lush, green town of Viaysia that I had known was no longer there. It had been drastically transformed, its size increased a dozen times over, and it had turned into a great empire where the smoke of war continued to smolder even under the heavy rain. Lorde wasn't lying. This place was a recreation of a world that had died a thousand years ago. All that was needed was to shift the time period a little. In other words, the world now spread out below us was a scene of Viaysia's past.

"This place changes its appearance based on my wishes. Using this mechanism, I have set the timeline to the exact point when you and I betrayed the nation. Hence, now all of Viaysia is your enemy. No one will help you. No one."

"Is that your plan?"

If that was true, I would be a wanted man now. I wouldn't even be able to shop at a store easily. And the food situation, which was the biggest problem when heading to the surface, would be unmanageable. But that wasn't enough to get me to give up.

"So, somehow..." I launched myself off the rain-soaked ground and started running. I had already made up my mind. I would make it back to the surface by the end of the day. If I couldn't buy food, I would steal it. The stage at which I had choices was long past.

"I will not let you do this!"

Lorde flapped her magical wings and dexterously manipulated the wind. Even though it wasn't magic, the wind moved like a living creature and tried to block my way.

"Kanami, have you forgotten what my essence is?"

She drew closer to me like a breeze, her rifle and bayonet of wind held in her right hand. I swung my sword to ward her off, but she dodged easily as she spoke.

"My attribute is wind. Escape is my realm. Just as Lorwen Arrace stole the Unbreaking Crystal, so Lorde Titee, the Thief of Wind's Essence, stole the Wind of Freedom. When it comes to escaping, I am *the* expert! Soon, it will be over!"

True to her word, she read my escape perfectly and grabbed my arm with her free hand. There was no way I could win in a contest of strength against a true Guardian. I had no choice but to play my trump card.

"Distance Mute!" I was able to catch Lorde off guard with one of the broken spells I had devised while I was down here.

I transmuted my arm and escaped from her grip. She was holding on to me with all her strength, so the sudden loss of solidity threw her off-balance. Then, I kicked her as hard as I could, yelling, "You!!!"

"What?! What was that magic?!" she cried. It seemed that this

was Dimension magic she hadn't seen before, not even a thousand years ago.

Sadly for her, the new spell worked exactly as originally planned. I left Lorde behind, astonished, and immediately began to work on my next spell.

"Layered Dimension!" I spread Dimension out to its very limits and determined the optimal path for escape. All that remained was to compress the space to reach my destination. "Dimension: Faultline! Dimension: Faultline! Dimension: Faultline!"

I used it three times and my body was pulled and pulled, and then finally made the jump, like I'd disappeared into thin air. With a leap that resembled teleportation, I moved instantly from the castle throne room to the wet streets of the town. However, due to the forceful and continuous use of magic, and the excessive momentum I'd gained, I ended up rolling across the ground. As I bounced through puddle after puddle, I managed to adjust my posture and put both arms and legs on the ground to stop my tumble. Looking at my status, I'd damaged my whole body so badly that my HP was down by half.

The results of that reckless move were significant, though. I stood up, despite being covered in scrapes and scratches, and used Dimension to check on the situation. About a kilometer away, on top of the castle, I caught Lorde standing stunned in the rubble-strewn throne room.

"So, such magic exists..." she muttered. "Well, that is fine. If Kanami wants to play the long game, I just need to surround him as originally planned and go all in. Don't think that spell will work on me a second time."

She must've thought she could win once she caught me. She puffed out her cheeks, looking a little frustrated, but she didn't seem to be in a hurry. She probably thought that I would only get weaker and weaker if she dragged it out. She wasn't wrong; she certainly had the advantage. However, her face was growing pale as her anxiety returned, and her breathing became erratic again.

"My bullets are fast, Kanami! After all, they're accelerating spirits. Yes, day after day, they accelerated. Accelerate. Accelerate.

Persistently whittling down, lightening...”

Lorde began incanting out of habit. She amplified the meaningless power and forced her thinning breath to slow as the cost of the amplification. It was possible she couldn’t even calm down without it at this point. Moreover, her familiarity with the practice indicated that it was habitual.

I was sure she had cried when nobody was around, incanting so that no one would know, and managing a smile just in time. Even though she knew that the price was to lose many things, she still wanted to smile. She wanted to laugh like a child to protect the walls of the castle that surrounded her heart and the country of Viaysia.

“Lorde...” Without thinking, I stared at her face with Dimension. She looked like she was suffocating.

She continued muttering her incantation as she walked out of the castle, her gait unsteady, outstretched wings drooping. Despite the contents of her incantation, her movements were slow. She walked through the heavy rain, dodging debris, until she reached the edge of the weather-beaten castle. There was a power in her eyes that convinced me that she would definitely hunt her prey down. The fine bayonet in her hand made her look like a first-class hunter. Then she pointed the muzzle of the gun at me, a kilometer away.

“Shit!” I quickly hid in the shadows. *What am I doing just standing around?!* I thought. I had to worry more about myself than about Lorde.

There was no time to stop. No time to think. Soon I was running through the back alleys of the stormy city. I ran away from her, not caring about the raindrops hitting my cheeks or the splashing puddles of water. I occasionally looked back and widened Dimension behind me, but I couldn’t see her. It seemed that she wasn’t heading straight for me but to some other place. Maybe she just didn’t have the magic to search for me, but I thought it was unsettling in any case. I couldn’t devote all of Dimension to Lorde, though. I had to meet up with Liner and Mr. Reynand. In order to find them, I spread Dimension thinly over a wide area.

“This... This is...” I gasped at the drastically changed world around me.

Many of the plants and trees that had once decorated the city had been reduced to cinders, and what little nature remained was discolored and nearly dead. Many houses that had been safe yesterday had collapsed and were now lying in ruins. The biggest thing was the bizarre lack of human presence. The weather might have had something to do with it, but more than that, the situation was not conducive to casual outings. If I believed Lorde's words, this place was now in the aftermath of the great war that had happened a thousand years ago, or perhaps even in the middle of it.

As I ran through the smoldering city, I finalized my plans. "First, I'll find Liner and Mr. Reynand... No, do we even have enough food to get through the Dungeon? Before we flee, I should make some preparations..."

"You there! Stop! Don't move!"

The next problem presented itself before I was even able to think. A group of people in imposing gear appeared in front of me as I ran through the rain. I had been thinking too much about what was to come and not paying enough attention to my surroundings.

There were five armored semifer men standing in defensive postures, swords drawn. It had been a long time since I'd seen anyone dressed like that. They looked a little like Dungeon divers from the surface. Perhaps deploying them was the reason Lorde had wanted to go so far as to shift this place's timeline. I tried to run past them but was forced to retreat thanks to the sharp blades that came at me from all sides.

"Huh?!" Surprised by their speed, I checked their stats. Starting from the left, they were Level 27, Level 24, Level 28, Level 24, and...well, anyway, they were all on par with me. And all of their Aptitudes had high values as well. They were not people I could ignore.

"Do not underestimate us. We are all members of the Queensguard. We won't let even our commander pass so easily." The knight with the highest level spoke for all of them.

The Queensguard. And he called me their commander. His politeness and strength reminded me of the Seven Celestial Knights that existed aboveground. However, these knights were from a

legendary era a thousand years ago. Not only was there a simple difference in power, but there was also a sense of intimidation peculiar to those living in times of war.

The knights continued to mutter as they carefully tried to surround me. “The power that was given to you...it is saddening to see it returned in this manner.”

“Now you have become a traitor, and we have no choice but to cross blades with you,” another said. The fire in their eyes was not just a reflection of the fires burning around us. They were probably thinking that even five of them were no match for me.

Even so, they wore expressions that said they would never back down. It was similar to the look I had on my face when I challenged a Guardian. I was convinced that if we fought, we would easily end up killing each other. To avoid that, I put my sword back in its sheath. From the way they spoke, it seemed they were old acquaintances of mine.

“I have no intention of fighting you. Will you listen to what I have to say?” I wanted to explain that this place was a space within the Dungeon. I wanted to tell them that they were in the hands of a Guardian from a thousand years ago. But it was not to be.

“We...cannot. Your words have power. And we do not have the power to judge their truth. Therefore, we could not listen to you even if we wanted to. We can no longer do anything but carry out our mission! Now we condemn the traitor, the Commander of the Queensguard!” With those words, the first semifer rushed forward. The others followed suit, attacking from the left, right, and even behind.

“Damn it!”

I had no choice but to draw my sword and intercept them. Almost at the same time, their five blades came at me as if to block my escape. The flash of their swords told me they were high-quality blades. It would take everything I had to repel them with my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword.

In the stormy streets of the city, the five-on-one fight struck up a unique, musical rhythm. And as we crossed swords, I could tell that I was the one who’d taught these knights how to use their blades.

To the extent that I could be sure of this, their fighting methods were logical and in line with modern values. They were thorough in attacking simultaneously, as they had the advantage of numbers. They never jumped in alone, and their prioritization of victory over pride as a warrior was a battle strategy favored by me when cornered. With this theory in mind, I could only defend against the wave of attacks, and I could find no opening to attack.

As I weaved and dodged my way between the flurry of sword flashes, I had a chance to think. Their battle methods were powerful, but their individual prowess was potent as well. At the same time, I had to wonder: Were there such fierce fighters in Viaysia before yesterday? No, there must not have been. I had confidence in my memory and understanding of the situation. No doubt, these were new faces to me. So where had they been?

Naturally, I put Analyze to use. The power of Dimension, amplified by my increase in level, brought one piece of information to my mind. It was the luminous color of their magic power. I had seen that magic power—or rather, I had seen the light of this magic gem before. I believed it was in Viaysia's dark sky. The light of the stars that had been shining faintly above and the light of the knights' magic power were exactly the same. After comparing it to my own memories, I was convinced. They had been floating in the sky as magic gems until yesterday. However, because the time axis of this place had shifted, they had been called back to the world once more. Lorde and Nosfy had chosen to do that.

"Dimension: Calculash!" The moment I understood that, I consumed a large amount of MP to cast my spell. Given their advantage, I couldn't afford to waste time. I released my magic and let my sword fly with all my might. The blue phosphorescence of the Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword became a thin line, striking down the five opposing swords, slashing the arms and legs of the beastmen and rendering them unable to fight. The battle was over in an instant due to the brute-force approach I took in leveraging the difference in our stats.

"Ugh..." The knights groaned as they fell.

"Please tell me, do you know where Liner and Mr. Reynand are?"

I asked. If we didn't leave, their roles would never be fulfilled. I tried to quickly gather information to rejoin my friends, but what I got were completely unrelated words.

"Commander... No, Lord Kanami... Why...did you betray us?" one asked, face contorted with grief.

I couldn't ignore their voices, although I had no recollection of what had happened back then.

"We believed in you. We believed you were the second savior. So...why?" asked another.

"Even though you were a knight of the South, you were kind to us sorcerers. You were so close with us that we didn't feel the slightest bit of discrimination," added a third.

"You lied about everything! Did you really hate us deep down in your heart, Lord Kanami?!" the fourth cried accusingly.

I guessed that they weren't thinking about Liner and Mr. Reynand.

"That... That's..." I stuttered. I had no memory of those days, so of course I couldn't answer a single question.

"Please give us back our Sovereign Queen Lorde. She is our hope, our guide on the path we had to take to survive."

"Without Lorde, this country will perish."

"Tell us, why did you take our queen?"

I could hear nothing but an inarticulate noise coming from the back of my throat. I wanted to say "You've got the wrong guy," but those words were choked off by the sad eyes of the semifer knights. I shouldn't have been allowed to even stand in front of them because I had no answers. At least, that's how I felt.

"I'm sorry. I have to go..."

I apologized for not remembering anything and ran off, leaving them lying in the rain. As I ran, the heavy storm that continued to pound the streets seemed to be playing a thunderous requiem. Deciding that it was impossible to ask people for the whereabouts of my friends, I deployed Dimension over a wide area.

"Layered Dimension!"

Before anything else, I looked for Mr. Reynand's house. Even though this land was spread out over an empire, there was no doubt

that the neighborhood was in the country of Viaysia. If we were to decide on a place to meet up, I thought his house would be the only option. But I couldn't find it. The town must have developed and declined over time. The information I'd had up until yesterday was of no use to me now.

As I was recreating a map of Viaysia from scratch in my mind, I noticed a familiar store on my way through the streets. Apparently, it had remained unchanged over the years as time and war had ravaged Viaysia. It was a general store with food, as I recalled. Thinking that it might not be a bad idea to restock, I rushed into the store. But what awaited me inside was...

"Total destruction."

Everything was in disarray, as if a storm had raged through the interior. It was no longer a functional shop. The shelves displaying merchandise had been destroyed, and everything was scattered across the ground. There were numerous sword marks on everything and a dead body in one of the corners. It was a semifer woman, whose upper and lower body had been separated. Like the store, I recognized her. It was the same woman who had helped me with my shopping over the past few days.

"Was she...someone who died in this timeline?"

A great deal of blood was smeared all over the store. What I felt most strongly from this brutal scene was sadness more than discomfort. No matter how many conversations I'd had with her, in the end, this was the truth. This city had already died a thousand years ago. But there was no time for such sentimentality, and I quickly shook my head. I hurriedly filled the store with Dimension to find something to eat.

"Damn it..."

I couldn't find anything. I had hoped to find some food hidden away amid the destruction, but as if to mock my impatience, there wasn't a single piece of bread to be found. It was possible that there was a national shortage because of the war. Or perhaps it had endured an enemy invasion and been looted. I could tell that the world had become a place where it was difficult even to steal things, let alone buy them.

Sparing no time, I ran out of the store and back into the storm outside. I was promptly spotted by a new group of semifer knights who were roaming the streets.

"There he is! It's Kanami, the betrayer!"

It seemed that because Dimension was focused far away for mapping purposes, my view of the surrounding area had been inadequate. Or no, perhaps I was simply disturbed by the situation. I was upset and distracted, as Lorde wanted me to be.

After taking a big, deep breath, I ran as fast as I could to get away from the knights. Even if I beat them, I would not get any experience or magic gems, and I had no confidence that I could successfully extract information from them. There was no reason to fight them at all. Fortunately, I was good at running from enemies. I had a lot of specialized magic exactly for that purpose.

While I was being chased around, I was also carefully bringing the new map of Viaysia closer to completion. In addition, I was able to eavesdrop on the exchange of information among the semifer knights who were running around. Just as I was about to complete my map, I overheard one of the words I was waiting for in a conversation between knights on the main street.

"You must find him! The Vohlz family mansion is nearby! The acting commander will be here in a few minutes! We must keep Lord Kanami in this area until then!"

"Lady Elizabeth Vohlz can handle it, even if she has to deal with the commander!"

I stopped in an alley and focused on the conversation. "Elizabeth Vohlz?"

I felt that that might be the full name of Mr. Reynand's granddaughter, Beth. That little girl was the acting commander? If the timeline had been shifted, then Beth's age would have changed a lot since I last saw her. Thanks to Reynand's blood, she had plenty of potential. It wasn't so surprising that as an adult, her position was that of a knight in the Queensguard. And if the conversation was true, then Beth's mansion was nearby. The reason I couldn't find it with Dimension wasn't because the Vohlz family didn't exist, but because the building may have changed drastically. If Beth was an

adult and Mr. Reynand had reached the end of his life, there was a possibility that even the workshop I knew so well would not be there.

I focused Dimension on the area around me rather than the whole of Viaysia. Then, without relying on the external features of the building, I checked the interiors one by one. There was a barracks with a smoldering fire, a store without a single item left, a warehouse full of burnt corpses, a fortress where soldiers were stationed, and a mansion that was the size of at least ten houses. Within that mansion, I found two familiar faces. In the entrance hall, which was spacious enough to host a ball, an injured Reynand and Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence, stood facing each other.

"I finally found—"

Just as I found them, Dimension shook as Viaysia was hit by an earthquake. Dimension deactivated, and I was thrown off-balance. Then, the exact same words I had just spoken came out of someone else's mouth.

"I finally found you." A high voice echoed from deep in the darkness of the alleyway, and a tall woman appeared. Every step she took was filled with magical power that seemed to have the earth attribute. There was no need to analyze it with Dimension to see that it was the cause of the earthquake. It was the first time I had seen this kind of magic. It was as if a giant statue were walking, shaking Viaysia with every step.

I balanced on the trembling earth and looked at her face. She had large eyes, a high nose, and light-pink lips revealing canine teeth, although it didn't matter what her features were. This woman looked just like the girl, Beth. And I knew before even seeing her stats that she was the grown-up version of that little girl.

Adult Beth was dressed in impressive armor. Her red hair reached down to her waist, with uniquely shaped feline ears sticking out from each side of her head. "Your appearance has changed, but there's no mistaking your footsteps, Lord Commander." Her statement indicated that she was proficient at earth-aligned magic. Furthermore, her stats displayed just how much of a threat she was.

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[STATUS]
NAME: Elizabeth Vohlz
HP 721/721
MP 103/143
CLASS: Knight
Level: 33
STR 15.91
VIT 14.46
DEX 12.01
AGI 6.44
INT 5.04
MAG 6.72
APT 1.52
INNATE SKILLS: Axes 0.89 Fire Magic 1.56 Earth Magic
1.67
ACQUIRED SKILLS: Swordplay 1.43 Smithing 0.88
Confectionary 1.56 Cooking 1.09 Knitting 1.00 Music
1.32
```

She had surpassed her grandfather. There was no mistaking it: this Elizabeth Vohlz was strong. I had no time to fight her, but it didn't seem like the magic emanating from her feet would allow me to escape.

"*Flame Flamberge*!" She drew a thin sword from her waist and directed the fire along it.

Unlike Maria's *Flame Flamberge*, Beth's fire seemed to be more for support, but I couldn't let my guard down. After all, her primary magic was earth, not fire.

"Lord Commander, looking at this country, I finally remembered... I am Elizabeth Vohlz. I was your subordinate."

The magic she was unleashing was dangerous, but her speech was gentle. I had hopes that maybe I could get past her without having to fight.

"I think I've become quite good at baking the sweets you taught

me to make. I practiced for a long, long time after you left." In the hand not holding the sword was a small package. "I believed you would return and have been waiting for you for a long time. Yes, a very long time. I waited, alone, until the end. I believed, until the very end, that you would come back to help me." She moved closer as she gave her speech, speaking to me directly as she showed me the cookies in the small package she carried. "You finally ate them the other day. How were they? Did they taste like your old home?"

From this exchange, I understood that her memory was continuous. "Beth. Do you remember what happened up until yesterday?"

"Yes, barely. Perhaps because of the strength of the blood that flows through my body," she replied, nodding slowly.

Seeing that, I stepped forward, finding hope in my heart. I knew she had a lot to say to me, but right now, Mr. Reynand was in danger. If I told her that her grandfather was at risk, the two of us might be able to work together to get through it.

"Beth! Right now, this Viaysia is going through a lot of strange things because of Lorde and Nosfy! They are trying to turn time to the war and do something they shouldn't! And right now Mr. Reynand is standing alone against them..."

"What's wrong with that?" she interrupted me with an incredibly indifferent voice.

I was surprised by her indifference, even though I had mentioned Mr. Reynand. "What's wrong with... Beth, do you really want the city to stay this way?"

"Of course. It's fine."

"It's not fine at all! They're trying to thoughtlessly recreate the battles of a thousand years ago! That's unacceptable!"

"So?"

"So?!"

As Beth continued to answer coldly, I noticed a huge difference in our states. She was not resentful of the situation. Rather, she was grateful. What she resented was something else. Perhaps...

"So, now is not the time for you to be talking to me? So, this war ended a thousand years ago and no one should remember it now?

So, you don't care one bit about the sins you committed a thousand years ago? Can you, of all people, truly say that?"

Beth was angry with me. She looked me straight in the eye and took no notice of her surroundings.

"Listen to me carefully, Lord Commander. The others have been mercifully worn out, but not me. My fight is still going on. You taught me that. War is war until it is forgotten. War is war until the bereaved are exterminated. As long as there is even a single testimony left, the war is not over. No, it will never be over! You must not pretend it never happened!"

Finally her wild emotions showed on her face. I understood the reason for her anger. It seemed that Beth could not forgive me for, above all, making light of what had happened a thousand years ago. However, there was nothing I could do about it now. As long as I had no means of recovering my memories, there was no way I could sympathize with her words. I had no choice but to retreat silently. Yet she continued to advance on me as I backed away, as if she wanted to condemn me further.

"So that silence is your answer. You have forgotten. You've forgotten the past, forgotten Viaysia, your men, me, everything, and you've run away."

I'd been naive to believe she'd cooperate with me. I had found hope in this place, even though Lorde had assured me so clearly of the truth.

"At that time, in that place, when I was all alone, you told me that you would become my family. But you forgot that too..." With a thin smile that looked like it would tear at any moment, Beth dropped the package in her hand to the ground. Then, she clenched her free hand. "So we have no choice but to fight. You are surely the last lingering attachment that binds me. Flame Accelerator."

She's coming. At the same moment I thought that, her body disappeared. A beat later, the ground shook. Following the shaking, the place where she'd been standing was gouged out and dirt went flying about with an ear-shattering pop. Dimension detected the cause of this phenomenon. It was a non-incantation combination of fire and earth magic—the magic of physical strengthening that Mr.

Reynand had once shown me.

With that magic, Beth kicked the earth and dived into the space between my arms and chest. She moved with frightening speed. Her legs were glowing a pale red from the Flame Accelerator spell. The rapid acceleration caused by her extraordinary muscle strength easily ignored the concept of distance.

"*Dimension: Calculash*!" I constructed my magic as her flaming sword swung through the air. I read the sword's trajectory and twisted myself away, dodging the attack just in time.

"Devour! *Flame Flamberge*!"

The flames that had nipped at my sleeves flared up as if touching oil. At this rate, they would engulf my entire body. I immediately ripped the sleeve from my shirt and threw it away. But while I was doing that, Beth's backswing was coming right at me. Deciding that it was too late to evade, I used my magic.

"*Dimension: Faultline*!" I leaped several meters backward by way of spatial compression.

"*Grasp and grind*! *Earthquake*!"

My landing was met with an earthquake, and my knees folded as if I'd been hit by a foot sweep. I lost my balance and almost fell down. By the time I'd recovered, Beth had drawn close again.

"Th-This..."

I was finally forced to draw my sword against her barrage of blows. The two blades, my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword and her *Flame Flamberge*, met. I cut Beth a little and moved to overwhelm her with Swordplay to make her flinch. But to my surprise, what unfolded was an evenly matched sword fight.

"What?!"

My Swordplay, Speed, and Technique stats were all much higher than hers, yet I was being overwhelmed even so. It wasn't long before I understood the reason for the inexplicable struggle. *Dimension* was getting me all the information I needed. As per our ruthless difference in status, there were many times when Beth was unable to follow my attacks with her eyes. In those instances, she was, unbelievably, intercepting my attacks with Intuition. If she was as skilled as she seemed, her Intuition must've been backed up by

some sort of experience, but it was too good. It was like she knew all the cards in my hand. It was so accurate and audacious that it felt like she was reading my mind.

I was sure that Beth was used to fighting with me. There was no other explanation. Perhaps my lost memories from a thousand years ago were filled with days when we'd trained together.

I abandoned the idea of taking Beth to see Mr. Reynand. It would be difficult to even get her there, let alone ask for her cooperation. Her power was dangerous, but above all, I didn't want Mr. Reynand to see that she'd forgotten him.

"I'm sorry, Beth! I can't deal with you right now!" I changed course and leaped backward through a gap in the flurry of blades. I then kicked off one of the alley walls and climbed onto a roof. That should lessen the effects of her earthquake spells a bit.

"I won't let you get away!" Beth kicked off the ground as well and leaped into the air.

I didn't wait for her to land; I just took off across the rooftops. This time, I wouldn't use *Dimension: Faultline*. Instead of using magic, I was aiming for a simple contest of Speed and Strength. Comparing our bare stats, the difference between us was obvious. She might be able to keep up with me for a bit by using *Flame Accelerator*, but I could just wait for her MP to run out. Even when comparing our MP, I was the clear winner.

"*Flame Accelerator*!" Beth converted all of her magical power into Speed to chase me. The distance between us instantly became zero, but I wasn't flustered. Every time she caught up with me, I calmly responded with my sword, found an opening, and then disengaged. I kept repeating this.

A strange game of tag began in the sky above the city of Viaysia. We jumped from rooftop to rooftop against the background where the flames of war were rising, and traded blows with our swords. About two minutes into our game, Beth began to stall, breathing heavily. The pained expression on her face indicated that it was more than simple physical exhaustion. It was likely because of her continued use of *Flame Accelerator*. I assumed it was the kind of spell that one could use to surpass their physical limits.

As soon as I saw the distance between us expand, I took off my shoes and began running barefoot. "If you're listening to my footsteps in order to chase me..." It might hurt my feet, but I didn't have any other options. I put my Burned Otherworld Shoes into my Inventory to disguise my steps at least a little.

Beth watched from a distance, surprised. "You... You took them off!" she cried. "I knew you would run away, Lord Commander! You're the same as you used to be! You really ran away from this place!"

She looked and spoke as if she didn't want me to see the act that she was putting on. But I didn't know what she meant. Deciding that there was nothing I could do about it now, I changed direction and headed for the mansion where Mr. Reynand and Nosfy were.

Just as I broke away from Beth's pursuit, I heard a wailing sound behind me.

"Ohhh, Lord Commander! Lord Commander, Lord Commander, Lord Commander, Lord Coooommaaaaanderrrrr!!!"

That cry shook the air. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't waste any more time. All I could do now was to return this place to its original state as soon as possible and return everyone to a world of peace and tranquility.

Repeating this in my mind, I continued to sprint across the rooftops, looking out for anyone who might be following me.

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I was breathing heavily as I ran across the rooftops. This place was dangerous. My—no, Kanami the Founder's—enemies from a thousand years ago were numerous. If I took my time, the number of foes standing in my way would only increase. I was up against skilled knights who knew me well, even though I had no memory of them. I had to meet up with Liner and Mr. Reynand as quickly as possible so that we could get out of here. I ran as fast as I could, even though I was out of breath, and finally arrived at the mansion. Seeing it in person, I really felt the grandeur of the place, and I was convinced it was where Mr. Reynand had been living. The grounds

had been enlarged and extended, the workshop crushed, but there were certainly remnants of it left.

I sprinted through the garden and shoved open the main door. If the information *Dimension* was telling me was correct, there were only three people inside.

"Mr. Reynand!" I shouted as soon as I opened the door. But it wasn't his voice that replied to me. It was a soft, girlish one.

"Hee hee, I expected as much, Master Kanami!"

In the entryway, lined with gleaming furniture, stood Mr. Reynand and Nosfy, but there was a huge difference in their appearances. While Nosfy had no wounds on her, Mr. Reynand was so injured that he was unable to reply. An arrow of magical light had pierced deep into his thigh, and he was kneeling on the floor. He also had other small cuts all over his body, and his clothes were in tatters. One of his arms was bent at a strange angle, and his weapon, a large axe, was lying on the floor. From his bloodied appearance, I knew he was in critical condition without even looking at his stats.

Nosfy, who must've been the one who'd hurt him, spoke to me with the same smile I'd seen on her face day in and day out. "You managed to escape from Lorde and the city overflowing with hostility in such a short amount of time? Hee hee, you're the same as ever, truly." She had her weapon, a flag, pointed at Mr. Reynand, but lowered it as her interest shifted to me.

"Nosfy!" I shouted as I approached. "Enough already! Return this place to how it used to be at once! This is all your doing, isn't it?!" I pointed my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword at her, feeling a mix of anger and animosity.

But she remained cool under the full force of my pressure. "Yes. Lorde asked me to do it, and I did. If you insist so much, I don't mind putting it back, but what are you going to do with it after that?"

"After that? What—"

"You're going to take Hellvilleshine and Vohlz, throw away the past, and escape up to the surface, right?" she asked, although she seemed to have assumed my answer from the start. She had a nasty expression on her face as she finished my statement for me and

then proceeded to shake her head sadly. “That’s no good. No good at all, Master Kanami. That will make Lorde sad again. I thought you were going to cheer her up. Weren’t you supposed to fulfill my selfish desires? You didn’t keep your promise...”

You said you just wanted to be selfish, and now you’re saying this?!

But it made me understand. She was different from Lorde. Lorde was suffering, lost, and crying. But this girl was the exact opposite.

“Because I have to! I said I have to go to the surface to bring Ide back here! As long as she has Ide, she can fulfill her lingering attachment! She’ll be happy! Then it will all be over!”

“But if you all go to the surface, she’ll be sad. I don’t want to see my friend’s face like that! Please don’t make her cry, Master Kanami!”

“It will only be a few days before I’m back with Ide! You just need to be strong for a few more days!” I yelled.

“NO! Don’t worry! We’ve prepared a plan that will satisfy everyone! Hee hee, Lorde and I had a lot of fun coming up with it!”

She laughed. On the surface, it seemed like both of us still had enough composure to argue back and forth, but this was no longer a conversation. Nosfy had no interest in listening to what I had to say. She just kept talking rapidly and selfishly.

“Seriously! There’s no need for you to go aboveground! If we all live here together, everything will be all right! We can fulfill her lingering attachment without making her sad! But it may take a thousand years—or even ten thousand—until she disappears completely!” She continued, giggling.

“Ten thousand?! You plan to stay here for ten thousand years?”

“Yes, I think it will probably take about that long. So why don’t you stay here for ten thousand years with us and reflect on the past? It’s not a bad idea for you either. Didn’t you feel guilty about a lot of things on your way out of town? Well, now you can atone for the crime of destroying this place, right? Penance is a good thing. It lightens the heart.”

She’d hit the nail on the head, and I thought back to the knights and Beth, from whom I’d just escaped. I couldn’t shake that off so

easily, so I asked in return, “Then you’re saying the state of this place is my fault?”

“Yes, of course. In the past, there were tens of thousands of people living here in Viaysia, and you deceived and killed them all. What could you call that but a sin? Therefore, you must be punished. Otherwise, it won’t add up. No matter how you look at it, you should reflect on your life here for at least ten thousand years. Yes, you should do the same thing that my dear friend Lorde has been doing for the past thousand years. Without a doubt, you are obligated to do so. Oh! And of course, I will be atoning with you, so don’t worry! I’m so thrilled to be living here, constantly apologizing to them all!”

“You’re thrilled? Does that mean it’s also connected to resolving your own lingering attachment?”

“What? It’s not connected at all. It’s Lorde’s wish to be with us here for tens of thousands years, and it’s your sin that turned this place into hell. I have nothing to do with it. Therefore, there’s no way for me to disappear. Actually, I think my body will become stronger because of the stress of being trapped underground for ten thousand years. Hee hee hee!”

“Why, you!” This exchange had me convinced—she clearly didn’t care for my suggested compromise, so we’d never be able to have a proper discussion.

Nosfy was taking in the bewildered expression on my face. “What’s the matter? This place is a world for you and Lorde! This isn’t something that I wanted! I’m just here! Therefore, my lingering attachments are safe and unharmed. I’ll never disappear! Hee hee hee, yes, it’s soooo unfortunate!”

“This isn’t something you wanted?! Liar! Then why?! Why are you making that face?!”

Nosfy was laughing. She’d been laughing since this morning. Instead of the mature smile she’d had on her face when she was first summoned on floor sixty, she was wearing a smile of childlike innocence. I didn’t need to look too closely to know that these were her true feelings. She was really enjoying herself, embarrassing me. At the same time, the question I’d had last night was now cleared

up. When I'd refused her, her lingering attachment had weakened. The reason for that was clear to me now. Nosfy enjoyed seeing me suffer. Yesterday, she must have learned the true nature of her own lingering attachment and began to devote all her energy to annoying me.

"'That face'? Oh, was I laughing? Hee hee, ha ha ha! Was I laughing as I watched you become so frantic? Was I laughing the whole time, since this morning? Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean too but, hee hee hee, I just can't, ha ha, stop LAUGHING! Hee hee, aha ha ha, aha ha ha ha ha HA HA HA!!!"

There was nothing but ill intent in her words. Her body shook like she was trying to suppress hiccups, and she covered her mouth with her hands.

"*Dimension: Calculash*!" I took a step forward and swung my sword, incensed by her taunts. It was the first time I'd ever made a move on someone who was talking to me.

Nosfy avoided it easily. I bit my lip as I watched her brilliant evasion.

"Hee hee! Oh, Master Kanami, stop making such a face! You'll inadvertently resolve my lingering attachment, hee hee hee, and I'll disappear!"

It was worth it, because I'd been able to change my position within the entryway and put Mr. Reynand behind me. I felt a wave of magic come from him. He was out of breath, but by using me as a wall, he could afford to cast a recovery spell on himself.

"Hey, Nosfy," I said as I continued to protect Mr. Reynand. "Do you really hate me that much? Are you my enemy?" Although I had fought her in the Dungeon at Liner's insistence, I still hadn't given up on the idea of reconciliation with the Guardian. I was hopeful that I could do for Lorde and Nosfy what I hadn't been able to do for Alty.

"Whaaat?! No way! Please don't say such saddening things! I'm on your side! Because I love you, Master Kanami! I've been in love with you ever since I was born. I'm still in love with you! There's no way I could ever be your enemy! If possible, I would like to become husband and wife again! I'm speaking from the bottom of my heart!

I love you very, very much!”

But I was reaching my limit. Neither Alty nor Palinchron had shown such blatant malice. The Thief of Light’s Essence in front of me was so deceitful that just standing opposite her was making me lose motivation.

“Then why do you look so happy to see me like this?!” I asked. I’d been able to sense the righteousness in every word of every conversation I’d had with Alty or Palinchron. While they might have lied for the sake of winning, they weren’t the kind to lie purely out of malice. I didn’t get that sense at all from the girl who was wriggling her body in pleasure in front of me, though.

“Hee hee, aha, aha ha ha! Is that so strange?! It’s not so unusual for love and hate to coexist, is it?! It’s the thing that makes you want to tease the girl you’ve got a crush on! I think it’s quite common. Therefore, I’m incredibly normal! Hee hee! Hee hee hee!”

“You’re normal?! It’s common?! How can you say that?!”

“The outcome of love and hate coexisting... I just think it would be nice if I could stay by your side and watch you suffer for a long, long time! Yes, that’s why I want to be a married couple again. Just thinking about the pain that you would go through having such a bride makes my heart soar. To be honest, I can’t stop my excitement! Hee hee, aha ha ha ha!!!” Nosfy’s smile grew even wider. It was full of malice and glittered with poison. It was a look that clearly proved that I’d been dealing with conscientious Guardians up until now.

“You’re crazy... You’re abnormal, and your lingering attachment is just inappropriate.” After a moment of stunned silence, that was all I could say.

“Huh? Abnormal? What do you mean?” Nosfy brushed it off with an unshakable smile. “I really think this is a normal lingering attachment. I just want a cute little revenge, you know? Revenge! Revenge! I think it’s a very, very common wish for a dying person. Frankly, wishes like Lorde’s and Lorwen’s are crazier. They’re the anomalies.”

“You!”

I turned my full hostility on her; even fulfilling her friend’s wish

was no excuse for this. But she seemed to take it happily. Then, with an expression that said she couldn't take any more, she shook her head.

"Hee hee, please! I mean it, stop! If you're in too much pain, my fun will be over too quickly! And that's not good. Not good at all! I still want to be happy! I haven't been selfish enough yet! I want to repeat more incorrect things and make more and more mistakes! I want to see the pained expression on your face every time! But...the most important thing is balance. I have to regulate it all very carefully so that I don't disappear. At the very end, I want to see you suffer like you did last night as I forced you to give me proof of our bond. Yes, our first time together will be our last! It would be a waste if I didn't enjoy every little bit of it until then! Hee hee, aha, aha ha ha, aha ha ha ha ha!"

Nosfy was in a good mood, but my thoughts were just getting colder. It was impossible. These were Nosfy's true feelings. She just wanted to make me suffer; that was all. There was no way I could make peace with someone like that.

"Then you're my enemy! In that case, I have no problem killing you right here, right now!" I would kill her. I would deal with her like I would a monster, not a Guardian. With that determination, I glared at her, but she looked back at me, puzzled.

"What?! You're going to kill me? But why? I love you so much. I care so deeply for you. Yet you're saying you'll cut me down and throw me away if I stand in your way? That's just terrible!" Nosfy broke down in tears.

I was caught off guard by her reaction, incoherent as it was in light of the preceding conversation. "What? Don't be ridiculous! You just said you want to make me suffer! You're my enemy!"

"I didn't really want to do this either! But I had to! You made me! You made me do what I had to to get revenge! And yet you still refuse to allow it to happen!" Her overflowing tears scattered.

"I made you do it? How in the world did I..." My voice instantly became quieter in the face of this sudden change.

"I lied. I can even lie to you now. I'm like a child, aren't I? Please give me a compliment."

"Nosfy!!!"

I swung my sword without even thinking. I couldn't take any rash actions with the wounded Mr. Reynand behind me, but her words made me move. My sword was slow, since I'd let my emotions get the better of me. She sidestepped it and continued to speak happily. The tips of her outstretched fingers came to rest on my forehead as she spoke leisurely.

"Hee hee hee. But Master Kanamiii...this is also something you taught me: look cuter when you're asking for something. If that doesn't work, start crying! If that *still* doesn't work, then cry as hard as you can! You taught me a long time ago that's the best way to get what you want! In other words, most if not all of this is your fault! First, Lorde and me—and the country of Viaysia and its history, the Knights of the Queensguard and the people of the city, the culture of everyday life and scientific knowledge—really, it's pretty much everything! Yeah, everything! All of it is your fault!" Her tone was aloof and sarcastic as she laid a lot of the blame at my feet.

"So you're saying it's my fault we're in this situation? That's why you want me to stay here? You've got to be kidding me!"

And yet I couldn't fully dismiss her claims. It was true that this place existed in the present because of my actions a thousand years ago. The names "Aikawa Kanami," "Kanami the Founder," and "Commander of the Queensguard" had taken root in every corner of this place. Everything here resented me for it. It was chasing me, trying to make me pay for my sins. It would prove that I had committed a crime in the past and escaped punishment. Nosfy's words entangled my thoughts, and my body stiffened.

Seeing that, she cutely placed both of her forefingers against her mouth. "Uh-oh! I'm in danger! I can't let myself win this argument, now can I?" She took a step back, ending any further discussion.

The way she spoke allowed me to catch a glimpse of her confidence in the idea that she would never be defeated in either conversation or battle. It was unsurprising that the only thing she was concerned about right now was "winning."

"I'm not the one who's supposed to break your heart, Master Kanami. That's Lorde's job. I'm just a minor extra. In terms of turns,

mine will come up toward the end of those ten thousand years. This time, if I don't get the last part right, I probably won't die..."

Nosfy was intentionally avoiding fulfilling her lingering attachment in order to live a long life. From the way she spoke, it was obvious to me that she was looking ahead to those years after Lorde disappeared.

"You're really gonna spend that long here?" I felt such fear over her outrageously farsighted perspective that I regained my composure, albeit temporarily. If I let my emotions get the better of me, I would really be stuck here for ten thousand years. I absolutely had to prevent that from happening.

With a cooler head, I waited to hear what she would say next. A moment of silence spread through the entryway, and then the door was suddenly thrown open with a bang as a semifer girl entered.

"Commander? Commander, Commander, Commaaannnddeerrr!!! Oh! I found you! I didn't expect to find you here!" It was Beth. She was covered in sweat and breathing heavily. She must have run all the way here.

Nosfy welcomed the sudden visitor with open arms. "Hee hee hee, I made sure to stop him in his tracks, Elizabeth. I'm glad you noticed my faint magic signal. You really are good at reading the slightest tremor, aren't you? I commend you!" Nosfy clapped her hands cutely and gestured for Beth to join us. From her words, I deduced that our whole conversation had been a stalling tactic.

After a quick bow, Beth went and stood next to Nosfy, not Mr. Reynand. "Thank you for your cooperation, Your Holiness."

"No, there's no need to thank me. Our interests are aligned. Now, Elizabeth, you have all of your regrets in front of you. Please make sure you settle them. That's all I ask of you. Ah, but...since we're here, let's hope for a little more. If you are going to die, please do it in front of Master Kanami. If possible, I would like you to be blaming him as you do so. Please let all that anger out and then finish. Can you do that?"

"Yes, my anger will accomplish that before fulfilling your request." At Nosfy's urging, Beth angled her sword at me.

"Hee hee, good answer, Elizabeth."

Nosfy's clapping grew louder. I realized that the worsening situation was also due to her stalling. The reason she'd been strangely talkative was because she'd been waiting for Beth.

"Well, as Elizabeth fights, I'm going to go get my friend Lorde. It seems like she hasn't noticed my signs and is working hard to destroy the doorway to this place. The plan would still work if the door is destroyed, but it's too much of a circuitous route to success," Nosfy sighed.

"Wait! Nosfy!!!"

"I won't wait. Both the incomplete Master Kanami and geriatric General Vohlz were surprisingly formidable, so I have to modify my plan a bit. Please wait here with Elizabeth for a bit, Master Kanami. Lorde and I will be back soon."

She happily walked out the front door, not even trying to conceal her plans. She was the one who'd created the current situation. I tried to get her to stop and fix what she'd done, but Beth interrupted me.

"I'm not going to let you get away again, Commander. I understand everything now. The anger from my past life has made these thousand years unbearable. Now, a thousand years later, I'm going take it all out on you!"

My way forward was blocked. I cooled my anger and gave up on chasing Nosfy. I'd been too confused for too long. What mattered now was neither Nosfy nor this place. What was important was to escape to the surface with Mr. Reynand, who was waiting behind me, and Liner—once I found him. I just needed to defeat Beth alone, and then the three of us would be able to move. With that mercenary point of view, I had to start dealing with the girl in my way.

A hand from behind stopped my advance. "Wait, laddie," Mr. Reynand said. "Let me deal with Beth. Thanks to you, I had a good rest." Despite being covered in wounds, he was standing up and trying to step in front of me. It had felt like he'd used some recovery magic while I was covering him, but it was clear he was nowhere near fully recovered.

"No, you can't! That's Beth!"

“That’s exactly why I must. Your opponent is that girl of light, and my opponent is Beth. Take Liner and run, laddie. He’s sleeping in the inner part of the mansion.”

“You’ll die if you push yourself too hard with those injuries!”

Mr. Reynand, who was like a towering pillar of rock, was looking as weak as a dead tree on the verge of falling. He didn’t look like he was capable of a proper fight, and his stats told the same story.

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[STATUS]
NAME: Reynand Vohlz
HP: 54/589
MP: 7/123
CLASS: Blacksmith
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Seeing me trying to stop Mr. Reynand’s advance, Beth stepped forward with a frustrated expression. She didn’t like anything that was happening. “That old man seems to be very important to you, even though you threw away your former subordinates without a second thought!”

“‘That old man’?! Mr. Reynand is your grandfather, isn’t he?! Did you forget something that important?” I retorted quickly. I couldn’t stand to see her treating him like a stranger.

Hearing this, she looked at me with deep confusion. “My grandfather? What are you talking about?”

“You two are family! You lived here together for a thousand years, didn’t you?! No, even in your past life, you two—”

“*Flame Accelerator*!” Mr. Reynand’s attack interrupted me. He magically strengthened his body, reached out his thick arms, and caught me by the scruff of my neck. Then, with his mighty strength, he threw me directly behind him.

I was unable to react to this unexpected attack from my ally. “Mr. Reynand! What are you doing?!” I shouted as I was sent flying toward the interior of the mansion.

“It’s not the same, laddie,” he replied, keeping his brawny back turned to me. “Don’t be deceived. The witch is after your kindness.

Listen, laddie, there is no persuasion or other easy path left for us to follow. My unworthy grandchild has been brought into focus by the witch at the worst point in her life. Probably at the lowest point, when she was most resentful of you. Therefore, it is useless to try to talk about it."

"That may be so, but..."

His statement was too accurate. I had no response, since I had been stalled by Nosfy just a few minutes earlier. I guessed his advice —that talk was useless—included not only the conversation with Beth here, but also the earlier one with Nosfy.

Mr. Reynand fell into a fighting stance. Before I knew it, he had picked up his greataxe off the floor and leveled it at his granddaughter. "Beth, that boy over there isn't the commander you know, and you're already dead. We, the dead, will not drag him into the abyss."

"Who...are you? You look important..." She spoke irritably to Mr. Reynand, who was in her way.

"I look important, huh? Well, I've been important to some extent, yes."

"You don't know anything about me, and yet... You don't know the depths of my lingering attachment, so don't talk big!"

"Hmph. You let go of your self-consciousness too soon and now you're the one who's talking big. You're acting like it's a tragedy when your lingering attachment is nothing close to mine."

"What?!" Beth, who'd had her whole foundation refuted, gradually shifted her hostility from me to Mr. Reynand. At the same time, her magical power began to swell and pulsate to the point that I could physically hear the earth rumbling. Their magic was stirred up so much that I thought they were going to start fighting to the death immediately.

"Mr. Reynand!" I shouted, trying to stop them. I couldn't stand to see family fight.

"Let me do this, laddie. I have always wanted to face my family. This is my role. Please don't take it away from me."

The way he said "I have always wanted to face my family," made me stop in my tracks. I knew that if I were in the same position, I

would've said the same thing.

"Just go, laddie! What are you stopping for? You have your own family! Don't make a mistake! Go to the surface! Run to your people!" He was asking us to abandon them. Then he cast another spell. "*Earthquake*!"

It was the same one that Beth had used earlier, but its power was on a totally different scale. As soon as Ms. Reynand's foot hit the floor, the entire mansion shook violently. With just that one tremor, weblike cracks shot through the walls, and several of the pillars at the entrance shattered. There were continuous muffled cracking noises, and a sound much like an avalanche reverberated from far away. Dust and bits of wood fell from the ceiling with each aftershock.

It seemed like the house would collapse at any moment. In fact, *Dimension* sensed that it was imminent. The shattered pillars were all important parts of the building. Mr. Reynand knew what the main supports of the house were and had targeted them for destruction. The spell had only one purpose—to keep me away. If the collapse continued at this rate, Liner, who was unconscious somewhere in the mansion, would be in danger. If he was buried alive, even someone of his strength would die. Mr. Reynand had cast *Earthquake* in order to force me to save the younger man.

"I'll be back with Liner soon! Just hold on till then, Mr. Reynand!" I had no choice but to leave the situation in his hands and go rescue Liner. I opened a nearby door and ran to the back of the mansion.

"Hmph, that's fine. Don't come back..." His voice was gentle as he responded. It was as gentle as a father finally telling off a spoiled child.

And then I heard Beth's voice as she faced him. "What a waste of time. I will end this in an instant before the building collapses. I won't let the Lord Commander get away."

"Yes. Let's end this. Everything has gone far enough." The voice Mr. Reynand used on his grandchild was equally gentle. It lingered in my ears as I ran through the corridors of the crumbling mansion. Gentle, but faint, like a last will and testament, the voice continued reverberating in my mind.

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I wouldn't be able to place a *Connection* inside the crumbling mansion, and because of the obstacles in the way, I couldn't use *Dimension: Faultline* either. All I could do was focus on *Dimension* as I ran.

"*Layered Dimension*!"

I found Liner quickly. He had collapsed in the corner of what appeared to be a storage room. Mr. Reynand had wrapped a giant overcoat around him like a blanket to protect him from the cold. However, because of the shaking of the house, the items in the room looked like they were about to topple over onto him. I ran as fast as I could on the trembling ground and entered the storage room.

"Liner! Wake up!" I yelled as I pulled the coat off him and slapped his exposed face. I didn't hold back because we just didn't have time. It was a slap that was practically an attack.

Liner scrunched up his now red face and slowly sat up. "Ow! Sieg? Why are you here?"

"Sorry, but we don't have time to chat. Mr. Reynand is in danger! We have to go save him and then get to the surface!" I told him the gist of what was going on and pulled him to his feet.

"I... Okay... Damn, you ended up saving me again, huh?" He seemed certain of that, even if he didn't know all of the details. However, he understood from the situation that there was no time for regrets, and he followed my instructions obediently.

"Mr. Reynand is fighting in the entryway right now! We've got to go there first!"

I pulled Liner along with me as we went back the way I'd come from. The mansion was continuing to collapse, the walls and ceiling crumbling all around us. Some of the corridors were blocked by rubble, so I used *Dimension* to find the shortest path back to the entryway.

I was able to grasp the condition of the entire mansion as we were running. This also meant that I could see how Mr. Reynand and Beth were doing. Even though it would take me a fair amount of time to get there, I could see their endlessly intensifying attempts to

kill each other.

The air was filled with red sparks near the entrance to the Vohlz home. The battle between the two, who had both declared that they would end it in an instant, had been intense from the very first move. In the space of a single breath, powerful fire- and earth-based spells were cast, and their weapons, clad in flames, were brandished.

Both Mr. Reynand and Beth were fierce warriors who had left their marks on history. Their skills had reached the realm of the inhuman. All of their attacks were powerful enough to blow up the entire mansion, but the entryway was still pristine. The reason was that the two of them were exchanging blows at the same intensity and with the same magic attributes, so they ended up canceling each other out. Attack after attack was counterbalanced, keeping damage to a minimum.

"Why? Why do you have the same magic as me?!" Beth asked, confused by the unusual situation.

"Hmph. It's natural since we share the same blood." Mr. Reynand seemed indifferent, though his granddaughter looked distressed.

"The same blood?!" Her irritation with her enemy's composure grew. "What kind of nonsense is that? There's no one in the world who has this blood! I alone carry the Vohlz bloodline!"

"Yes, I know. I know that you, my granddaughter, not my sons, inherited the strongest amount of my blood. That's why we two are the only ones left in this mansion!" Even as he answered, Mr. Reynand continued to build his punishing spells. He was completely nonchalant and just wanted to get it over with. The gushing magic conveyed that he had no intention of going easy on her just because she was his granddaughter. The two were shouting at each other amid the storm of one-hit-kill attacks.

"Yes, my blood is strong! And because of this blood, I have no one! The war has taken everyone from me! All my family, all my friends, all because I'm a Vohlz!"

"Yes, I know that too. No, I only know now, after dying, that it was all my fault!"

Both of their faces were contorted, as if they couldn't breathe

without yelling. Their cries were tormenting each other, there was no doubt about it. But even though they knew they were both suffering, neither would stop. Beth seemed to be on the verge of a realization. This battle had made Beth dimly aware of who the person in front of her was. That was why she was appealing to his emotions. And there was no way that her grandfather would ignore her.

"I am the only Vohlz left! I was so lonely! But even more so, I was *angry*! I hated everything that had been taken from me, so I became a knight! I killed so many enemies and did my best! But everyone around me betrayed me and left! They ran away! In the end, I died alone! I'm so *angry* with this life!"

"I know that too!!!"

Truthfully, I wasn't really comprehending the argument happening between them. If I'd had the memories of Kanami the Founder from a thousand years ago, I might have better understood, but at present, I could only grasp that the pair had a past that only they could understand.

"But now," Beth continued, "the Lord Commander is here! The one on whom I can vent my anger has returned! I thought I could finally burn up and disappear from this hell! Is it so wrong to ask him to take responsibility for betraying us? I'm not wrong! I'm absolutely not wrong! He has a duty to atone for his sins! So get out of my way, 'grandfather'!!!"

"I won't do that! Even if that boy is him, it shouldn't be his burden to bear! As Reynand Vohlz, I will not allow that to happen!"

"Grandfather." "Reynand Vohlz." At the mention of his name, the battle came to an end. The two distanced themselves from each other and began constructing the spells that they each believed in the most. It was, of course, the same incantation to cast the same spell.

"*Call forth the roaring blaze*! *Spirit sweeping over scorched earth*!"

"*Call forth the roaring blaze*! *Spirit sweeping over scorched earth*!"

However, the quality of the two spells was different. While Beth's spell was meant to burn only her enemies, Mr. Reynand's spell was

created to burn everything, including himself. While Beth was using all her magical power to win, Mr. Reynand was using all his life force to fight her.

I didn't even have to check his Status. I knew without even looking that he was whittling away his own HP and turning it into magic. Like a dying monster, his body was dissolving into particles of light. That magical power was the radiance of his soul, the last light of life.

"*Blazing Fall*!"

"*Blazing Fall*!"

Their bodies glowed red. The heated magic was probably raising their physical capabilities to the limit. The residual heat then became an inferno that enveloped their entire bodies. Like with *Flame Flamberge,* I could see the pair using their own bodies as weapons, and their power was being strengthened to the point of no return.

The subsequent charge was faster than that of an animal and as wild as a cannonball. First of all, the strength in their legs was unbelievable. They leaped forward at an explosive speed that reminded me of seeing nitroglycerin being used, leaving a gouge in the ground where they'd been standing.

Then there was the strength of the arms wielding the weapons. The muscles in their arms were abnormally swollen, and the veins were so prominent that they looked like they might burst at any moment.

But the biggest difference between the two was the amount of heat surrounding their bodies. The moment their weapons struck each other, the heat from them burned each other. For their final attacks, they had opted for a diagonal slash that looked more like a full-body slam.

Unlike earlier, there was no contest here. The winner was decided in an instant. The difference in the quality of magical power was day and night. Beth had certainly put all of her magic energy into the fight, but compared to Mr. Reynand's magic, as he had also used his life force, there was no choice but to acknowledge her attack as inferior.

Her sword shattered. Mr. Reynand did not try to avoid the debris

of sword shards, letting them strike his body as he gouged her shoulder with his great axe. It was undoubtedly a fatal blow, as the blade reached her heart. Beth's body was losing its strength. Even so, Mr. Reynand's momentum was unstoppable. He pushed forward with her body on his axe, broke through the wall of the entryway, and ran out into the yard. After a few dozen meters, he finally stopped. The battle ended in the center of the mansion's garden.

"Grand...pa... Why... Why did you..."

"I'm sorry, Beth. No one was there for your final moments before. I will be here with you this time, though it's too late now..."

Defeated, Beth began crying, tears overflowing from her eyes.

Mr. Reynand could only respond apologetically. "I've always been afraid to touch you. I knew that nothing I could do would dispel your anger, so I could only watch over you..."

Beth continued crying, unsatisfied with the way her life was ending. She was likely left feeling only discontent and regret. As her body turned into particles of light, she wailed even louder. While hugging Beth close, Mr. Reynand closed his eyes. He accepted without resistance that he, too, was dissolving.

"Beth, you don't have to forgive me..."

That was how the battle between grandfather and granddaughter ended. It was a battle that had lasted only a moment. Their end, which should have lasted a long time, was so abrupt, so at odds with who they were, and so final.

"Mr. Reynand!"

Liner and I finally made it back to the entryway. The first thing I did was to rush out of the house just before it collapsed and run up to the two people disappearing in the garden. I'd been running at full speed this whole time. I hadn't gotten lost even once in the house. I had done all I could think of to get there. But I hadn't made it in time, and they were disappearing.

Mr. Reynand saw us coming out of the house and had a look of relief on his face. My expression was the exact opposite—contorted, unable to accept the scene in front of me.

Leaving me in a daze, Liner tried to approach the two of them while activating his recovery magic, but Mr. Reynand shook his head

and refused. Liner nodded silently and stopped. They both knew it was too late.

As they disappeared, only Mr. Reynand's final words remained. "Laddie... No, Kanami. As you can see, I'm finally able to disappear. I couldn't change anything in the past after all. Still, I'm mostly satisfied...that my second ending is with my granddaughter." Even after all that, he still smiled kindly at me. He was satisfied with his life and didn't want me to worry.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh! No!!!" It shouldn't have been like that. They were family. They should have had much, much more to talk about. And yet, in the end, they had to part like this? After that kind of conversation?

"It's okay. I am satisfied. I have only one regret. There is still one girl here who is like my daughter and has the same troubles as my granddaughter. Yes, she is here, still alone..." His voice was fading away. Even at the time of his death, Mr. Reynand was still worrying about others, not himself. "Now she is the only one I..." Even though time was running out, he choked on his words. He looked troubled, took a moment, and then spoke forcefully. "Kanami, leave her here and escape to the surface, okay?" His face contorted and his eyes squinted as he said his final words. "Well then...farewell..."

With that, Mr. Reynand's and Beth's bodies finished dissolving. They didn't become magic gems, just particles of shimmering light soaring high into the sky. The souls that should have been here drifted far away, becoming stars in the too-dark sky. As quickly as I could, I reached out and grabbed a particle, but like water scooped up in my hand, it spilled out through the gap between my fingers.

It was impossible to stop their disappearance.

"They...disappeared. No...they died?"

Both had originally been regenerated from magic gems, but now, not even those gems remained, disintegrating into light. I didn't know what would be the appropriate way to describe that end. But I knew intuitively that they had met a fate more terrible than death.

I groaned in confusion, repeating Mr. Reynand's parting words in my head. The testament was broken up in the middle, but I understood it even without being told the end. Mr. Reynand always

worried about others, not himself. When he said, "she is here, still alone," he must have been referring to Lorde. There was no doubt in my mind that he wanted me to watch over her, but he'd cut himself off in the middle of that request. He was trying not to burden me. As I felt his deep affection for me, I also became acutely aware of the loss of his genuine kindness. Up until yesterday, we'd been chatting amicably. We'd even promised to go to the surface together. And yet, I couldn't save him.

It was precisely because I was now familiar with how magic and the Dungeon worked that I understood. Now that they had become particles of light, they would never come back.

"Ah, damn it... It happened again..." I suddenly thought of Wyss Hylipröpe, who'd disappeared in a similar manner on the surface. I saw in my mind's eye the expression on the face of the girl who'd disappeared after Palinchron and I had pierced each other through the heart. I almost fell to my knees with the understanding that I had lost someone who truly cared about me.

"No! I can't cry! I can't become useless; I can't stop! I have to return to the surface quickly!" I forced my legs to straighten and took a step forward.

If I'd still had the *???* skill instead of *Double Covenantor*, I might've lost control again. But I was no longer that person. I didn't rely on my skills at all. If I'd had time to be shocked, I would have forced my feet to move. To avoid wasting Mr. Reynand's spirit, I had to get to the surface as soon as possible. Then I had to find Ide, bring him back here, get him to convince Lorde, somehow talk to Nosfy as well, and then...and then...

"No...even that's... No!" Just as I roused myself, what came out of my mouth was more denial. I swung my hands down and hit my knees. "Am I stupid?! I already know that! Running away from here and turning away from the past won't change anything! What I have to do isn't that but..."

Beth's crying earlier had included my name. Even then I had pretended not to hear it. I'd run away from Nosfy on floor fifty, run away from Lorde in the throne room, run away from the words of people a thousand years ago, run away from Beth... I'd run and run

and run away. If I hadn't, would Mr. Reynand have ended up like this?

"I ran away a thousand years ago too..." There was no mistaking the fact that I'd bailed and left this place behind.

I can't repeat what happened a thousand years ago, I thought. Nothing would change if I did the same things as before. In fact, thanks to Mr. Reynand, I now knew that the more I ran, the more others would have to pay my debt.

"I was the one who was asked to take care of Lorde! Ide has nothing to do with this place now!" Mr. Reynand had been asking *me* to do it since the very beginning, not Ide. "It's not up to Ide! I have to be the one to do it! I'm the one who has to deal with this thousand-year-old country! It was me all along!"

I had just wanted to escape to the surface under the pretense of bringing Ide back here. Did I really think that bringing them together and leaving the problems of this place to others would actually solve anything? Or did I really plan to bring this problem up to the surface with me and make my friends deal with it? Was I just going to keep insisting that I had nothing to do with it simply because I didn't have my memories from a thousand years ago?

Mr. Reynand and Lorde had both seen the current me and spoken with me. The same was true of the other people who lived here—and Beth. It didn't matter to them that I had no memory of a thousand years ago. They had basically been begging me the whole time I was here. And yet, I'd been acting like they were someone else's problem. Like it was all about me.

"Running away is no solution! I ran a thousand years ago and that's why this place exists now! Only I can complete the trial!"

I should have realized such a simple thing from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the reason I'd tried to escape to the surface was probably because I was aware of the true nature of this place from the start. It was because I knew that this was a place where not only the sins of the Sovereign Queen Lorde, but also the sins of Kanami the Founder, would be settled. That was why I had tried to escape. I was angry with myself for being so despicable. The emotions inside me were raging. Mr. Reynand, now a casualty of it

all, had finally shaken something loose in me.

"It's not too late! I'll make it in time!"

I wouldn't run away again. I looked at the dark sky where the particles of light had risen and decided that I was ready to squarely settle my debt, even if it was for an outrageous crime that I had no recollection of. Unlike before, there was still a small chance of success this time. In this particular environment, there was still the smallest of chances, maybe even for Mr. Reynand and Beth...

"Uh...Sieg?" Liner finally piped up, concerned by my repeated cries of self-doubt.

I felt bad, but he would have to wait a little bit longer. I was going to use the magic I had been unwilling to spend in my earlier battle with Nosfy now. I was going to stop making excuses that it wasn't suitable for battle, or that it was a burden on my sister's body, or about its success rate. Since I was dealing with an irrational opponent, there was no need to worry about etiquette. Both my opponents were of a higher rank, so I could unleash my strongest spells from the start. Or rather, I could start using them even before the battle began.

"Status, Skills, *Analyze*..."

```
[STATUS]
NAME: Aikawa Kanami
HP: 340/353
MP: 623/1,165-200
CLASS: Diver
LEVEL 25
STR 14.01
VIT 15.54
DEX 20.77
AGI 25.87
INT 20.79
MAG 45.23
APT 6.21
```

INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79
ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic 5.33+0.40, Magical Combat 0.79, Responsiveness 3.56, Commanding 0.89, Rear Guard Technique 1.01, Knitting 1.15, Swindling 1.34, Smithing 1.00, Sewing 0.68, Blessed Iron Smithing 0.56

"Sieg, what are you saying? No, what are you planning on doing?!" Liner asked anxiously.

But I didn't have time to explain to him now. Nosfy would be bringing Lorde soon. I had to finish crafting the spell before then.

"Liner, give me a minute to prepare. I want to see something with my Dimensional magic."

"See something? With your magic? What—"

"*Dimension*!" The magic power that I had built up was released and spread throughout the entire world below floor sixty-six. What I needed most of all was information in preparation for what was about to happen. So I would use my magical vision to see every possible thing.

There were dark clouds covering this place and countless stars shining in the black sky. There was a country burning under that gentle light. In the vortex of war, where angry shouts echoed and smoke rose, there were many rows of houses, their roofs reduced to rubble. Nearby, knights ran around, their iron armor clanging. Sparks of fire danced everywhere, each one shining like a ruby.

At the end of a shimmering red street was a towering castle, and the two I was searching for weren't there. A little farther away, I found the door leading to the sixty-sixth floor of the Dungeon completely shattered. Two Guardians were walking toward us from there. They were Lorde, the Thief of Wind's Essence, and Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence. In a few moments, they would reach the house. They were moving very slowly.

I'd known from the beginning that we were trapped here. Lorde had destroyed our only escape route. But without any uneasiness at all, I used the Dimensional magic as guided by the magic gem of the

Thief of Dimension's Essence that resided in my body.

"*Dimension: Calculash—Realize*!"

It was the same "predicting the future within a specific space" magic that I had used in my fight with Palinchron. As soon as the spell activated, the number of dimensions that I could perceive increased by one. Countless visions of the future appeared before my eyes, albeit faintly. In an instant, the space of my thoughts, which should have been infinite, was filled with branches of the future. It was like watching a large tree grow. It was only one more dimension to perceive, but without any limits, and my mind was saturated with the branches that spread out forever and ever. I felt like I was going to explode.

I can't...process...the magic! In a second...my head...is gonna burst!

"I still don't have enough power!" I would just have to find a different way to generate the power I needed. I knew how to do that better than anyone else. Lorde had taught it to me just a little while ago. She'd reminded me. I was more than just an expert in Dimensional magic, I was an expert in Spellcraft.

```
[SKILLS]
INNATE SKILLS: Swordplay 3.79
ACQUIRED SKILLS: Martial Arts 1.56, Dimensional Magic
5.33+0.40, Magical Combat 0.79, Spellcraft 5.33,
Responsiveness 3.56, Commanding 0.89, Rear Guard
Technique 1.01, Knitting 1.15, Swindling 1.34, Smithing
1.00, Sewing 0.68, Blessed Iron Smithing 0.56
```

The moment I acknowledged that, Spellcraft was added to the Skills section of my Status.

"*Spellcraft: Connection*! *Spellcraft: Dimension*!" What came out of my mouth wasn't magic, but something different. The two spells had hybridized in a way that felt familiar, bound together with words that were also familiar.

"*Spellcraft: Incantation*! *I swear that I will atone for all my sins.*

Even if the world is to end!" As the Founder, I formally performed it as an incantation. As usual, I simply said whatever my heart desired, but the incantation drained the world of its boundless energy.

"So, please! *Let me save everyone*!"

I promised the world that even if I could not pay the price now, I would pay it in the end. In the truest sense of the word, the incantation was completed, and magic power equal to the weight of the oath was welling up from the depths of my body. It felt thick and viscous. The magic, so strong that it could practically be called a poison, tried to consume my body. Even though the attack tried to melt my spirit, not my physical body, I put that price behind me by activating Double Covenantor.

"Guh...uuughh...AAHH!!!" Letting the enormous amount of magical power overflow, I cast *Dimension: Calculash—Realize* again and immediately continued predicting the future. I calmly viewed the various possible futures of this place that saturated my thoughts.

There was one in which I was defeated, unable to even touch Lorde. There was one in which my spirit was completely broken and I succumbed to Nosfy. There was a future where my will to resist was not broken, but I was locked up deep underground. There was another where Liner died after struggling and fighting. There was one where all four of us destroyed each other and disappeared along with this place, and yet another where the war between the North and the South would continue forever here.

All I could see were futures stained with blood, and all of them were miserable. There was nothing that could be called victory. I understood that it was not possible to look for and choose a future with a positive outcome just yet. But I didn't care. What I wanted now was not some big thing. I just wanted a small chance. No matter how precipitous or slim, if I could only know that my chances of winning weren't zero, that was all I needed!

"*Dimension: Calculash—Realize*!!!"

At the end of my incantation, I yelled out the spell's name again. For the briefest of moments, like a lightning strike, I saw the future that I wished for. It was a world with a possibility of existing that was only a fraction of a billionth of a percent or less. However, there

was certainly a world in which Aikawa Kanami and Liner Hellvilleshine fought against the Sovereign Queen Lorde and Nosfy, the Banner of Light, and won. I had confirmation, no matter how small, that such a world did exist.

I was able to breathe again, which I had stopped doing the whole time I was casting. At the same time, my Dimensional magic, which had filled the whole place up, disappeared as though it had been sucked into the earth. I shook myself, took a few more deep breaths, and wiped away the large drops of sweat that had accumulated on my forehead without me noticing. I had exhausted a great deal of physical and magical energy, but by combining spells with Spellcraft, the *Future Sight* casting was indeed complete and successful. Of course, the path to that future was incredibly steep, narrow, and fragile.

"Sieg?" Liner, who had been patiently watching me as I concentrated on my magic, called out to me.

"Sorry, I'm okay," I gasped as I caught my breath. "I just used a bit of Support magic, that's all. But now I'm ready to go. We can fight those two anytime. We can even win." That was probably the best Support magic I could've used before the fight. Even though it was imperfect, being able to fight them after learning what was about to happen was nothing short of cheating.

Liner looked a little sad about my decision, but he immediately spoke in the same determined tone that I had. "So you've already decided. You're going to end it here, now, aren't you? Well then..."

He drew his sword, Sylph Rukh Bringer, which the recently deceased Mr. Reynand had given him. Liner seemed to have a lot of feelings about the current situation. He gripped the weapon tightly and began imitating my incantation from earlier.

"I, the knight Liner Hellvilleshine, will lend you my strength. *I swear that I too will atone for all my sins. Even if the world is to end.*" He spoke an incantation that was only different from mine by one word. Of course, unlike my Spellcrafted incantation, the effect of his was weaker. Even so, I felt like some contract had been signed. From the corner of my eye, I could see that there was a price that couldn't be ignored, and it was pressing down on his body.

"Liner..." I had done my incantation in order to use magic, but his was almost a waste. It only served to increase my own magic by a little bit. He was strictly incanting in order to swear an oath. I was about to chastise him for his recklessness but held my tongue as he spoke up.

"You taught me that we have to help each other and find a way to survive together, right?" He was just practicing what I'd taught him in the Dungeon earlier. There was no way I could blame him for that.

"Thank you..." That was all I could say. Liner's incantation was proof that he would follow me to the end of the battle we were about to have. Nothing could have been more encouraging for me to continue on the narrow and fragile path I had just found myself on.

"You don't need to thank me, Sieg. Situations like this are what Hellvilleshine knights are for, after all." My friend said that like it was normal, like no more words of thanks were necessary.

"Well then, I'll have to impose on you further, my most trusted knight, Liner Hellvilleshine." I fully believed that he would be able to carry out the suicidal order I was about to give him. Come to think of it, I might have been training him for this moment all through our Dungeon dive—preparing him for the worst battle that I had anticipated ever so faintly...

"Hee hee, I just heard the most interesting thing, Lorde. Master Kanami said he's going to beat us."

A crystal clear voice rang out just before I could give Liner his instructions. I had noticed their approach via *Dimension*. Two girls appeared in the garden of the Vohlz family mansion. First, Nosfy from the south, holding a banner of light. Next, Lorde from the north with her bayonet of wind.

"Oh, Kanami is going to win? Against us? Ha ha ha ha!!!"

I was sandwiched between two great heroes who had died in the past. They had been the greatest forces in the North and South a thousand years ago: the Sovereign Queen Lorde and the Banner of Salvation. My body trembled. I felt like I was caught in a tsunami that reached all the way to the heavens. But I wouldn't run away. Thinking about it now, I realized that the only way to return from

this underground past to the future on the surface was to triumph over these two.

I ignored the two Guardians sneering at me and continued with my command to Liner. "Knight Liner, while I'm talking to Lorde, try to keep Nosfy under complete control. She'll get in the way of ending things here and now."

Nosfy's eyebrows furrowed at the order, and Lorde's eyes widened in surprise. Only Liner smiled brightly and gave me a knightly bow.

"I understand, my lord," he replied. With a quirk of his lips he discarded all of the rings and bracelets he was wearing. Finally, he pulled out Sylph Rukh Bringer and Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan. Having lightened himself to the absolute limit by tossing down even the swords' scabbards, he turned south to face Nosfy.

I followed suit, swinging the giant coat that I'd been holding this whole time—the one Mr. Reynand had used as a blanket to cover Liner—and putting it on. Wrapped in the bulky coat, my figure looked a little bit like me from the past. Clad in thick layers of Dimensional magic, I acted like I had returned to being the mage who had been called the Founder as I turned north to face Lorde.

Together, Liner and I stood back-to-back and showed our willingness to fight the Guardians of the fiftieth and sixtieth floors.

◆◆◆◆◆

Lorde muttered to herself as she watched me approach. "You're really not going to run away, Kanami? Even with such a huge difference in our fighting power?"

"Oh, I *want* to run away. Even thinking about it logically, running away is the right choice. But I've stopped using 'logical' and 'right' as excuses. From now on, I'll fight as long as there is even the faintest glimmer of hope!"

"Ha ha ha! So it'll be a direct confrontation, then? It'll be over quickly! *I do not choose the path I walk. I am the wind. I will continue to walk the entire world. I remember wishing so!*"

Lorde laughed and then launched into the foundational

incantation that she'd taught us just a little while ago in one of her magic lessons. The spell that she cast was also one of the basics.

"*Wynd*! This will be an overwhelming victory for us!"

But the power of that spell wasn't even remotely close to basic. It changed the weather of the whole world in an instant. Like the higher-level spell *Sehr Wynd*, a powerful and all-encompassing gust blew through the area, repelling the rain that was still pouring down.

As I waded through the strong wind and approached Lorde, I gave my companion one last instruction. "I'll end this quickly, so just hold on for a little longer."

Liner nodded silently. His attention was already focused on Nosfy in the south, and he didn't even glance to the north. Under Liner's glare, Nosfy looked a little uncomfortable as she finished casting a basic spell whose power was also out of the ordinary.

"*Light*. Lorde, it looks like Kanami wants to divide us."

"Ha ha ha! Let's play along, Nosfy. I'm sure we'll be able to defeat them individually rather than having to improvise some Resonant magic." Lorde was clearly convinced that they had the upper hand. She was suggesting that any uncertainty should be eliminated.

"You want a one-on-one with Master Kanami? That would certainly be acceptable, as your own strength is far superior, but... No, I need to trust my friend. I will leave Kanami to you." Nosfy frowned slightly but eventually agreed to Lorde's plan.

"Okay, I'll leave Liner to you. There's no way I'll be defeated!" Lorde stated.

"That is correct, because you are stronger than everyone. I will not lose to you either, so I will end things here as quickly as possible. I will capture Liner unscathed and give him to you as a commemorative present of this day," Nosfy replied.

"I'm looking forward to it!"

All four of our interests aligned.

"Very well, then, Master Kanami. I will be playing with Liner, so please wait just a moment. I will end it quickly and be with you soon." Nosfy brazenly bid me farewell, but I ignored her. From here on out, I couldn't waste even the slightest bit of magical power.

I left dealing with Nosfy to Liner and concentrated my *Dimension*

solely on Lorde. We began to move in order to separate the two battlefields from each other. We left the mansion's garden and went out into the empty street, where we faced each other and had our last conversation before commencing battle.

"Lorde, let me say this first. In order to bring a complete end to this place, you and I are going to look back at the past together. No matter how much I scream, I won't stop it anymore. So don't cover your ears." I spoke to her forcefully, in a preachy tone. I had no doubt that she hated this kind of sermonizing, which was why I was provoking her. In order to win the game, which I was now plotting, it was of the utmost importance that she take me seriously. I might even have to resort to underhanded tactics just to touch her, let alone capture the Thief of Wind's Essence, who was sure to be the fastest Guardian. And frankly, I was worried about remaining calm during a drawn-out battle with her, since she could fly.

"Look back into the past? You?"

"I'm sorry I tried running away from it. But I've decided I'm not running any longer. So you can't either."

"What a thing for you to say! I'm not some meek little thing who will listen to a lecture from you! After all, I'm—"

"I know, I know," I cut her off. "So I'm going to force you to listen to me. Yes, I'm going to force you."

"How can you, with your mere support magic, go head-to-head with someone like me?!" Lorde shook her head a little. Even now she couldn't believe I was serious about fighting back. I supposed she had enough confidence in her own power to feel that way.

"Don't underestimate me. When it comes to Swordplay, there's no one better than me." I'd been the rearguard the entire time I was down here, but that wasn't because I was incapable of being on the front line. I'd only been staying back because I'd been thinking about our overall efficiency. However, Lorde, who'd never seen my true skills, would judge my words as mere vanity.

"You're getting too carried away just because you were lucky enough to defeat a weakened Arrace! All you can do is hide and shoot magic!"

"Don't compare me with my past self! The past is just the past," I

replied. This whole time Lorde had been looking at the world through the lens of the past. In order to change her mind, I would have to use my sword and not my magic.

Lorde, sensing my will to fight, increased the magic going to the wings on her back, making them larger. She pointed the muzzle of her rifle at me, seemingly having realized that it was impossible to make me surrender through conversation and threats.

"Well then, I'll make you regret this! I'll negate everything and make you one of my vassals! Come and get me, Kanami!"

"Let's go, Lorde!" With that, I rushed forward and began the battle. First thing was to read the line of fire from her rifle with *Dimension: Calculash*. However, I soon realized there was no need to do so. Lorde was planning to use the rifle as a sword, not a gun. She held the weapon at ease and didn't move at all. She seemed willing to go along with my plan for close-quarters combat in order to prove my claim about my skills wrong.

"First show me this 'Swordplay' you mentioned. A dull blade won't work on me!" she cried.

"I was going to show it to you now anyway!" I ran straight at her to show her my skill. I wanted to advance our conversation in my favor, but I also wanted to refute her strength as the Sovereign Queen Lorde. That was the necessary victory condition that I'd seen in my *Future Sight* granted by *Dimension: Calculash—Realize*.

I swung my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword with great force. But what came back was a hard sound, like I'd struck iron. Lorde smiled at me. Unlike my sword, which was a physical object, her bayonet was made of magic. She'd made it lose its shape for just a moment to let my sword pass through it.

I activated my *Responsiveness* skill, and my Swordplay skill taught me the corresponding technique. I used the pommel on the end of my hilt to repel the incoming bayonet. Once again, a high-pitched clang rang out, and Lorde was knocked out of her stance.

"Yes! But, wait..."

It still didn't give me an opening. Lorde was balancing only on the tiptoes of her left foot, her center of gravity off, but no matter where I struck with my sword, I couldn't make her fall over. The reason

was simple.

"*Wynd*!" She was balancing herself using her perfectly controlled magic. From that impossible pose, a ridiculously strong gust of wind came flying at me.

"Damn!" I gave up the chase and defended myself with the flat of my sword. I thought I'd created a decisive opening, but she countered.

"Ha ha ha! You are a little different than before! It's not enough!" Lorde somersaulted and finally found a foothold midair. Turning upside down, she stepped through a sky that had been hardened with *Wynd* and slashed at my head.

I managed to block her messy blow with the flat of my sword, but the barrage continued. Lorde's blade, which should have been repelled, was guided by the surrounding wind, and she attacked again, ignoring inertia. Even though I had the slightest advantage because of my Swordplay skill, I was forced to be on the defensive. My skill level was definitely higher than hers, but her movements were just too fast. Her haphazard stance, the flash of her weapon, and the movements of her body no longer fell into the realm of Swordplay. It was all the work of her Wind magic.

Not long ago, Lorde had said that once you knew the basics, you could do anything. As if to prove her point, she performed a series of *Wynd* spells without incanting. Her blade danced weightlessly in the air, becoming a whole different skill that might as well have been called Wind Swordplay.

"Ha ha ha! What do you think, Kanami? I'm stronger than you, aren't I?!" She smiled proudly, seeing me on the defensive.

I wanted to say something in reply to her premature victory speech, but instead I remained silent. There was no need to tell her that my Swordplay was not yet at its full potential.

"And it's not just swords! Because even when I fight like this, I'm strong!" Her voice grew louder, perhaps because I'd remained silent. Using the bayonet as a distraction, she grabbed the hem of my clothes with her empty left hand. I guessed that she wanted to prove that she could do not only Swordplay but also Martial Arts.

I was slow to react to this sudden change of tactics, and she

threw me roughly to the side. Because of her inhuman strength, my body flew like a bullet through the empty streets of Viaysia. I hit the first wall of a row of houses, smashed through it, and then, without losing momentum, hit the wall of the next house, smashed through that too, and repeated the process about five times before rolling across the street and coming to a stop.

"Ugh! Gah! Urgh!" My increased level had caused my HP and durability to soar, and I was thankful that it had made me sturdier than a house.

I quickly stood up amid the cloud of dust that I'd created. But it wasn't painless. If I'd gotten hit in the wrong places, I definitely would've broken bones. I tried to gather information about the area around me, but with my eyes, not *Dimension*. I found several knights holding weapons in my immediate vicinity.

"Huh?! Lord Commander?!"

"Why did he come flying through the wall?!" They realized that while they'd thought it was just an explosion, it was actually the person they'd been searching for. It was only natural they'd be flustered.

But I didn't have time to deal with them right now. I leaped up and climbed on top of the house I had just passed through, ignoring them. I used the roofs to travel and tried to shake off the knights.

At that moment, *Dimension* detected the presence of bullets flying at ultra-high speed toward me. I twisted my body to dodge the bullets of wind. Then I spotted Lorde who, like me, had climbed on top of a roof a little ways away.

"You can't escape, Kanami! It's pointless to even try! Even at this distance, I'm stronger than you! No matter where, no matter when, no matter the battle, I am stronger than everyone else! That is why I was the Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"You idiot! That's fine; we just need to move! Other people will get pulled in if we do this here!" It seemed she had assumed I was trying to run away when I'd come up to the roofs. I was fed up with her overly shallow thought process and just wanted us to move somewhere else.

"Move? Why?! It doesn't matter where you are! *Flying Bullet*!"

Lorde replied, shooting bullets of compressed wind magic from the muzzle of her rifle. Countless high-speed projectiles flew at me, but *Dimension* worked on them too. I used it to read all of the trajectories and avoid each bullet. As a consequence, countless explosions sounded from behind me.

"This... This can't not matter, you idiot!" Each bullet of wind exploded on impact.

I jumped from roof to roof to avoid the assault. The city of Viaysia was being destroyed with each bullet. Roofs were blown off like there was an air raid going on, and a cloud of smoke was rising across the city. The conspicuous attack showed that she didn't care about the intervention of the surrounding knights.

"Ugh, Kanami! You'll go this far just to run away?! Then I'll change my methods! *Thunder and gale become a loop! I will put strange bullets in your spirit!*" Lorde began pulling her magic together with another incantation.

At that moment, a voice came from the street below. "Is...that the Sovereign Queen Lorde?! She's fighting the Lord Commander?!"

"Yes! It is her! She has returned in our time of crisis! She hasn't betrayed us!"

"She's finally returned! After all, this place is her home!" Several knights were rejoicing at her appearance. But her face contorted at their encouragement.

"Don't get in the way! Stay back!" She spat at them. The knights froze in place where they'd been rushing to her side. Lorde was clearly on edge after hearing the cries of her own people. The area around her became electrified, as if her emotions were leaking out. The strong magic winds were continuing to blow, and there were thunderclaps from overhead. Gradually, the lightning strikes became concentrated in one place. The bayonet in Lorde's hand was charged by the repeated lightning strikes, and *Dimension* sensed that it was beginning to emit an unusual power.

What is *this?! It's not something I've experienced since being here... Is it...magnetism?!* Between *Dimension* and my knowledge from my former world, I was able to guess what the phenomenon was. There was no doubt that the unique movement of the electric

current was generating a kind of cylindrical magnetic field. *Dimension* was able to gauge the level of danger by analyzing the magnetic forces, and *Responsiveness* sounded a warning bell in my head.

This is bad! As soon as I understood what was happening, I leaped to the side.

"Rush through, my thunderbolt bullets!!!" A blinding flash instantly filled the world, and a purple bullet flew toward me. It felt like the space I'd just occupied was pierced by the bullet in the same instant it was fired from the gun. The power was extraordinary. Even though it wasn't Dimension magic, the space was distorted after the bullet passed through it.

"Tch! So you can avoid its initial velocity, huh? Well, that bullet was just a test run to adjust for any calculation errors! My bullets are still *Accelerating*!"

I'd been lucky to dodge the first bullet, but Lorde wasn't stopping. Just like ejecting a shell casing, blackened magic power was ejected from the rifle, and more magic power began forming. It wasn't only the electrification that was frightening: The expansion of wind and magic wasn't stopping. I broke out in a cold sweat at the natural disaster-like use of magic power. I had planned on continuing to smile as long as I could, but my expression hardened. I didn't say it out loud, but in my heart, I put the brakes on her.

Wait...what is that?! Inside the thin barrel of the gun, numerous whirlwinds were forming, creating multiple vacuums between them. And that wasn't all. The air was repeatedly being compressed and expanded, and although small, a sort of gravitational collapse was happening. A science-based "force field" that didn't suit this magical world was developing inside the small barrel. It was only natural that one would break out in a cold sweat at the sight of such a ridiculous scene.

There's no doubt about it, the person who taught her that was an inhabitant of my world...

"Second gear! Don't die, Kanami! This is the power you gave to me in the past! Eat your sins directly! *Flying Bullet—Piercing Night*!"

And the one who taught it to her was none other than me...

I was even more convinced when I heard the spell name. It was really my style. The way she shouted it was also the same way I'd taught to Liner not too long ago. Had Kanami the Founder really been so stupid as to teach her something so dangerous? I cursed my past self for what felt like the millionth time and shouted out my own spell.

"*Dimension: Difference*!" I knew it was impossible to avoid the force field. Therefore, I had to change its trajectory instead by shifting the space around it.

Our spells activated at the same instant we finished speaking. The muzzle of Lorde's gun glowed black. As soon as I could see the dark bullets, a line was drawn across the world. It wasn't a laser beam of light, but a beam of darkness. The dark laser bent just before it hit my stomach—due to the dimensional displacement, its trajectory had changed and it went into the sky.

Immediately afterward, a high-pitched sound, like the death throes of an animal, filled the world. When I used *Dimension* to look behind me, I saw a large hole at the end of the black line. It reminded me of the picture of a black hole I'd seen in a science book when I was younger. It was drilled into the boundary of this place. Cracks began appearing around the gaping hole. Space cracked and the sky began to peel away. The membrane of the boundary created by Kanami the Founder a thousand years ago began crumbling like an eggshell.

"Are you trying to destroy this place?!" I yelled at Lorde.

"Shut up! You'll figure out a way to fix it!"

"Even so! That's not the kind of magic you can use when there're people around!"

"You taught me this magic expressly *to* shoot at people! So what's so wrong with using it?!"

"I said that?!"

"Yeah!!!"

"Well...then you can only shoot it at me! But you can't shoot it at Viaysia!"

"I *am* shooting it at you!!! The only reason it hit Viaysia is because you dodged it!"

"Well, of *course* I'm gonna dodge it!!!"

We were whining at each other like children, probably due to the confusion of witnessing such unrealistic magic. When I saw Lorde trying to load another magic bullet, I ran toward her to switch to close combat. It would be bad for her to shoot multiple projectiles again.

As I was running, I noticed something strange. I couldn't get my left arm to work properly. Upon closer inspection, I found that it was dangling limply. Next, I felt a dull pain start to pierce my brain.

"Huh?!" I'd dodged the *Flying Bullet—Piercing Night* perfectly. It hadn't even grazed me. But my arm was still twisted and broken. Only a bit of the aftermath had touched me, and it had still taken out one of my arms.

"Hm? Heh, heh, ha ha ha! Your arm's broken?! How?! Have you finally learned my power as the Demon Queen?! I got one at last! Heh ha ha! Now I'll beat you by a landslide in close combat too!"

Lorde was so pleased with my broken arm that she stopped loading the magic bullet into her rifle and instead rushed toward me. She probably thought that since she was dealing with a wounded opponent, all she had to do was get close enough to capture me. She jumped into the air and took flight, approaching me as though mocking gravity.

I clicked my tongue, adjusted my grip on my sword, and repelled the bayonet that came at me. Unfortunately, my balance with only one functioning arm wasn't very good. My broken left arm ached as I was repeatedly battered by blows. Gradually, my defense was worn down, leaving me wide open.

Taking advantage of that, Lorde grabbed my broken arm and did something like a judo throw. Since she was upside down while fighting, I was thrown into the air instead of being slammed to the ground. My broken arm burned with pain. The speed at which I was thrown was so fast that the wind, which hit my entire body, became a deadly weapon. The friction alone was enough to burn me. Finally, when the momentum of the throw stopped and I was left feeling like I was floating, my eyes met hers.

Lorde was a hundred meters above me, her wings outstretched

and her face relaxed. She turned her empty hand toward me and shouted, "*Sehr Wynd*!"

"Guhh!!!" I was blasted downward like an invisible mallet had been swung into me. I fell the length of a thirty-story skyscraper in a single instant, into a river near the castle. The shock of the impact pierced my body, and my vision filled with water. Although I'd changed my stance to land, it didn't do much good. Lorde had probably thought that sending me into the water wouldn't hurt as much, since she didn't want to kill me, but when it came to hits with that much force behind them, the water felt harder.

Every bone in my body creaked and groaned sickeningly. There were limits to what I could take, even after the increased strength from leveling up. Given my human anatomy, it wouldn't be surprising if I'd gotten a concussion.

Regardless, Lorde seemed to be intent on continuing the pursuit. Using her wings, Lorde turned herself into a falling bullet and swung her fist down into the river. The energy from the fall was added into her attack, and a simple punch became something else all together.

Since I was underwater I couldn't speak, but I activated *Dimension: Faultline* and escaped from the river. Then, from the riverbank, I witnessed the power of Lorde's fist with my naked eyes. It sounded like a huge number of water balloons had all burst simultaneously, and then the water from the river flew up into the air. The river bed, now devoid of water, cracked under the force of her fist, creating a huge fissure. The depths of the cracks were as black as the big hole in the sky. She had shattered the boundary of this place with a physical attack.

Holding my aching left arm, I chided Lorde, now at the bottom of the river, for her reckless attack. "You're really going to destroy this place! You don't care? I thought you'd lived here for a thousand years?! You're going to return it all to nothing!"

All of the shaking and destruction of the ground was making Viaysia Castle start to lean. At this rate the castle would collapse and take the surrounding town down with it.

"Shut up! It doesn't matter, since you're avoiding it all! Just take a hit and get out of my mind! Then this battle is over!" Lorde jumped

up from the river bed, shifting the blame to me. She stood with her back to the hole in the sky, and her green magic began shining. Her magical strength hadn't decreased at all during the fight. Her inexhaustible magic was proof that she was a Guardian, and proof of the depth of her lingering attachment.

Her magic power was limitless, but it was an empty strength. Knowing that the reason her magic power didn't diminish was because she kept dragging out her lingering attachment made her radiance suddenly look pitiful. But depending on how you looked at it, her radiance could seem divine. If you didn't know what was going on, it might have looked godlike. People cheered from afar, seeing her glowing figure in the sky.

"That's the Sovereign Queen Lorde for you! Please! Arrest the Lord Commander!"

"The Sovereign Queen Lorde has returned! And with her own hands she will capture the commander who betrayed us! After all, this is all the Lord Commander's fault! Our queen remains the Queen of the North!"

"Everyone here is cheering on our queen!"

The knights were starting to gather on the banks of the river. Looking closely, I could see people who'd taken refuge deep inside their houses coming out as well. The elderly, children, and everyone else had emerged to see the heroic figure of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. It was only natural after such a spectacular battle. The residents of Viaysia knew better than anyone who was capable of such a battle. They loved their savior more than they loved anyone else. And they believed more than anyone else in her victory.

But Lorde trembled under the cheers of the crowd. She looked sick enough that she might fall right out of the sky.

"No! I'm not capturing Kanami for you! I'm... You... You..." She started breathing heavily.

I was able to catch her quiet words through *Dimension*, but the people making all the noise below couldn't hear her. The cheering went on for a long time.

"We all believe in our queen!"

"We knew you'd come back and save us! We've believed in you

for a long, long, long time!”

“Our counterattack will commence from this day, right?! As long as the Sovereign Queen Lorde is here, the country of Viaysia will never die!”

“Yes! The Sovereign Queen Lorde! Our Sovereign Queen Lorde!”

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!”

Before I knew it, nearly a hundred citizens were all voicing their unconditional support for her. They kept cheering, expecting the righteous queen to condemn me, the treacherous villain. Everyone was awaiting it.

Lorde, under the burden of that expectation, grimaced and gritted her teeth. Then, a snarl escaped from her slightly open mouth. “Even after all this, you still expect more from me?! The one who’s destroying this country right now isn’t Kanami, it’s me! And yet...”

Her breathing grew even more ragged. Her physical condition was only getting worse. She was out of breath from all the cheering, even though she hadn’t been breathing hard at all during the fight with me.

“This...expectation...is heavy! Heavy! Heavyheavyheavy!!! Yes, make it lighter... If I don’t lighten the world, then I... I won’t...” She fell into the same hyperventilating symptoms as before, and, half crazed, began to weave a spell in the sky. It was the first time I’d seen a spell construction like that. It was a little different from Wind attribute spells. “Only the puppets that moved automatically! Stay in the sky! *Reverse*!!!” Lorde spread her wings and created a whirlwind around the castle. People touched by the wind were instantly shattered. Like a sand castle blown away by a strong wind, they disappeared in a flash of light. And then the cheering, like an overlapping song...

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!”

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!”

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign

Queen—”

...cut off.

My eyes grew wide. “What?!” There was no way they’d all disappeared completely, and the magic gems left behind were proof of that. But those remaining magic gems were floating softly in the air and rising into the sky. Perhaps they were trying to return to the stars they had been before. It might be safer than having them watch us fight, but I didn’t think it was right for Lorde to do that when they’d been cheering for her the whole time.

“Lorde! They were calling your name because they were thinking of you! You’re saying you don’t need their support?!”

“They were thinking of me?! Lies! If they cared about me so much, why did they leave?! Everyone left me to fend for myself! They had expectations for me! If they expected so much from me, then it would be unfair if I didn’t have expectations for them too!”

Lorde seemed to be extremely upset about being blamed for what she had just done, so she screamed back at me. I saw a new side of her. This was the first time she had ever uttered the word “unfair.”

“Ugh, jeez! They were just in the way! In the way, in the way, IN THE WAY! Don’t look at me like that! Their eyes were pressing down on me, making me heavy! If I’m heavy, then I’ll lose to you!!! AAAAAGGGHHHH!!!” Lorde spread the whirlwind she’d created across the entire country. Beams of light began to rise from all over. I didn’t need to use *Dimension* to know what was happening. Lorde, agitated and unhinged, was making all of the people here “leave.”

“Now the world is a little lighter,” she said, breathing heavily. “Now there are only four people here! Me, Nosfy, Kanami, and Liner! Just the four of us!”

“Lorde! Stop your childish tantrums!” If possible, I wanted her to have to face the people from a thousand years ago, but she was trying to destroy the convenient past of this place.

“What’s wrong with throwing a tantrum like a child? I am a child, more than anyone else is!”

“You idiot! Look at your body! What are you even saying with such a big body?!”

"A big body? So you want to call me an adult?" Lorde began laughing uproariously but her laughter quickly grew full of rage and she rushed toward me. Then she thrust her bayonet wildly.

"You were an adult holding the office of queen aboveground for years! And you've lived in this place for a millennium! You need to count your years!" I said.

"You're saying I should be aware of the value of my life because I'm old?! Like that's something I can just do?! It doesn't matter how long I've experienced life if there wasn't anything of substance happening in it. Don't you know that an adult who's only wasted their time is more troublesome than a child?! That's exactly what I am! I have always been empty! An empty queen with no will and nothing but expectations to live up to!"

Lorde continued swinging her bayonet. She wasn't even sparing the time to breathe as she shouted and thrust her weapon at me wildly.

"But it's not my fault! It's not my fault! Time just sped up on its own! When I thought a second had passed, it was a minute, and when I thought a minute had passed, it was an hour! And then an hour became a day, a day became a month, a month became a year! Before I knew it, my life as a queen was over! It was truly a life without substance! I never learned anything. I never grew up. I just stayed a child! You're the only one who truly understands this, Kanami! You're the only one who's ever said they understood me! You said that time seems to stand still without your sister. And I understand! That day, the day I became the Thief of Wind's Essence, the day I lost my brother, was the day my life clock broke, and it hasn't moved since! That's why you and I will never grow up!"

Lorde was speaking passionately about her past. Her life had been empty, and in the end, she'd died without a reason, and it was over. So she sulked, fretted, and threw tantrums. Just like a child.

I understood that feeling a bit. Thinking back, I'd been shouting the exact same thing just a little while ago when I was aboveground. Lorde and I were both children. That was an undeniable fact. So, envying us as children, even Nosfy had begun imitating us. That was the beginning of this place's collapse. But that was why I would

refute Lorde's claim, even if I had to shut my eyes to my own faults.

"That may be so! But that doesn't mean we should just give up on growing up! Not everyone is an adult because they feel like one! You have to tell yourself that you've become an adult and live as hard as you can!" I replied.

"You want me to do that?! You want me to pretend I'm an adult and throw my life away?! Waste my next life as a Guardian?!"

"I'm not telling you to waste your life! I'm not saying you need to go back to being an adult immediately either. I'm telling you to stop using being a child as an excuse for your selfish actions!"

"If I had that kind of self control, I wouldn't be calling myself a child! Time is accelerating, accelerating, accelerating too fast, and my memories are fading away, fading away, fading away! I have only a few years in which to experience my life! Yes, I've only lived a few years! So my age is still in the single digits! A child is a child—that's my opinion!"

I understood that, but I wouldn't be able to persuade Lorde with just the right words. It would only make her angry. I realized that as I continued to hold off her onslaught.

"Tch! You dodged again?!" Lorde's doubt began to show on her face as she was unable to land a hit on an injured opponent. Sparks flew, but her bayonet seemed unable to touch me. Her weapon was still moving too fast for me to see it with the naked eye, and it was wielded with such force that it continued to break down the barrier around this realm. The fact that I could only use one arm to parry was an overwhelming disadvantage. The only thing was that Lorde currently had a very narrow field of view. Thanks to my use of the "right words," she'd grown angry and her attacks had become monotonous.

I had my reasons. She'd shown me too much of her Wind Swordplay skill. I'd sacrificed an arm for it, but it allowed me to observe her fighting closely. I already understood the characteristics of her unique skill. I was no longer surprised when she turned upside down. I had memorized every technique and maneuver that she'd performed on me at least once. Not only would the same techniques not work a second time, but I was already prepared to

counterattack. Since I was able to do that, I could finally say that I had inherited the Arrace style from Lorwen.

The trickiest thing about the Arrace School of Swordplay was its flexibility. Since it anticipated all kinds of opponents and situations, it could devise countermeasures on the spot and grow stronger with each passing second. Thanks to dealing with an enemy as mighty as Lorde, I could see the numerical value of my Swordplay skill increasing rapidly. If I was fighting with the kind of child who relied on her strength, then I would be able to quickly make up for having one useless arm.

As if to reflect that fact, Lorde wasn't able to finish me off no matter how much time passed.

"Why?! Why can't I hit you?! I'm moving so much faster than you! Why, why, why, why?! Ugh! Well, then..." She stepped back and pointed the muzzle of her rifle at me.

Shit. I could deal with melee attacks using Swordplay, but I had few countermeasures against ranged attacks. Because of that, I decided to enter the castle, which was on the edge of collapse.

"Huh?! Oh, oh! Don't hide in the castle, Kanami!" Lorde fired bullets at my fleeing figure, but they merely hit the walls of the castle and exploded.

As I'd expected, the bullets she randomly fired seemed to have the same characteristics as the earlier ones. Although they exploded violently, they didn't have much penetrating power. If she switched to a penetrating bullet, it would be the end of me, but even so, there was a big difference between having a shield and not having one against a long-range weapon.

Lorde probably knew that as well. She exploded with frustration, screaming, "The castle's in the way!!! Nuisance, nuisance, nuisance! It's all useless!!!"

I looked outside using *Dimension*, wondering what she was going to do next. She was suspended in the air, her bayonet unsheathed, right hand raised, concentrating all of her magic power into a single point. It sent chills down my spine. This wasn't a simple concentration of magic power. It reminded me of the *Fon A Wraith* spell that Lorwen had unleashed, and—frighteningly—I felt the logic

of the world eroding.

"This is the *Wind of Freedom* that I have stolen! The essence of wind! Let everything fall apart!"

Lorde swung her fist aggressively. It was very plain looking compared to the earlier magic bullets. Her fist didn't actually hit the castle or anything else. It was a spectacular swing and a miss, I thought, until the castle began to shake violently, disrupting my observation. Then a crack appeared in the space in front of me. Irregular lines cut through the air, like a breaking mirror. The cracks were especially noticeable around Lorde's fist, and they were quickly spreading out across the entire place. Her fist had put a crack in the world.

It was a scene that could only be described with absurd words. The castle's pillars, the surrounding walls, the ground beneath my feet, and even the air was cracking. The castle, which was already near its limit, made a sickening noise. That ominous sound told me that it was being destroyed from the ground up, both physically and existentially.

"I need to get out of here quickly! But..." I couldn't leave. Outside was Lorde, waiting for me with her other fist at the ready. Then, clearly annoyed that I wasn't coming out, she swung her fist at me anyway. The castle wasn't the only thing that was going to be destroyed.

Lorde had an obsessive look on her face, as though determined to destroy every last one of my escape options. "If you don't come out, I'm gonna shoot you again! Bring it doooooowwwwnnnn!!!!!!!!!" Her cry seemed to reverberate across Viaysia. At the same time, she swung her fist down.

There was a shaking below my feet that was more than just a simple earthquake. The cracked floor fully shattered, and I was thrown into the air. My footing was disappearing like a crumbling biscuit, but I was able to find a suitable handhold on a piece of debris.

"Damn it!" The castle had completely collapsed now, but I knew that wasn't the main problem. I knew that because I was using *Dimension* to watch over the country. The second shot from Lorde

had put the final nail in the coffin of a world that was already in shambles. The ground split in two like a breaking board. The entire country of Viaysia, which had been recreated within this boundary, was broken. Naturally, the boundary could no longer be maintained.

The black hole in the sky spread everywhere, and the blackness that was under the cracks in the ground spread too. Originally, this place had been built in the empty space behind the Dungeon. With the destruction of what was above it, it was about to return to the empty, black nothingness. The world was collapsing. Along with the physical space, the various laws that had been set up to recreate the nation as it had been aboveground also began to go awry. The laws of nature, which were necessary for human life, began to crack.

The most obvious crack was in gravity. The earth that supported the castle crumbled and disappeared, but even though the infinite pitch-black sky spread out below, the debris of the collapsed castle didn't fall down. It floated in the air like we were in outer space.

I lost the cover the castle provided. Still hanging on to the debris, I was able to see the entirety of the changed landscape of this place. It looked like the end of the world. All of the houses had been demolished, and there was a massive amount of wreckage floating in the air. There were pieces of ground mixed in, so it was hard to tell what had been buildings. The once magnificent setting was now a shadow of its former self. Large trees that seemed to reach the sky were broken, their huge roots exposed to the open air because they had lost their bed of soil. Countless blades of grass, trees, and flower petals drifted about, covered in the embers left over from the fires of war. The river, bridge, town, and castle had all been destroyed. The country of Viaysia was gone.

Just like that, we were in the nothingness of the reverse side of the Dungeon. The aftermath of the great destruction reverberated in my ears like a rumbling of the earth. All that remained was the wreckage floating in the emptiness. It reminded me of a universe of drifting debris.

"Is this...the true power of the Thief of Wind's Essence?"

As I shuddered at the world that had changed so drastically, the person who had caused its collapse answered me.

"Oh, yes! Your magic, deployed here a thousand years ago, was broken down by the Essence of Wind! This is the magic that I am best at! The Wind of Freedom! This violence that doesn't choose what to hit is my true nature! It's a power that's the exact opposite of control and order!" Lorde stood, upside down, on the bottom of a floating piece of rubble a little ways away. Free from the bonds of gravity, her long green hair spread out around her like a lion's mane. It danced around her every time she shouted.

"I've thought about it this whole time! I've always wanted to do this, to make everything fall to pieces! And I, myself, wanted to disappear as free as the wind! Because I didn't want this world! So let it all break into pieces, pieces, pieces, pieces! Just like this disgusting picture!"

Floating near her was one of the paintings I'd seen in the vault that day. It was the torn canvas, the one that depicted her as a brave, perfect queen. Lorde ended its existence by hitting it with all her might. A wind that was far heavier than needed to destroy a single canvas whipped up, and the painting disintegrated without a trace.

"Kanami! It's true I've been underestimating you a little bit! So now I'm gonna get serious! As my ally, you called me the Demon Queen, and Nosfy, my enemy, called me the Mad Queen. So this is me being serious! Look at this world! We're way past the level of Swordplay!"

That was true. The frightening thing was that even after everything, she still wasn't being serious. I remained far away from my path to victory. I needed to make her angrier and angrier or I wouldn't get an opening to hit her with my daring play. But the idea of pushing her further sent a chill down my spine. The wild winds spread the dust of the canvas across the black sky—or no, the jet-black universe now.

I followed the particles with *Dimension* and organized the information I had about this place. There was really nothing left. Physically, Viaysia had been completely destroyed. This would no longer be anyone's domain. Of course not. There were no people. Since there was no one left, it belonged to no one. It was a space of

complete nothingness. There was nothing to the left or right of me. Everything tangible had been lost. All that was allowed to exist here was dust and debris. All that remained were the distant stars, the souls of the dead. There was nothing in front of me or behind, above or below. It was no longer an inhabitable space.

This was the true reverse side of the Dungeon. It didn't belong to my original world or to this one. It was a space that didn't belong anywhere. Thanks to *Dimension*, I was aware of its true nature. I thought it likely that the breathable air would disappear soon. The little bit of gravity that remained would too. The laws of motion and heat...even everything intangible would be lost, without exception. That's what it meant for this to be the reverse side. That's what it took for Lorde to say she was going to get serious.

There was nothing here, so there was no weight. There was nothing here, so there were no restrictions. There was nothing here, so there were no expectations placed on her. There was *nothing*. This was the field where Lorde would be able to exert her full power. This empty world, not somewhere people lived, was her stage.

She was breathing heavily again. "*A-Accelerating*! *Accelerating*, *accelerating*, *ACCELERATING*! *Acceleratingaccelerationgaccelerating*!!! Now I can show my true colors without restraint! The battle up to this point has just been a sideshow! This is the realm of the Thief of Wind's Essence! Ha ha, Kanami! If you're going to hang your head, do it now!"

She laughed and used an incantation to regulate her ragged breathing. Then, as if acting in accordance with the words of the incantation, the universe began accelerating. The law of time had been completely broken here. The world accelerated. Accelerated, accelerated, and accelerated. Accelerated, accelerated, accelerated, accelerated, accelerated, accelerated, and accelerated.

All restraints were broken and the wheel of time made a great revolution. As a result, the starry souls floating far, far away began to spin like celestial bodies. The velocity added and multiplied itself over and over. Acceleration upon acceleration was added, and acceleration upon acceleration was multiplied so that the points of more than a thousand stars formed more than a thousand circles.

“What... What is this?!” It was unbelievable. It was so unbelievable that I couldn’t slow my pounding heart. The curves of those stars were rippling lines of time and light, gray and white, that traced across the black world. When the end of the curve reached its beginning, it became an illusory halo that could only be seen in a world accelerated to a trillion times faster than its original speed. More than a thousand halos were born. The history of countless soul stars drew circles, leaving behind scars on the empty universe.

The circle that imitated infinity continued to rotate. Like a wheel, it kept turning and turning. In the center of this thousand-layered halo stood Lorde, majestic, upside down, and with both wings and her long hair spreading out around her. Her magic power was so intense that she looked like a shining green sun. The world, which had been jet-black, was now dappled with vivid green and teal. This world was now beyond a universe. If I were to call it a false celestial body woven of false stars and a false universe, then it was already...

“This place, empty of all but me, is now Floor Fifty! This is the floor of the Thief of Wind’s Essence! Isn’t it a perfect match for how empty I am?! Of course, I have nothing! I can’t build anything fast, I can’t borrow anything! This place is all I have! Now, there is nothing here, but relax and make yourself at home! The trial of the fiftieth floor is about to begin! I will win you over and lead this place to true peace!”

This was the domain of the Thief of Wind’s Essence. I had finally, truly arrived in her domain. The trial of the fiftieth floor would begin at last. I knew what it was without being told. Lorde had said something about peace, but it was much simpler than that. It was nothing more than a small child tugging at the hem of her friend’s clothes as she left the playground. That’s all there was to it.

So there was only one thing for me to do. The muscles in my back were still frozen, but I exhaled a long, hot breath from the bottom of my stomach, trying to shake off the chill. “Lorde, I’m ready over here. Stop showing off and just start already!” I shouted back at her.

“You’re talking nonsense, Kanami!!!”



I was going to grab that little kid by the neck and run into the outside world with her. I couldn’t leave her alone in this place any longer. For my own sake, and for her, I would absolutely bring about a victorious future.

I launched myself off the rubble, knowing what a narrow and fragile path lay before me.

Chapter 2: At Last, the Final Retainer Falls into Floor Fifty, Only to Attend to the Death of the Childish Queen

From a street a short distance from Mr. Reynand's mansion, all that could be heard was a storm of explosions. It was probably Lorde's wind magic. My liege's magic was much, much quieter.

"Lorde is fighting freely, I see. Well then, Liner Hellvilleshine, shall we fight somewhere without any people?" Nosfy turned away from me, a smile on her face, and began walking down the street.

I guessed she was confident that she could handle a surprise attack from behind. I could tell from her behavior that she thought of me as nothing more than a warm-up before fighting Sieg.

I didn't follow her. I would never chase after her. To be honest, I had a bad feeling about going anywhere with this awful woman. Lorde and Sieg had moved away from me, so I was going to fight her right here, right now.

"I'm telling you, I'm going all out right from the start. Unlike before, I won't let my guard down, Guardian of Light. Mr. Lorwen! Sylph Rukh Bringer!" I pulled out both the Treasured Blade and the Cursed Sword and poured all of the magic I had gained from copying Sieg's earlier incantation into the blades, granting them magic power and restoring their brilliant luster. But that wasn't enough. Not yet.

"*Accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *Acceleratеaccelerateaccelerate*!" I copied one of Lorde's incantations as well in order to further amplify the magic. The power of the wind in my body swelled at a frightening rate. It felt like this one was better suited to me than Sieg's incantation. However, the cost of it grew proportionately. As if to say that lightness was necessary for

acceleration, everything was being chipped away, chipped away, chipped away.

My ego, my experiences, my memories—my very soul was being chipped away and lightened. This self-injury was accompanied by a pleasant sensation. It was so pleasant that I was on the verge of bursting into laughter at any moment. However, behind that happiness were many things that were irretrievably lost. I almost forgot. I almost went back. I almost returned. I would go back to the distant past, before I was a baby, back to before I was even born, and I would want to die.

I'd stopped breathing without even realizing it and gasped for breath. This was a terrible price. In exchange for magic power, I was being deprived of many things I needed to live.

"Oh, is that Lorde's incantation? It seems that you, a descendant, are no different when it comes to imitating other people's incantations."

"That... That incantation isn't normal! Nobody should use it! But Lorde did! She was laughing and chanting it while she was working!" Somehow, my memories linked back to each other. Among them was the memory of Lorde teaching me magic. She was awkward but had taught me in a very kind manner. Seeing her like that had reminded me a little of my sister Fran, probably because of the kindness at her core. We'd trimmed gardens together, eaten together, and had fun together in our spare time. I still remembered her buying me lunch when we played at being the neighborhood watch, acting like she was my big sister. But when I thought of what was behind that smile, I wanted to gouge my heart out.

"If Lorde had to resort to something like that, it was only because she was driven into a corner! I won't move a single step from here! I won't let you near those two!" I cried.

"You really don't understand. If Lorde is suffering, is it not my presence as her friend that she needs the most? From the bottom of my heart, I wish to see her smile."

Damn it! This woman was speaking so shamelessly!

"Impossible. I trust my instincts. No matter how I look at it, no matter how I consider it, all I can think is that you're the root of all

evil! Yes, that's all I can think about! My good-natured liege still seems to believe in you somewhere in his heart, but I don't! I don't care what you say or what the circumstances are! I will kill you without question!" I declared. My speech had grown a little rougher since Sieg had left, but since I was dealing with Nosfy, it was fine.

"Did Master Kanami not tell you to go easy on me?" she replied.

Look at that... Her face didn't change at all. She was still smiling and calmly trying to take the conversation to the next level.

"His orders were to stop you. But I'm not that overly sincere knight anymore! I subconsciously planned on killing you from the very beginning!"

"I see. Your decision has been conveyed to me, Hellvilleshine." Even under the full force of my killing intent, Nosfy didn't lose her sympathetic attitude. After all, not only was there a difference in power between us, but there was also a clear difference in experience.

According to the legends of the Church of Levahn, the girl who had become the Banner of Light had had an extraordinary military record. Once she appeared in the history books, she'd filled the annals and apparently fought in a thousand battles. And now I, a nameless knight, faced her. But I absolutely could not lose. Sieg believed in me and had asked me to do this, and I couldn't betray that trust. Above all, as a knight—no, as Liner Hellvilleshine—I could not lose.

"Someone like you can't defeat me," I stated.

"Oh? Someone...like me?"

"Sorry, but I can't believe you're stronger than Mr. Lorwen." I'd seen Mr. Lorwen, the Thief of Earth's Essence, in battle in Laoravia. At the time, I hadn't thought there was even a possibility of me winning. There'd been no way to take advantage of him, and it had felt like no matter what I did, he could cut off my head with a single breath. But this Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence, was different. Only in regard to combat, of course, but...she felt lukewarm. Mr. Lorwen's specialty had been combat, but it wasn't hers. At least, that was my impression.

"Hee hee, you understand well. Yes, if it is just combat skills, then

you are correct. But is that not too obvious? It is no good if the knight who protects is weaker than the master."

"That's right. One can't be called a knight if they're weaker than their master. And my master, Sieg, has defeated Mr. Lorwen. In other words, I can't waste my time on someone like you, who's probably weaker than Mr. Lorwen!" By speaking aloud my reasons for being unable to lose, I kept myself from running away and thought only of victory.

Nosfy laughed. "That is a good aspiration! Except for the problem that it is absolutely impossible."

"I'm on a mission to be stronger than Sieg, so I *have* to defeat you!" I spoke more for my own sake than to convince her. From my experience, I knew that making this kind of contract was the most important thing in a battle. With a feeling akin to an incantation, I shouted, "So, today, here, I will defeat you, and become Sieg's knight in the true sense of the word! I will kill you, Nosfy! *Ix Wynd*!" I used my wind power to rush forward.

Nosfy began weaving light magic as she muttered to herself. "Yes, it really is irritating to watch. Your irreverence, arrogance, and recklessness. You know you cannot do such a thing, but you fool yourself by saying it out loud. That kind of thing reminds me of the old days, so can you please stop?" Naturally, the speed of her spellcasting was god-tier and unmatched in accuracy. "*Light Rod—Nosfy's Banner*!"

She finished filling the banner with magic before I even reached her. Then, she waved it just once to the side. There was no shock wave, no magic, just a twinkle of light from the flag. I was bathed in its brilliance. It didn't matter. I couldn't prevent it anyway. If she wanted to control my blood, she could do so. Since the seed of her power was already broken, all I had to do this time was concentrate on my swords alone and not on magic. But a voice rang in my ears, disrupting my concentration.

Listen to me, Hellvilleshine.

"Huh?!" I looked at Nosfy out of the corner of my eye, but she didn't move her mouth. It was still closed, and a smile was on her face. But I could definitely hear her voice. That was when I realized

—her light wasn't trying to control my blood, but my entire being. Her *Discussion* was starting right from the very beginning.

Please take a moment and listen to what I have to say. Fighting produces nothing. First of all, put your swords away and have a Discussion *with me. Hurting each other will only create mutual hatred. That hatred will lead to more fighting, which is just too sad. And it will not save the world. The battle will involve everyone around you, and it will spread forever. Your sword will kill not the enemy in front of you, but innocent people. After slaying your enemies, you will have slain those you wish to protect. One day, you will kill your beloved neighbor. That is battle. That is war. Please understand the truth. Conflict produces nothing. What you should do now is exchange words.* Discussion *is the path to true peace. Now, let us talk. Talk with me. Let us talk, let us talk, let us talk, let us talk, let us talk.*

The light emanating from the flag was condensed into myriad words. It was truly a pleasant voice from heaven. It was warm, like a mother singing a lullaby, like a ritual prayer echoing in the main hall of a church. Perhaps this was the original use of her Light magic. It was persuasion by an overwhelming amount of light, without any cheap tricks. Even now, it was making me nod along.

But I put all my strength back into my body and shook my head. "Shut up! I already know that much! But how can the world revolve around such a beautiful thing? The time for *Discussion* has long passed!"

I ran straight into the light and pressed in close to Nosfy. At the same time, I swung my twin swords like scissors, hoping to cut off her head. She avoided my attack easily by turning and bending backward. My rush was completely ineffective, perhaps because the light made it difficult for me to gauge distance.

"Oops! Even bathed in all this light, you are not perturbed. Normally that many incantations would create a gap in your mind. It is interesting, no? You are paying the price and yet still holding your own. No... Are you avoiding the price by sheer willpower alone?"

It didn't matter if I was avoiding it. I took another step forward and swung my swords back and forth quickly. Even Nosfy seemed to

have a hard time avoiding my blades empty-handed, so she stopped the banner's glow and used it as a defensive weapon, repelling my swords.

"Liner Hellvilleshine, descendant of Hellvilleshine. It is possible that the same unfair but correct procedure led us to the same realm. In terms of willpower, you have more than all the Essence Thieves. Well, that is natural, since one of the conditions to become an Essence Thief is to have a heart full of holes." She analyzed me, repelling each of my strikes and looking like she had all the time in the world. I was so eager to diminish that leeway that I kept increasing the speed of my attacks. "I am not sure why you are on the same stage as us, but it is quite interesting. I am beginning to want to have a little brother too. Unlike Lorde, however, I will not love him, but see him as a brother worthy of tormenting."

A chill ran through me, and I aggressively swung my sword in refusal. "Who will be your brother?! Your light is sinister! You have the same eyes as those rotten Whoseyardian knights! You use the same words! Your light hurts people! I'll choke the life out of you right now!"

I recognized the look in her eyes. It was one I remembered from my childhood. As a boy, I'd been constantly harassed by the people around me because I was a commoner adopted by a noble family. I guess my peculiar origins made it easy for them to toy with me. I was bullied in a way that was easy to understand. At that time, every knight who toyed with me had shone brightly. Since they were not of lowly birth like me, their speech and behavior were perfect. Their families were rich, their bloodline old and long and noble. They were talented, wore beautiful clothes, had pretty faces, and smiled as they took pleasure in harassing me. Nosfy reminded me of those knights. They couldn't conceive of their own deeds as being wrong, instead humiliating others with the ease of an afternoon tea break.

"Are you going to kill me? Just to be kind, I am going to tell you a simple fact: you cannot beat me," she stated ruthlessly, easily dodging my twin swords, which were swinging at super speed, with room to spare.

Her words were persuasive.

I was now strong enough to easily defeat the upperclassmen at the academy I used to attend. Even if there were a hundred Whoseyardian knights, they wouldn't be able to deal with me. But Nosfy was on a totally different level. She could handle someone from Eltraliew Academy or the nation of Whoseyards itself without a problem. It was a sheer difference in class. Not only was she a monster in terms of her unique Light magic, but she was also abnormally strong even in close combat, and she even had time to make jokes as she effortlessly defended against my twin swords, though I was putting my full weight behind them.

I let out a yell as I swung my blades again. Even in the Dungeon I'd never swung them with such serious intent. Before fighting Nosfy, I had thought this all-out effort would work a little better, but she shattered that faint hope with a cool expression.

"Heh. What a beloved sword. But it's only beloved because I'm familiar with it." She narrowed her eyes, waxing nostalgic in the middle of our fight.

I resented her attitude. But more than that, I was bothered by the remark. She was "familiar with" the sword? Why? Up until now, she'd been keeping me pinned down here while I was still trying to get my bearings. The fight between us had only lasted a minute or less in total. However out of the ordinary she was, it was way too early for her to have become familiar with my style.

"Is it not strange how easily I can respond to it?" Nosfy asked, seeming to sense my confusion. Then, her face turned a little cruel and she broke the banner of light in her hand.

"Huh?!"

The banner split into two rods and changed shape, becoming similar to the two swords I was holding.

"It is not over yet, Hellvilleshine. I suspect I can handle those swords better than you can," she said, chuckling as she began to fight with the twin swords of light. Nosfy's stance and the path her blades traced from the left and right were all too familiar.

"That... Is that...the Hellvilleshine technique?!"

Even though I was bewildered, I employed the same stance to block her blows. There was no mistaking it—Nosfy knew the

Hellvilleshine's double-blade fighting technique. And she was way better at it than me. Even though I was inferior when it came to basic physical ability, it was too much of a disadvantage to also have such a drastic difference in skill.

In a panic, I tried to change my fighting style. "W-Well, then! Mr. Lorwen!" I tried to pull out the skill from the sword by appealing to the magic gem of the Thief of Earth's Essence.

But before I could do anything, Nosfy started laughing. She no longer concealed her expression, and it became the look of a typical bully. "Oh, you are going to use Arrace style next? Not a bad idea, but it would take Arrace himself to actually reach me. In this, too, I am superior."

Nosfy's light blades reformed into a single sword. Then, she swung it in a flash, reminding me of Mr. Lorwen himself. I blocked it by holding my twin swords crosswise. Naturally, her sword wasn't as sharp as Mr. Lorwen's had been, but she was still better than me.

"Damn it! *Tauschaus Wynd*!" I released a spell on the spur of the moment, perhaps because of Mr. Lorwen's subconscious dislike of close-quarters combat. But Nosfy laughed at that too. With flushed cheeks, she dodged the oncoming wind spike like she was dancing.

"That is a good spell, but it shows the habits of your teachers in its construction. I am very used to reading its invocation. I do not even need to borrow magic from *Discussion* to counter it. Let me just tell you, countering your magic in the Dungeon was a performance to break your heart. I am more than capable of handling it without countering it."

I was at a loss for words. The confidence that I had gained in no small measure over the past month was crumbling all at once. I was cornered, so I cast the spell I'd sealed away on my legs.

"*Ix Wynd*!" I kicked off the ground, releasing the wind compressed in my legs. The bottom of the left leg of my pants was torn away, and my skin was seared off by the wind. In return, I gained speed proportional to that damage. After the most impressive charge of my life, I put my whole body into the sword slash that I aimed at Nosfy. But the scene in front of me was cruel. There was no one where Nosfy had been standing just a moment before, and

my twin swords slashed through empty air.

Then, I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard a voice from behind me. “Your idea is just like that stupid Hellvilleshine knight. But I am used to that as well. I do not know how many times I have stopped that self-destructive move,” Nosfy said with a sigh, her breath warm against my ear.

“Nosfy?!” As I was about to spin around, my vision turned upside down. Just before it flipped, I was able to catch a glimpse of her. She had turned the sword of light back into its original rod shape and swiped at my leg with it.

I grunted as I hit the ground. I felt weight and then pain on my hands. I opened my eyes, waiting for my shaky vision to settle. There was Nosfy, using long strides to step between my hands. She was gripping her rod of light. The end of it came to rest right at the tip of my nose. It was the perfect assertion of dominance, a too-pretty checkmate. In all things sword and sorcery, I had failed miserably. It was a defeat without an excuse. My face contorted at the quick end to the fight.

“There we go. I win. But I may have gone a bit overboard. My heart is starting to ache, so let’s get it over with. When I see the pained expressions on other people’s faces, it makes me feel stiff and uncomfortable. Hee hee, as I thought, Kanami is the only one for me. Hee hee hee hee hee! Oops! I’m drooling just thinking about him. How shameful of me!”

Drool almost fell on my face, but Nosfy wiped it up with her quick reflexes. I could tell from how she was acting that she was still feeling calm. I wasn’t able to stall her, let alone corner her. That was my current situation. Naturally I was filled with frustration. I felt like biting my tongue out of shame.

“Then, let us have you pass out, shall we? I am going to go hard, so please do not bite your tongue.” Nosfy pulled back the hand holding the rod of light. It floated in front of my face, and I could sense it was about to pierce my brain.

Just then, the earth shook. A roaring sound, louder than thunder, rang out from the distance, and the world was struck by a massive earthquake. It halted her final blow.

“Oh? Oh my, oh my! So Lorde has finally become serious.” Nosfy didn’t seem to care much about the missed chance and gazed into the distance. It seemed Lorde had unleashed a great magic on the battlefield over there.

Looking up, I saw an unnatural crack spreading across the sky, which was peeling away from the edge of it. That wasn’t all. Looking to the side, I could see countless cracks in the earth as well. A scene that could only be described as the collapse of reality spread across the entire place.

This was the aftermath of the battle between Sieg and Lorde. Although it was being fought far, far away, I could feel the intensity of their fight all the way over here. It was a clash of forces that I could never imitate. I grieved at this revelation.

“Damn it! Even after all this ridiculousness, I still can’t reach their level!” I shouted. I knew that I couldn’t best the Guardians as I was now. I should have known better and followed Sieg’s advice to just stop Nosfy in her tracks. In my arrogance, I’d been too naive, believing that I was going to win.

Nosfy heard the lament and replied in an unusually gentle voice, “That is correct, you cannot reach our level. Hellvilleshine, you have lost. You are weak. You are remarkable, but you are still not as good as us, the Essence Thieves. Above all, the main problem is that human life is too short. From the look of it, you have only lived a dozen years, correct?”

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she wasn’t trying to demean me. She was just laying out the facts and giving me credit where it was due.

“You are inevitably lacking compared to the other three people here. And that deficiency will never be filled no matter what you do,” Nosfy continued.

“Even if it can’t be filled, I have no choice!” I was almost throwing a tantrum.

“Moreover, you have not caught up with the power of that body. Perhaps it was some trick that made you so strong? To be honest, my impression of you is that you are only using borrowed power to keep up appearances and that you have very little in the way of

substance," she replied gently.

It sounded like advice. It also meant that I wasn't being treated as an enemy. Nosfy's words echoed in my mind. Liner Hellvilleshine was shallow. I was only keeping up appearances with borrowed power. I was a coward who relied on cheap tricks, so I'd never be able to catch up to her, Lorde, or anyone else.

I knew all that. I'd known it from the beginning. First of all, my current level and magical power was almost entirely Wyss's. I was only able to stand here because I had received her soul. The swordsmanship was a gift from Mr. Lorwen. I hadn't honed it myself but received it rather spur of the moment. The same could be said of my magic. I had managed to get up to a practical level by learning some tricks from Ide and Lorde, but again, I hadn't studied it personally, simply receiving the wisdom of a thousand years ago. Even my equipment had all been given to me. Not only was it not made by me, but it was not even made from magic gems that I had collected. I hadn't paid a single gold coin for it—Sieg had provided everything. The fact that he'd lent me Mr. Lorwen, who'd been his dear friend, clearly showed the depth of his concern for me.

I hated to admit it, but I knew all that. I guessed that Sieg had been worried I would surely get into a fight in this underground space. He must have predicted from the beginning that I would be alone in the coming battle and that I would not be strong enough. That was why he wanted to strengthen me even though it made things dangerous for him too. He really was a kind master.

I couldn't say it out loud, but I thought he was an honorable man, more worthy of service than anyone I had ever known. That was why my frustration was doubled. I felt frustrated that I was not strong enough to serve my ideal master. He had trusted me to handle Nosfy, but I couldn't live up to his expectations. I was so, so, so frustrated that I couldn't stand it.

"Damn it!!!" Why was I so weak? I was *so* weak! A weak knight was a worthless knight. If I couldn't protect my lord then I was nothing. I was trash! Just a piece of trash! No, I was less than that! Instead of being useful to someone, all I did was drag them down! No matter how much time passed, I would never change! I'd lived

this long and nothing had changed!

I screamed internally and almost broke down under my own abusive thoughts. But there was an emotion in me now that outweighed the pettiness and frustration.

"I...lost? No, I made a vow! I swore to project my master! So...aaaAAAHHH!!!" I bellowed, still on the ground. Then I started an incantation again. "*Accelerate! Accelerate! Accelerate! Accelerate! The path leading from the sky! The path leading to the heavens!*"

Nosfy observed this with dismay and calmly continued speaking. "You're not so weak that you cannot pay the price. It is good to rely on the world, but the world is not so convenient. You should know that," she advised me, and I caught it over the sound of my incantation. I was dependent on the world?

The tip of the rod of light approached again, and was about to put an end to me.

"For now, you'll have to pass out. This is the end."

If I didn't do anything, Nosfy was right, it would be over. And yet, there was something that bothered me more than the fight. It was a word I couldn't get out of my mind. Just before defeat, in that brief moment, my thoughts accelerated like a bullet.

The world? Was I trying to rely on such a thing now? No. I denied it reflexively. I was relying on something else. Even in this incantation, I wasn't thinking of the world, but of the faces of those I trusted. I was remembering the teachings of Mr. Lorwen, Ide, Lorde, and Sieg. To me, the world was an enemy rather than a source of support. That had been true ever since I was born. This was Liner Hellvilleshine's innocent and true belief. What I believed in wasn't the world. Of course, it wasn't myself either. I didn't use any magic as I reaffirmed this.

A soft wind blew. It flowed between Nosfy and me, making my bangs sway. It wasn't wind created by either Lorde or me, and of course it wasn't Nosfy's. I knew the feeling of that wind. I knew whose wind it was.

The tip of the light rod was about to swing down on my head. The light grew and grew, and now that I was about to be defeated—at that moment, I clearly knew the true source of my power.

I screamed.

I recalled the name of the person I trusted most in the world. At the same time, the ground beneath me shook. Everything there, as well as my heart, revealed its true form.

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The Trial of the Thief of Wind's Essence began.

I manage to jump from one piece of debris to the next, bewildered by the crazy gravity shifts. However, Lorde, the Thief of Wind's Essence, was close behind me. Unlike me, limited in where I could move, she could use her wings to move freely. If we continued to play tag like this, I would probably be cornered at some point. I tried to hide behind some rubble to get out of view for a moment before that happened. However, Lorde's fist struck the rubble without hesitation.

"Such a nuisance!" The debris, which was about the size of a house, was crushed easily like a cookie. Her fist was so fast that I only heard a slight thud, but the scene that unfolded before me was horrible. The rubble shattered into small pieces and then came at me like a hail of bullets.

I quickly used my sword to slash away the stone projectiles, but some of the ones I couldn't avoid caused me damage. In some places, the pain reverberated all the way to my bones.

"Damn!" I tried to find some kind of advantage I could use, but this was still Floor Fifty. No matter how I struggled, it would only be to Lorde's advantage.

"Ohhhh! Don't you hide from me!" Lorde didn't seem to share my thoughts. The cost of the incantations and the excitement of the battle were making her hotheaded. Unable to make rational decisions and frustrated by her inability to corner her prey, she switched from close combat back to long-range.

With a flap of her wings, she moved several hundred meters away in an instant, breathing heavily as she continued incanting. "*Accelerateaccelerateaccelerate*!"

A green magic circle floated into the sky. It grew in time with her

chant, becoming huge. The wings on her back spread out as well, scattering many green feathers. It was a fantastic sight, like green snow.

"*Accelerate, whittle and break*! *All petal fragments become wind*! *Flying Bullet—Wynd Arrow: Scattered Flowers*!!!" she shouted.

At the same time, the magic circle that had been growing scattered. The green lines of the circle, which had been drawn in the sky above, disintegrated and broke apart, becoming countless dots.

I was able to understand what was happening because of *Dimension*. Those many dots were all *Wynd Arrows*, and they were about to fall like rain.

"Damn!" I immediately tried to get out of range. I wasn't as fast as Lorde, but I was indeed fast. I pushed off the debris and moved away in a single leap. Immediately after that, a hail of *Wynd Arrow*s pierced the spot where I had been a moment ago, turning the rubble into a honeycomb. I watched it from a distance and had a chance to take a break.

But my brief respite was interrupted when I saw the corners of Lorde's mouth lift in a smile as she flew in the distance. *Dimension* sensed that all of the arrows that had pierced the rubble were twisting far below me. They were supposed to fall into the abyss, but they had changed trajectory and were now coming toward me.

"No way!"

I kicked off the rubble again and jumped, changing the direction of my escape repeatedly by running back and forth between the debris, trying to escape from the wind arrows that were coming toward me. But they changed their trajectory as if they were living things and continued to chase me. At this rate I would quickly be blown full of holes just like the rubble had been earlier.

"*Dimension: Calculash*!"

I stood on a single piece of rubble and readied my sword. Naturally, the moment I stopped, the rain of arrows came for me. The countless green dots heading my way made my brain overheat as I processed the information from *Dimension*. But with my current Swordplay skill level, I should be able to handle them. I felt the strength that I had lost during the battle with Palinchron returning to

my body. Or perhaps I should say that the sense of discomfort that had been created by the loss of Hitaki's magic gem had disappeared and my instincts for actual combat had returned. Thanks to the sword fight with Lorde, even though it had only lasted a few seconds, my Swordplay had evolved even further.

"At this level..."

I poured my magic power into my *Dimension: Calculash*, which sharpened my perception and thoughts and prolonged the amount of time I could experience in that moment. With the progress I'd made in understanding the essence of Dimension magic, *Dimension: Calculash* was on the verge of reaching a whole new realm.

The world moved slowly. It was *Dimension: Calculash*'s new tier. It was like I could see the futures of all the trajectories of the arrows flying at me. There were 344 of them in front of me; 54 were likely to hit me, and the other 290 would change direction and strike me from behind. I knew the distances of all the arrows. Therefore, I could calculate the time it would take them all to land. Then what would be the optimal sword swing? My *Responsiveness* skill immediately answered that question, and Swordplay made that absurd answer come true.

A rain of arrows... First, clear away the closest one, then—without losing any of my sword's momentum—clear away the arrow to my side, then another swing to clear the arrow on the other side. These three sword strikes opened a gap in the rain of arrows, and I ran into that gap, swinging my sword. By slashing and moving optimally, I slashed and slashed and slashed and slashed at hundreds of wind arrows without any wasted movements. In doing so, I managed to slip through the barrage.

But there were still arrows left that I hadn't cut down. They changed their trajectory and attacked again, so I jumped backward once more, slashing and slashing and slashing again and again. After a few seconds, I was the only one left, the countless *Wynd Arrow*s vaporized by my sword.

"What?! You repelled them all?!" Lorde shouted as I finished.

"With energy to spare!" I replied boldly after a moment of staring at the sword in my hand. I was a little surprised too. I knew that the

longer the battle went on, the more advantageous it would be for me. But still, I thought it was strange. Now I was really thinking at a speed that could be described as "calculating," and I was dispatching arrows with frighteningly keen intuition. It was as though I was approaching an already determined future, and I'd even felt a sense of déjà vu as the arrows had rained down.

"Is this...?" I whispered, staring out at the space filled with magic power. Right now my spell was no longer *Dimension: Calculash*.

"W-Well then! You wasted magic dodging that! You'll regret allowing me to use this on you!" Undeterred by my success, Lorde began casting her next spell. The magic power being gathered was so dense that it looked like it was forming a new star in the universe.

"My next spell is one that I created to fight the whole world! The target of the attack is the world itself! When I used it just a little while ago, my army was angry with me, but here I can go all out! No matter where you are, no matter where you hide, this is the end! Don't hate me! It's your fault, Kanami, for blocking my *Wynd Arrow*s!" she yelled, taking flight.

She flew farther and farther away, which meant her next spell wouldn't be as powerful as if it were cast up close. Wrapping herself in her green wings, she soared high into the air, up and up, as though preparing to dive. Her magic and the atmosphere rubbed against each other, and the frictional heat drew a bluish-white line through the universe.

It was frighteningly fast. I thought that there was no more speed and magic power beyond what she'd already gained, but it still wasn't enough for Lorde, so she began another incantation.

"*I am accelerating*! *Accelerate, accelerate, accelerate*!" She repeated the word as if she was still too slow. Through the incantation, she cried out about the meaninglessness of her own life, and her soul was shaved away, becoming lighter and lighter. She was a green star.

The star named Lorde shone while incanting and continued to rise. That endlessly shining star was certainly a heavenly queen. She was truly beautiful as she soared high into the sky, never showing the slightest sign of the limits of her power.

And yet...

"*Accelerateaccelerate, ACCELERATING*! *I am the spirit that sprints through this hell*!" Her appearance was too ephemeral. If she continued to cut off the important parts of her life for the sake of acceleration, not only her heart but her life and soul too would be destroyed. I couldn't bear to watch.

"Lorde! Your incantation is already—" I tried. Of course, my voice didn't reach her. Physically and psychologically, she was too far away to hear. That's why she wasn't willing to be the Sovereign Queen Lorde—she'd *never* been willing.

"*Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*!"

I could only hear her chanting because of *Dimension*. She was proving with her own body that cutting and selling herself off was the essence of being a ruler.

Finally, Lorde stopped flying. In her floating realm, there was no more debris of Viaysia left. I was horrified by her ghastly expression and appearance when I observed the green star floating in the black sky above me with *Dimension*. The magic power that had accumulated from her incantations couldn't be contained, so it gushed out from her shoulders, elbows, hips, backs of her knees, and ankles. She looked like she had multiple green wings.

Her long, emerald hair shimmered and reflected her body's magical light, making her shine infinitely. The sight of her hair dancing enticingly, like tentacles, was a bewitchingly beautiful and lewd scene.

Just as with the rain of arrows, a geometric magic circle was painted on the black canvas of the sky, but the size of the formation of it was on a different order of magnitude. And the magic circle, which was larger than the stars, was not one that would become arrows as it dispersed.

With a thud, Lorde put her foot down. She used the magic circle as a platform.

"*Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate*

accelerate! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*!"

Even though she was standing still with her feet firmly on the ground, she still shouted "Accelerate." Her luminescence didn't stop. She was shining like her light was being multiplied, filling everything. But it was no longer really light. It was an enormous mass of Wind magic. Her appearance, which could be called the embodiment of magic power, was just like...

"*Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate accelerate accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *AcceleRATE*! *I AM an accelerating SPIRIT! Green light SPILLING, chasing, a continuous RETREAT! Falling white cherry blossom PETALS, even if I am ALONE, a continuous RETREAT! Filled with DEATH, now FASTER, a continuous RETREAT! Family TAKEN, loathing the CURSE, a continuous RETREAT! Lost DREAM, the air and EARTH, a continuous RETREAT! Retreat from the BATTLEFIELD, retreat from the GRAVES, retreat from HELL—the acceleration does not stop in the depths of HELL*!!! *I am an accelerating spirit*!!!"

She really was the Mad Queen. There was no going back. Lorde had long since disappeared. The world reverberated with the continuous beat of her incantation, as if she was asserting with regret that she had become queen. The incantation certainly reached my ears even though she was so far away that I shouldn't have been able to hear it. The magic circle grew in time with her chanting. It grew and grew, like a cracked mirror, a blossoming bud, an illusory pattern eroding everything, everywhere and anywhere. The magic circle must have been Lorde's spirit. The green star shone like the noonday sun.

"Therefore, I will strike down once more! This is the magic bullet of my soul! The most effortless blow in the world! Let's go, Kanami!

Iiiiiixxxxxx WYYYYYYYNNNNDDDD!”

The spell she finally cast was *Ix Wynd*. It was an intermediate spell that many divers aboveground were able to use. But the effect was totally different.

First, the green light scattered violently like fireworks. The magic circle that had been her stage was shattered when she put her foot down on it. Next, the compressed wind burst in all directions like a popped balloon. With an explosion, endless light and wind filled the world like a huge blizzard.

And then Lorde disappeared. She was plummeting toward the depths of hell. Far, far overhead, a green blur fell from the heavens like a shooting star. *Dimension* informed me of the mechanics of the meteor. The answer was simple and clear. This “meteor” was just Lorde drop-kicking with all her strength. That was all there was to it. And yet, a magical phenomenon was occurring. The air burned as she flew too fast, and her whole body glowed blue. Although she was still green, she fell toward me, leaving a blue streak behind her.

The “meteor” cut through the world with only physical force. This dimension was being severed, as though a black piece of paper were being cut with a pair of scissors. I now understood, in the truest sense of the word, why she was called the Mad Queen by her enemies and even the Demon Queen by her allies, even as she was the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

This was the legend from a thousand years ago. A symbol of strength passed down from generation to generation. A vision dreamed of by all the people of the North. A tale that brought together nations on the brink of destruction. A queen among queens who had inherited the noblest blood of all. The incarnation of the wind that pierces not only countries and continents, but the world as well—the Thief of Wind’s Essence, Lorde.

She existed once again. She was trying, with her whole being, to pierce the world. Her target was a single person—me.

I broke out in a cold sweat and swallowed hard. If the attack hit me, I would be extinguished. If it grazed me, I would inevitably die instantly. If I was anywhere close to it, my body would be torn apart. Even at a distance, the heat and impact would reduce my HP

to zero in an instant. There wouldn't be a point in deflecting it with *Dimension: Difference*. No matter where I was, I wouldn't be able to escape the attack. No, it was doubtful whether I could even deflect it in the first place.

But I knew what I had to do. I was finally starting to feel at ease. I didn't remember seeing this skirmish earlier in the *Future Sight* given to me by *Dimension: Calculash—Realize*, but I recognized the scene. In other words, Lorde had finally begun to get really angry and we were now on the road to the victory I had witnessed.

The Trials were always all-out battles full of emotion. I had already known from the start that I wouldn't be able to reach victory if I didn't draw out Lorde's full strength. From now on, I would probably sustain serious—or even fatal—injuries from this shooting star. I had given up the naive idea that I wouldn't get hurt again. Therefore, what I had to concentrate on was not defense, but finding what I needed for the final move. Surely it was still out there. If this place was the world Lorde wanted, since she was Lorde, it must be out there!

"Ha...ha ha ha! *Layered Dimension*!" I let out a strange laugh. I may have been starting to feel a little delirious from the mixture of fear and joy. But now that the world had begun to follow what I had seen through *Future Sight*, I had no choice but to push on.

"Warp this space—*Default*!!!" I constructed my usual Dimension magic before the shooting star struck. Truthfully, I was worried that my magic was too unreliable. That made sense, given what was unfolding before me. I wanted to offer my surrender to Lorde right now. Perhaps it was because I was feeling a little weak.

As if to compensate for my unreliability, a soft breeze blew. It caressed my cheek. Caught up in the sensation, I turned my attention to the direction it was blowing from. Far off to my right, I felt a powerful wind, and at the same time saw a warm, shimmering light.

It wasn't Lorde's wind. And the light wasn't Nosfy's. I knew neither had come from Liner. It was impossible to forget—this person had saved my life many times before.

The wind bolstered me, and I faced Lorde, who was still floating

in the sky. I felt my uneasiness fade away, but only a little. The situation remained terrible, but my sense of victory grew stronger. After all, only Liner could defeat Nosfy. It was Liner, not me, who had the power to conquer the Thief of Light's Essence, and only I had the power to conquer the Thief of Wind's Essence. The two of us could defeat them together.

Believing that, I yelled internally, *Liner! We'll overcome this together! We're not fighting alone! We've always fought with the help of those who lent us their strength! Let's win to repay those people! Let's win and get back to the surface!*

In tune with the cries of my heart, the shooting star began falling toward me.

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I felt like I could hear my master's voice coming to me on the soft breeze.

That's right... What I'm hearing in my final moments is a human voice. Not the world.

"I've never once relied on the world!!!" The wind shook my body as I shouted out those words. The wind also pushed away the end of Nosfy's pole, and for the first time in this fight she had a look of surprise on her face. "Yes, you're right! I can't reach your level! But that's always been true!"

I knew there was no such thing as a perfect world. That's why I'd been relying on other people to get me through it. My brother, Sieg, Mr. Lorwen, and Lorde. A piece of trash like me was relying on those people and borrowing their strength to keep fighting now. The wind I was generating reached its peak turbulence. Nosfy, standing above me, was buffeted by it, and she naturally tried to counteract it with Light magic, attempting to use her magic on my blood in order to cast the same spell I was using.

"This wind...it's not magic?!" she cried, clearly confused. "No...in fact..."

The wind converged on my shoulder and took shape.

"An arm?!" she yelled.

Indeed, the wind had coalesced into an arm, and one that seemed familiar to me. It moved to grab Nosfy, who was standing there wide-eyed. She leaped away from me, trying to avoid it.

Thanks to the *Wind Arm*, her dominating position was broken, and I was released. I shakily stood up and regained my grip on my swords. Before I knew it, the battlefield had turned into a fantastic sky of darkness and green phosphorescence. The world had been broken, and only rubble floated around. It felt like it was all made of stardust. Perhaps that was because of the floating sensation I was feeling, similar to falling, and it was a struggle just to get a foothold on the debris. If I made a single misstep, I would fall headlong into the abyss. But strangely, I wasn't afraid. The world had collapsed, but the wind was still blowing.

The gentle wind floated past, and I heard a tone that I felt was a voice. *That's enough, Liner.*

The sound wasn't an actual voice, but somehow I could understand what it was saying. It was a voice I had been missing.

It will be your bonds with other people that save you, boy, not something as unreliable as the world. Shall we go together, successor of my will, Sir Liner Hellvilleshine? Let us, together, defeat the Guardian of Light.

All of the wind that had been blowing returned to my body. It restored my magic power, as if that was the place it had come from to begin with.

"Is this...Ms. Wyss? Or my brother? No...some other woman?"

It was a familiar voice, but the magic power was a feeling I didn't recognize. Perhaps because of its mixture of various attributes and characteristics, it was impossible to identify the source. However, I soon realized it was unimportant.

"No, it doesn't change anything either way. That's right! As long as I know it's everyone helping me and not the world, it won't change anything!"

I yelled it out for everyone, an unspecified number of people, to hear. But I didn't hear any more voices in response. All the wind that had been blowing had turned back into magic power. But that power started to move on its own. Spells were being constructed

independent of my will.

Nosfy watched all this and began mumbling to herself, "This isn't *Wynd*... Is it *Connection*?"

I didn't know either. Whatever the case, it wasn't my magic. It was magic to help only me. As long as I understood that, it would be enough.

"No... Why would Hellvilleshine use Dimension magic?" Nosfy stared in astonishment as the *Wind Arm* activated Dimension magic. Then, it pulled a sword out of nothingness.

I'd seen this before. It was the same as when Sieg took an item out of his Inventory. I had also seen the sword before. I had the same one, shining silver at my waist.

"I see! So the other Single-Winged sword was in Ms. Wyss's possession! No, it was inside me!" I said, laughing as the effects of the magic continued.

Another *Wind Arm* grew out of my other shoulder, and it immediately drew the sword I had at my waist. The twin sacred wings of the Hellvilleshine, which had long been thought lost, were reunited at last.

I looked at the arms holding the twin swords. "That's right! You and I are both knights of twin swords! If that's true, then two and two is our true essence! You take the Single-Winged Swords, and I'll use Mr. Lorwen!" I took Sylph Rukh Bringer and Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan in my hands and assumed the same position as the *Wind Arm*s. The two were overlapping with my physical arms, the holy twin swords hidden directly behind the evil twin blades.

Nosfy glared at me and muttered, "That is strange. Too strange! Are you saying you managed to reproduce Dimension magic with Wind magic? No, is this about Fresh Blood magic? Either way, what a messy, greedy spell construction! It's disgusting!" She was biting her lip and looking very irritated.

To be honest, I didn't understand what was happening either. But I stepped forward with a look that was the complete opposite of hers. "All right, Thief of Light's Essence, let's go. This is true Resonant magic. *The Resonance of Blood and Soul* and *The Twin*

Swords of Life That Tear Through the World. If I had to name it, I would call it *Hellvilleshine Sword Duo*!" Then, as taught by my master and teacher Sieg, I kicked off the ground and leaped forward.

"It is strange. It is too strange!"

The battle resumed on a stage of loose rubble. Nosfy continued to mutter to herself as she assumed a defensive stance with the rod of light. My twin swords attacked from both sides. She dexterously blocked them with the rod, but even though she was able to block my own twin swords, there was a second pair left. The second set of blades flew out from the shadows of my main swords.

"Yes, it is strange! If this is the extent of it, then it's still not enough!" Nosfy had seen through all of my movements, repelling the second set of swords as well.

As one would expect from a Guardian, this still would not be an easy fight. Even though I had twice the number of hands, I still couldn't find a way to break through. In that case, I would have to...

"*Wynd Arrow*! *Divine Arrow*!" I sent out a double dose of basic magic from the tip of my twin swords as I backed away. It was a simple check-and-control magic. But the important thing here wasn't the spells I had cast. The real focus was the magic of the Wind Arm that followed my magic. Just as I had hoped, the third and fourth spells came from the hidden twin swords. Hence, there were two of each spell. The magic I sent out in duplicate was duplicated again.

"Spells too?! You are a very clever imitator! But if that is the kind of magic you use, then... What?!" Nosfy, who saw me casting the spells, tried to cancel them out by working on my blood with the light of her banner. However, that only worked on the two spells I had personally cast. Nosfy wasn't able to cancel out the third and fourth attacks released from the *Wind Arm*s. She hurriedly struck down the second pair of magic arrows with her rod.

"It's pointless, Nosfy! The power isn't flowing from my blood! It's coming from somewhere deeper! From the very soul of the Hellvilleshines!" At least, that was where I thought it was coming from. To be honest, I wasn't sure, but my confidence seemed to confuse her.

“What?! I don’t understand!” Nosfy cried, as she dodged the spells I had released at her.

At last, my enemy was on the receiving end of overwhelming power. I leaped at her and attacked her with merciless speed. The two pairs of twin swords, wielded not only from the left and right, but also from above and below, gradually wiped the composure from her face.

“Tch! Every single sword stroke has too much individuality! It’s like I am fighting my three knights at the same time! Perhaps a feature of that sword is...”

Nosfy, who seemed to have realized something, focused the light of the banner on a different spot. Her next target wasn’t me or my blood, but the four swords I was now wielding. But that didn’t matter. I believed that all the swords had their own distinct wills. I continued to attack, ignoring the light.

“My light doesn’t penetrate?! How... It is just a sword... Against me?!” Nosfy began screaming. “Arrace! Rands! Hellvilleshine! Those three damned knights! As usual they do not listen to me, their master!” Surprisingly, she began swearing when she couldn’t handle the swords. It was the first time I’d ever seen her in such a state.

In response, I relaxed. Arrace, Rands, and Hellvilleshine... I was grateful to know the true names of these swords. So the insane will that resided inside Sylph Rukh Bringer was Mr. Rands. I would use that information to help me wield it. In fact, I would use it right now to bring Nosfy down.

“Diiiiieeeee, Noooossssfyyyyyyyy!!!” I shouted, feeling my own arms tearing from my body as I swung my blades to take my enemy’s life. “*SEHR WYND*!!!” I continued shouting, my throat already hoarse.

“Guhhh!” Nosfy managed to withstand both my attacks and the windstorm, but she was dripping with sweat now. She had lost her absolute advantage and was facing an unidentified force. This would be my only chance to back her into a corner. I now had not only more arms, but also a much greater number of spells. I remembered Sieg’s advice from the Dungeon: Aim for what your opponent doesn’t want you to do; don’t choose rational methods, but methods

that she'll find confusing. In this situation, it would be best to use a mixture of spells that could be canceled out by light magic and those that couldn't.

"*Quartz Bullet*! *Sehr Wynd*!" I drew Crystal magic from Mr. Lorwen, and my other hand released ordinary Wind magic drawn from my blood. My strategy was to use the Wind magic as a decoy so I could accurately hit with the Crystal magic. I was certain that the *Wind Arm* would understand my plan. "Let it reaaaachhh!!!"

As I expected, more magic was added automatically. Following the crystal and wind bullets, the *Wind Arm* released a dimensional distortion and a sacred arrow. As a result, double twinned spells with four different attributes, each with its own will, attacked Nosfy.

"This is...Earth, Wind, Dimension and... Guuuhhh!!!" No matter what Nosfy said, even she couldn't handle four different kinds of magic at once, and an arrow of light pierced her cheek. Finally, one of my attacks had hit.

"Yes! Thank you, everyone!" I shouted out my appreciation. Feeling certain of my victory, I attacked again. I wielded twin swords on top of twin swords and double magic on top of double magic without ceasing.

Each of the swords had different natures, and each spell was independent of the others. Nosfy had no time to *Discuss* with each different aspect of the attack. My advantage came from the borrowed power. I was convinced that this was my true strength—that the power of Liner Hellvilleshine was only borrowed from others. That's what was driving Nosfy's power into a corner.

"I'll hit you next time, Nosfy." I was so happy about my strength that I laughed and continued to push hard. I felt I could overwhelm her. Perhaps it had something to do with the nature of the Thief of Light's Essence. She was probably the strongest when it came to battles that didn't kill her opponents. I didn't think anyone could match her in sublimating a crushing defeat into a complete victory.

That could be predicted from the legends of Whoseyards. In the history lessons I had taken at Eltraliew Academy, we'd learned that a thousand years ago the South had succeeded in taking over many cities without any bloodshed. I remembered that the general who

had led the South in each of those instances was none other than the Banner of the South, Nosfy. From the way she fought, it was clear that she was trying to capture her opponents first. After all, the weapon she was using was a banner, which was not intended to kill or injure. In other words, her strategy was to capture rather than to kill. Talk instead of fight. That was the true strength of the Thief of Light's Essence. So I had to carefully stay away from her areas of strength.

It was time to get away from the clean game and bring on the bloody killing spree. It didn't matter if it was pretend. The enemy in front of me still wouldn't like it. Not only would I gain the advantage in combat, but I would also gain a mental advantage. So I would smile bigger and harder, fight like a fighting maniac, and get bloody!

"Die! *Ix Wynd*!" I yelled, laughing. Launching myself with my legs and on the wind, I laughed and I went on a suicide mission. This fighting style was something I was embarrassingly familiar with. Attacking with abandon was my specialty. Ever since I'd met Sieg, I'd always been thinking of ways to take my enemies down with me. I believed that this was my true nature. Perhaps because of that, I was able to move very smoothly. Moreover, I didn't have to think so much, which made it a little more enjoyable.

I could take as many risks as I wanted. I only had to look at the enemy I was going to stab in the back. All I had to do was burn my life. It was so easy! Fighting was easy! I was a piece of trash anyway! A useless piece of trash! There was no better life to burn than mine!!!

"I'll kill you! Kill, kill, kill, kill! You're the enemy of my master, Sieg! So I, his knight, will kill you!" I said, laughing maniacally. I dared to reproduce the same thoughts I'd once had when I'd fought Sieg on the theater ship in Laoravia. It was definitely a regression to take up the suicidal tactics that I'd suppressed after he'd scolded me. But now, this regression was the best move.

"This is really repulsive! Hellvilleshine, you're moving like crazy!" Nosfy screamed in disgust, looking like she was chewing on something bitter. I guessed she was reluctant to hurt me because of the promise she had made to Lorde. She had completely stopped

fighting back. To be honest, I thought this was a sneaky way to fight. I also thought it was unbecoming of a knight. But I couldn't help it, because killing was in my nature. Because even the worst phase of the fight would be satisfying for me! Oh, I'd really missed this! And it was so refreshing! The fact that my true nature, which everyone had criticized as a bad habit, was effective against a strong enemy like Nosfy! I couldn't stop myself from enjoying it.

"DIIIIEEEEEE!!!!!!" Our battle grew more intense. Little by little, I began to overwhelm her.

"Ugh!" Nosfy, finally acknowledging that she was at a disadvantage, jumped backward.

In response, I exhaled a breath that smelled of blood and laughed as she ran away. I calmly waited to see how my opponent would react and showed that I had the advantage. Nosfy stared back with a reproachful expression.

"Let us be honest. This is a very difficult fight. And your eyes... So, you are a descendant of Hellvilleshine after all. No matter how hard I try to stop you, you will not stop. From the very beginning you had no intention of stopping, which is why you disobeyed your master's orders. You say it is for your master's sake, and yet you ignore orders—all with the eyes of a madman!"

It seemed like I shared a lot of traits with the Hellvilleshine ancestors. It was an interesting coincidence that I had been adopted and didn't actually share their blood. It made me laugh hard.

Nosfy watched me laughing and frowned. She seemed to think that I liked being called a madman. She looked at me like I was a piece of filth and took another step away from me. "I do not mind going along with this messy killing spree, but I am not very skilled at it. I want to avoid being killed, just in case," she mumbled as she continued moving away and repositioning herself.

Just in case I didn't want to kill her? It was a natural progression of thought. Nosfy was different from me—I thought it would be a major accomplishment if I could fight with just one Guardian. From her point of view, if she died here, it would be a double suicide with a piece of garbage like me. No one wanted to die like that.

"Besides, our fighting styles are incompatible. My magic, which

utilizes my opponent's power, is very weak against the type that draws power from elsewhere. Besides, you have a resistance to mental contamination," she continued. The more she muttered to herself, the calmer she became. Apparently, this was a way to stabilize her mind. "But if I use the curse of the Thief of Light's Essence, then I will not be able to prove my feelings for Master Kanami," she continued. "That is absolutely unacceptable. But it is also not possible to regain the consciousness I have lost because of the Light incantations I used. It is no good if I turn into a half-monster. Having said that, I cannot use the ace up my sleeve yet either. No..."

She took a deep breath in and let it out. Then she thrust her banner into a piece of debris and spoke directly to me.

"It's strange. Too strange that you would take this unlikely path to victory!"

She looked around, not at me but at her surroundings, trying to find the source of that strangeness. And then she found a clue to its cause and finally fixed her gaze on the magic in the palm of her hand.

"I still feel some kind of magical interference... The color of this attribute is more like Master Kanami's than Hellvilleshine's... And the target of the magic is not a person, but this whole space? When and where— No, I cannot detect what kind of magic it is..."

It seemed like Sieg was supporting me from somewhere else. I thought back to the incantation and *Dimension: Calculash—Realize* he'd done before the battle. He'd said it was support magic, but there was a high probability it had allowed for this situation to unfold. I laughed at how dependent I was on others in this battle.

"And that face? I really am not suited to battle. I cannot understand the mindset of these warmongers at all," Nosfy said with a look of dismay, having moved beyond even disgust. And then she glanced over her shoulder.

I became impatient. Perhaps I'd gone a little overboard. It would be a bit of a problem now if she was checking her path of retreat. "Huh? Hey, hey, are you running away from someone like me?" I hadn't considered that possibility. I'd believed that someone as good

as Nosfy wouldn't be afraid of trash like me.

"Do not say 'someone like me' at this point. I will admit it, you are strong. It is not an exaggeration to say that you are the second coming of Fafner Hellvilleshine, although your hair color is a bit different. Therefore, I would like to run for my life. I do not want to be involved in any battles except those that I can definitely win."

Strangely, I was being recognized by the Thief of Light's Essence. As she spoke, she pushed herself off the debris and tried to flee the battlefield.

"Wait! I won't let you escape!" I hurriedly chased after her.

"*Light*." Nosfy waved her banner in response. It was a simple flash, but an effective tool for her escape. For a brief moment, I was deprived of my sight, and in the meantime, she managed to make it a good distance away. In this gravity-crazed world, Nosfy dexterously jumped off debris as she navigated around. Her destination was probably the battlefield where Lorde and Sieg were fighting. If I didn't do something, she would join back up with Lorde even though I'd succeeded in keeping them apart so far.

In a panic, I tried to construct a spell for movement, and at that moment, in the distance, a shooting star was falling. The wide, dark world was cut open by a blue line. Then, I was hit by a shock that lifted me off my feet. Not only was there a strong wind, but the ripples caused by the dimensional distortion spread throughout the entire place.

"Dammit!"

"What?" Nosfy said, also lifted into the air, clearly not expecting this. I was pleased to see that another favorable accident had occurred for me, and I immediately pounced as she lost her stance.

"I'm your opponent, Nosfy!"

"You are disgusting! Stay away from me!"

My twin swords met her banner of light. If Nosfy wouldn't fight me properly, I would have to give up on winning and just try to stall her. I switched my fighting style so that I was working to block her escape instead of fighting with abandon. Once that happened, the advantage was reversed. Her retreat was efficient, and slowly our battlefield moved closer and closer to Sieg. But I wasn't out of luck

just yet.

After the shooting star, something that resembled a tornado was brewing over near Sieg. I couldn't exactly call it a tornado because the scene before me was just too bizarre. The "twister" was glowing greenish, distorting this dimension to keep everything in the world at bay.

Nosfy's face changed dramatically when she saw that. "Seriously? There was no need to go that far! It is unfinished! And dangerous!" she shouted, loudly enough to interrupt the battle.

I couldn't disagree with her. "Is this really...magic?" It was dangerous; anyone could see that. It was definitely no ordinary tornado. If I had to describe it, would I say it was a tube of wind? No... A giant cocoon? Since I also used Wind magic, I knew it was no simple wind. The magic was so dense that it had materialized into physical form. Its existence was too heavy, and the world was distorted.

"Lorde! Please hold on until I arrive!" Nosfy, who gathered herself first, shouted as she started running toward the wind cocoon.

I also shook myself out of my daze. My guess was that Sieg and Lorde were fighting inside that cocoon of wind. Neither of them would have any margin of error. I was convinced of that by the sight of their great magic. It would be even more dangerous to let this malevolent Nosfy intervene in such a situation. Above all, Sieg had ordered me to stop her, saying he would handle Lorde himself. As a knight, I believed my master's words. So right now, there was something else I had to do.

"My master asked me to do this! I won't let you go, Nosfyyyyyy!!!!!!!!!" I wouldn't allow her to reach the other battlefield.

"Oh, you are so disgusting! You are in the way! Lineeeerrrrrr!!!!!!" she shouted back, revealing her deep dislike of me.

My challenge with the Thief of Light's Essence was drawing to an end.

◆◆◆◆◆

I dodged the shooting star. It was easy since I could just manipulate distance. *Default* made it simple for me to move a large ways away, allowing for the shooting star to pass me harmlessly. However, I knew in advance that dodging was pointless. The shooting star itself was about the size of a person, but its area of effect was the entire world.

Falling into the depths of the darkness, it first sent a shock wave throughout the world. The ripple was accompanied by a distortion of space that outdid me as a Dimension magic user. If I touched the distortion, it seemed likely that my flesh would be easily torn to shreds.

"*Dimension: Difference*!"

On the other hand, as a Dimension magic user, I was used to these kinds of spatial distortions. It was a hundred times better than an unidentified attack. Even if the attack was a fatal one, it could be dealt with as long as you knew what you were doing. I used *Dimension* to grasp how the distortion of space moved and then employed *Dimension: Difference* to deflect. However, even that couldn't stop the tsunami-like windstorm that followed. Like a light feather swallowed by a typhoon, my body was blown away. In an instant, I was swallowed by the muddy current of the wind and lost all sense of direction.

A strange, monstrous sound, far from natural, echoed from the wind. The roar, akin to a wailing lamentation that cursed the world, struck my ears. If it was only about the pain, the sound would be the most agonizing to me. I gasped. The friction of the wind burned my skin, shook my eardrums, and made it impossible for me to keep my eyes open, disorienting my senses in every way. My sense of time was no exception, and after what felt like either an hour or an instant, I finally regained my freedom.

As I felt a floating sensation, I spread out *Dimension,* as was my habit, to confirm that I was alive. Then I looked at my changed appearance from a bird's eye view. My outer cloak, which had been a memento from Mr. Reynand, had been cruelly torn off. My body was covered in blood from countless cuts, and to a third party it might have appeared that I was dead.

The shooting star hadn't hit me directly, and I had avoided all the spatial distortions, with the damage from the wind being minimal, but even then, I'd ended up in this state.

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[STATUS]
NAME: Aikawa Kanami
HP 32/353
MP 134/1,165-200
CLASS: Diver
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My mouth dropped open when I saw that almost ninety percent of my HP was gone. I was pretty battered, but I could still move. I opened my eyes and braced my feet against a piece of nearby debris. My vision had turned pure red, so I switched to observing everything through *Dimension*, taking stock of the world that had been ripped apart by the shooting star. The hilt of my sword was slick with blood, but I readjusted my grip on it and took a deep breath.

Everything was going exactly as planned. Since I'd been able to draw out Lorde's power to this point, it meant I was almost there. I was confident that I could end it all with just one more move. She would probably get even more frustrated when she saw me still trying to fight. She would likely try to hit me with a stronger spell to make sure I was finished off. I would take advantage of the gap in her defenses while she attacked to hit her with *Distance Mute*. It was a cowardly plan, but it was the only way for me to beat the Thief of Wind's Essence.

"*Layered Dimension*!" I could taste the blood in my mouth as I cast my spell. This would be the last time I could slow down and look for something. The world had been completely mixed up by Lorde's flying kicks, but I did my best to permeate it with my magic. Finally, I found what I'd been looking for this whole time.

A few paintings were floating through space a short distance away from me. They were just children's doodles, but they were housed in expensive frames. The paintings depicted a gabled house

in a grassy field, an elderly semifer couple, an orphanage, and a castle garden. The world had been completely destroyed, yet these paintings were still intact.

It made sense. This world had been created by Kanami the Founder according to Lorde's will. Therefore, these paintings were the only things that couldn't be destroyed.

I took the paintings in hand and did exactly what Lorde wanted me to: I cast a spell.

"*Distance Mute*!" I did what I'd done the first time on the table, using the spell to pull the magic gems from the paintings. The magic inside the gems was pretty weak, but they emitted a warm green glow.

The true value of Dimension Mute *isn't in its ability to reap the lives of enemies. It's a spell that was made to keep the memories of precious things from this world*, I thought as I placed the gems in the palm of the hand of my broken arm.

All that remained was to hit Lorde with these gems. As I finished preparing my final move, I heard a voice off in the distance.

"Did I do it? N-No, maybe he died? I tried to make it as gentle as possible..." Lorde was flying around and looking all over for me. She looked a little uneasy, like her head was cooling off after that huge attack.

"Then why don't you stop, idiot?" I replied.

At that snide remark, Lorde turned around and finally found me.

"There you are, Kanami! And you're still being cocky!" she growled, looking both relieved and angry as she came over to me.

"Yes, still being cocky. I'm doing just fine. After all, even from the start, none of your attacks have hit me directly. To be honest, you're not that great, huh? Even though you're the 'Demon Queen,'" I said, riling her up again.

"WHAT?!" she shouted. Lorde was too much of a child to let that go.

"You're really not that great, Lorde. You aren't capable of wishing for world peace, nor are you capable of bearing responsibility for your people. You are a much bigger coward than you think you are, and I'm going to prove it to you right now," I announced.

"You're wrong! I'm strong! I'm stronger than everyone else! That's why I was the undefeated Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"The Sovereign Queen Lorde is just a facade. Don't you get it?"

"A facade? *This?* This is strength!" She opened her arms wide, emphasizing the ruined world around us.

"You fight like you're strong, but it's all for show." I understood her because I did the same.

"You think my strength is just for show?! You're wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong! I *am* strong! I was there because I am strong! I had to do it because I am strong! If you say I'm not strong, then why was I fighting there? It doesn't make sense! It's not logical! I can't accept such a thing!" Lorde began hyperventilating as I shook her identity to the core. "If I'm not strong then I'm not Lorde! No, I'm Lorde because I am strong! No, I'm strong because I am Lorde!" she continued, and then she began screaming.

It looked painful. It seemed like she didn't know which part of herself had come first. She'd forgotten the most important thing, whether she'd found her desire or created it herself. Her true emotions had been revealed by the all-out battle, and she was beginning to understand. That was the main reason for her breakdown. And, fortunately for her...

"I know that feeling too," I said. "I don't have any memories from a thousand years ago. It's like I lost the evidence of that life. What's more, this isn't even my own body. The Thief of Darkness's Essence told me that Aikawa Kanami was somewhere else. He told me I didn't have a name. He also told me I was a Jewelculus and that my desire to save my sister wasn't my own. And I lost sight of what I was fighting for and almost lost myself, just like you're doing now. But in the end I told him that I was me. No matter what anyone said, I existed here as Aikawa Kanami. Anyone can claim that, even you!"

"That's wrong! *You're* wrong, Kanami. In the end, the only thing that matters is what the people around you think! It's your surroundings that determine who you are! It's only the perceptions of those around you! No matter what I say, if people think that I am the queen who is more powerful than anyone else, then that is what

I will be!”

“It’s true others may give us value. But look at this place! You and I are the only ones here! I’m the only one who believes in you! And I don’t believe you’re strong! I don’t believe you’re a queen!”

“What the...?!” Lorde’s face contorted as she listened to my sophistry.

I knew from experience that putting on a brave front could turn into real strength. It was just a guess, but I figured that a thousand years ago Lorde had become strong enough to become a queen, and in the end, really *had* become queen. Surely, she couldn’t have protected her loved ones otherwise. There was no other reason for a gentle person like her to become such a show-off. But there was no one here for Lorde to protect. There was no one left here at all. She was too out of her mind to realize that there were no enemies, let alone people to save.

There was no South or North anymore. There was no country, not even land. No enemies, no family. No one. So there was no need for her to act like a queen anymore.

“That’s right! I’ve never thought of you as a queen, not even once! Not even a thousand years ago! I always thought of you as a weak, pathetic, crybaby! How can I believe that a weakling like you is a queen?”

“I’m weak?! The Sovereign Queen Lorde is a crybaby?!”

“That’s right! I’m going to make you cry right now! I will *prove* you’re weak!” I pointed the tip of my sword at her figure flying high above me as I continued to provoke her sophomorically. Naturally, Lorde resented my overly rude words.

“KAAANAAAMIII!!! You can’t speak if you’re dead! Experience the power of the Sovereign Queen Lorde! You’ll regret it all the way to the afterlife!” she screamed.

She really was a kind person. The Sovereign Queen Lorde was the admirable representative of her people. So to disgrace her was to disgrace all the people of the North. That was why Lorde was finally, truly, angry. Her repeated incantations had likely made her lose her mind, and if she was unlucky, she might not even know when or where she was, or what she was even doing and with

whom. But even so, she was still trying to protect them.

She'd wanted to abandon her rank of queen so badly it had broken her spirit, but she'd still acted as everyone's protector. This place was the result of that contradiction. She had fallen into this abyss because she was too kind. And in the abyss, Lorde raised her voice.

"*This body is the spirit that sprints down the road to hell*!"

This was the first time I'd heard the incantation. But I could sense that this was her true incantation. It caused unlimited magic power to begin leaking from her body, and she used the wind to gather more magic from this place. This was truly Lorde's maximum magical output. It was her preparation for releasing her most powerful spell with the maximum amount of magic power.

Of course, the wind that was gathering wasn't any ordinary wind; it was the *Wind of Freedom*. It didn't choose where it blew, nothing could interfere with it, and it interfered with everything.

Lorde's wings were mixed into the *Wind of Freedom* and grew even larger, expanding in every direction and enveloping the entire space. Left, right, up, down—everything around me was green, and I was now trapped in a cage of wind. Even though I was surrounded by it, none of the wind touched my body. Contrary to what I was seeing, the inside of the cage was calm.

In this windless realm of calm, the only thing that passed through was the sound of a voice incanting. "*I shall continue to bear a grudge, in the depths of the earth, against the world that left me behind*!" The walls of wind surrounding me gradually began creeping in as Lorde incanted. The cage began changing shape. It grew into a cylinder, like it was being pulled on a potter's wheel. It turned into a tilted tunnel of wind connecting Lorde and me as it finished its transformation.

Lorde stopped flying and landed on the tunnel. With a quick gesture, she sent a blast of wind through the tunnel. In an instant, it leveled off and a beautiful road was laid at her feet. But the spell didn't end with the creation of the road. The wind tunnel continued to stretch and narrow. It became so narrow that I started to feel like I was trapped and suffocating. And then the wind blew once more,

flowing from Lorde to me. It washed over me, trying to push me backward.

Soon, I was unable to keep my balance on the unstable debris and was forced to move onto the road like Lorde had. But even after I moved, I was still unstable. I couldn't stay in one place as it pushed me farther and farther back. It was like the direction of gravity had changed. Gravity had been unstable before, but now it was artificially fixed in one direction and was endlessly pulling me backward.

The false gravity became stronger and stronger. It was like the road beneath my feet had changed from slope to precipice. Unable to bear the force any long, I put both my hands on the road. Looking ahead—no, above me—I saw that Lorde was in a similar state. Thanks to her wings, she wasn't falling, but the battering of the wind made it look like she was about to topple toward me. Even if her plan had been to alter gravity with wind magic, her method was too messy.

But the magic that was rolling off this road was Lorde's life. It was just like Lorwen Arrace's *Fon A Wraith*; I was sure of it. It was the exact opposite characteristics of the Thief of Wind's Essence, who'd said it didn't choose its path. The magic that blocked my escape and left me no choice but to fall down the road was Lorde's true magic.

"*Lorde's Road*!" she shouted as she completed the spell.

I started running just before her spell finished. *Lorde's Road* was exactly like *Fon A Wraith*, meaning it was an unavoidable instant death spell that no one could defend against. I could be finished by a single blow if I was forced through the road.

However, that also likely meant that it had the same weakness that Lorwen's had. To start with, the preliminary movement was too big. Second, the spell was unfinished. I somehow knew that this was originally meant to be used as a Resonant spell, a type of magic to be used with a loved one, and that something important was missing from it. Lorde was trying to force out a Resonant spell that was originally intended to be cast by two people. Therefore, there was a tremendous opening between the magic of the road and the flying

kick she'd done earlier.

"Lorde!" It was now or never. Right now she was consuming a record amount of magic power and opening her mind to its fullest. It was the longest opening of her life. This road she'd created was definitely my path to victory. With that belief, I started running. Of course, the strong winds from above would push me back down. If I slowed my speed even a little, I would be knocked into the abyss, so I ran upward as fast as I could.

"What?! *Wynd Scythe*!" Lorde yelled as she saw me running. She interrupted her casting of *Ix Wynd* to release countless blades of wind from above me. "You're not supposed to be coming up, Kanami! Go the other way!"

There was no way I would stop running. "I won't go the other way! You and I have no choice but to go up! Toward the surface!!!"

To prove my words, I ran forward, forward, forward—up, up, up.

Before I knew it, the wind road had become a complete wall. But it didn't matter as long as I didn't stop. I could hear the sound of my muscle fibers unraveling as I pushed myself beyond my limits. Even now, my tendons seemed to be splitting and snapping. My skin started to tear as I continued to defy the wind. At times it gouged my flesh and shredded my blood vessels. My right eardrum popped and the pain made all other sounds distant. Blood drained from my wounds, and a red mist dispersed over the green landscape. Still, I wouldn't stop.

"Lorde! We're going back together! We'll go back and look at how you were a thousand years ago! We'll see who was standing next to you! For what and for whom you became queen!" I revealed to her what my next attack would be.

"A thousand years ago?! What are you talking about, Kanami?!"

A little while ago, I'd told Lorde that I couldn't find anything to say to her because I couldn't remember anything. I'd told her that I'd forgotten her and that I was sorry. But that wasn't entirely true. If I used my magic, then I would be able to find the right words. If *Dimension: Calculash—Realize* was a spell that transcended dimensions and allowed me to see the future, there was no reason it couldn't go the other way to see the past.

"*The future and the present are connected*! *The present and the past can connect*!" I shouted. I intended to weave my life into the incantation in the same way that Lorde had. I spun the spell, believing that this was the essence of the magic that I'd taught Liner and that the Guardians had attained.

"*Before you realize it, we will arrive at a time when you remember me*!" My incantation caused Dimension magic to overflow from my body, and I directed it not into my sword, but into my left hand. Or to be more precise, the magic gems I held there.

"KAAAANAAAAAMIIIIIII!!!" Lorde's expression changed as she sensed the danger of my magic, and she shot another bullet from her rifle at me. The wind projectile pierced my torso, but I didn't stop running. The magic of *Lorde's Road* made it so that I had to take that bullet, as all other options were taken from me by the spell.

"LOOOOOOOORDE!!!!!!!"

I was finally closing in on her. She swung her rifle, trying to stall my approach, but she was too late. I deflected her bayonet with my blade, swung my broken left arm at her, and phased it into her chest using *Distance Mute*. I immediately released all of the magic gems into her body. Finally, I grabbed her heart—her magic gem.

"Connect it!!!" I touched my spirit to hers and built a connection between the two of us. I forced the connection in the same way I did when I connected with Reaper. "Lorde! Let's look at the past together! You had your own family! Remember that! Because you had a family that was important to you, you're still holding on to them, and you continue to rely on those lingering attachments! We'll go back to the past to find your precious treasures!" I shouted, spitting blood as I moved in close to her. I clenched her magic gem tightly in my hand. The words drilling directly into her from our connection made her shake.

"My...precious treasures?"

"Yes! That's exactly what my magic is for!" Magic of my own, comparable to both *Fon A Wraith* and *Lorde's Road*, activated. This spell was also unavoidable and impossible to stop, and although it had a different meaning, it was also a magic of instant sight.

"*Dimension: Calculash—Recall*!!!"

My spell pierced Lorde's spirit. It made her consciousness jump over not only space but even time and into another dimension. The spell acted on me as well, since I was connected to her. My senses were interrupted and connected to new ones. It was like the world was being painted over, and my consciousness suddenly drifted away.

Past Sight was the true nature of this spell.

My consciousness fell into darkness, and my entire body was enveloped by a familiar breeze. It was one that had blown in Lorde's past. She was trying to return to a thousand years ago, back to her childhood.

There it was. I could see it. The thing that lay in the depths of Lorde's heart. The true origin of the magic she unleashed when she was cornered. Her long life. The true meaning of the incantations she used when she couldn't bear the suffocating pain. I would learn all of it.

Chapter 3: My Long Life (Second Half)

Before I knew it, I was standing in a two-toned world. The horizon split the setting into dark green and sky blue. A meadow, brimming with a feeling of freedom, spread out beneath the sky.

What is this place?

I was supposed to be fighting. I was supposed to be fighting Kanami in a place it was much harder to breathe in, not here. So why was I here?

Why am I here?

I looked around, trying to remember the reason, and saw a single child sitting in the meadow. The child was laughing. The sight interrupted all of my thoughts. All thoughts of battle or anything else flew from my head as I was drawn in by that child's expression.

The child was a girl, thin, with bright-green hair and a pair of small wings sprouting from her back. I felt like I'd seen her somewhere before, but I couldn't remember her name, even though I tried.

As I was observing her, I noticed that she had found something interesting and had started to laugh. Her hands were clasped, and she was peering into the middle of them. She held a little pebble in her hands. Its edges were rounded, and it was a semitransparent green color. It wasn't as transparent as a gemstone, but it had a special sparkle to it when the light from the sun hit it. To an adult, it would just be a normal pebble, but it had an interesting shape that would please small children. It seemed like the girl considered it her treasure. She looked happier than an adult who'd found a gem, and I was enchanted by her expression.

"Hey, kid. Can you show me what you've got?" My words came of their own accord, spurred on by some strange impulse. But my voice

startled the child and she trembled and stood up. She looked toward me and continued to tremble, a fearful expression on her face.

That made sense. A stranger had just called out to her and asked to see her treasure, after all. It was no surprise she was frightened.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I'm not gonna steal it or anything. I just want to see it..."

I tried to explain, but the girl didn't listen and instead ran off. She started sprinting at full speed across the wide, wide meadow.

"Hey! You'll fall over running that fast!"

As predicted, the child seemed to trip on nothing and fell over. She dropped the pebble she'd been holding. Her precious, precious treasure tumbled across the ground. Her mouth popped open, and she raced to chase after it. She chased it and chased it and chased it, but for some reason, no matter how much time passed, she couldn't catch it.

Watching from a distance I realized what the problem was. This endless meadow sloped just a little bit. The pebble painted an unnatural trajectory as it continued to roll into the distance. I was assailed by the feeling of my blood beginning to boil as I watched. I perceived a strange shadow of death hanging over the child's back, and a shriek bubbled its way up and out from the back of my throat.

"Wait! Don't go! That way is—"

That way lay the depths of hell. As I was about to say that, I realized the child's true form. How did I know what lay ahead of her? It was because I'd traveled that road before. In the past, as a little girl, I'd run across this meadow. The memory was faint, but it was there. I was certain of it. She was me. I'd run around this place when I was young. That was why I knew what lay ahead.

When I understood that, my perspective suddenly shifted. I'd been watching the child running in the distance, but suddenly, I found myself chasing a pretty pebble across the ground.

Yes... Yes, I remember...

This was my life. A long time ago I'd dropped it, that precious thing. That was why I was chasing it. Desperately. And I knew well that it was pointless to keep running. That pretty pebble wouldn't come back because the slope of the meadow would gradually grow

steeper and steeper. No matter how much I chased the pebble, it would only get farther away.

As I'd guessed, it soon vanished from view. By that time, the meadow had given way to a splendid road. It was the kind of steeply sloping road that made it difficult to stop running once you started. So even though I'd lost sight of the pretty pebble, I kept running. Even though I knew the hill would only get steeper the longer I ran, I couldn't stop. I slowly started to pick up speed as the hill got ever steeper. I was just going to keep going faster.

I ran, almost falling now that the road had pretty much become a wall. At the end, I collided with the depths of hell and fell into it. I was covered in scratches and teary-eyed, but I stood up.

I'd fallen to the bottom of a hole, surrounded on all sides by rock walls. The ground was stone too, and there was nothing else in here. Actually, looking closely, I could see a lot of pebbles falling. But they were just normal stones. Thinking that my treasure might've fallen down here as well, I picked one up and looked at it, picked up another and looked at it, and repeated that over and over again. But none of them were my treasured pretty pebble. There wasn't a single one that glittered like the one I'd found as a child. There were plenty of pebbles that looked similar, so maybe if I kept looking patiently, I would be able to find another nice rock. But I would never again be able to find that exact pebble.

"It's not here! Why?!" I searched desperately; I didn't want to believe I'd never find it. "Why? Why can't I find it?"

I turned my downward gaze up. Staring at the wide sky above me from the bottom of the hole, I finally understood. That pretty pebble was a treasure that could only be gained in that meadow at that time. If I became an adult even once, I would never be able to find it again, no matter how much I looked. My face crumpled at the realization and I began to tear up. But no matter how sad I was, I would never be able to go back to that time. I'd fallen too far. That meadow had become a hill, then become a wall without me even realizing it. There was no way to climb back up.

My tears spilled out at the heartlessness of the world. I cried alone in the depths of the earth. I cried and cried and cried, but my

voice didn't reach anyone. I spent a thousand years like that. It was plenty of time to go mad.

That's right. This was the last stop in my life. This abyss, this dark hell where neither life nor death was allowed was my world. In that hell, a weak child, with only her body growing older, cried miserably alone. The pain, suffering, helplessness, and loneliness broke her heart, and she could no longer protect herself. And finally, at the end, she just burst into laughter in the hole. That was...me. I would spend another lifetime here, alone.

"No."

A voice I didn't recognize echoed through the hole. But it was too much trouble to try to understand it. I'd spent too long here to think about things. But the persistent voice continued to speak.

"Lorde, remember."

"There's no point. I don't know anything anymore." I shook my head. I didn't know what I should be remembering.

"Do it anyway. It's okay; pick it up."

"Pick what up?"

"Pick it up and read it."

"Read it?" I didn't know what I should be reading. And there was nothing here to read, anyway. There was nothing here, and that was why I'd become like this.

"I'm shortening my life to recreate that book here. Please read it, even if you don't want to."

There was nothing here. There was nothing here, and yet I found a single book. It had fallen silently into a corner of the hole. It had too much presence. In a world where there was nothing, that strange item drew me in, and I picked it up.

I traced the cover with my fingers, opened it up, and looked at the table of contents. *The Sovereign Queen Lorde*, it said. The first chapter was titled "The Sovereign Queen's Awakening."

S-Sovereign Queen?

No...NONONO!

My name wa—

My name was—!!!

"That's right, it's different. And that's not the bottom of a

precipice. What you thought was a cliff was just a flat road."

I... I was me! I wasn't the Sovereign Queen! No! My real name was...

The pages of the book opened, and the first chapter, "The Sovereign Queen's Awakening," began. This was the heroic tale of the Sovereign Queen Lorde, and the history of the north, a tale that traced the queen's history backward.

◆◆◆◆◆

It was a very long story, but one that, at the time, everyone in the North knew. It began, of course, with "Once upon a time, an elderly couple in a remote village found a child." However, the death of the old couple was spelled out soon after, and there were no details about the kid's childhood at all. A matter-of-fact and inoffensive series of words followed that, and soon it got to the part about the awakening of the queen's power. That's just how it goes. There was no heroic tale that detailed a peaceful and ordinary life. Readers would be nodding off the whole time! And my own memories were in a similar state. My memories of that childhood were strangely hazy. I couldn't remember the remote village or the faces of the elderly couple.

But old memories were like that for everyone. Once you pass twenty and become an adult, everyone is more or less in the same state. As for me, I was over a thousand. At that point, it was better to be happy that any memories remained at all, no matter how hazy they were. At least, that's what I thought—that I should be grateful. Because I felt like my life with the elderly couple was really important.

I couldn't remember my childhood no matter how much I tried, but I remembered what happened next *very* well. It was my awakening following the death of that couple. I remembered *that* clear as day. It happened, if I recalled correctly, when the hunt for sorcerers was at its peak in many areas.

Sorcerer. That word referred to a new race of people who had suddenly started appearing in the world. Their bodies included the

characteristics of monsters. I had a feeling that a great scholar had said that the effects of the world's poisons had caused the body to become more like that of a monster. People called these monsterlike beings sorcerers. For some reason, there were more of them in the North than in the South of the continent. And perhaps because of the difference in numbers, although sorcerers were accepted as a quirk of the Northern regions, they were treated like a disease in the Southern areas.

Naturally, a movement against the sorcerers started as the difference in treatment toward them became apparent. Countries in the South adopted policies to eradicate them, while the North rejected those policies. A war broke out that further divided the continent. As a result, sorcerers became hunted in many areas.

It happened one day during that tumultuous time. My younger brother and I were on our way home when, from a distance, we spotted it. Our village. If it were a book, it would say, "Soldiers from the South invaded while hunting for sorcerers," but when we saw it firsthand, we began to tremble and couldn't move an inch. The scene was so brutal. All the houses had been destroyed, the carefully tended livestock slaughtered, and the corpses of our friendly neighbors heaped in a pile. Among those corpses were the elderly couple who had raised us. So...

So...?

Yes. So Ide and I began to fight. With my power as the Thief of Wind's Essence, there shouldn't have been any other way. That's right. I was beginning to remember, piece by piece. Seeing the burning meadows, the collapsed houses, and the corpses of my Northern friends, I was furious. I jumped into that battle to retaliate against the Southern soldiers who had committed such atrocities.

"I am the queen of the winged people of the continent! The last descendant of the oldest magical bloodline, I am the Sovereign Queen! There is no reason for us to be defeated by you and your ilk!" I shouted at them in high spirits as the Southern soldiers pointed their swords at me. I deceived them into believing my words and achieved my revenge with my overwhelming power. No mere mortal could stand up to the strength of the Thief of Wind's Essence,

and all of the soldiers were quickly cut to pieces. For a short time, I reclaimed that land from the South. The reversal of control was like a fairy tale.

The end of the first chapter, "The Sovereign Queen's Awakening," ended thus: "The Sovereign Queen lost two of her family members to an invasion of vile Southern soldiers. However, this awakened her powers. With those powers, she successfully drove away the scourge upon her homeland."

Then came chapter two. Yes, but what was chapter two? It was a person's life, and yet so arbitrarily cut up and portioned out.

No, it didn't matter anymore, right? It had nothing to do with me now. The sovereign queen had managed to regain her home, but the prairie around it had all been burned to a crisp, making reconstruction difficult. If we remained stubborn and stayed in this place, we would someday be swallowed up by the South. I knew that. If it was just me, I would stay, but I had to consider my weaker younger brother, so we had no choice but to flee.

The setting moved to a capital deep in the North, and the orphanage arc began. This part also seemed to have been broadly omitted from the book, likely because it didn't involve any fighting. As I recalled, there was a lot going on as we traveled. There was the kindness of another elderly couple who made arrangements with the orphanage, which should have been very touching, but there was nothing left of that because the guy who wrote this heroic tale was really only interested in the battles.

By the way, the book narrated it incredibly simply. "Time passed for the Sovereign Queen as she moved to the orphanage. This was the last period of relaxation that the young queen had. From the season of pink flowers to the season of yellow flowers. From the season of red flowers to the season of white flowers. The young queen lived in an orphanage with her future subjects as the unstable seasons particular to the North passed.

"At the same time, the Sovereign Queen was working as a gardener in Viaysia Castle. While trimming the trees lining the city streets, she realized something—that she had her own talents and idiosyncrasies, and the reason she was queen. She realized she was

more than a gardener and understood her mission as the Sovereign Queen. The Sovereign Queen who had gained not only knowledge but also resolve, would also—”

What was this? It wasn’t supposed to be such a cool story. I was just barely able to remember this part. I was positive I was incredibly frightened at that time. I was in the corner of my room at the orphanage, trembling. “I haven’t changed? I haven’t changed at all? Why is it just me? Why haven’t I changed at all?”

It had been a few years since I’d come to the orphanage, and my younger brother, Ide, had grown taller and taller. Although he was still a child, he’d grown as tall as an adult, and the gap between our heights was rapidly diminishing. I, on the other hand, hadn’t changed much at all. Even though I still *should’ve* been growing physically, the only thing that grew was my magic power.

“I’m just guessing, but maybe you don’t age?” Ide suggested. We shared a room.

“I don’t...age? Did it start that day?” Everything had started that day. I knew it had all started that day, at that moment. “Don’t tell anyone, Ide,” I shuddered again as I ordered his silence. If people around me found out about this, they would surely give me the cold shoulder. Even though this was an orphanage full of sorcerers, that didn’t mean that there wasn’t discrimination.

“It’s okay. I’ll never leave you alone. That day, I too made a promise. A promise that you would never be alone,” Ide said, taking my hand.

“Th-That’s right. I can relax because I have a confidant who is so supportive of me.”

“Yes, you have me, Sovereign Queen Lorde.”

In order to keep my heart strong, I had to act like a perfect queen. I remembered the games of make-believe I used to play with Ide in the prairie outside of our hometown and put on the mask of a heroic queen. If I didn’t create this heroic persona for myself, I would go insane. That’s right, I was so frightened I went insane. That was the true story of the second chapter, “The Orphanage Arc.” I was a weak child scared of my fate, not a queen ready to embrace it. And as if to torment me, the orphanage soon became embroiled

in war.

While I was still frightened of my unaging body, the war that had started with the appearance of the sorcerers was coming to an end. The South was winning its battles across the land, and the North was losing much of its territory. The people of the North gradually became disheartened, and the effects of the defeats finally reached the orphanage in Viaysia where I lived. We were all frightened. We could do nothing about the approaching threat and could only endure the passage of time.

Finally, the peace of the orphanage came to an end. The capital of Viaysia, a country in the center of the North, was taken over by soldiers from the South. It was a moment of defeat for which there was no excuse. In other words, the Northern countries were defeated by the onslaught of the Southern countries.

The orphanage was easily seized and used to house the noncombatant "impure" sorcerers. The "pure" humans of the South were always on guard, surrounding us. The faces of us sorcerers in the orphanage grew grim, like we'd been put into prison. It was the same for my brother. I could still remember his face.

"Hey, sis. What will become of us now?" he asked. We were stuffed into a corner of the packed orphanage. Ide had grown taller, but I was still bigger. He looked up at me with tears welling in his eyes. I knew I had to protect him. In truth, though, I wanted to be the one asking *him* what came next. But I could not show weakness. As Ide's older sister, and above all, as the Sovereign Queen I had declared myself to be that day, I had to be invincible.

I could see it in Ide's eyes. He was relying on the power of the Thief of Wind's Essence that I had shown that day. No, he was counting on his sister to truly be the legendary Sovereign Queen. He believed with all his heart that I would be able to handle even the end of the country.

"Ide, I'm..." *Lost*, I wanted to say.

As a matter of fact, unbeknownst to him, I had already been briefed by the Apostles about the Essence Thieves. Apostle Deiplachra said that the first me, the first Essence Thief, was incomplete. But if I continued to use my power, I would become

perfected.

I was afraid. I was so afraid I could barely stand it. Such undeserved power. I had no idea what would happen if I wielded it. I knew that such power shouldn't exist in this world. I knew that because I wasn't stupid. I was wise in my own way.

"Hey, sis, you're the Sovereign Queen Lorde who's stronger than everybody else, right? You're the queen who will save everybody in the North, right?" Ide asked.

But the face of my cornered, cute little brother was right in front of me. And even more voices came from around me. Everyone in the orphanage, people who were as good as relatives, looked at me and started talking.

"Titee, can you do something?"

"Don't be stupid. It doesn't matter how strong she is! What can she do against so many?"

"Sure, Ide's sister may be as strong as the legendary Sovereign King. She's smart and strong enough that no one could beat her, but...under the circumstances..."

"No, this is Titee; she could probably..."

Everyone had been driven into a corner and was now looking at me. It was not only the children, but also the adults who took care of me and adored me. Indeed, I might have been the best swordsman in town. My physique rivaled that of the adults, and my academic skills and ability to hunt were outstanding. My little brother was always boasting about my power. Amid all the despair, it was not surprising that a little hope seemed dazzling to people. But I was still a child.

And yet even the adults had expectations for me? They were relying on me?

"Y-Yes, I am the Sovereign Queen. Little brother, everyone, there's no need to worry. You can leave everything to me." There was so much I wanted to say, but the weight of their expectations overwhelmed me, and I looked down. They were right; I had power. My sense of responsibility as the one who had power, as the Thief of Wind's Essence, overrode my fear.

Then, without showing an ounce of fear on my face, I headed for

the hall at the center of the orphanage, followed by those who knew me. Their eyes sparkled with hope as they followed me in droves.

In the center of the hall, I called out to those who were familiar with me or the orphanage. "I am the Sovereign Queen Lorde. There is something I need your help with." I invited them all to listen. I could do what I was going to attempt by myself, but the chance of success would be much higher with everyone's help. And I was afraid to do it alone.

The first one to respond was my best friend at the orphanage. "Are you really going to do it, Titee?" He was a dragonewt named Seldra, one of the few people who understood me and the one whose support I most wanted for this endeavor. He was a sorcerer and someone who could follow me, the Thief of Wind's Essence, without any divine protection. Although he remained unknown to history because of me, there was no doubt something wrong with him as well.

"I owe you a debt, Titee. If that is what you want, I will help you as a friend—no, as your subject. But are you sure this is what you want?" Seldra asked. He was close to me in strength and had known me for a long time, so it seemed like he was able to see through my mask and straight to the fear beneath it. Seldra was, just barely, still my friend.

"Yes, please, Seldra. I will need your strength." I nodded. There was no turning back now.

"I understand. Then from now on I shall call you the Sovereign Queen Lorde," he replied.

"Seldra, gather all who are willing to fight against the South and advance on Viaysia Castle from the left. You can figure out the details as you see fit."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Seldra and I used to play a game of make-believe together. One about the Sovereign King. During those games, Seldra was a general who commanded soldiers on the front line. We were just repeating that game now in front of everyone, but unlike little Ide, he looked very dignified as he called me the Sovereign Queen. It was enough to give the illusion that I was a competent leader.

"Seldra! I want to help too! I won't let us be killed in silence!"

"Me too! I'll do it! Please Titee—no, Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Yes, there's lots we can still do!"

Deceived by my performance, my friends from the orphanage came forward one after another. They would rather die than just wait around to be killed. Even though I knew it was an act of reckless abandon, I could not help but welcome them with open arms.

"Thank you, everyone. But I want you to work with Ide, not Seldra." I quickly finalized the plan for rebellion. It required no tricks; speed was the name of the game here. I instinctively understood that this was the nature of the Thief of Wind's Essence.

"Ide, your group is to retrieve General Vohlz from where he's being held. After that, you will go with him and advance on the castle from the right. I will go through the center alone and cause as much damage as possible. Perhaps my fighting will plunge all of Viaysia into chaos. If we can take advantage of that, it should be possible to liberate that area and march on. If something happens, you can join up with my rampage. No matter what you bring with you, I'm sure I'll be able to handle it."

The people who had taken shelter in the orphanage began to stir at my reckless tactics.

"Hey, what sort of stupid—"

"That's impossible! It can't be done! The South is swarming all over the town!"

"We've already lost! There's nothing we can do!"

Even if they thought I was crazy, the people who knew me were following me on blind faith. This reaction was the natural one and probably the most normal option. In order to make those normal people more reckless, I spoke without any sort of hesitation.

"I can do it."

"What?! There's no way!"

"Your Sovereign Queen Lorde says she can do it," I said again.

I crushed them with that single sentence. Horrifyingly, words that had been too extreme when it was just make-believe held real weight now. In this unusual situation I emanated something so

strange that my people were at a loss for words. It was a glimpse of the talent for controlling sorcerers that would later be passed down from generation to generation. My extraordinary amount of magical power and extremely unique blood tickled the instincts of the sorcerers present here. The people were overwhelmed by me and proceeded to prepare for the rebellion without any hesitation.

"For now, it is imperative that we regain Viaysia Castle. It is more of a symbol than a base, but we can't do anything without it. We must hurry. Let my *Wind of Freedom* be our signal. No, let it be the beacon for the North to counterattack." Then I released the power of the Thief of Wind's Essence, which I'd been hiding for a long time. An unusually powerful gust of wind swept through the orphanage. The chatter in the building reached its peak.

"D-Did you just raise a wind? It's like magic..."

"It's like a wind whipping through a valley. It gathers around her. Is it really...?"

"Could it really be the power of the legendary Sovereign King from the stories?"

I used powers that could only be found in local fairy tales at that time, and I used them as naturally as I breathed. It was unsurprising that it would cause confusion.

Cloaked in the wind, I spoke softly to those who were still unable to make up their minds. "If you doubt me, you can just watch my back. But when you see my power, I want you to tell all of your brethren about it. Please let them know that I will be paving the way, as long as nobody gives up!"

With those last words, I wove a spell with all my strength. I spared no effort in chanting loudly, invoking the supernatural power that had been lost. I would inspire all those present.

"I am the winged one who will rule over this continent! I am the last descendant of the oldest magical bloodline! I am the Sovereign Queen Lorde! There is no reason I should be defeated by such garbage! *Wynd*!"

My amassed wind roared upward, making a hole in the ceiling. I spread my wings like the legendary Sovereign King and soared up and out of the orphanage.

"I will drive all our enemies out of the North!" I shouted. "This wind is the *Wind of Freedom* desired by our sorcerers! The wind of hope to dispel the invaders! *Sehr Wynd*!" I created a storm in the city to announce my presence to the soldiers from the South.

In that day and age, this kind of power was basically cheating. A wind that destroyed all things was released from my hands, disintegrating the surrounding area and dismembering those they found. In an instant, more than a hundred people were wounded and over a thousand were killed. It was like a natural disaster had hit the people of the South. The vicious storm that was chopping people to pieces produced a great deal of blood and screams.

I strove to keep a serious expression on my face as I looked down at the scene from the sky. In the chaos of the storm, I saw Seldra and his men taking weapons from the Southern soldiers. In the opposite direction, I saw Ide's group sneaking out of the orphanage. And so a child's plan to retake the capital was set in motion. All that remained was for me to fly straight to the castle and rampage through it.

Not going too high or too fast, I flew low so that the people from the South would see me as I headed for the castle. To be a beacon for our brethren in the North, the Thief of Wind's Essence would destroy everything while proclaiming that she was the second coming of the legendary Sovereign King.

The stunned people of the South gradually recovered from their confusion and joined together to bring me down. And I... Well, to be honest, I don't want to remember the rest of the story. What was about to take place was a massacre. The wind chopped people up, crushed them, and just splattered everything with blood and gore. It killed and killed and killed until there was nothing but a trail of blood. And in that blood, I could sometimes hear the voices of the sorcerers who had found hope.

"Oh! Oh!!! Is that the Sovereign Queen Lorde?!"

"How foolish! A descendant of the winged ones? But such power!"

"It's overwhelming. Will she continue to the castle?"

"Everyone! The power of the Sovereign Queen is no rumor! She

will pave a path of blood on her own! And on her own she will break into the castle!" I could hear Ide's voice mixed in with the shocked cries. "But after that, she will have need of your strength! Right now, her faithful followers are advancing on the castle from the left, but they don't have enough people to take it! They need others to help occupy the castle!"

Ide was fighting in his own way, and I strengthened my wind. In order to live up to all of their expectations I continued to fight as a flawless leader. Even as I was surrounded by a thousand soldiers, even as ten thousand arrows rained down on me, even as countless screams beat against my ears, I fought, and I fought, and I fought, paving a road of blood.

"I am the Sovereign Queen Lorde!" I shouted, breathing heavily. "The Sovereign Queen! And I won't stop until all you pieces of trash are annihilated!" I continued to kill and kill and kill, thinking only of boring a hole through the occupied country. I cut down a thousand soldiers with my blades of wind, rained ten thousand arrows back down upon my enemies, piled up countless corpses, and finally, at the end of it all, reached the castle.

By then, the victory had been decided by Seldra and General Vohlz, who had joined forces. With the castle gate broken, the enemy had lost the option of barricading themselves inside, and there was no need to launch a siege. It was a complete and utter victory. A great success. Capturing the enemy commander was a piece of cake, and everything went smoothly—for a time.

Ironically, my game of make-believe masquerading as a real march had worked. It was probably all due to the power of the dreaded Thief of Wind's Essence. That was what made me so anxious and uneasy. It was a ridiculous power that could easily turn a childish dream of mine into reality. Just thinking about the cost of that power made me tremble. But I wasn't going to reveal those feelings to anyone.

"Yes! We did it! We took back the castle!"

"We won! We took it back! We killed those Southern bastards!"

"Thank you! Thank you so much, Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Hooray! Hooray!"

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!”

There was no way I could show my unease when my people were surrounding me with tears of joy in their eyes. I had no choice but to put on the face of the Sovereign Queen Lorde so that they would not worry.

I laughed. Speaking of which, I thought it was around this time that I started to get better at crafting a composed smile.

And thus ended chapter two, “The Orphanage Arc.” A great, triumphant reversal. The recapture was a great success. An indisputable beginning.

Next was chapter three, or “The Defense of Viaysia.” But was it really “the defense of Viaysia”? Oh, it was really making me mad. You couldn’t just divide people’s lives into chapters without permission! Who has the right to do that? You do whatever you want because you’re dead? Only I was allowed to do that!

No, that didn’t matter now. It didn’t matter anymore.

I was alone in the throne room, in distress, after having reclaimed the castle. Around the town, the people were rejoicing over their victory and celebrating with a banquet. Inside the castle were countless prisoners of war. It was good to be excited...but where did we go from here?

There was no way that I, who only knew how to play pretend, could maintain this peace. I was an amateur who didn’t know how to handle prisoners of war. I didn’t even know how to conduct diplomacy. Was there anyone in the castle who knew about war and politics? Was there anyone who could somehow get us to a truce from here? No, I needed to replace the top brass as soon as possible. I couldn’t continue being the leader of a rebellion. This required adults with more expertise. That’s right! To be honest, being a leader was too much for a child like me. It was so heavy that it crushed me. If the leader of the group was crushed, the ten thousand people who were now rejoicing would fall into despair. So before that happened... Someone, anyone!

“Sovereign Queen Lorde! I have that report you asked for!”

“Oh, yay! Is it finally over?!” I asked. I’d been sitting cross-legged

behind the throne but jumped up, excited that someone I knew from the orphanage had come in. I'd asked him to conduct a little investigation to solve the problem I'd been mulling over.

I quickly gathered the main members of the rebellion in the throne room to hear the report. The adults from the orphanage, the generals of the House of Viaysia and the powerful people of the Northern city. However, my expectations were betrayed by the report's unexpected contents. "What? Not a single member of the royal house of Viaysia is in the castle at this moment?"

"That's correct. Although a large number of them were killed in the battle, about half had fled in advance."

In my disappointment, I became visibly angry, even though there were big shots around.

"How can this be?! They abandoned their people and ran away? Isn't a king a king because he protects his people? He took on that responsibility and yet forsook his duty to them and fled? That is unforgivable! That is absolutely unforgivable! Such a person cannot be called royalty!" I was so angry at them for not protecting me that I humiliated myself in front of the big shots. "Oh..."

Now I'd done it. I couldn't complain if they hanged me for disrespect. I looked around, terrified. But for some reason, there was no one there to condemn what I was saying. On the contrary, it was just like what had happened at the orphanage.

"I'm terribly sorry for interrupting your meeting! Sovereign Queen Lorde, the enemies from the South are..." said a messenger who'd suddenly entered the throne room. Mercilessly, the battle wasn't over yet.

"More enemies are coming? But there are no members of the royal family here!"

"Royalty? What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"Well, there's a problem..." I swallowed my next word ("obviously"). It was not only the messenger; everyone there had the same expression. The adults from the orphanage, the generals of the House of Viaysia, and the city's authorities were all staring at me.

Why were they looking at me? Surely those present all knew that

my performance as the Sovereign Queen Lorde was just that—a performance. Right?! Not a drop of that noble bloodline ran through my veins! It was true that the power of the Thief of Wind's Essence was incredible, but if it was just strength they were after, surely there was someone better suited to the job! Didn't they think it was strange?! I was the youngest one there! I might have been tall, but if someone had asked how old I was, they'd have been shocked! The strongest adult there was... Oh! That guy in the corner!

"If the enemy is approaching, then...General Vohlz! From now on you will act..." I began. I'd heard of the general before. His body was large, and his appearance gave him a sense of dignity. I was sure that he would be able to take my place.

But this suggestion was intercepted by a man who appeared to be General Vohlz's second-in-command. "I'm sorry, Sovereign Queen Lorde. General Vohlz has been betrayed by his country and has lost many friends and family. Frankly, he's at his wits' end."

Looking closely I could see that the general's face was lifeless. He looked like had lost everything in the world. He was standing at the edge of the room for some reason.

"I see. You, military man, do not call me 'Sovereign Queen Lorde.' I am not forcing you to use that title." I wondered if this man would be willing to take my place.

But of course, that suggestion was also rejected. "No, I cannot do such an impolite thing. We have all seen your heroic form in battle."

Looking around, I saw that they were all staring at me the same way. It was the same expression Ide wore, like they expected something of me.

"It's amazing. You're the only one who can do this," I heard the low voice of my friend Seldra say from behind me.

"I...know."

Seldra understood my situation and remained composed. Unlike me, one who didn't want to acknowledge the expectations of those around her, he was convinced that I was the only one who could lead this dying country, masquerading as the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

"Okay, Seldra! I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to do a

little more!” I said.

“Yes, I’m the only one who can do it. I’ll follow you and act as your right hand, my Sovereign Queen. I’m still your friend, after all.”

With the help of my friend, I gained a little courage.

Taking that little bit of courage, I shouted to those in the room, “Everyone! I will go out and intercept the enemy. I’m sorry, but will you follow me as the Sovereign Queen just a little longer?”

Since I couldn’t negotiate, I had no choice but to ask them frankly for their support.

“Of course, my queen. All of my men are at your disposal,” General Vohlz said.

They all supported my idea as if it were natural. It was at this moment that the Northern rebel army, with me at its head, raised its banner in Viaysia Castle. I walked around the castle with that momentum and spoke with the people I knew from the orphanage, including Ide.

“Um, sis—no, Sovereign Queen Lorde! What happened in the meeting?” he asked.

“Enemy reinforcements are coming from the South. I’m organizing our defense. You’re going to help!” I replied.

“Yes, of course! I’m your number one subject after all!” he said with a smile.

It was heavy... Why didn’t my little brother understand how painful and heavy it was? I didn’t have time to let my dissatisfaction show on my face, so I began preparing my counterattack.

I could hear people chanting my name from the town below. With their expectations weighing on me, I had no choice but to lead my army out of the castle. Our opponent was a large army of humans from the South, and unsurprisingly at this point, I was overwhelmed by this as well. My tactic of extending my game of make-believe was a success, but it also felt like a curse. The more I won, the more my expression hardened. The Sovereign Queen Lorde was gradually growing up in the game. It was like it was taking away Titee’s time to grow up. In a frighteningly short amount of time, my transformation into the Sovereign Queen Lorde was complete.

That was how chapter three, “The Defense of Viaysia,” ended.

Like the story was picking up speed, it was already time for chapter four, “The Retaking of the North.”

I didn’t even feel like getting angry. After all, at this point, the story just went downhill from there anyway. Nothing mattered anymore.

Victory after victory, the North gradually expanded its territory as well as its defenses. Although it had not yet taken shape as a country, it had the strength to fight on its own. During this period, the castle town was almost overflowing with sorcerers who had fled from the South. The explosive increase in the number of people confused me.

“What... What is all this? How did it happen so fast?” I looked around the hastily constructed basecamp we had set up as I listened to my personal aide relay the details.

“It’s all because of you. I’ve heard them talking about a paradise in the far North.”

“A paradise in the far North? They said that?”

This place? It was being led by a child playing make-believe, and the finances were barely under control. It was all on the verge of collapse. But people were calling it a paradise? Why? They weren’t the ones aiming for a paradise in the first place; it was me...

“My queen, the Southern army is demanding their return.”

“Return? Of what?” I asked.

“The sorcerers who fled here. They’re claiming the immigrants belong to the South.”

“What nonsense! Tell them we have our own laws! The people who have fled the South are our family! They cannot be returned!”

“I’m sure they would believe that the Sovereign Queen Lorde would say that. So be it.”

“Y-Yes...”

That bad habit of mine had returned. Whenever I got angry, I would express myself loudly. The oppression of the sorcerers inevitably made me angry. At that moment, the look in the eyes of the immigrants who were watching me changed. As usual, they began to murmur about how this was something they expected of me.

Yeah, I knew that already. My face started twitching, and I wasn't able to pull it together. I guessed I would have to live up to their expectations again. Fortunately, I wanted to go to that "paradise" more than anyone else, so I figured I would at least be able to give them a convincing show. Thus, the Northern rebels were forced to think of a policy to accept countless immigrants and maintain their way of life.

It was largely due to my younger brother Ide's help that the immigrants were accepted. Although he had no talent in combat, he was unrivaled in his steady work and attention to detail. Above all, he was prepared to sacrifice himself for the sake of his country. However, Ide didn't consider the burden that he placed on me. My brother had a tendency to think that the Sovereign Queen Lorde should be able to do anything. And I tried to live up to that expectation. To my horror, as I continued to repeat the process, the country gradually came into its own. The new country of Viaysia was about to be born, with me as its ruler.

"It's hard that the royalty of Viaysia has disappeared. Because of that, everyone is looking to you to act like royalty, to be calculating as a general, and even to have the charisma of a revolutionary," my friend Seldra said, as he calmly analyzed the situation.

"Seldra..."

"And lucky for you, it seems you had the wherewithal to make it all happen," he continued.

No, it was *unlucky*. As usual, my friend didn't understand the hearts of others.

"I didn't have the wherewithal...not at all. It all happened by chance. It's just luck. It's all a misunderstanding," I said. We were the only two in the room, so I let my weakness show as I spoke.

"Is that so? Well, I'm pretty incompetent, so the only thing I can do is help you." That was all he could say, even though he was equal to me in power.

But my vulnerability didn't reach my friend. Even he no longer doubted that I was truly the Sovereign Queen Lorde. I knew I no longer had anyone to consult with.

"No, no, it must be troublesome for you. I am grateful for all of

your help," I replied.

"I'm the one being helped. I know it's inappropriate, but this position is a medicine for my ailments," Seldra replied.

"I see. I'm glad. I'm sorry, but can you leave me to myself for a moment?" After that, I no longer confided in him. I could no longer rely on anyone. I had to manage all by myself.

"I have to do it! All by myself!" With that decision made, the speed of everything accelerated even more.

Now feeling defiant, the only thing I thought about was ending the war. I changed from being on the defensive and began actively retaking the Northern territories. I now had the strength to do so. Although I didn't want to admit it, I had acquired not only simple strength but also the ability to lead. I felt like the game of make-believe would never end, so I spent every waking moment studying alone in order to fight the South. I scoured all the literature in the castle and developed my own fighting style.

As a result, I won the hearts and minds of the people and gained the trust of my subjects. Even though I possessed extraordinary power as an individual, with the help of others, the Thief of Wind's Essence was nearly invincible. And after a few years, I easily fulfilled my long-desired wish.

"I did it! I've restored the Northern territories to the way they were before the war! Ha ha, it's finally back! See?!" I shouted.

The fact that the sorcerers had completely reinvented their fighting style had been a huge boon. Originally, when comparing humans and sorcerers, the latter were stronger. And as long as there was a general who could unite these strong individuals, there was no way we could fall behind the South. As if to prove this point, the North repeatedly won battle after battle. That was to be expected, since we had not only a well-organized army of sorcerers, but also me, leading real magical beings. When I was accompanied by the dragons that rampaged through the most remote areas of the North, we were feared by enemies and allies alike.

I succeeded in restoring the land to the way it had been before the war. The Northern countries regained their strength, and they were united under one banner, and I named us the Northern

Alliance. The balance between the North and the South was restored to a state of equilibrium, and the situation was such that an armistice could be signed.

I immediately pushed for the armistice and succeeded. The world had returned to the way it had been when I was in my homeland.

"The North is back to normal! So at last..." *I can end my role*, I thought.

"You did it, Sovereign Queen Lorde. We have finally found peace. Now, let's use this time of truce to prepare for the next battle. We need to set up our domestic finances and reorganize our army. Then, we need to unite the powerful local clans. But with your prestige, that should be a piece of cake."

Of course.

The sorcerer in my entourage continued to speak. "Let us push forward diplomacy with the South, of course, but also with the West and the East. This revolution would not have succeeded without the cooperation of those countries. I am sure they will demand a lot of us. And then—"

"I'm sorry for interrupting, but what ended up happening to the Viaysian royal family who fled?"

"What? The Viaysian royal family? Oh, they might come back, taking advantage of your kindness. But what of it?"

What of it? I knew what that meant, and I despaired. But my expression remained unchanged. The perfect queen with an austere expression was listening to her aide's report. My body was heavy. I couldn't move my face. Above all else, I hated myself for getting used to that.

"No, I will be glad to have them back," I replied. Someone might use the royalty as a launching point and target the throne. It was a good thing that was a possibility. That was the only thing I could hope for.

Naturally, of course, my expectations were betrayed. No matter how many years passed, there would be no rebellion in the Northern Alliance. The endless days of being busy with national affairs began. A heroic tale might describe it as "from the season of pink flowers to the season of yellow flowers; from the season of red flowers to the

season of white flowers.” The fifth chapter would probably be titled “The High Queen.”

But even that didn’t matter anymore. As my position as queen became stronger, the sensation of falling grew in turn. It was as though a snowball were rolling and swelling, and countless bonds were clinging to my body. It was not only the expectations of the people but even the expectations of other Northern countries that were pressing down on my back. It was so heavy that I was on the verge of being crushed. But I couldn’t allow that. If I were to run away now, the Northern Alliance would be swallowed up by the South again. There was no doubt about it.

There was no choice. I had to keep going. I grew closer and closer to being the Sovereign Queen Lorde, and farther from the girl Titee. That loss had a profound effect on my mind. Little by little, I no longer knew what I was doing. I lost my self-awareness, and my sense of time further accelerated—or rather it went haywire. A second became a minute, a minute became an hour, an hour became a day, a day became a year... How many years had passed since that day?

That day, I welcomed subjects into Viaysia castle with those thoughts in mind. I looked exactly the same as before. However, as the legendary Sovereign Queen Lorde, I welcomed many kings, heroes, generals, and heads of powerful clans. It was now my job to make the Northern Alliance even stronger.

That’s right. I had no choice because it was my job. I had to quickly...

“My queen, it’s time for the meeting,” Ide, who had grown up to be a fine chancellor, called to me. He’d grown older. Before I knew it, he’d gotten taller than me. His innocent face had changed to that of a man. His body was a little thin and unhealthy, but unlike me, he had become a respectable adult.

“Yes, Ide. I’m going.” That day I headed in the direction of the throne room. I sat on the throne with the banner of the Northern Alliance behind me. The appearance of the Sovereign Queen Lorde took away the breath of all the influential people seated at the round table in front of me. However, there were more and more unfamiliar

faces. The number of influential people here represented the size of the Northern Alliance at present—more than ten times the size it had been on the day of the rebellion.

"Now then, Sovereign Queen Lorde..."

"Yes, let's begin."

The meeting, which had become a regular occurrence since the day of the rebellion, began. But no matter how many years passed, nothing changed in content. Everyone looked at me with expectant eyes. Even the country's highest-ranking general, Vohlz, only ever agreed with me. And the chancellor of the country, Ide, was in agreement.

"Yes, everything is in accordance with the words of the Sovereign Queen Lorde," Ide said. Everyone bowed their heads to me. The meeting ended as usual. The influential people left the throne room. The Sovereign Queen Lorde was all that was needed to make everything safe. It was very different from the meeting I had envisioned. The purpose of this meeting was to reconcile opinions on the way that I had created the Northern Alliance with how the country was supposed to be. I had thought that this would lead to a country that didn't depend on me, but that was not the case at all. The country would still be in ruins without me.

The result of being too perfect a leader, I supposed. In any case, military and political affairs would all be resolved once I appeared. I wanted the sorcerers to be happy, and I would succeed at that no matter what. I knew this, but my body moved on its own. It was not the girl Titee, but Lorde that moved my body. The more perfect I was, the faster time seemed to pass. I didn't mean in the sense that I was busy with exhausting work, but the feeling that I wasn't present. It was like I was dreaming and time was being fast-forwarded.

In the midst of this nightmare, at an unknown moment in time, I muttered to myself, "It's over. My role is finished. But how long will this nightmare last?" I never got an answer to that question. But I had an answer in my mind. First of all, I didn't grow old. That was the biggest problem. I couldn't even plan my retirement because of it.

“I don’t change. And since I don’t change, will I never finish?” I kept asking myself that. The country was not yet at a point where I could even consider a successor. The level of education was low and there was a complete lack of manpower. Of course, I was taking measures to solve that. But after a few decades, after I’d solved that problem...would the people give up such a convenient figure as the Unaging Queen?

I was also the most powerful sorcerer, so strong that I couldn’t even be assassinated. I had the strongest magic on the continent, with a body that, even if poisoned, would only make me a little sick. I had fought a hundred battles, and my political acumen had also grown significantly. I never aged, so my abilities never deteriorated. On the contrary, they only continued to develop. I was in a period of perpetual growth and peak performance. I was rumored to be a woman of perfect character who loved her country more than anyone else. Furthermore, my enemies feared that I was insane, while my own people had gone beyond respect for me and straight to faith.

So there was no need to ask myself that question. I already knew the answer. As long as I was me, I would always be queen. Once I understood this, my body, which didn’t tremble even when surrounded by a thousand swords, shook.

“I...can’t... I can’t stay sane...” I would always be queen? How long was “always?” If I really was immortal, it might be more than a hundred years. Or not even a hundred years, but a thousand. Not a thousand, but ten thousand. Did I have to be queen forever? Alone in my room, I shook my head.

Haunted by that fear, I left my room. I wanted someone to help me. I could no longer bear suffering alone. The first person who came to mind was my friend, Seldra, but I quickly thought better of it. Right now, he was fighting at the very tip of the Southern part of the continent. Even if he was here, it was doubtful that he would be able to communicate with me. It was my fault, as queen. He was no longer my friend. He was leading a new life as a general on the front lines.

Then it would have to be my brother. Only Ide would help me. I

should be the one protecting my younger brother, but I was at my limit. I couldn't say that, though; I was his older sister.

I wanted to stop. I wanted everything to stop, and I wanted to go home! I wanted to find a place that resembled my hometown and run away! I wanted to live in secret with my brother! I looked for Ide because I wanted to tell him that. I ran through the castle to the chancellor's room.

Yes, Ide... I was suffering. Ide would help...

"Ide! IdeIdeIde! IDE!" I ran through the corridor, arrived at his room, and yanked open the door. Ide was there. He'd become a tall and lean adult before I knew it.

"Oh, good timing, my queen! I did it too! I became the Thief of Wood's Essence!" Ide had an unusual presence, like he was a monster.

"What?" I asked. There was no younger brother left to protect. Ide, who'd been more than two times smaller than I was, had grown bigger and stronger than me. After being beside me for so long, he had become a perfect chancellor worthy of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. Moreover, he had even become an Essence Thief like I was.

"Look! What do you think of this power! I myself followed the apostle's advice and stole an essence! Yes, now I can help you. No longer will I let you say that the country is led by you alone! Now I can follow you perfectly! Yes, I will accompany you everywhere and forever, my queen!" Ide said, looking at me with sparkling eyes. My body, which was already heavy, felt many times heavier than before. I felt as though I would bore a hole in the ground and fall into an abyss.

"Finally! Finally, my wish is going to come true! I will be worthy of being the first vassal of the Sovereign Queen Lorde! With this power, I will be able to fulfill the promise I once made!" Ide continued.

"Sure, Ide..." My throat grew dry and it became hard to speak. I didn't want my ecstatic younger brother to notice.

"Heh heh heh, has so much time passed that you've forgotten? I'm talking about making the world someday forget the word 'sorcerer'!"

"Ide..."

"The word has always been associated with an image of defilement. I think a more suitable word, something that will make us all aware of the blessings that nature has bestowed on us, would be better. Something like 'semifer.' It might project a bit of a wild image, but don't you think it's rather good? It would also make our strengths clearly known."

No. It didn't... It didn't matter.

"Ide, wait..."

"Oh, did I shock you? Of course, I know that the present is more important than the future. If we try to change the opinions of people all over the world from the bottom up, it will take hundreds of years after reunifying the continent. Honestly, it will probably only be possible over a thousand years. Even so, as the chancellor of Viaysia, I can't help but wish for it. Or rather, perhaps, as a semifer born in the North," Ide continued, chuckling again.

I was no longer interested in this country, or the friction between humans and sorcerers, or anything else for that matter. I just didn't care. I didn't care about others anymore, only myself.

"Oh yes, that's right. That's your dream. Well, as your queen, I support you."

"Thank you! Let's protect this country together, my queen!"

I ended up nodding. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't say anything to Ide—no, to the chancellor of Viaysia. As my brother, he had more expectations of me than anyone else in the country. He was saying that it was natural that I would continue to fight for a thousand years to brainwash the people of this continent. No, that face he was making implied more than a thousand years. He wanted me to do it forever. He wanted to be my vassal forever and ever. He'd become immortal like me for that very purpose. I could tell. He had no intention of ever going back to being my little brother. Never again.

I burst out laughing.

"Heh heh, I'm looking forward to the future," Ide said, chuckling again. The queen and her chancellor laughed together.

Before I realized what was happening, I was alone. Since there was no one left who knew me as Titee, I realized I had no more

proof of who I was. I had no choice but to return to my room, alone. Then, since I had no one to talk to, my perception of time sped up again.

Season after season passed. At the same time, the number of people cheering for me increased. The number of people leading the troops increased. The number of people I had to protect increased. The number of people I had to fight increased. The burden resting on my shoulders only increased. I'd gone way past my limit, but everyone assumed that I was okay because I was the Sovereign Queen Lorde, so they kept piling things on me. All of my limbs felt paralyzed, and I could barely move. My perception of time was paralyzed as well and then finally shut off. Looking out at the world, everything became a blur. Time, again, sped up.

Huh. When was this? What was happening? Who was I? What was I supposed to be doing? I continued to fight as the queen even as I asked myself those questions. Even as strange dark clouds had, at some point, covered the entire sky. Even as I began using my special Essence Thief magic to help people. I continued to fight, unshaken, as the perfect queen.

Ironically, even though my sense of self was fading, it was still easy for me to rule the Northern Alliance because of my skills. If there was civil unrest in the North, I would make a speech as the Sovereign Queen Lorde and settle it. If there was an altercation with the South, I would go down there and put it to rest. Over and over, I returned triumphantly to Viaysia as the undefeated queen.

And so it went, on and on. Over and over again for years and years, over and over again, over and over again, over and over again. My sense of time accelerated and accelerated and accelerated and accelerated and kept accelerating.

Along the way, there was one anomaly that could not be overlooked.

Fortunately, perhaps, a foreign object interfered with Sovereign Queen Lorde's perfect world. First, among the enemy soldiers in the South, there was a sudden increase in the number of those who didn't fall easily. Furthermore, the probability of the birth of sorcerers

in the South began to decrease drastically. The repetitive work changed, and my frayed sense of self recovered a little.

The first thing I noticed was a trio of particularly strong soldiers. Arrace, Rands, and Hellvilleshine were the names of those three skilled men.

Then came the appearance of the saintly Nosfy Whoseyards who led them. She appeared suddenly, just like I had when I first made a name for myself. The South, which had been losing the war, finally established the Southern Alliance in opposition to us.

But we still managed to maintain the upper hand. We had the advantage of experience, and they weren't strong enough to make the Northern Alliance collapse. To do so... That's right. At that time, I had wished for the collapse of the country. I had been waiting for it. For someone to destroy my country—no, for someone to kill me, the Sovereign Queen Lorde. I'd wished for the existence of such a savior. The only kind of savior someone like me *could* wish for.

Then, on a certain battlefield, I met one. We faced each other head-on, on a battlefield where the terrain was changed by the wind and stained with the blood of the dead. A monster like me faced down a monster exactly like me, and we exchanged words.

"So, we've finally met, 'Mad Queen.' I'm going to help you from now on," the man said. He was an outworlder.

"Is it you? The one they call 'Kanami'?" I asked. I wasn't interested; I'd just heard about him because I was the queen. There was no mistaking it: This black-haired, black-eyed knight was the 'Founder' who had rallied the South.

He looked young. However, it soon became clear that that wasn't the case. His magic power was too specific. It was even more incomplete than mine, and I'd been called a "prototype" by the apostle. What an unstable and powerful Essence Thief, I thought.

"Tell me what you want, Lorde."

"Wait, why would you ask me such a question?"

"Just answer! It's people like you that irritate me!"

The man looked like me. He was just as hopeless and mad as I was. From my perspective as queen, he was definitely someone I should kill. I knew we had to fight. But he understood me more than

anyone else. He spoke to me in a language I could understand. Better than anyone else in the North.

"You seem pretty cocky! I'm the Sovereign Queen Lorde!" I shouted.

"What queen? You're just a liar, you stupid woman. If you just look, you'll understand. You're not fit to be a queen. You're a weak human being, just like me, who was forced to keep on living. Yes, a weak person who was deceived, oppressed, and kept alive for others' convenience," Kanami replied.

So, there were enemies who would speak rudely to me. But this was the first time that anyone, including my allies, had been able to guess my inner thoughts to this extent.

"I am...forcing myself?" I asked.

"Yeah. And that way of speaking doesn't suit you. Can't you speak differently?"

"Um, ah...well..."

"Tch, you're annoying. Answer me quickly, you dimwit."

"No... I don't know. I can't really remember. I think I used to speak differently... I think I started to speak like this just to manage...but actually..." I wasn't able to speak clearly, perhaps because his words had cut me so deeply. It had been many years since I had been so self-aware. When was the last time I *had* spoken as myself? Anyway, my tongue wasn't moving properly.

"Jeez, that's enough! I get it! Just tell me what you want!"

"What I want?" What was that? I think there were a lot of things. There were places I wanted to go. But I was so worn out that I couldn't remember any of them.

"I don't know. But I know it's not this place!" I shouted. "Yes, you're right! I want to quit being queen! I want to quit; that's all I know for sure! Please get me out of the North! Please!" I spit the words out, bewildered by my sudden understanding.

The dark-haired, dark-eyed man accepted that.

"All right, then. The contract is complete," the man, Kanami, said. "But we'll have to time it right if you want to get out of this place, Lorde. If I was to take you away now, Seldra and Ide would just come and bring you back. It would have to be sometime else..."

"I didn't mean right now, of course! Just sometime! Please! If things continue like this, I won't be myself anymore!" I said.

"Yes, I know. Don't worry, I won't abandon you. If there's something you want, I'll do my best to make sure you get it."

"Hmm... Sorry to be a bother..." With that, I welcomed the traitorous knight into the Northern Alliance. There were various protests from people, but I had a good track record and managed to get him appointed to handle my personal affairs.

"From now on, I, Aikawa Kanami, am your vassal. But don't forget our contract. Someday, I will betray the Sovereign Queen Lorde and take the girl named Titee out of this place, even if I have to destroy everything in Viaysia. I'll take you wherever you want to go."

"Yes, please..."

"In exchange, you'll allow me to use the Northern Alliance army just once. Without those soldiers, we won't be able to break down the walls surrounding the Southern Alliance's apostles," Kanami said.

"That should be easy enough," I replied.

"There are the three knights—Lorwen, Tida, Fafner—and then Nosfy. If you can use your power as the Sovereign Queen Lorde to hold back the Essence Thieves, I'll be able to kill the apostles."

The murder of the apostles would cause rapid growth in the Southern Alliance. It wasn't a bad story for the North, and in the long run, as queen, I could agree with it. That's right. I wasn't doing the betrayal. Aikawa Kanami was the betrayer, so I wouldn't be betraying anyone's expectations. It was truly a sweet way out. I had no choice but to run down that path, even if it was all some plot by Kanami. That was how far I'd come.

"Just wait, Lorde. I will betray you soon. And I will destroy your country. Frankly, I've been disgusted with this kingdom for a long time. This is a nation of incompetents who are kept alive by the apostles. And on top of that, they make such a stupid girl an Essence Thief, enshrine her as the Sovereign Queen, and then continue to rely on her! It's repulsive!" Kanami said.

"You really think that?"

"It's unthinkable where I'm from. Both the North and the South

are so messed up that I honestly feel sick," he replied, his face growing a little red.

"Hmm," I said. The Founder's estimation of my country was incredibly low. As queen, I should have pushed back against him, but I just made a noncommittal sound. I knew in a corner of my mind that I was just as pissed off and disgusted as Kanami. There was no doubt that he was the only one who understood me.

More months passed by with Kanami as my personal guard. Perhaps it was because my sense of time was numb, but the betrayal came quickly. I wasn't sure exactly when, but at a very early stage, Kanami spoke to me.

"It's over. I've done the math. Thanks to Seldra and Ide, we've succeeded in dividing the three knights. Now, I'll abandon this country and go hunt down Apostle Sith."

"It... It's over already, Kanami?"

"Yes, it's over. If you want to escape, now's the time to do it. I'm doing as much as I can to make sure that the betrayal falls strictly on my shoulders. At worst, it will still be half mine."

"Well, then, I'll run away too. I want to escape..." I said.

When the battle between the Northern Alliance and the Southern Alliance reached its climax, the queen and the commander of the Royal Guard disappeared from Viaysia Castle. The fact that I wasn't alone, but with someone else, lightened the load on me. My body was at its limit, but with someone who understood me leading the way, I was able to move. Under the cover of darkness, we fled Viaysia. We ran and ran and ran through the mud-covered war zone. When we crossed the border and reached a village with no name, I thanked Kanami.

"Thank you for betraying me, Kanami. Thank you for abandoning my country. Thank you so much..." I said, tears beginning to fill my eyes.

"Now you're free. It doesn't matter if you're from the North or the South. Now get the hell off to another continent," he said.

On a grassy plain beyond my country's borders, under the cover of night, I roared. Dressed in old clothing that was unbecoming of a queen, with my prized green hair tied up in a knot, I looked like a

village girl, and I continued to thank Kanami pathetically without any care for people's attention.

My whole body trembled with the liberation of no longer being queen. However, the trembling was not only due to joy. There was also a bit of fear mixed in. I knew that no matter how far I ran, the people of the Northern Alliance wouldn't accept it. They might even go all out to bring me back. It was frightening just to imagine what would happen to Viaysia now that I would no longer be there. Although it wasn't an absolute certainty that they would be ruined, the possibility of such a situation had definitely increased.

Even at this moment, I was afraid, thinking that I might as well go back. Of course, more than that, I was standing still *because* I was afraid of going back to that hell again. A mixture of factors kept my body shaking.

Kanami sighed as he looked at my pathetic state. "If you're afraid of being alone, come with me. It would make a big difference."

He held out his hand. Feeling like I was about to die, I reflexively took it.

"Are you really coming?" he asked. "If you follow me, you'll only be taken advantage of. Don't be fooled so easily, you stupid girl." He took pity on my pathetic self and told me in advance what he had in mind for me.

I knew all that, but I still wanted to follow him. "I don't care. You can deceive me and use me as much as you want. Let me follow you just a little longer," I said. To be honest, I didn't know what I was going to do on my own. Even if I was to return to my hometown, I was confident that I would go insane with loneliness if I didn't have someone to share it with. But even more than that, I didn't want to let go of Kanami, because he was the only one who understood me.

"And it's a heavy burden for you to carry alone, isn't it? Even if you've succeeded in isolating the three knights, there is still the Thief of Light's Essence left in an apostle. You really want the power of the Demon Queen?" I asked.

"Sheesh, you really are an idiot, you know that? You've sacrificed so much already and now you're going to give up your life?"

"It's okay. I'd like to help you, Kanami. Even if it's just a little bit."

"I'm not saying you can't. You're powerful, so I wouldn't have anything to worry about..." he replied.

Thus was formed the best apostle-killing party conceivable on the continent at that time. We headed south from the border, aiming for the castle of Whoseyards, where the apostles were likely to be. But, of course, there were people pursuing me.

First, there was the perfectly flawless chancellor of the North, the Thief of Wood's Essence, Ide. He stood in front of us and shouted, his face red with anger. "KAAANAAAMIII! Why?! Why did you betray us?!"

"Ide...I'm sorry, but I have nothing to say to you," Kanami told him.

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! You must fight! Fight the traitor! You can win, even against the Founder!" Ide yelled.

"Goodbye, Ide. I'm going with Kanami," I stated.

"But...Lorde! What do you mean by that?!"

"At the end of the day, I was just a child," I explained.

"What?! Lorde?! LOOORRRDE!!!"

I left behind my little brother, who even at the end could only call his sister by her title.

Next came the battle against Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence, a foe with whom I had a history. We approached the castle of Whoseyards, the capital of the Southern Alliance, from the rear, creeping through a neutral zone. In the desolate darkness, a luminous girl was waiting for us.

"Lorde? *Lorde*??? LOOORRRDE!!! Why are you here with Master Kanami?!"

"That's our line! Why are you here, Nosfy? You're the banner of hope for the South! You should be on the front lines. The South is in danger!" I said.

"I do not want to hear anything from you right now. I am here for one reason and one reason only, and that is you, Master Kanami!" Nosfy replied.

I was shocked by her single-minded response. The balance of power on the battlefield was now a mess. I had thought that my turn to fight would come a little later, but Nosfy appeared earlier

than we had expected.

I spoke up, sensing Kanami's hesitance. "Leave this to me, Kanami."

"Okay. Thank you." After another moment of hesitation, he ran off without a word or backward glance at Nosfy.

"Please wait, Master Kanami! Please listen to me! Everything that happened that day was a misunderstanding! Please hear me out!" she called, trying to chase after him.

"You're the same as always, Nosfy. Since Kanami is busy, why don't we have a little fun together? It wouldn't be a bad idea to settle this battle here, would it?" I asked, blocking her.

Naturally, she was furious. "Get out of my way, Lorde!" she shouted. Then she attacked me. Her banner and my bayonet met, and the final battle began.

This was also *my* final battle. I didn't know what had happened to Kanami and the apostles after that. All I knew was what happened to Nosfy and I.

Nosfy roared at the climax of the battle as she became a half-monster. The fight between the representatives of the North and the South didn't just fill the immediate area, but extended to the Whoseyards castle town. The capital collapsed as though ravaged by a thousand storms. Most of it was the work of Nosfy, the supposed savior of the Southern Alliance.

Still roaring, she had lost her human form.

"Is this a snake made of light?! No, it's some kind of Lamia?!" I shouted.

Nosfy, having released all of her power, had turned half her body into that of a snake. She continued to fight, even though she was half dead and her life was being whittled away by power beyond her limits. She was no longer the Banner of Light; she was trying to become light itself.

Even so, that wasn't enough for her to become a true demon. No matter how much she tried to push her limits, she was too new as an Essence Thief. I, on the other hand, was older. The absolute difference in experience would decide the match.

"You think I am inferior to you?! Then more power! I will gain

more power! I will pull it from the World Restoration Array!" Nosfy yelled. She wouldn't accept defeat. She attempted to draw power from the magic circle that had somehow been set up on the continent. But the power was too great to be handled by just one person.

"No, Nosfy! I won't let you do it!" I shouted. At this rate, the magic power would go out of control. If left unchecked, it would cause many deaths in the capital, and the whole continent would be destroyed. I could tell the magic circle had at least that much power in it.

If the continent was blown up, that would impact the North as well. I was no longer queen. I didn't care about the North. I was now just a traveler. But that didn't mean I could just walk away. I didn't want to see innocent people die. It was an innate desire in me. With that single-mindedness, I did everything in my power to stop her.

The battle could no longer be called a fight between humans. I also got serious and became a half-monster, and it became a conflict of epic proportions. However, the battle of the century would end at the hands of a third party.

I suddenly saw the magic circle move in a completely unexpected way, and it was about to engulf Nosfy.

"Wait, what?! Nosfy is destroying herself?! No, she's being swallowed up by the circle?! Then, the true purpose of this magic circle is to capture, or rather, absorb, Essence Thieves like me?! Stop interfering with the magic circle, Nosfy! If you continue at this rate, we will fall together!" I shouted at her, shocked. I offered her a ceasefire in the face of the demonic magic circle that was melting the continent.

"I will not stop, especially if this is what it takes to kill even an Essence Thief! You must be in pain, Lorde! I see it as an opportunity! Yes, always living positively is what I am all about! I will keep moving forward, forward, forward, forward! If I keep moving forward, one day my wish will come truuuueeee!!!" Nosfy yelled in reply.

The magic circle was definitely affecting my body as well, but

Nosfy was in greater danger.

"You have to stop!" I shouted. "Don't you understand that I don't want you to die?!"

"You do not want me to die?! What are you even saying?! I am your enemy! Your *enemy*!"

"You're wrong! If only we'd met in a different way, we could've become friends! Yes, if only our fates had been a little different, we could've all been friends! That's what I've learned in the battle so far today!"

"You are too late! It is all too late, Lorde!"

In the end, there was no way to persuade her, and we ended up striking each other down. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that we were both killed by the magic circle. And as I was being swallowed up by the continent, I wondered if perhaps the power of the magic circle was the work of Kanami. He hated the world, but he especially hated the Essence Thieves. It was entirely possible that he had intended to wipe us out here from the very beginning.

Kanami really managed to trick me, I thought as I felt my body beginning to disappear.

I was relieved to die better than I'd thought I would, though. It wasn't as painful as when I had been the queen of Viaysia. At least now I was free from eternal suffering. That was the greatest relief for me. I was even smiling as I was enveloped by the magic circle, my body shattered.

So, this is death. It's the end. I'm disappearing. To be honest, I'm a little scared. But mostly I'm relieved. I am liberated. Everything is finally over. Finally...over... I can go back...home.

And so I met my end.

Or I was supposed to, anyway.

After a few moments, I realized something was strange. No matter how much time passed in the darkness, my consciousness wouldn't fade. In the nothingness, my sense of self persisted.

I was supposed to be dead. And yet, I couldn't help but wonder why I was still conscious. I was scared more than confused. The fact that it wasn't over yet terrified me and made my soul tremble.

What does this mean? As that question floated into my mind, the

words “Dungeon” and “Guardian” appeared in response. Then further information was revealed to me, albeit vaguely. The dead Essence Thieves would become Guardians of the world and wait for a capable person in the Dungeon a thousand years in the future. That person should be able to make the Guardians disappear, so I had to wait until then. This was the strange information I was provided with.

Is it Kanami’s voice telling me this? I wondered.

The unnatural darkness was explained by the voice of someone who seemed sympathetic. The Essence Thieves born of the apostles were immortal and unkillable. As long as they had lingering attachments, they couldn’t easily die. And among them, my lingering attachments were so intense it was concerning, the voice told me. I was also troubled by the sudden mention of lingering attachments. I didn’t know anything about them.

Is there something you want? the voice asked me.

But I didn’t know that either. And because I didn’t know, I’d followed Kanami and died.

If you don’t know, then can you find something? it asked.

But if I didn’t know what I wanted, how could I find it? And since the voice was telling me that even though I didn’t know, my life wouldn’t be over, I had no choice but to try to think of something.

The first thing that came to mind was the country of Viaysia, which I’d left behind. I wondered if the North would be able to defeat the South after I’d disappeared. If my country had been destroyed because of my choices, I would definitely consider that a lingering attachment. If I had any other regrets, they would be about the past. Of course, I figured the answer to everything lay in the past.

In the darkness, I gave that answer to Kanami, and he simply replied that he understood. Then I felt his presence moving away from me.

Kanami! I tried to stop the one person who understood me, but my hand couldn’t reach. Of course not. I didn’t have a body anymore.

Just like that, I was left alone in the darkness. After that, time

passed, feeling both long and short, and my heroic tale reached its conclusion. If my betrayal and death formed the last chapter, then it was only right that what came after was the epilogue.

That's right. That hadn't been the end of me; it was actually the beginning. After that, the true curse of being the Sovereign Queen Lorde began.

I'd gone beyond suffocating. I was no longer breathing. My life had accelerated so much that it had gone through death at a frightening speed. My body had perished, vanished without a trace from this world.

But I was still there. My story wasn't over.

All that remained was the heartbreaking epilogue. An excessively long sequel. A long, long, story that I didn't want to read anymore. No matter how much I tried to fast-forward, the story ate at my heart. It was the tale I tried so hard to forget it drove me mad.

But the story was there. The time before Kanami and Liner fell into my world a few days ago certainly existed. And I remembered it.

◆◆◆◆◆

Before I knew it, I was sitting—just like usual, on the throne, wearing my queenly attire. Although confused by my sudden consciousness, I took in my surroundings.

"Where am I?"

Broken candles lined the stone walls. Light shone through the windows, making the dust motes floating in the air visible. Behind me hung a tapestry symbolizing the country of Viaysia, and expensive carpets ran all the way to the doorway. I thought it looked similar to the place where I used to live, but I soon realized it was different. The castle of Viaysia was an old building, which should have been apparent everywhere, but this throne room was too new. There was no doubt in my mind that it had been rebuilt.

"Is this the Dungeon?"

The Dungeon had been explained to me in that darkness. And I'd thought Kanami had said that a special space would be prepared for

me, since I had such intense lingering attachments.

I got up from my throne and walked around, checking out the situation. I walked up to a window and looked around at the world outside. There, the Viaysia of the past spread before my eyes. It was the world before it had been engulfed in war. Indeed, it was an exceptionally convenient world.

"But what am I supposed to do here? And how did I even die in the first place?" My head felt strangely heavy. My memories were fragmented, and I couldn't really remember the past. But I remembered I'd been fighting with Nosfy when a magic circle had suddenly swallowed me up. Naturally, the moment right before my death was memorable.

I knew my cause of death, and I knew where I was. But I didn't have any information beyond that. It was unnatural. As I strained my eyes to look as far out as I could, I could tell that the countries of the North were there, but honestly, all I could think was that it was imperfect and incomplete.

That wasn't like Kanami; he was usually a perfectionist. Maybe something had happened and caused the construction of it to fail. But there was no mistaking that this was the past I had wished for. Viaysia was all there. It was possible that Kanami had some sort of intention that I didn't understand.

"So what should I do?"

I leaped out of one of the throne room's windows. I flew through the dark sky and checked all of the buildings. As I was doing so, I saw little glimmers of light fall across the town.

"Are these magic gems? Speaking of which, Kanami did mention some technique called Re-Collection being implemented in the Dungeon. If this *is* the Dungeon, then anyone should be able to do it easily, in which case..."

I picked out a suitable looking gem and touched it. Thanks to the explanation I had received, I immediately knew what its true form was. As an Essence Thief, I also knew how to use these gems.

"Is it possible that all the people of Viaysia who were trapped in the magic circle on the last day have been scattered here as magic stones? Does that mean that I should use them to restore Viaysia to

its original state? Surely, then, any past could be recreated...”

My goal now was to fulfill my lingering attachments so I could finally disappear. But I wasn’t sure what those attachments were. The only thing I could think of off the top of my head was Viaysia, which I had abandoned. I’d been concerned about my country up to the moment of my death. But did that mean if I brought peace to *this* Viaysia, I would be able to disappear?

“No, peace in Viaysia isn’t just my wish; it’s my duty. Or, no...promise? Whatever it is, nothing can start without bringing it back. First, peace. I have to do it one by one, with a fine-tooth comb.”

Wanting to focus on one thing at a time, I picked up the magic gems of my subjects that had fallen in the castle’s garden. Then, starting at the throne and working my way down, I tried to regenerate them from their gems. I sensed the reactions of the special wards that had been placed on this space, and the miracle that existed only here was activated. The magic power in the air gathered around the magic gemstone, and a temporary body was formed.

So this was Re-Collection. What a nonsense use of magic. But it was normal for Kanami to do something like this. I watched the magic.

The first person woke up—someone who had been working as my aide.

“Where am I?”

He said the same thing I had when I’d woken up. I’d raised him without thinking much of it, but this time around, I wondered “when” in my past he was from. I got my answer quickly.

“Oh! Sovereign Queen Lorde! You’ve returned to Viaysia!”

So, it seemed like if I returned them to life now, they would have memories of what had happened immediately before they died. That made sense. If nothing had been done to change them, they would be just as they were.

“Oh...um...well...” I began.

“But, my queen, why is it so quiet? Did you do something while I was unconscious?!”

My subject looked at me, a betrayer, with sparkling eyes. He still believed in me, even though I'd run off without any kind of explanation. Even though he knew what I'd done in his rational mind, he might not have been able to accept my betrayal due to his previous experiences with me.

Since I was skilled at reading people, I knew that I was being asked to explain myself. So, I would answer. It was how I'd gotten along my whole life. I would do it to save my fellow sorcerers and make them happy. But that was the only reason for me to answer.

"Um, yes, of course. The battle is over. The reason I disappeared was to defeat the root of all evil in the Southern Alliance: Apostle Sith and Nosfy Whoseyards," I said.

"Oh! Just as I thought!"

His face was filled with joy. In order to maintain his expression, I pointed out the window.

"Look outside. There are no enemies here. At last, our sorcerer's bloodline has achieved true peace. Yes, from now on, there will be peace here. As long as that is what I want, it will surely happen."

I showed him the beautiful town that was free from the fire and devastation of war. Naturally, there was not a single person out there.

"Our circumstances are a little particular. I will explain soon," I added.

Although I didn't fully understand the situation, if those at the top showed unease, it would propagate to those at the bottom. Like a perfect queen, I pretended to be confident and told the man that the battle was over and that this was where peace in Viaysia would be realized. It was also a way for me to organize my own information.

Upon hearing this explanation, my subject was first bewildered by his own death. Naturally, this afterlife-esque space would be hard to accept for anyone other than anomalies such as an Essence Thief. It took me half a day to settle his confusion and another half a day to make him accept what was going on.

The next day, after he'd regained some of his composure, I spoke with him again about what came next.

“Now, I will revive everyone who was transformed into magic gems one by one. And then, together, we will recreate a perfect and happy Viaysia. That is the last thing I can do as the Sovereign Queen Lorde.”

“I’m sorry that I got upset, my queen. I completely understand your feelings,” he said.

And so began the second time I resuscitated Viaysia. I had only one goal: to see it through to the end and find my death. This time, my goal was clear, so I felt more at ease. Since it was the second time, things would also move faster.

After having made sufficient preparations in the throne room, I attempted to regenerate a second subject. I decided to again regenerate my subject as they had last been. Even if I had chosen my subjects from a time of peace and regenerated them, I didn’t think that would bring about true peace. I myself would not be satisfied unless the people were regenerated as they were stored in the magic gems and found peace naturally. What was important was that my lingering attachment could be fulfilled.

So now, I had a second person. This time, when he regained consciousness, he began screaming before anything else.

“There! If you hadn’t slipped away back then, Viaysia wouldn’t have been destroyed! It wouldn’t have been destroyed, Sovereign Queen Lorde!!!”

Words of condemnation were all that awaited me. Maybe my first subject had died early in the war. That’s why he’d been so composed. But this second one had survived to the end of the battle, and that’s why he held such a grudge.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. There was nothing I could do but apologize. To be honest, I’d felt guilty ever since Kanami had taken me away. I had been regretting my escape. So I was ready to atone for my sins.

However, an unexpected voice interrupted me. “Wait! It’s true that our queen disappearing at that time caused many deaths. But she fought to the death somewhere else! Don’t lay the blame on her!” My first subject was defending me.

My second subject’s anger lessened at that. “Elsewhere? If what

you say is true, then wouldn't there have been a different outcome?"

"There were other circumstances that prevented it. Isn't that right, Sovereign Queen Lorde?"

How should I respond? I knew of only one way to meet these heavy expectations.

"That's right. Please calm down and listen to what I have to say."

My second subject relaxed and settled in to listen openly to my explanation. The sight of him gave me chills. In other words, this man, too, somewhere in his heart, still believed in me. He knew that was the only way to be saved, so he was hoping for an excuse from his queen.

I had no choice but to repeat the same story. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that queenly and perfect explanation was powerful enough to soothe the anger of the second man.

On the third day, I woke my third subject. It was another repeat of the day before. So I told the same story again. I repeated that story over and over for the fourth, fifth, and sixth people.

"Everyone, please calm down and listen to what Sovereign Queen Lorde is saying. All of this was done with deep thought behind it."

Again and again people started following me. Again and again I saved my subjects. It was all nothing more than another farce. But I had to do it, all because I had disappeared.

"I'm sorry, Sovereign Queen Lorde. I hadn't realized that's what happened," one subject said.

Before I realized it, I was surrounded by more than ten of my subjects. And so I would be treated as the ruler of Viaysia until my very end.

I couldn't do anything but nod in agreement with them. But every time I nodded, a nostalgic weight pressed down on my body. There was nothing else I could do. If I told the truth here, it would be difficult to recreate peace in Viaysia. If that was to happen, I would be unable to fulfill one of my lingering regrets from when I was alive. I wouldn't be able to disappear. I had to avoid that. So I did what I had to do.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I fought Nosfy for as long as I could," I said. I had to make a haughty excuse like that.

"No, it's okay. Just knowing that makes me feel better. Thank you, Queen Lorde." My subjects readily accepted my excuse. It was too much of a farce, even though I knew from my own experience from when I was alive that people were creatures who only believed what they wanted to. It was suffocating, so much so that I felt the world blurring around me. One after another I regenerated my subjects.

A few months later, the peace of Viaysia castle was restored. It was a world no longer threatened by foreign enemies, as it had been when I had served in the castle as a gardener. It became the place that everyone during the war wanted and sought until the day they died. So I made it happen.

"Finally, we've made it. We've made it to the paradise that all the sorcerers dreamed of. Thank you so much, Sovereign Queen Lorde. I have no more regrets," one of my subjects said with a smile. Their body was turning into little particles of light. Then the light rose and became a star in the black sky. It was too unrealistic and sounded like a fairy tale, but I could only describe it as my subject passing away.

"This is..." The suddenness of the event took everyone by surprise. However, only I immediately understood the meaning of it. In other words, this must be what it looked like to fulfill a lingering attachment. Everyone here had much in common with a Guardian. They could almost be described as pseudo-Guardians, so it made sense that their endings would be similar.

It became a tangible hope that I could achieve the same. That was natural, since it had been proven that the end was possible as long as the lingering attachment was eliminated. Immediately, under the guise of doing it for everyone's sake, I began to investigate the details of the particle phenomenon. Of course, my true intention was to gain this knowledge for myself.

My investigation revealed that the star in the sky, the magic gem, still had a personality but no sense of self. It seemed to be something like a corpse. Furthermore, I knew that by interfering with the magic gem in the sky, it was possible to Re-Collect the personality. I was deeply relieved by this mechanism, because peace in Viaysia, *my* lingering attachment, was impossible without

everyone's smiling faces. I was grateful to Kanami who must have planted this technique in my mind.

I was glad. The construction of this place had been well thought out. As the rules were revealed to me, it became clear what I had to do. I gathered my revived subjects for an announcement.

"Everyone, there is no cause for concern. Those who are satisfied with the situation will live out their lives, and their souls will return to the world. That's all there is to it," I told them.

"Satisfied?" Some of my subjects seemed doubtful.

"That's right. It means that when you feel happy, truly happy, then you will be able to complete your life. That is the way it is here, so that you will never die in a state of regret again," I explained. "This is a world where everyone is happy. This is the last paradise created by Kanami and me."

"A paradise!" There was a stir among my subjects when I said that. It made sense, as it was what they had wanted for so long. It was also what I had hoped for.

"Of course, it is my fault that I could not create it while we were alive. I know there are those who think that such a paradise in the afterlife is not real. However, I promise you that I will make this place a better paradise than the one on earth. I will make it a better paradise than the real one! So I want to ask for everyone's help! Together, we will make this the most peaceful country in the world!" I told them. I would definitely see it to completion. This was paradise, and more than that, it was my graveyard.

That's right. I finally understood. I was sure that I had wanted to return here. Perhaps my conviction was conveyed to them, because they threw their hands in the air and began cheering.

"Of course the Sovereign Queen Lorde's plan would be flawless! A truly perfect plan!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Finally! We've finally gotten to a world of true peace!"

"We're in the paradise we've always dreamed of! We can live happily without fear!"

"Our Sovereign Queen Lorde did it! She's the great Sovereign

Queen Lorde!”

Their voices hurt my ears, and I felt nauseous. But I would endure it. All of it was to fulfill my lingering attachment. This time, I would die for good.

“Great! With that decided, it’s on to the next thing, which is outside the castle! Let’s bring the townspeople back! It’s all for the sake of creating a paradise in the North!” I cried.

With my subjects in tow, the work of restoring the castle town began. However, the amount of magic gems out there was far greater than inside the castle. It would be work that took many years.

Day by day, or rather, year by year, I aimed for paradise. Along the way, there were many times when the rehabilitated people glared at and cursed at me. They threw stones at me, and I was even stabbed. But all of it was to fulfill my lingering attachment, and I accepted the situation as the perfect queen. Despite being abused, I continued to patiently apologize to everyone. Despite the bloodshed, I endured the pain and continued to explain what had happened. Still, there was much resentment. It felt like the cries of my people were coming from the depths of hell.

“If only the Sovereign Queen Lorde had been there when it mattered! I will never forgive you!!!” one of my subjects said in between bouts of screaming.

It took me months to come to an understanding with even a single frenzied person. But, undaunted, I spoke carefully, one day at a time, one person at a time.

Once the castle town was finished, the surrounding villages would follow. And when that was over, so would the neighboring countries. In order to create our paradise, it would be necessary to revive and pacify the entire Northern Alliance. As a result of my steady work, peace was built with Viaysia at its center. At the same time, voices praising my name echoed around the world.

“Of course there was no way our Sovereign Queen Lorde would betray us. She’s *our* Sovereign Queen. The only one who can rule the North! The great hero who appeared to create a paradise for sorcerers has returned! It’s just as the legends say!”

"Yes, our Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

My face stiffened and my expression grew even harder. It felt like an old wound was reopening. I'd been able to escape thanks to Kanami, but I'd always known I would come back.

No, I was *falling* back into it. I remembered this feeling of time accelerating, like I was being whittled away. The speed at which I was falling was so fast that it became really hard to breathe. But this time, there was a goal. If I went into the depths of hell again, I could die. I knew that. So I could endure it. I could persevere.

Ten years passed without a pause in the outpouring of praise. By then, I had returned to the state I was in before my death. With infinite expectations on my shoulders, my whole body felt heavy. My consciousness was dazed, and I felt that time was moving too fast. The world was accelerating, falling down, and yet I continued to be the perfect queen, not making a single mistake.

Today, as always, in order to bring peace to the world, I would lead new people to happiness.

"Oh! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Thank you very much! With this, we can finally live in a world of peace!"

"No, thank you," I replied. "The more happy people there are, the happier I am."

My response was fully automatic, an art perfected over decades. My response was flawless, but my consciousness was dazed. Various things accelerated and did not stop. My head was dizzy, like I had a cold. However, since I wasn't any less capable, I could clearly see the dizziness, which made me uncomfortable. My sense of equilibrium was gone, and I felt like I was upside down. I felt like I was about to ascend into the darkness of the sky, even though gravity was pulling me downward. I felt like I was hanging on to the earth, my feet hooked into the ground. I felt like I was about to fall

into the sky, and it filled my heart with anxiety. I felt so bad that I didn't know what I was doing.

Why am I the queen again? I wondered sometimes at the end of all those sensations. I knew the answer. I had to be queen so that I could stop being queen. But if I was queen, there was no way I could *stop* being queen. That was just how it worked. So maybe I should quit being queen sooner rather than later. But to quit being queen meant I had to be the queen. I knew all that, but I was starting to lose my mind. Perhaps it was because I had been queen again for decades after my death, exceeding my limits, that my body was so heavy and unbearable.

My body was heavy. Heavy, heavy, heavy. The heaviness was painful. I couldn't stand it anymore.

And then my vision distorted. Maybe I'd relaxed too much alone in the throne room.

"Wait, what? Why am I...crying?"

I couldn't stop. Huge tears were flowing from my eyes. I couldn't let anyone see. I quickly hid myself behind the throne. I managed to somehow stop the tears. I desperately told myself that this was what I needed to do to die. Sure, it might be a painful process, but it was all to be endured until my lingering attachment was fulfilled. As long as I finished apologizing to all my people, turned the North into a paradise of peace, and atoned for my sins, I would surely be able to die satisfied this time, with no sorrow and no regrets.

So I had to hang in there, just a little bit longer. I had to hang in there, hang in there. Hang in there, hang in there, hang in there...

Repeating this in my mind, I wiped away the last of the tears. Then, from behind the throne, the perfect Sovereign Queen Lorde reappeared. To lead the North to peace, she went forth from the castle to save her people. And so another year, and another, and another, and another, passed.

"Thank you very much, Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"We who were oppressed in the South are so lucky to live here now! I'm so glad!"

"Thanks to you, I was able to finally reach paradise!"

"Everything is thanks to you, Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Yes, our most thoughtful Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

Their cheering voices wrapped around me until I could no longer tell what they were saying.

Alone again, I cried behind my throne. The voice of the curse that accompanied the rebirth of my people hurt my heart. Their voices of expectation rubbed salt in the new wounds. The people might have thought that the Sovereign Queen Lorde would be all right, but that would never be true. I couldn't help but cry.

"I'm so grateful to you!"

"Our Sovereign Queen Lorde is perfect!"

"The Sovereign Queen Lorde is working so hard for our sakes! We have to work hard for peace too!"

"Of course Sovereign Queen Lorde would achieve this!"

"With her here, there's nothing for us to worry about!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde is the true queen! I am happy to serve the true queen!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

Shut up. I couldn't stand it anymore.

"But I have to endure it! So that it will all end! I must! Endure!" My perseverance finally broke, and I walked around the castle. To somewhere far away. To somewhere I couldn't hear those voices. I walked like a lost child, those thoughts filling my mind. At the end of my wandering, I ended up in the castle's library. I thought it would be quiet because of all the books, but the cheers still reached me. To escape even further, I went deeper into the library, where I found a

door. I quickly opened it and went inside.

It was the vault for paintings. There were many paintings of the victorious figure of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. A queen with a proud look, green hair, and a crown. This was how the people saw me. I didn't even recognize myself.

I started screaming. But I could still hear the crowd chanting my name. I was at my limit. My body, which was supposed to be running on automatic as the queen, began to erupt with violent emotions.

"No! This isn't me! I'm not the Sovereign Queen Lorde! This isn't the real me!!!" I grabbed a painting at random and slammed it to the ground. I ripped away the perfect expression in the painting with my fingernails. I broke the expensive frames and threw them against the wall, shattering them.

I vandalized and vandalized and vandalized, breaking everything and tearing the canvases to pieces. I was breathing heavily by that point. For some reason, it was hard to breathe. I should have had the strength of a monster, but I couldn't catch my breath. Whether I took in air or not, it was as painful as though I were drowning.

Why? I was breathing in so much air, but the suffocating feeling didn't go away. In fact, I felt like even the air from my lungs was being drained out. It was painful. Suffering, suffering, suffering. I couldn't breathe. I kept repeating the same things over and over again, and it began to lose all meaning. When was now? How long had I been hanging in there? How long had I been queen? How old was I even? How old had I been when I died the first time?

I moaned like some sort of ghost as I left the vault. Just as well; there was a library here. I looked for a book about myself and read it. I read the history of Viaysia and the heroic tale of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. My hands trembled as I read. I was astonished by the weight, or rather the lightness of the content, of the life I had lived up to this day. Most of all, I trembled at the answers that emerged by calculating the year of the heroic tale's beginning and the year of its end.

It was impossible. I was well over a hundred years old?! How was this possible? This body! Nothing had changed since that day! And

yet I was older than gramps and granny! More mature than those two! I couldn't believe it! Even now, I wanted to cry to them and be doted on by them!

I started moaning again. I didn't understand. I was a hundred-year-old lady? It didn't feel real. I still considered myself a child. Was it because of the long period of time when I hadn't felt like myself? No doubt about it, it was due to the acceleration of my sense of time. I felt like I had jumped through time. And then I realized that my fears were serious.

I was a girl named Titee, but my very existence was being erased by the Sovereign Queen Lorde. I was being devoured. The sensation of no longer being myself was so unpleasant that I couldn't stand it anymore. It was like flesh eating insects were gathering on my bare skin. It was uncomfortable and hopeless!

I screamed again. I was going insane. Even though my body and mind could not die, they could still be broken. If that happened, I would never be able to fulfill my lingering attachment, and I would never be able to die. That was no good, no good at all. I had to do something about it quickly.

"That's right! The incantation that Kanami taught me should be able to interfere with my spirit! If I change the incantation a little bit, and with the right price, then I can get rid of this sickening feeling!"

Maybe I was already insane. I touched things I knew I should not touch.

"*I-I do not choose the path I walk. I am the wind. I will continue to walk the entire world. I remember wishing so!*"

Many of the wind incantations lightened the heart. But that meant nothing other than diminishing it. My heart, which was more important than the flesh, was being gruesomely knifed away. That couldn't be a good thing to do. However, it was necessary for me at present. It was necessary to cut away the indecent parts. And then I sublimated the incantation. To kill not the true me, but the queenly me, I would come up with my own special incantations. I knew that the essence of them was to express all of myself in words for me and me alone.

"*Accelerate*!" It came out easily. That was me now. I wanted to

say it out loud and get it all out of my body.

"*Accelerate. Accelerate. Accelerate. I am an accelerating spirit.*" I spun my life out from the depths of my heart. With that incantation, I felt everything become lighter. I was released from unbearable anxiety and fear, even if only temporarily.

"Yes! *Accelerate*! *Accelerate* faster and faster! *Accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *Accelerate*! *Accelerating! Accelerating! Accelerating! Everything ends! Faster! Even faster! ACCELERATE! Accelerating! Hit my head on something! Die! Accelerate faster to the end!*" I screamed again. I rejoiced that my body, which had been so heavy, was now as light as a feather.

I knew I was cutting away something very important. But it was so much easier. The feeling of living in a small box disappeared, and I felt like I was living in a very big world. I could feel the clear air seeping into my lungs, and I was no longer suffering. It felt so good. I was able to pull myself together a little bit. There was no doubt that this was a forbidden pleasure, but it was the only way. I was more afraid of going crazy than I was of the price I was paying. So I had to keep grinding, grinding, grinding, and forget about the fear. Otherwise I wouldn't last any longer. Now all I could do was think about disappearing.

I didn't question the means that went toward achieving that. It was my lingering attachment. It didn't matter what the cost was as long as I fulfilled my lingering attachment, and that was the end of it. It would all disappear one day anyway. Me, this place, and everything else. What was wrong with whittling my heart away? What was wrong with making it lighter?

"*Accelerate. Accelerate. Accelerate.* Let me die. Let me hurry up and disappear. Surely I'm close...so close..." With those words, I walked unsteadily, using the wall for support, and left the library and then the castle. And then, as was my daily routine, I revived more of the Northern Alliance. It was all right now. If I felt pain, I could do the wind incantation. If I kept repeating the regeneration and paying the price, then one day it would end.

With that as my only hope, I resumed the rebirth of the people that day and the next. I would continue to revitalize, apologize,

persuade, and thank. At the same time, I rebuilt the country and created a perfect peace. Muttering the incantation, I repeated it all as if it were my duty.

Again and again, and again and again, again, againagainagain. Time accelerated faster in proportion to my work. Again and faster, again and faster, faster. Because I kept repeating the same actions over and over again, I could feel the world get faster and faster but thanks to that, finally, after a hundred years, it came to an end.

My apology was made to all the people of the North, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and all of them were convinced that, without a doubt, the world was at peace. It was perfect. Not a single person held a grudge. Of course, there were no foreign enemies either.

With the country of Viaysia at the center, it became the ideal Northern Alliance. There was nothing more to ask for. The perfect world that I had imagined as the Sovereign Queen Lorde was completed.

"Thank you so much everyone! At last, this place is complete! We've genuinely made the last paradise for sorcerers here!" I called out to the people gathered around the castle. And they responded with cheers. I didn't even know what they were saying anymore, but I knew they were calling my name.

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde! Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

The only thing reverberating in my mind was my name, like it was brainwashing me.

Of course, I went to inform not only the castle but the town as well. Then I went to the surrounding towns, to the outlying villages, and to the neighboring countries allied with the North. I went around proclaiming our success. As I did, half the souls of the people fulfilled their lingering attachments and disappeared. I saw them off with a smile on my face. But for the sake of peace among

the other half of the people, I asked for the souls of those who had departed to return. Thus, the people of the Northern Alliance sang their praise of this paradise as their souls went to the sky.

Things were going very well. But for some reason, I felt a sense of unease. My power as an Essence Thief wasn't decreasing at all. While I was being attacked by this uneasiness, the number of people with souls was visibly decreasing.

"Yes! I finally understand! I'm so glad I belong to Sovereign Queen Lorde's country! With this, I can sleep easily."

"This peaceful world is what we were aiming for! Paradise!"

"I am satisfied. Finally, I can see this peace with my own eyes."

One by one, the few remaining people returned to the sky and fell asleep. And then, as far as I could see around me, everyone had turned into stars. From the castle's lofty perch, I looked down to see what was happening.

"Everyone within my sight has disappeared. Now..." I could see the castle town where the soulless people were walking around. Next, I could see the whole country. It really was a peaceful world. This was finally a country where people enjoyed peace without being intimidated by war. Beyond that, the countries of the vast Northern Alliance were connected, and the end of the world was a paradise.

But now, I was the only soul left in Viaysia. I stood alone, my soul too dense to disappear, on the castle hill.

"What?" A sense of emptiness overtook the sense of accomplishment. This was the paradise that I had longed for. It was supposed to be the treasure that I couldn't get no matter how hard I tried before my death. But something was wrong. I didn't feel anything. My power as an Essence Thief hadn't diminished. I didn't feel like I could disappear with a smile on my face like everyone else. Perhaps it was because I didn't feel like I was fulfilling my lingering attachment, but for a moment the worst possible scene flashed through my mind.

Once this was over, I couldn't think of anything to do next. There would be no way to fulfill my lingering attachment. Perhaps I would be stuck, alone, in this situation forever.

Would I be alone forever?

I could feel it becoming harder to breathe. "*Accelerate. Accelerate. Accelerate! I am an accelerating spirit!*" With my incantation I shook that horrible scene out of my head. It wasn't possible. Well, maybe, but there wasn't enough time. Besides me, there were others who were taking longer to disappear completely. They were the ones who'd had great magical power and adaptability before their deaths. They were still here. And my magical power and adaptability were at their peak. I guess I had to enjoy this peace more than ordinary people.

"That's right...it's just a little longer... Of course..." So I would feel more. Laugh more. Enjoy it more. It was true peace. This was my lingering attachment. I didn't remember who wanted it, but it must have been the peace I'd been striving for.

So I would laugh. For my own satisfaction, I would laugh more. Staggering out of the castle, I went into the streets. I enjoyed the treasures I had spent a hundred years acquiring.

"Treasure? Ha ha, this is my treasure?" I naturally trembled as I spoke. In the bustling castle town, a wide variety of sorcerers were walking around. Not a single one of them was wearing a dangerous weapon or armor, and everyone was laughing and living without any worries. No one, young or old, male or female, suffered, and they enjoyed a peace that could go on forever. But most of the substance was missing.

Was it shining? Could I call this world, that didn't even have any color, a treasure? I stood there, dumbfounded. Then one child without substance spoke to me in a friendly manner, acting out her role. In this peaceful world, even the queen could be interacted with easily, which was a very wonderful story.

"What's wrong, Your Majesty? You look a little pale."

"Oh, do I?"

"Let's smile some more! We don't have to fight anyone anymore!" There was no soul there. She was an empty puppet, laughing. I felt nothing but unease.

"Ha ha, yes. You're definitely right," I replied. If this girl was a doll, then what was I, returning her smile?

"You look kind of down in the dumps! Do you sound tired

because you always talk like a grandma? Hey, you should talk like me! Then I'm sure you'll feel better naturally!" the girl said.

"No, as queen I can't..."

"Sure, you're the queen, but you don't have to be so stern anymore! This place is peaceful now!" The girl spread her hands out. She wasn't wrong.

"Y-You're right. There's no reason to be so queenly anymore. We're not fighting anyone now. No...there's no one..."

"Yeah! We're at peace!"

"That's right, we're at peace..."

"Yeah! And it's all thanks to you! And if anything happened, then you'd take care of it!"

"Y-Yes...naturally..." The child reminded me that I was the queen, even if I didn't look like one. Even the dolls still expected me to be their queen. It was too frightening.

"Nope! No more saying 'naturally'!"

"Y-Yes...of...course?"

"Yeah! Like that!"

I didn't mind if I changed the way I spoke. I didn't have any attachment to it anyway.

Did I really not have any attachment to how I spoke? I couldn't remember that either. Perhaps because I had spent so much time in this place, I couldn't really remember what anything was like when I was alive. One hundred years had passed. The attachments from my childhood...were too far away now.

"Your Majesty, will you play with me?" the girl asked.

"Play? Well...that's not a bad idea..."

No, I wouldn't think anymore. I'd decided to enjoy the peace. It was highly likely this was part of my lingering attachment too. I'd always clung to the idea of a world at peace. So as long as I could play with this child in this peaceful world, I would be at peace. Then I would be able to disappear like everyone else. I could disappear. It would be strange if I couldn't. Because at this point, I had no other lingering attachments. So this was the only way left for me to disappear. This would definitely make me disappear. I had to believe that.

Two hundred years of my life passed in that place. My sense of time was not only paralyzed, it had completely broken down. Yesterday felt like ten years ago, and ten years felt like yesterday. But suddenly, I was reminded of something that had happened a hundred years ago, and yet, because of how everything remained unchanged, it seemed like it had happened yesterday. My confusion reached its peak. Time was speeding up even more. Once again, like a pebble rolling down a hill, I lived another hundred years by myself. I felt like I was falling.

Repeating and repeating and repeating and repeatingandrepeatingandrepeatingandrepeating and accelerating.

"Your Majesty? Are you okay?" My playmate seemed to worry about me almost every day.

"Y-Yes, I'm okay. Because I'm happy! This place, this peace... It's the world I searched for for so long!" I replied, laughing.

Still? I thought. Maybe it was because my thoughts kept going over the same things again and again that I was looking unwell.

That's right, it was every day. Day after day, for two hundred years... Every single day! Every day I was uneasy. I wondered if I would really suffer forever, unable to disappear. But I quickly shook my head. That couldn't be true. Everything was all right. If push came to shove, I could go to the surface. I had a little too much free time on my hands, so I looked for the door leading to the Dungeon and found it right away. If I went through there and aimed for the top of it, I'd get to the surface.

What would I do if I left this place and went up there? Unlike here, the surface wasn't made just for me. It was a completely unreasonable world. Everyone was feuding with each other, surrounded by enemies, and the endless battles continued. It was the world as it should be.

Walking around that world, I wouldn't be able to resist helping others. And if my power as an Essence Thief was discovered, there was no doubt in my mind that I would have to fight again. Once one was discovered to be the strongest of a group, it was inevitable.

At the end of it all, there was a strong possibility that I would become queen again. My power would ensure it. I didn't think I

could refuse. If I'd had the type of personality to do so, I wouldn't have been in this situation. Besides, it was possible that there was someone up there who knew me. If I met someone I knew, there was no doubt that I would return to being the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

It would be the same. If I went up there, I would be in the same situation as down here. I didn't want that. It wasn't that I thought people with expectations were bad. People were creatures of expectation, so it couldn't be helped. But I didn't like the things I didn't like.

So I had no choice but to do something about it, not on the surface, but here. I had to somehow come to an understanding in this place and get rid of my lingering attachment. I kept repeating that thought over and over again.

Repeating and repeating and repeating and repeatingandacceleratingandrepeatingandaccelerating and acceleratingandrepeatingandrepeating and repeatingandaccelerating and acceleratingandacceleratingandaccelerating and repeatingandaccelerating...

Three hundred years passed. Today I woke up in my castle and walked around a peaceful Viaysia. It had become a daily routine. No, it was a fully automatic action at this point. Some time ago, I had thought I wanted to do something about my condition. But I no longer cared to think about it. Because thinking about it was painful. So I had no choice but to spend my time playing. Today, again, I would play like children played. It was really, really fun to do that.

"I would expect nothing less from you, Lorde!" my playmate said, laughing.

"Right? I can do even more amazing things!" It was fun to do things I couldn't do as queen. Playing and playing and playing, it all saved me just a little bit.

"Hey, Lorde, let's draw together!"

"Okay! I'm good at drawing!" I said. Living as a child here wasn't bad. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad either. So it was okay.

"I'm done! Me first!" the girl said, showing me her drawing.

"Whoa! You're good! Is that your mom and dad, Beth?"

"Yeah! My most important mama and papa! And this is..."

"Oh, Grandpa Vohlz!" I said.

"Yeah! My favorite grandpa! What about you?"

"I drew my family too!"

"Oh, so this is your family?"

"Yes, my dearest family. My grandpa, my grandma, and my brother too..."

"Wow! What a pretty place! Amazing!"

Pretty? Perhaps it was because my vision was blurry, but I couldn't even make out what I'd drawn. Not only was the world in black-and-white, but even the lines were unclear. What did I just draw? What beautiful thing could I have drawn in such a state? If there was something missing from this place, I wanted to know. But because of the accelerating pace of the world, I couldn't even see it.

"Oh! Let's frame it! I think I saw one at my grandpa's house!"

"A frame?! If we do that, I'll bring one from the castle. My house is more beautiful than yours, so it'll be more expensive!"

"Is that okay?!"

"Of course!"

No, I was done with that too. I didn't want to think about anything right now. I was tired. I wanted to sleep.

This place was beautiful. It could be called a paradise. I had no doubt that one day I had reached a place similar to what I'd been looking for. It should be someplace as beautiful as the pebble I dropped that day.

No, on the contrary, it was superior to it. It was a perfect paradise. Then...it was fine like this. I shouldn't have to do anything else...

No more... It was enough.

I couldn't do it anymore. That was the moment I abandoned being myself.

With that, the acceleration of my sense of time sped up even more. Accelerating more and more, the world fell faster and faster. It continued to *Accelerate*.

And another four hundred, five hundred years passed. The

unchanging days kept repeating themselves. I could no longer sense time at all. In a world where time had collapsed, all I did was laugh innocently. It had become my own thing, beyond even custom and etiquette. The soulless doll Lorde laughed again today.

"It's peaceful again today, isn't it, Lorde?" Beth asked.

"It is. My country is at peace today too. It's very easy to work as a gardener in a peaceful country like this," I replied, laughing.

"Easy? Are you by any chance skipping work today?"

"I am not! Is my reputation that bad?!"

"But you're always playing with me! Even though you're an adult..."

"Because everyone says that! This is how you keep the streets clean! I'm good at this kind of care! I'm a pro!"

"Hee hee, I guess you're right. Thanks to you, Lorde, Viaysia is beautiful!"

"Right? This place is beautiful!"

I was tired. I didn't want to think.

I accelerated and accelerated and accelerated even more, and in the end, I had to accept that eternity might not be so bad if it was here. I really seemed to enjoy myself as I played without thinking. If I became a fully automatic puppet, I could live in peace with everyone forever here. If I couldn't disappear even in that eternity, it would mean that whatever I was doing was futile after all. So now, all of my lingering attachments were resolved. In other words, it was over.

This was my end. I felt relief that it was finally over. It really hadn't been a satisfying life. As queen I'd lived a life of fighting and died without succeeding at anything. Even after dying, I had run about as queen and become solitary without succeeding at anything.

The first hundred years were incomprehensible. In the next two hundred years, I'd broken. After three hundred years, I'd reverted to being a child because I had exceeded the acceptable limits of human life. After four hundred years, I had finally been unable to recognize the world. When I reached five hundred years, I was no longer a living being. From six hundred years on, there were not even

memories left.

Surely, there was nothing in my life anymore. Although I had a soul, it was weathered and completely motionless. Unable to perceive the world, time flew by as though I were asleep. It seemed to fall away as it *Accelerated, Accelerated, Accelerated*.

At last, I hit the bottom. The depths of the abyss were orderly and beautiful. So I continued to believe that someday this place would gently erase me. I lived another six, seven, eight hundred years. I continued to live, laughing and playing, in this place.

Occasionally, I would very painfully return to sanity. I wanted to be broken all the time, but then, as though remembering, my consciousness returned. I was startled by the years that had passed. It frightened me, I trembled, and I wanted to cry like a small child. So I would cry behind the throne in the empty castle. The truth was, I didn't want to cry anymore. I didn't want to be sad. I just wanted to laugh all the time. I didn't know how I'd gotten into this mess.

Was it so important that I had wanted this? Was this that important to me? What I wanted was...

That day, I found a beautiful stone in a meadow.

It should've been just a normal stone, but...

My treasure was gone.

I could never have it again.

◆◆◆◆◆

A thousand years passed.

I temporarily awoke from my dream and returned to reality, screaming.

Kanami was able to escape thanks to his horrible *Dimension: Calculash—Recall* spell. Its power was tremendous. My memories up until I met Kanami were condensed and beaten into me.

That's right. That had been my life. I'd wanted to die, to disappear, to become nothing, but I hadn't even been able to do that! It was a completely useless life! And its endpoint was this place! The peaceful Viaysia that had taken a thousand years to build was destroyed by my own hands, reduced into nothingness! But I

was still here, accelerating and rushing toward an abyss.

"Kanamiiiiiiiiiiii!!!"

That man had forced me to remember it all. I screamed his name like a curse. I glared at the black-haired, black-eyed man in front of me who was reaching into my chest. Why?! Why had he forced me to remember such terrible things?! It was tearing apart my body—no, my heart—no, my *soul*! The damage was causing my spirit to drift away.

"I don't want to see any more, Kanami! I know I've gone mad! I know all that! That's why you and Liner are necessary right now! I need to supplement the things that this place lacks so that I can disappear! So that I can come to an understanding now, in this place!" I screamed, trying to make sense of my fading consciousness. However, I couldn't gloss over the damage done to my soul. For me, the memory of my life as queen was a wound. It was an old wound that I didn't want touched. The gouging out of this old wound caused my very soul to scream. It was so deeply wounded that my body began to mutate, judging itself to be on the verge of death.

This was what happened when an Essence Thief died.

I screamed.

Due to the damage from Kanami's magic, I was encased in a cocoon of wind, becoming a half-monster. First, my magical camouflage was broken. The green wings I'd made by condensing wind were scraped away, revealing my original, shabby wings. My wings had been so overused and damaged that they could no longer be used to fly. Next came the monstrous features. They sprouted from my ears and limbs and became new wings. I could almost be mistaken for the mythical race of winged people. But no, this wasn't something impressive. I looked like a monster called a Harpia. If I was being accurate and giving it a sorcerer's name, it would be a mutant version of a harpy.

That's right. I was just the kind of half-human, half-bird monster that could be found anywhere. Half magic, half monster. There was nothing legendary about me. But even so, I was still the Sovereign Queen Lorde! I *was* a mythical winged person! I was the messenger

of heaven! I was the reincarnation of the legend! That was what I had become!

"KAAANAAAMIIIIIII!!!" Power overflowed from my body as my transformation finished. I used it to strike back at the enemy who was holding on to my soul. The slightest movement caused extreme pain due to having his hand inside me. However, my anger and resentment toward the man in front of me overcame the pain. Oh what terrible, terrible magic he had cast on me! He was such a coward! He was employing cowardly tactics in combat as usual! I would never approve of his style!

I slowly began reaching for his neck. At that moment, Kanami, who had been clenching his jaw for a long time, screamed as loudly as I had.

"Don't move! Not yet! My spell's not over yet! It's just getting started! This is where it all starts! I'm going back further and further, Lorde!"

"Further and further?! Going back?! Where do you think you're going back to?! It's just like what you saw! This place is the end! It's my everything!"

"No! It's not! You have a past that's kept you together this long! You just forgot about it! You forgot because you became an Essence Thief! Forgetting was the price of that curse!" Kanami yelled at me.

"Wh-What are you...?!" The rest of my sentence was cut short by the look on his face. My enemy wore the same expression that I did. He was twisted and suffering, and his soul was screaming. I knew the reason for that bitterness and anguish. I could sense the inner workings of Kanami, even though he was my enemy, like there was a *Connection* between us.

The memories of my life were causing him pain too, because he'd been the one to cast the spell. At that moment, I recalled a memory from when I was alive, about Kanami being the one who understood me best. When he, without his own memories of the past, had fallen into this place, he'd felt like there was no one in the world who could understand him. He'd been trying to escape, pretending he hadn't seen anything. Honestly, I couldn't forgive him. But now, he was facing the past and trying to understand me. He was trying to

recover my memories, and risking his life to keep me from running from the past any longer. I could feel his determination through *Connection*.

It wasn't just that. The power of the *Dimension: Calculash—Recall* spell he had cast was transmitting everything. If he'd wanted to, he could've killed me instantaneously. But instead, Kanami was choosing to relive my past with me. He was willing to sacrifice the body of his sister, the most precious thing in the world to him, and his own precious future, to reach out to this broken person in front of him.

That was why my hands, which had been reaching for his neck, stopped.

"Kanami... Then what... What was my lingering attachment?" I asked, weakened by the pain. I wanted to know what this "further and further back" was that he was referring to. Did it mean there was something even older than the memories we had just seen? Did it mean there was another story that preceded the Sovereign Queen Lorde's story? Something that didn't take place in Viaysia but elsewhere? Where I hadn't been a queen or a gardener? Much, much earlier? Even longer ago?

When I was a child?

The moment I thought that, my vision grew even hazier. The light of magical recollection began to engulf me. The world that lay ahead was too dazzling for my old eyes, but it didn't hurt at all. On the contrary, it was pleasant. It was a very warm light. It was a time that wasn't recorded in the heroic tale of the Sovereign Queen Lorde. It was a time that was even older than the time in the orphanage. It was a memory of a long, long time ago, so long ago it was impossible to count the days. It was so far away that I couldn't grasp a shadow or the shape of it, and only a faint, fleeting scene reverberated in the air, like a mirage. But it certainly existed within me.

I was beginning to remember it. I was sure there was a meadow. And next to that meadow would've been a house with a gable roof. And I...no, *two children* lived there.

I screamed. As the memory returned to me, my sense of time,

which had only been accelerating, began to stall. In a world that was slowing down everywhere, I remembered how time used to be so slow when I was a child. Then, my vision, which had been blurry and unrecognizable for so long, became clear. I saw what lay beyond the light that filled my eyes.

It wasn't a gaudy green, but a gentle, deep green that spread out around me. A meadow sprawling beneath a blue sky, the grass gently swaying in the wind.

I screamed again. I wanted to see more. *Kanami, go further and further back. Slow down! Let me see*.

In his magic I saw the real paradise. I saw the beautiful pebble I had dropped that day. I wanted to somehow return to that wonderful childhood.

Embracing his magic with my entire being, I started to hear a voice coming from very far away. It was a hoarse voice. It sounded old. Half dozing in the light, I picked up on that voice. It was reflexive, the way a newborn reflexively grabs for their mother's finger.

"Hey, granny! She's awake!"

It was the voice of family. I had long forgotten that voice, but I remembered its distinctive way of speaking. I'd kept it with me for a long time so that I wouldn't forget it. I knew the owner—no, *owners*—of these voices.

Chapter 4: My Long Life (First Half)

"Hey, granny! The kid's awake!"

Recognizing the weathered voice, I tried to open my eyes, but they wouldn't obey.

Like a rusty door, it took a long time to let the light of the world in. Meanwhile, from the other side of my eyelids, I heard another wrinkled voice say, "Oh, it looks like it. Well, then, let's get her something warm right away. First, we've gotta get something in your belly. Get you some energy."

"That's right."

When I finally opened my eyes, I was blinded by a light that I hadn't seen in a long time. But I managed to squint to get some information about what was around me. The first thing that caught my eye was a strange ceiling. It wasn't flat, but rather a pyramid with an unusual depth to it. It was supported by wood that was woven into it.

Where...am I? It wasn't anything like where I'd been before. I'd been somewhere much darker. Why? I couldn't remember. That's right, it was more important to figure out where I was right now.

I slowly turned my head to the side. A man was sitting, smiling, with his back to a bright window with no screen. He was old and dressed in beige clothes that showed at a glance he'd been wearing them regularly for many years. He must've been a sorcerer like me. The ends of his arms and legs were like the tentacles of an octopus. It was likely he was mixed with a jellyfish or an octopus, or some other kind of aquatic monster.

I felt relieved when I realized that the creature next to me wasn't a human, but a sorcerer. Then, with that feeling of safety, I started to speak, to gather more information about my surroundings. I was

a little anxious, but my voice came out easily, albeit hoarsely, from my dry throat.

"Where am I?"

I was obviously inside of a building. Next to the window was a cabinet lined with a diverse array of tableware. Dried fruits hung on the wall, indicating that it was a private residence. I was lying on a bed.

"This is our house. You can relax. At least you won't starve to death," the old man said in a very gentle voice.

"O-Okay..." I replied, surprised by the warmth in his voice. I couldn't thank him properly. It had been a long time since I'd received such direct kindness.

Then, as I was still trying to process everything, something warm was offered to me from my other side. It was a wooden bowl. Inside was potato soup, white steam rising from its surface. An old woman, also an octopus—probably the old man's spouse—put the bowl in my hand.

"It's not much, but here," she said. Her voice was kind as well. My confusion only increased.

"Why? Why're you giving me food?" I asked, looking at the soup.

"'Why?' Is it because we would receive divine punishment from the god who watches over us should we abandon a child like you? No, it is because we would not be able to show our faces to the royals of Viaysia who protect us. I think that about sums it up."

Divine punishment? Unable to show their faces to the royals of Viaysia? It didn't make any sense to me at all, and my confusion about the situation only grew. At least, it was a way of thinking that had never existed in my life. So I froze, unable to reject the soup or even take a sip of it.

The old man saw this and continued. "We understand. You escaped from the South, right?"

The South. It was an expression I had never really used. But I had come aiming for the North, so it would be correct to call the place I came from "south." I nodded back.

"Yes..." I had run and run and run away. I had made my way here without eating or drinking, believing the rumors I had heard that

there was a paradise in the North for sorcerers like me. Then, I'd ended up unable to walk or even move, and I'd lost consciousness alone on the grassy plains at the very end of my journey. I'd thought I was going to die.

"I'm so impressed that you made it to the northern frontier with such a small body. You can rest easy now. There is no one here who will hurt you," the old man continued.

They'd saved me. I was alive. I'd been saved by a grandma and grandpa sorcerer couple. Grandpa comforted me with words, and grandma gently rubbed my back.

"Today, you can take a good, long rest. Tomorrow we will introduce you to the village."

"Huh?" I was truly surprised to hear them talk like I could stay there forever. I was just thinking about how to thank them and how I was going to live going forward.

"Kid, were you planning on leaving?"

"Y-Yes. I'm..." *A burdensome outsider*, I thought.

"What are you mixed with?" Grandpa interrupted me suddenly.

I shuddered. *Mixed*. That word triggered my trauma. But I couldn't *not* answer the people who had saved me. I tried to stop myself from shaking too much as I answered.

"It's some sort of variation, but I think it's harpy."

"So you are a sorcerer."

Sorcerer. That word had followed me here. Not being a human had driven me mad my whole life.

"Then we are brethren. What's wrong with family helping family?" he said, a huge smile on his face. Even though others would've reacted to my answer with contempt, his demeanor didn't change at all.

"Family? But..."

"Blood ties have nothing to do with it. We determine family by our laws. By that law, you are now our family."

By their laws? We were family? What...?

"But I am poisoned and unclean..." I said.

"Such foolish talk won't fly here. We're also sorcerers, see?"

That was true. I'd been so confused that I'd somehow thought I

was the only one who was unclean. But not anymore. The South and the North were different. That was why I'd worked so hard to get here. Because there were many sorcerers just like me in this place.

"We won't force you. You can stay for just a little while if you want. But won't you think about living here? We don't have much time left, so it would be nice to have someone to talk to." The old man in front of me gently touched my cheek with his wrinkled hand as he spoke.

The old woman on my other side gently stroked my bright-green hair as she murmured, "Young people are always welcome. Especially a pretty little thing like you."

The warmth of their hands was something I'd never experienced in my entire life. It was so warm that I felt like I would melt away at any moment.



"Thank you... Really...thank you!"

I was finally able to squeeze the words out. All tension was broken when I said them. All this time, I'd felt like I was walking on the edge of a dark, cold abyss. But not anymore. This place was bright and warm.

"Thank you so much!"

Finally feeling relief, all the strength left my body. My vision grew dim. This really was paradise. The rumors were true. There was an ultimate paradise in the far North. When I realized that I had finally arrived there, I completely lost consciousness. I fell asleep in a warm bed in a warm house, with my head sunk into a soft pillow.

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However, people are driven by money, and although when I was dying I thought of grandpa and grandma as gods, as I regained my strength I began to wonder if they didn't have an ulterior motive of some sort.

"Hey, kid, what're ya doing?" grandpa called from a ways off. I immediately stopped and wiped the sweat dripping from my forehead.

Next to the house, there was a huge tree with white flowers. Grandma had told me that it was a kind of cherry tree. I was in the process of chopping wood using a stump near the tree. White petals were sticking to my forehead, so I picked them off with my fingers.

"I'm over here, grandpa!" After the old couple found me, I became a member of the village. But even though I was offered a place to stay, I had yet to really feel comfortable. For several days on end, I casually watched the villagers as I helped them with their household chores.

"I've just finished splitting firewood," I said. I quickly lifted the wood up onto my shoulders and headed off in the direction grandpa's voice had come from.

He was behind the house and seemed surprised when I appeared. "Whoa, you're pretty strong!"

"Really?" I asked, as I put the firewood in the storehouse.

"You're mixed with harpy, aren't you? You shouldn't be that strong..."

"But others can do this much," I said.

"Others?"

"You know, people mixed with tauroi or galwolf."

"There's something wrong with ya if you're comparing ya'self to those kinds of people."

Something wrong? But if I hadn't been able to do this amount of work, I wouldn't have even been alive right now. Before, I had struggled to keep up with those around me, so today was the first time I'd really thought about my species.

"Ya must have something special about ya," grandpa remarked.

"Special? You mean something else mixed in with the harpy?"

"No, something more fundamental. I've heard that some people adapt well to the poisons of this world. They say those kinds a' people manipulate the power of that poison to create fire and wind."

"The power of a poison? Fire and wind? Isn't that just like the monsters?" I asked. That sounded like magic out of a fairy tale. It might be useful if such a thing were possible, but it sounded unbelievable.

"Well, that's the stuff of legend, innit? But it's true those who can adapt to the poison and make it their ally can be physically strong," grandpa replied.

"Huh, I see. I'm like that?" Legendary magic was a bit questionable, but improved physical abilities might be possible.

"Mm, I think you just might be, kid. But calling you 'kid' is getting hard. We can't keep calling you that forever; you're gonna grow up, after all."

"I'm sorry... I don't have a name," I replied.

"You got nothing to apologize for. How about a new name?"

I'd never been called by my name before, so I didn't know what it was. I'd been called "kid" this whole time. Not "hey" or "you," always "kid." I liked it a lot, but grandpa not so much.

"Oho ho! Then I'll have ta give you a cute new name!"

While I was thinking about that, grandma appeared from the house. Her timing was perfect, and she seemed to startle grandpa.

"Oh, granny, were you here the whole time?"

"The kid's name will be Titee. Whaddaya think? Cute, right?" grandma suggested confidently.

"Oh! That is the perfect name," grandpa agreed.

"'Titee'?" I repeated. They nodded in response. I was very happy to receive the name. "The name means a lot to you, doesn't it?" I could tell that from their expressions. When they'd said the name, it had looked like they were missing someone for just a moment.

"Do ya not like it?" grandma asked anxiously.

There was only one way I could answer that. "I like it. I think it's a wonderful name. Titee..." It was a little childish, but it was a pretty name. I liked it immediately.

"Then it's settled. From now on, your name is Titee," grandpa said, smiling. The somber atmosphere disappeared, and the topic of conversation changed. "And you'll hafta change that way of speaking you got too."

I tilted my head in confusion. I'd never thought about it before. "Is my way of speaking strange?"

"Yeah, it is. We're family. You don't gotta speak so politely."

"I don't need to speak politely with my family?"

"That's right. You can speak more frankly, Titee!" grandpa said, slapping my back.

I nodded in confusion. "Y-Yes, okay. I'll try my best." I lowered my head.

Grandpa looked troubled by this. "There's no need fer that." His hand drew close to my face, and he quickly extended his index finger and flicked me hard on the forehead.

"Ow! I'm sorry!" I said.

"Hmmm, if that's how you react to a flick... You gotta say something like, 'What the heck are you doin?!' Don't be so polite!"

"Y-Yes! Okay!" I bowed my head again.

I was still too polite. Grandpa flicked me in the head again.

"Oh! Oh, um, okay! *What are you doing?!*" I cried out after a short pause, determined to get it right this time. I'd gotten rid of anything polite in my words this time. I looked at grandpa and grandma expectantly.

“Stiff.”

“Wooden.”

It was no use. The words might have been grammatically correct, but my intonation and all was still too unnatural. It was awkward. I never thought it would be so difficult to speak any way but politely. Ever since I was born, I’d thought I had to speak politely, but I had never thought that the price I would pay for it would come in a place like this. I looked up at grandpa and grandma to hear their assessment.

“Hmph, well, it’s better than it was before,” grandpa noted.

“It sure is! I’m sure she’ll get used to talkin’ right eventually. It’ll probably help her get used to this place too,” grandma added. They both smiled gently at me and patted me on the head.

I laughed because it tickled a bit, but their palms were very warm. I smiled as I let myself be touched by them. I was sure that my expression matched theirs. I could feel my face, which had been frozen like ice, start to melt.

The sun was shining just right in the blue sky, and a refreshing breeze was blowing from the meadow. The nearby white flowers were falling and their petals came to rest on the gabled roof of the house. Watching them fall was truly relaxing.

This place was warm. Surely, this was where I belonged. In my childish mind, I decided that this was my place, and I decided I would protect it.

“Thanks! I’m off...ta my next job!”

“Titee, didn’t you just finish choppin’ wood?” grandpa asked.

“I’m still full...a energy! I’m fine!” I replied. I tried to move quickly, as I felt that there was no place for those who didn’t work. I ran out of the yard. There was plenty of work to be done at home; chopping wood was just the start. I had to do more for my place. I would start by fetching water.

“Well, all right, but be careful!” grandpa called after me.

“Don’t trip!” grandma echoed.

They waved as I ran off with a bucket.

I ran across the meadow, almost skipping. The wind blew through the wide, bright world. I loved the wind that caressed my

cheeks. Thanks to it, I could run all day long. Fetching water was no trouble at all.

Following a gravel road a short distance from the house, I headed for the river that served as the water source for the village. There was a forest in between the house and the river, but it wasn't very dense. It was more like a grove of trees, or something in between a grove and forest. Since there was a lot of space between the trees, it was as well lit as the meadow, and the path was easy to walk on. The animals that lived in the forest were all small. It wasn't the kind of environment to support large animals, so even a child like me was safe fetching water alone. Of course, since it *was* me, I knew I would be fine even if some large beast came at me.

"Please don't mind me, everyone!" I called out to no one in particular as I walked down the path.

Small animals appeared from the bushes nearby. They were all different sorts, from white ones with four legs to brown ones with four legs. I didn't know their names, but they had cute little ears. They were my friends. They'd heard my voice and come to help me out.

"Today I'm just fetching some water. I want to do my best to surprise gramps and grammy!" I said, and the animals nodded.

I placed the bucket I was carrying on the backs of two white animals that ran up to me. For a few days I'd been helped like this when it came to carrying heavy objects.

Once we reached the river, I immediately fetched the water and then carried the full bucket home with the help of all my friends. I didn't feel tired. In fact, as we went back and forth, the buckets seemed to get lighter and lighter. The more I moved, the more power came from deep inside my body, and I had the sense that I was absorbing some kind of energy from my surroundings.

I worked for about an hour before I'd gathered enough water for the house, which I collected in the garden. Grandpa and grandma were surprised when they saw it.

"You've brought a lot of water. We've got more than enough now, and plenty of things that can be used for firewood. It must've been hard work!" grandpa called out from behind me.

“No, I’m okay. My friends helped me!” I was still mixing my speech up.

“Your friends?” grandma asked.

“Yeah!” I said, nodding as I introduced the dozen or so small animals running around my feet.

“Well...this is certainly...” They both looked quite impressed. Or maybe it was surprise on their faces.

“Titee, can you understand what they’re saying?”

“There’s no way that’s possible!” I’d gotten my speech mixed up again. Maybe it was better not to force myself until I’d gotten used to it. I took a deep breath and explained. “I think I can kinda...feel what they want to tell me,” I said. I didn’t want to hide anything.

Their faces grew strained. “Kinda...”

“Is this weird?” I asked.

“I don’t wanna put too much stock in fairytales, but it seems like you’re manipulating the poison of the world. Like the legendary Sovereign King Lorde,” grandpa said.

“The Sovereign King Lorde?” I asked.

“Long, long ago, he was the king of the North. A savior who saved many people,” grandma explained.

I felt my heart beat a little faster. The words “king” and “savior” really piqued my curiosity.

“It’s not a bad thing. It’s a little unusual, but you’re you, Titee. Anyway, it helps us out a ton. Thank you,” grandpa said. They both smiled at me again, and I felt a warmth well up in my chest. That warmth was so comforting that it naturally made me smile too.

I giggled, putting both my hands to my chest to make sure the warmth was real. With just those words, I was filled with such euphoria that it felt like I knew why I’d been born.

“You’re a proud kid, huh?” grandpa said.

“Proud?”

“Yes. You’ll grow up to be smarter, stronger, and more resilient than anyone else in the Northern capital,” grandpa said. I blushed at his praise.

“Those wings will heal soon enough, and you’ll be a right beauty,” grandma added, pointing at my back.

The proof that I had harpy blood was hidden under my clothes. I'd plucked my wings myself because they'd made it obvious I was a sorcerer in the South.

"Titee, you may not be a variant but a member of the winged race. According to legend, the Sovereign King Lorde was also one of them. Your characteristics are very similar."

As the conversation continued, they returned to their slightly serious expressions.

"Titee, you have a lot of talent. That's why I gotta ask you some things," said grandpa.

I trembled at his words. I was terribly afraid of losing the warmth that was building up in my chest.

"You can choose from many futures. With your talent, you could become anything. Why don't you go somewhere else and hone your skills? Then perhaps you could serve in Viaysia castle." The look on his face showed me that it was true skill, not favoritism, that made him say that.

But... "I don't want to go," I replied. I didn't care about talent. I had something more important than that in my heart right now. I put on a serious expression as well as I spoke about my future. "I know very well that the people in the Northern towns are not bad people. Even the orphanage was a fine one. The capital must be a very nice place."

The other day, grandpa and grandma had taken me to a Northern town, where I had seen the many different ways of life of many different people. For example, there were those who had big dreams and lived and worked in stores, those who laughed with many friends at the orphanage, and those who were young and working hard at their jobs. Grandma and gramps were very kind and had told me that their little village wasn't all there was.

"But I'm happy here," I continued. "I like it here." It had taken me a while to be sure of the answer, but now I had no more doubts. I wanted to make "here" my place. And eventually, I wanted it to be my final resting place.

That was what I sincerely wished for. But it would be a very selfish request, since they were the ones who had found me and

taken me in. It was a request that did not take into consideration the burden and inconvenience it would cause grandma and grandpa. They might reject me. No, it would be normal for them to refuse. Those dark thoughts swirled in my head, but the clouds soon cleared.

"If you say so, then it's fine. We're very happy with that, Titee," grandpa told me.

"That's right! Nothing would make us happier than to have you here, our pride and joy," grandma agreed.

My anxiety had been for nothing as they welcomed me with open arms. "Thank you very much," I said, bursting into warm tears. I wasn't even sad; I was smiling now, but I couldn't stop crying even though this was a place of comfort.

Grandma and grandpa wrapped their arms around me. I had found my family. After a long and arduous journey, I had finally arrived.

I started working even harder in the village for them. I worked to the utmost of my abilities to repay them as much as I could. I worked so hard that they sometimes got upset with me for working too much.

Those warm days passed at a very slow pace. Day after day, I walked on the flat, happy path that went on forever. And yet, despite my happiness and contentment, there was more to this story. Another family member would be added to that warm house.

It was me, and grandpa, and grandma...and my little brother. That brother was my third and most beloved family member.

It would be another year before that idiot brother would appear.

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"Granny, granny! Isn't this kid suspicious?"

It was a very long year. I finally grew a year older, but it was so slow it made me want to yawn. But before I knew it, I was as tall as my grandparents. Harpies were a fast-growing race, but even so, they said I was growing unusually fast. Even though I wasn't yet a preteen, I almost looked like an adult. It was like the world was

pushing me to grow faster.

The top of the child's head came up to my stomach. I ruffled his hair as I presented him to grandma and grandpa. Grandma was sitting in a wooden chair in the house that looked the same as it ever did.

"What's this, Titee? Where did you find this child?" she asked.

"I was playing kinda far away and I found him."

"Kinda far away? Were you heading south by any chance? I told you not to go that way."

"Ummmm, I was going to the town to the east and might've gone a bit south?"

Grandma sighed. She'd easily deduced that I'd gone to a restricted area. However, in doing so, I'd caught a strange person approaching the house, so I was hoping that would somehow even the score. She gave up on interrogating me and looked at the boy, who was clad only in dirty rags.

"It's okay now. You can relax. You have no enemies here," grandma told him.

"O-Okay..." the boy replied. He was clearly frightened.

"Let's get your name, huh?" grandpa asked gently to put him at ease.

"My name? I don't know. I don't think I have one..."

The boy's words were familiar. Grandma and grandpa seemed to recognize that as well.

"Just like Titee. The boy probably escaped from somewhere like she did," grandpa remarked.

The child had fled from the South just like I had. I couldn't remember much, but I knew I had no good memories of that place. Perhaps this trembling boy had also had a bad experience there. Thinking that, I felt a little closer to him.

The conversation with the boy continued. It was a very familiar story to mine. Grandma and grandpa's warmth quickly made the boy let his guard down, and he readily decided to stay in the village. It was all the same as my story, even to the point where he collapsed into sleep on the bed.

I glared at the boy who occupied the bed that I always used. I

felt as if a foreign object had entered my precious place, and my mouth twitched in disgust.

"But isn't he suspicious? Gramps, are you sure you want him in your house?" I asked.

"If we're going down that road, then you're just as suspicious as he is," grandpa replied.

I grumbled in response. I couldn't say anything when he mentioned my past. Grandpa chuckled as he patted my head, and the boy became the newest member of our family.

"Don't be so cross, Titee. You're from the same place. Be nice to him."

"I don't know what you mean by that," I muttered. There were too many strangers. I'd already decided that this place was my home. The South wasn't somewhere I'd be going back to.

"He's your little brother," grandma said, urging me to accept the boy. "From now on, you'll be a big sister."

Those words made me stop. "Little brother?" I muttered, looking at the boy in the bed again. This time, instead of glaring at him, I looked at him with curious eyes. He had brown hair and small tears falling from his eyes. This little kid who was so like me was my brother? I was puzzled by this sudden change. I had always thought that it would just be grandpa, grandma, and me. But a new family member had entered.

That was my first encounter with my little brother.

The next morning, I went out to fetch water. It was a little chilly, but it was pleasant to breathe in the fresh, moist air of the early morning. It was a routine that I had followed every day since I was taken in, without a break. However, there was something unusual in my routine that day. The boy was following me.

"Why are you following me? This is my job; don't copy me," I said, turning around to him.

The boy looked puzzled and said, "But grandma and grandpa said I should go with you..."

His style of speaking was very polite, just like mine had been. Grandpa and grandma criticized it as being "stiff," but his speech showed no signs of changing. It was like he was cursed. Maybe he'd

come from somewhere harsher than where I was from. I grumbled when he quoted grandpa, but since grandma and grandpa were so important to me, I grudgingly allowed him to tag along.

"Just don't get in my way."

"O-Okay!" the boy responded happily.

I walked fast, and he desperately tried to keep up. I wondered why. I hadn't bothered talking to him much, but the kid seemed fond of me. Was it because I was the one who'd found him? Or was it because he'd heard from grandma and grandpa that we were both from the same place? He seemed to believe it too.

"Are you sure you don't have a name?" I asked.

"I don't..."

Then I'd just have to keep calling him "you" or "boy." I didn't mind, but he probably would. Then it would be a good idea to decide on a name quickly. As I stared at him, the boy looked back at me, his face red.

"Um, and my older sister's name is...?"

"Sister?" I echoed. I wasn't used to the idea yet, so it made me feel a little uncomfortable. But I didn't really mind.

"Yes, what should I call you, sister?"

My name... That was a very good thing to ask. I had three things I was proud of: my strong, fast-growing body; the way I spoke like grandma and grandpa; and my name.

"My name is Titee. Don't get it wrong! It's a very precious name given to me by grandpa and grandma!"

"Titee... And I'm curious, why do you speak like that?"

"Heh heh heh, isn't it cool? I've been reading books and found a way of talking that fits who I am, so I borrowed it! It's more youthful and fits me, don'tcha think?"

"Oh...yes. I see."

I was boasting about myself, but the boy just nodded with an affectionate smile. I had expected a more surprised response, but it seemed that we might not have the same tastes. He should've clapped his hands and acted more excited about my revelation.

Since he didn't react how I'd expected him to, I huffed and walked silently through the meadow. As usual, I went to draw water

from the river. However, unlike before, the number of animal friends helping me was different. The quality of their help was also different. I called out to those who were waiting for me at the river.

"Hello! Thank you for your help again today!"

There weren't just small animals waiting for me this time, but insects, birds, and even monsters. As my body grew, so did my ability to talk to animals. Thanks to that, I was able to get their help with transport and even barter with them. I also consulted with the animals when they had problems, and mediated between different species. As a result of these interactions, the animals in the area began to revere me and give me offerings. Even when I told them I didn't need anything, they had stubbornly continued to give me gifts, saying they were indebted to me.

Today, there was a lot of food from the mountains. I really wanted to eat fish, but I didn't let it show on my face. I graciously thanked them and accepted their offerings. It was the same as usual. My daily routine. But when the boy saw that, he shouted in surprise.

"W-Wow! You can talk to them?!"

"Yeah, that's right," I said.

"Really?! With that power, you'll never go hungry!"

What the heck? So he could speak loudly after all. I thought he'd only been able to mumble.

"I mean, I'm not doing this for free. I do what only I can do as a human, and they do what only they can do as animals."

"But that's still amazing!"

"Really?"

"I've never heard of such a thing before! There was not a single person in the South who could talk to the monsters! Your power is amazing, Titee! It could completely revolutionize our lives!"

I didn't know what I'd said to make him react that way, but I wasn't complaining. I was a little surprised, but it wasn't bad to be praised for being amazing. Not bad at all, I thought.

"O-Of course! Food! Your older sister is very powerful! I am smarter, stronger, and more robust than anyone else! See?!" I cleared my throat and then clapped my hands. All the animals in the

vicinity lined up in unison. They all looked at me strangely because I'd never used our emergency signal before, but I hoped they'd forgive me. As a sister, this was a very important moment in my life.

And, as I'd hoped, the boy's eyes lit up. "That's so cool, Titee!"

"I know, I know!" I replied, laughing.

Then the boy said something that made me even happier. "You're just like that legendary king! The Sovereign King Lorde!"

"I'm like the Sovereign King Lorde? Lots of people tell me that. Isn't that the story of the Savior of the North? There's a rumor that I'm the second coming of that king!" I said, still laughing.

"The second coming of Sovereign King Lorde?! Wow!"

"That's right, that's right, that's right!"

This kid wasn't that bad at all. As expected of my little brother.

"You're so amazing! You're from the South, but you're totally different from me!"

"Not at all, little bro! If you work hard, you can be just like me! Everything takes effort!"

"Oh, no, that's not possible. I'm a weak species..." the boy said looking down, a dark expression on his face. He seemed to think that the difference in power was due to our difference in species.

"Oh! What are you mixed with? I'm a mutant variation of a harpy," I said.

"I'm a dryad..."

"Dryad? I don't see it at all." At a quick glance, there was nothing arboreal about him.

"I've already picked off all the visible features, so I've only got the parts that are hidden," he said, pointing to his brown hair. I wondered if that was where his dryad features would've originally grown from. Then he began to roll up his sleeves to show me what was hidden beneath them.

"I see. No, you don't need to show me. You've been through a lot, haven't you?" I grabbed his hand to stop him. I didn't feel the need to see it, because I had done the exact same thing. I guessed that the wounds there were just as bad, if not worse, than what I'd done to my wings. I quickly changed topics. "But anyway, you... Wait! As your sister, I don't like calling you 'you'! You don't have a

name yet, do you?!”

“No...I don’t.”

“I’m sure you’ll come up with a name that you like! Just put yourself into words, so to speak! It won’t take long!”

“Well...I don’t know who I am. I don’t even know what I like...” the boy muttered, looking troubled.

I understood his feelings very well. If grandma and grandpa hadn’t given me a name, I would’ve said the same thing. That’s why I couldn’t stand the fact that my brother was still nameless. I didn’t like it one bit.

My mouth started moving before I fully had a chance to think. “Okay then, your name is Ide. Ide! It’s a good name, right?”

“I-Ide? Why Ide?”

“Huh?!” I was at a loss for words. I’d just come up with the name on the spur of the moment. It was the name of a small animal that had died recently. Grandma and grandpa had given me the name of their deceased loved one, and I had tried to imitate them, but I might have failed. “Um, well, Ide was the name of one of my animal friends here. He died of old age recently, and I was wondering if you’d be willing to carry on the name...”

The name of a dead animal might not be very good. But, if I remembered right, the name originally came from the tales about the Sovereign King Lorde, so it shouldn’t be a problem for a human to use it.

“It was the name of one of the animals? What kind of animal?”

“What kind?”

“Yes. I want to know what he was like,” the boy said, looking at me seriously.

I began telling him about Ide. “Ide was a friend who played with me every day this past year. He was also my first vassal as Sovereign Queen Lorde. He was the first one to cross over from being an ally to truly following me.”

“Your first friend and vassal...”

“That’s right. I was little when I first started playing make-believe here, and he quickly became a close ally. He was always by my side until the day he died.” I thought I’d gotten over it, but as I

remembered my little friend, tears pricked my eyes. Even now I felt like I had Ide riding on my shoulder.

"Until the day he died. Ide... It's not bad. No, it's cool," the boy said, considering the name carefully before praising it.

"It's...cool?"

"Yes! Very, very cool!"

Hearing his unreserved praise, all of my earlier misgivings were blown away. I started laughing.

"Well, it's not as good as my name! But be careful, brother! The name 'Ide' isn't something to treat lightly! It is, after all, the name of a heroic spirit of this kingdom! You should be honored to inherit it!"

"Yes, thank you very much! I will do my best to live up to the title of your first vassal, Titee—no, Sovereign Queen Lorde!"

"Good! You better!"

Ide seemed to enjoy going along with my game of make-believe. We were both all smiles as we shook hands. A new sister and brother had been born. To celebrate the moment, the animals serenaded us with their cries. Amid their blessings, I felt even better.

"The people's cheers are so good to hear today too! And I have a new trustworthy vassal! I am satisfied!" I said, letting out a high-pitched laugh.

"Ha! You two must be playing an interesting game, considering how late you are. You better be sorry for worryin' us, right, granny?" A voice cut in that belonged to neither of us.

"Titee must've heard too many folk tales. But when it comes to the kingdom, we're the chancellors, no?" grandma replied. She and grandpa had come to see how things were going. But they had nothing to worry about. Ide was now my little brother, and my kingdom was doing well.

"No! I'm going to be the chancellor! I wanna do it!" Ide said, full of enthusiasm as he raised his hand. He seemed to have a strong feeling about the role, and for some reason, he looked absolutely determined not to give it up.

"Okay! Then I will appoint Ide as chancellor! Grandpa and grandma will serve as advisors to the kingdom—the senate or something like that!" I said in high spirits. I assigned them the roles

that had appeared in the lore and sounded important.

"Well, granny, it sounds like we're the senate," grandpa said.

"I'm surprised we've been given such high positions," grandma replied.

The sound of laughter echoed in the air. Light danced on the crystal clear river, and everyone was smiling. The sight satisfied me to my very core.

"Good! My kingdom is bright again today thanks to everyone!" I said.

"Yes! That's right, Sovereign Queen Lorde!" I joined hands with my brother and blessed my little country. Grandpa and grandma went along with us with small smiles.

"Titee sure has changed. And grown a lot more wild too," grandma commented.

"That's her nature, isn't it? It's a good thing," grandpa replied.

The world really was bright. It was a warm, wonderful place where everyone could laugh. With a new family member, my place only grew brighter. In just one day, the distance between Ide and me was gone, and soon the two of us began to play together. That was how our story began.

The next day, after finishing my daily routine, I took my little brother out to play.

"Grandma, grandpa! I'm going with Ide," I called. "We're gonna swim in the river!"

"In the river?!" Ide asked.

"Yes! We'll be thinking about what we're going to do tomorrow! Time is precious!"

"Um, okay!"

The next day, we played in the forest, and in the mountains the day after that. Some days were spent running around in the meadows, and other days were spent helping the villagers.

That was my real beginning. It wasn't the kind of adventure you could write about in a heroic tale. It was mostly a series of failures and silly days. But it was certainly a great adventure for me, one that could rival any heroic tale.

I invited a spirit that appeared in the river to my house, I fought

nighttime monsters that appeared in a northern town, I tamed and befriended flying birds, I begged a traveling wizard to teach me things, I got carried away and went to the city and offended some important people, I entered a fistfighting tournament in a northern town to save Ide, who'd been taken hostage, and slew a pterosaur that appeared in the great plains of the Northeast. Well, I lost most of the battles but was somehow forgiven because of my special skills with communication. All of these were great adventures for me, comparable to the Sovereign King Lorde of legend.

All of these events were condensed into just one year. Perhaps it was because I had a partner named Ide, but each day was so tumultuous that I felt like I had gone through decades of adventures in just that short time. And so that year passed.

Growing up in this place, we continued to lead unchanging lives. Believing this would continue forever, we ran across the meadow again one day. Before I knew it, my body had grown again. I had surpassed the bodies of my grandparents even before turning ten and had a physique that rivaled my adult counterparts. My bright-green hair had grown darker and almost translucent, and the wings on my back had regained much of their shape. I had transformed so much that I could be described as an adult.

"Ide! I heard a giant creature appeared in the eastern forest! Let's exterminate it together!" I called. The way I spent my days was the same as when I was a child. I was *still* a child, as I'd been a year ago. I felt that I might not change until I died. On the other hand, my partner in crime...

"Hm? What's the matter, Ide?"

Unfortunately, my little brother hadn't gotten much taller. He was standing near the house, staring at the same spot for a long time. His gaze was on a tree with white flowers. He'd caught one of the falling petals in his hand and was smiling.

"I like this tree." Over the past year, Ide had spent a lot of time staring at plants and trees. Of these, the tree next to the house was by far his favorite to look at. I didn't quite understand this hobby.

"You always do that when you're not studying. You're a greedy kid who only admires nature!" I said.

“It’s fun just to look at it, isn’t it? The wind makes the plants and trees move slightly. It’s also interesting to see how much they have grown compared to a few days ago,” Ide replied.

“I don’t know about that...”

But there were limits. I bought books and toys from peddlers, but Ide never did. He always refrained from buying what he wanted, saying, “It’s not in here.”

“Is there really nothing you want, Ide?”

It was a problem. Besides just troubling our unselfish grandma and grandpa, as his sister—no as his queen—I couldn’t stay silent.

“Tell me what you want! I’ll make it come true!”

“You will?”

“Yes! It’s your reward!”

“My reward?”

“Yes! I am your queen! I haven’t praised you for the past year! This is unacceptable!”

“Oh, no! I can’t take it!”

“You won’t accept my reward? Does that mean you’re quitting your position as chancellor?” I asked. I was being a little nasty, and he looked troubled.

“N-No, that’s not it. I want to keep being the chancellor of your country.”

“Then say it quickly!”

The first thing Ide did was turn his eyes to the tree with white flowers. Then he shifted his gaze and looked at the sky. He looked at the clear blue expanse and spoke his wish.

“Well then, I would like you to give me more of this time.”

“Huh?!” It was a very sincere wish, but the abstract nature of it confused me.

“Um...I mean, I want to keep living in peace. In this place,” Ide explained.

“Oh, so you want peace. I’d hoped you’d wish for something more dangerous.”

“No, Sovereign Queen Lorde. I want peace. I love this country, this village...no, I love this house.” Ide laughed as he spoke. My little brother, who always smiled insincerely, was grinning radiantly. I was

pulled in by his smile and found myself reflecting his joy.

"I want that too! I love this place!"

"Right? If I have 'here' and 'now,' then there's nothing else I want. So please, Sovereign Queen Lorde, please give me more of this time."

"You're really unselfish!" I said, laughing.

"It's not that. I think this is an incredibly greedy desire."

"'Here' and 'now' don't cost anything! They're gonna be here tomorrow and next year, of course! It's not worth a single copper coin! It's not greedy! You gotta start over!"

"Really? To me, it's a greater treasure than any gold coin," Ide said.

He was really stubborn. And unlike me, he was pretty mature. That was what made him charming, but it also made him inflexible.

"Well, I guess it can't be helped! If you're that anxious, then I'll make you a promise! This promise will be your reward! I swear to you that I will protect the peace of this place! Let's live here forever and ever, Ide!"

Ide laughed, even happier at the promise of that reward. Then, he nodded. "Yes, Sovereign Queen Lorde!" Next to a gabled house, on a grassy field sprinkled with white flowers, Ide narrowed his eyes, puffed out his cheeks, and opened his mouth wide enough to form the shape of a half-moon. Satisfied with that best-ever brotherly smile, I took his hand.

"Okay! Come with me, we're going east!"

"I will follow you!"

So today, too, we jumped out from the shadows of the trees. We ran through the meadow as fast as we could so we could enjoy our next game. As we ran, I looked up at the sky. It was a deep, rich blue that stretched all the way to the horizon, with many fluffy white clouds. The sun was shining in the center of the sky. There was a flash of dazzling light, and a single wisp of light flew by.

As I ran, the crystal clear sound of the wind seemed to penetrate my ears. Thanks to its beautiful music, I didn't have to look down to know what the ground looked like. The wind blew between the grass and the weeds, causing them to sway and rustle irregularly, making

them play the melody of nature.

I was now running on a vast carpet of grass. I could lie down, stretch out my arms and legs, yawn, and become the wind of freedom on the wide, wide prairie, and spread as far and wide as I wanted. My heart was like a cloud, floating high in the sky. The joyful feelings burst forth and sparkled, making me want to spontaneously sing along with the sound of the wind.

As I kept running, I started to feel a little out of breath. But it wasn't painful at all. The rhythm of my exhalations was exhilarating. It was also refreshing to feel the sweat dripping down my face and my heartbeat quickening. It felt so good.

This *place* felt so good. This place. This was where I really belonged. It was also the place where my personality had been built. No matter how many hundreds of years I may spend in orphanages and castles in the future, this place and this place alone was my home. Therefore, all the things I had learned here were my values, and all I had gained here were my beliefs.

I hadn't wanted to forget it, but as my life progressed, I did. I had been searching so hard for it, but I just kept moving away from this real paradise. It was the most distant but also the warmest memory.

At that time, Ide had understood that I was the queen of make-believe. I was still a child and was protected by my grandparents. It was a very safe and joyful time. There was no doubt about it. This was my treasure—the beautiful stone I found as a child. But, as I already knew, this world wouldn't last long. Because soon, that story of the Sovereign Queen Lorde would soon begin. If this were a book, I would drop my beautiful stone at a single sentence: "The South invaded in order to hunt sorcerers." That was on the way back from an excursion to a town in the north with Ide. We saw our beautiful meadow engulfed in a terrible fire.

It hurt to remember. But I couldn't forget it just because it hurt. I shouldn't have forgotten it no matter what, but I had because I hadn't wanted to admit what had happened. Maybe I had wanted to escape from that past. I was a child, after all.

The village was destroyed that day.

The soldiers from the south had reduced our house to ashes, killed the sorcerers of the village, eaten all of my forest friends, and turned the entire meadow into hell. Among the piles of dead sorcerers were grandpa and grandma.

"Grandma! Grandpa!" Ide shouted when he saw their bodies.

"No, Ide! If you go out there, you'll die!" I said, keeping my composure, perhaps out of a sense of sisterly obligation. I wanted to save them too, but as the elder, I knew it was too late. I took his hand and pulled him into some nearby bushes.

"I'm scared! I'm scared, Titee. What's going on?"

"It's okay, Ide. I'm here. You don't have to worry about anything, because I'm here," I told him. He was trembling. I could offer him nothing but platitudes, and those platitudes were the beginning of everything.

"Yes, that's right. My sister is here. You're here."

"Yes, that's right! I've always managed some way or another, right?!"

"Yes, you're strong. You're stronger and smarter than everyone else. I'm proud to call you my sister," Ide said.

"You're right, I *am* strong. I'm the second coming of that legend, aren't I?"

"Are you truly stronger than everybody else?! Are you really like the legendary Sovereign King Lorde?!" Ide asked. He had expectations of me.

"Of... Of course I am! Leave it to me! All those soldiers are nothing to me!" I said.

"Good! I feel safer with the Sovereign Queen Lorde here! You're the savior of the North! You won't be defeated by enemies from the South! You're the most powerful queen of all!" Ide cried.

Together, the two of us would create the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

"Yes, that's right! I'm strong! I'm the Sovereign Queen Lorde, who's stronger than everybody else!" I said, standing up. Leaving Ide in the bushes, I walked toward the burning battlefield where the enemy was waiting. If this were a heroic tale, I would have sworn that I was the Sovereign Queen Lorde and accomplished revenge with my overwhelming power, but the reality was different.

I was certainly strong, but only for a village girl living in a remote area. There was no way I could compete with soldiers. I knew that. But Ide believed in me. He believed that his sister would do something. So there was no way that, as his older sister, I wouldn't go out there.

"I'm going to go save everyone now! Wait here," I told him.

Then I shouted at them. I was going to take my revenge. If this were a heroic tale, no mere mortal would be able to stand against the Thief of Wind's Essence, and the power of the Wind of Freedom would cut down all the soldiers. Then, I would take back this area from the South, if only temporarily. But the reality was different.

The truth was...I died. I was defeated easily. I wasn't strong enough to take on a thousand soldiers. I did the best I could for a while, but eventually, I was killed. My arms were cut off, my heart was crushed, I was pierced by arrows, and I ultimately bled to death.

"What a pain in the ass," a soldier said, spitting on my corpse.

That finally made Ide jump out of the bushes, unable to stand hiding any longer.

"Lor— Sovereign Queen Lorde!" he shouted.

"Huh? Another one? What an annoying brat. A relative of hers?"

"Sister! Please stand up! You're the queen, right?! You're the legendary Sovereign Queen Lorde! You don't lose to anybody!" Ide shouted.

"Have you gone crazy now that your sister's dead?"

"No! She's not dead! The Sovereign Queen Lorde can't die! She gave me her word! She promised me! She can't die until she fulfills it!"

"Well, shall we take the kid with us? Unlike that messed up girl, we can sell this one," the soldier said.

I was supposed to be dead and yet I could hear their conversation. The ears of the corpse on the ground heard their words. Ide kept calling me the Sovereign Queen Lorde the whole time he was being taken away. That voice full of expectations echoed in my ears. So even though I was only a soul, my body trembled.

My brother believed in me. That was enough for me to challenge the essence of the world. My soul tried to push beyond its limits in order to live up to his expectations. My soul pleaded with the laws of the world, even though I was a corpse, to make its appearance and strength a reality.

Please.

It's okay if my heart is crushed. But for just a moment, pretend to move again. As my soul said that, I staggered to my feet.

Oh, legendary Sovereign Queen Lorde. It's okay if you don't exist. But for just a moment, lend me your legendary magic power.

As my soul said that, I manipulated the wind.

It's okay if I'm not alive. But for just a moment, let me fight to save my brother!

As my soul made that vow, I stole the essence of the world. Unfortunately, the girl named Titee was talented. Unable to die in this place, she was destined to become an Essence Thief and lose something precious to her in exchange.

"Don't cry, Ide. I can't lose to anyone," I said, moving the mouth of the corpse. The soldiers heard me and turned around. Their eyes widened; they looked like they'd run into a zombie or something.

"Stand down you lackeys. You stand before the Sovereign Queen Lorde," I said. Against the burning meadow, a bloody girl with no heart but a moving body stood and spoke, clad in an unusual wind. It was perhaps inevitable that they should wear such expressions.

A giggle slipped out as I looked at their faces.

"A-A monster?! What?! What are you?!"

"It's moving! It's full of holes! There's a hole through its heart!"

One soldier merely screamed. Half crazed now, they stood to challenge me.

I stated my vow like I was reciting a poem. "Fear not, Chancellor Ide. The Sovereign Queen Lorde will protect the peace of this place. I will protect everything that grandpa and grandma loved."

The soldiers came at me, yelling and slashing with their swords, but I intercepted them easily and sliced them with a blade of wind. Blood rained down.

"Above all, I will protect you now, my dear brother," I said.

A rain of arrows came flying at me from a distance. I brushed them all away with a gust of wind and sent back a volley of wind arrows, exterminating the archers. With that display of my power, the soldiers began to flee. I cut them down from behind with the wind. If this were a heroic tale, this would be the scene where no mere mortal could stand against the Thief of Wind's Essence, and the power of the Wind of Freedom would cut down all the soldiers.

At the end of this opportunistic reversal of fortunes, I shouted, "I am the winged queen who rules over this continent! I am the descendant of the oldest magical bloodline, the Sovereign Queen Lorde! There is no reason I should be defeated by trash like you!"

That was how the story of the Sovereign Queen Lorde really got rolling. The time of the girl Titee was stopped by a curse. This was everything I had forgotten about my childhood.

After that, this false queen was lauded by the people of the North, who were in dire straits. The child queen, who had only been playing a game of make-believe at the start, ruled over the country for decades before finally causing the Northern Alliance to crumble due to being overworked.

The Sovereign Queen Lorde was killed by Nosfy of the Southern Alliance, but because she was an Essence Thief, she couldn't truly die, so she ended up ruling for a thousand years in the bowels of the earth, her soul completely shattered.

This was the whole truth of my life. I'd finally remembered. The paradise that I'd been looking for was a gable-roofed house that had been burned down. The family that I'd been looking for was grandpa, grandma, and my little brother Ide. The reason I'd become queen was to protect my only remaining family.

That's right. My paradise wasn't Viaysia. And of course it wasn't the Northern Alliance. Family didn't mean the citizens of this country. And of course it didn't mean Liner or Kanami. I hadn't become queen for some grandiose idea of national peace. The Sovereign Queen Lorde was born only to protect the peace of the here and now that my brother had wished for. I wasn't meant to be the Guardian of a country, but the protector of a much, much smaller world. It was a role created to guard a meadow large enough for

two children to run in under the watchful eyes of an elderly couple.

And yet...I couldn't tell anyone about that. Being a Guardian had driven me into a corner, but I'd just held on to the role and grinned and borne it. I was sure that was the influence of grandma and grandpa's teachings. I didn't want to have to tell them up in heaven that I hadn't helped fellow sorcerers when I'd had the opportunity to do so. So I'd just let myself be endlessly shaved away.

But if I'd properly explained my suffering to Ide, I could have avoided such an ending. My brother would have been the most understanding person, not Kanami. However, my vain sisterly pride got in the way of that. All I'd had to do was confess to my brother that I was just a child *pretending* to be the Sovereign Queen Lorde. That would have been all it took for me to return to being a mere child, not a queen, in his eyes.

But I hadn't been able to do it. More than anything else, I regretted that I hadn't denied his expectations of me as a flawless queen.

Yes, finally, I was beginning to understand what my underlying lingering attachment was.

It was very simple to put into words.

I wanted to go home. I wanted to go back to that house that had been burned down, to the "here and now" that Ide had cherished. I wanted to betray all the expectations people had of me, leave everything behind, and go home.

That was the lingering attachment of a little girl named Titee. I wanted to go back to that gable-roofed house and have grandpa and grandma call me "Titee." I wanted Ide to call me his sister rather than the Sovereign Queen Lorde. I wanted to go back to that pleasant breezy meadow and run as fast as I could again!

Yes, that's right! This whole time I'd been trying to go home. And yet...how about that?! I'd gotten lost and fallen all the way down here. Where was I?!

I finished looking at the memories of the past and opened my eyes to the present. My gaze opened on the scene happening on the reverse side of floor sixty-six. It was a fiftieth-floor world that represented everything I was. It was empty. When I looked up,

there was no blue sky or fluffy white clouds. There was only emptiness, in a space that didn't seem like the human world. Not even the sun, not even a ray of light, could enter. Naturally, not even the slightest wind of freedom blew. The air was thin. I felt like I would stop breathing at any moment.

Even if I listened carefully I couldn't hear the wind. All I could hear were the screams of the world collapsing. The sound of doom was ever present in the air.

My body grew numb. Freezing. Cold. It was hard to breathe. My gasping breaths reeked with the smell of blood. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it was about to burst. The smell and the beating of my heart were so unsettling I couldn't bear it.

I felt sick. This place was the worst! This definitely wasn't where I'd been aiming for. It was that meadow I wanted. So why...? Why...?

"Why?" My voice slipped out. I shook my head and looked around. "Why this place?" I muttered to myself. The sound of my voice resembled a soft heart being crushed. It was almost like the sound of bone and flesh tearing apart. It was a desperate cry, a posthumous curse. "Why did I end up heeeeeeeeeeeeere?!?!?!"

To put it briefly, I screamed. I screamed for a very long time.

The Dungeon echoed with all of the screams that had built up inside me. It was the scream of 1,111 years.

◆◆◆◆◆

My *Past Sight* spell ended with Lorde's scream. We had just watched eleven heavenly years, one hundred suffocating years that canceled out those eleven, and one thousand years of being cursed and going crazy.

I let out the breath I'd been holding. I'd managed to see it all. However, because the execution of that spell had pushed me beyond my limits, my breath smelled of blood. I'd been really reckless, but thanks to that, I finally knew. The girl in front of me had had her beginnings in that little house in the windy meadow. That was what Lorde and I had remembered.

Lorde let out another long scream and tried to distance herself from me. This dislodged my left arm from her chest. Before I knew it, the magic of *Lorde's Road* was dispelled around me. The wind paths and walls disappeared, revealing an empty sky.

Lorde moved freely and took a step backward on the rubble. She looked left and right rapidly as she took in the world as it was now. "No! This isn't what I want! This isn't what I've been looking for this whole time! It's not this place! Not here!" she screamed, shaking her head vigorously. The pitch-black world warped and distorted in time with her cry. Like a pulsating heart, the entire Dungeon floor shook. The shaking caused cracks to appear in the empty space, and the darkness began to peel off.

It was the exact same phenomenon as the breaking boundary I had seen not long before. The broken world was breaking down again. But this time, I knew the destruction wasn't being caused by physical force, but because of the principles of magic. Kanami the Founder had set down the rule a thousand years ago that this place would change its form in accordance with Lorde's wishes. It was only because I was the person in question that I could see that the world was simply obeying that law.

Lorde's past was peeling away and the other side was beginning to appear. It was a place that was connected to the city of Viaysia by a door—a grassy field with a huge spiral staircase in the center. The front side of the Dungeon's sixty-sixth floor. The front side and the back side of the Dungeon were about to overlap now that the boundary of the world had been broken.

"Both parts of floor sixty-six are about to connect? No, perhaps..." I muttered. My idea that they were two sides of the same coin may have been incorrect from the very beginning. Originally, these worlds had overlapped, and the two together had made a domain just for Lorde. However, it was possible that it was also incomplete.

The nothingness was peeling off from the world, and the next thing I knew, Lorde and I were standing on the grassy field of floor sixty-six. I could tell that we were at the edge of the domain because I could see the wind dragon Elfenreize and the spiral staircase in the distance.

The sky hadn't yet peeled away, so it was a strange mixture of grassland and outer space. But it was a lot better than before. There was no longer just nothingness. In the carpet of grass was a staircase leading to the surface. That alone was more than enough for us.

I ended both *Dimension: Calculash—Recall* and *Distance Mute*, regained my grip on my sword, and called out to Lorde. "Lorde! No...Titee!"

I used the name of the girl who had become lord of this world.

The girl that name belonged to turned slowly to look at me and screamed my name back at me. She walked across the meadow toward me, nose red, eyes full of tears, mouth open so wide it looked like her face would split it two, wobbling like a newborn fawn.

"Yes, it's me! I've finally made it here, just as I promised a thousand years ago!" I said.

"Kaaaaaanaaaamiiiii!!!" Titee let out a roar, kicked off the grassy ground, and rushed me. She swung her bayonet wildly and slammed it down at full strength. I met it head-on and rebuffed it. Titee was thrown back the force of it. Even so, she regained her footing and attempted another wild swing. There was no longer any technique behind it. No wind and certainly no Wind Swordplay.

It was just like a child's play-fighting. Naturally, there was no way I could lose. It would be easy to ignore the bayonet and just cut Titee's body, but instead I dared to meet her blows head-on.

In order to prove that the girl in front of me was weak, I sliced completely through her Wind Bayonet in one blow with my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword.

"M-My blade!" Titee cried. The broken bayonet dissipated into the wind.

"Yes, I win!" I said immediately. "I've been telling you all along! You're weak!"

Titee shuddered and backed away. Staring at her right arm, from which the bayonet had disappeared, she continued to stagger backward, tripped over nothing, and fell on her butt.

"Kanami won? So...I lost? The queen lost?" However, Titee wouldn't admit defeat so easily and immediately tried to get up,

pushing herself off the ground, but her hands slipped and she fell forward.

She plunged face-first into the ground and got covered in mud. Still, she attempted to stand up again. But partway through, she stopped moving. Her green eyes were fixed on the ground. At the end of her gaze were little drops of tears that had overflowed from her eyes. Titee stiffened as she realized she was crying. The symbol of her weakness was clearly visible and she began to crumble.

"Aaaaahhh! I-I'm..." Her sobbing made it impossible for her to speak clearly.

Titee was at her limit. No, to be precise, she had long ago exceeded her limit, even before fighting me. Her limits had been exceeded before she had spent a thousand years in this place, before she had fought Nosfy in her previous life, before she had become a queen and lost herself. It had happened much, much earlier. The girl had been at her limit since that day her heart was crushed.

So there was no way she could fight anymore. There was no way she could stand up. Her body and soul were in shambles, and all that remained was a flood of tears.

"I'm— I'm— I'm— Aaaaaahhhhh!!! Waaahh! WaaaaaAAAAAHH!!!" At last, everything that she had been patching up ever since her death was falling apart. Regardless of her position or name, Titee began to cry like a child, without regard for her sense of shame or appearance. It was the moment when a girl who had never cried in public finally cried in front of someone. At the same time, the vicious magic power that had been enveloping her body dissipated.

The Sovereign Queen Lorde was no longer here. I could tell there was only the weak little girl left, and I lowered the tip of my blade.

"Yeah! It would be okay for it to end in defeat for me! No! I'm glad I lost! I always wanted to lose as a weak child! Because I always wanted to go home. Yes, I just wanted to go home!" Titee said, still crying. Falling to her knees, she splayed both hands in the dirt. She turned her face down and spilled a few large tears on the ground, exposing her true feelings without any pretense. "I miss grandpa and grandma! I miss my little brother! I miss all the

villagers! I miss them, I miss them, I miss them, I MISS THEM!!!”

Titee was crying hard. She opened her big, crooked mouth, shook her head, and then looked up. She looked up at the sky, but the tears just wouldn’t stop. Rivulets ran from her eyes, wetting her cheeks.

I felt a deep sense of relief upon seeing her tears. I’d made it in time. I was definitely on the road to victory. While I was feeling relieved, Titee continued to speak. The screams of a thousand years echoed through floor sixty-six without end.

“Wh-Why?! Why is everyone tormenting me?! Why are they all gone?! Why did I have to leave grandma and grandpa?!”

She slammed her hands into the ground and picked up handfuls of dirt. She threw her hands out to the side and tossed the dirt away from her. Again and again, she grabbed the dirt and took her anger out on the world. And then her voice gradually grew quieter and quieter.

She spoke in hiccuping, intermittent phrases. “No, I understand. I had a little brother, so I couldn’t chase after death. As a sister, I had a mission to protect him. That is why I lived! Even though it was painful, I worked hard to survive!”

I approached her squatting form and watched her back tremble.

“Family was the most important thing to me. Nothing else mattered. But no one understood that. Little by little, I was driven into a corner. So I...”

“Yes, that’s right. Family is the most important thing,” I said.

“You’re the only one who understood that, Kanamin. Only you saw through the feelings that even I didn’t understand a thousand years ago.”

“Only me?”

“Yeah. After all, ha ha, it’s probably because you have a sister complex. You probably really understood how I felt,” Titee said, looking up at me with a wry smile on her face. But that smile soon disappeared as a sad look crossed her face again. “I want to see my family again just like you do. I want to see my brother. But he’s not here in this world anymore. He’s the Thief of Wood’s Essence now. Before I knew it, he was taller than me and had become a true

monster. He was the Sovereign Queen Lorde's most loyal retainer and the chancellor of Viaysia. I can't call him family anymore. Just as I can't call myself Titee anymore after becoming the Sovereign Queen Lorde, I can't call the Ide who became chancellor my little brother."

She was at her wits' end, having regained her memory and now knowing how close she was to her wish without being able to reach it.

"Titee, please hold on. Even if it's painful, let me hear you say it. Let me hear what you really want..." I said, trying to bolster her with my words.

"Ha ha ha, what I really want? I wasn't able to say it back then, but it's different now. I wanted a way back home. I really wanted a path that led back to the meadow where grandpa, grandma, and Ide were. That meadow was my only treasure! All my life, I had desperately searched for a place that resembled that meadow, but there never was one! It didn't exist anymore..."

Titee confessed to me the lingering attachment that was the core of being a Guardian. She wanted to go home. It was an incredibly childish lingering attachment.

"I didn't really want to be queen!" she said, now ready to express her regrets. "I didn't really care about protecting the country! I wanted to protect grandpa, grandma, and Ide! That's all I wanted! Anything more than that was too much for me! World peace wasn't my problem! The responsibilities of the nations were too heavy for me to bear!"

It was like a dam burst as she began complaining about all the frustrations that had been building up over the years.

"I'm only a gardener at best! Just being a run-of-the-mill gardener suits me! Such horrible titles like 'Sovereign Queen Lorde' and 'Demon Queen' and 'Mad Queen' are too much for me! Even if I could rule, it would only be over a few small animals! So why did it end up like this?! Why was everyone fooled by a child getting carried away pretending to be queen?! Everyone's so stupid! Stupid!!!" She cried out to the people of Viaysia who had propelled her to the throne. It was tantamount to rejecting herself, and Titee looked like

her body was about to fall apart completely, but at the same time, she looked refreshed.

"Ever since that day! I've been a child ever since that day! I've remained a weak, stupid, foolish child! And yet, why did I become queen and go through with it all?! How did I end up here?!" she cried plaintively. "I didn't know! I didn't know that once you become queen, you're stuck there forever! I didn't know you could lose your family so easily! I'd never heard of that!"

The role of queen hadn't been worth it for her.

"If you knew, why didn't you stop it?! You just made empty promises because I was stupid?! Why didn't anyone tell me? Why didn't anyone..." She hated everyone who had paved the way for her to become queen.

I couldn't say anything in response to her questions. I knew what had happened because of *Past Sight*, so I couldn't offer her any empty platitudes.

That country on the verge of destruction had needed a strong ruler. And Lorde was stronger than anyone. I knew that she *had* to be made queen. And Titee, who knew that as well, kept crying.

"Someone should have warned me that being queen was a hard job! I didn't know that! If I'd known, I never would've done it!" she sobbed. There was no way someone would've warned her. At that time, the only thing people had wanted was a savior.

"I didn't want vassals or subjects, I just wanted a warm home! I just wanted somewhere I could live in peace with Ide! All I wanted was to be able to run around in that meadow again! I just wanted a normal life! Because then I wouldn't have had to run away!!!"

But someone had needed to do it. Someone had had to take on the role of savior, or the nations of the North would have been destroyed. And the one who had accepted the task was a little girl named Titee, who was now curled up like a baby and crying. That was the whole heroic tale of the Sovereign Queen Lorde.

"I'm sorry, everyone! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I wasn't the amazing person you all thought I was! I was just a weak, young, fragile child! There was no Sovereign Queen Lorde like everyone thought! I wasn't wise, strong, or even great!"

Titee's manner of speaking was all over the place as she let out everything about herself. But this was the true Titee, a girl who'd just regained everything she'd shaved, and shaved, and shaved off her life. A girl who was awkward, careless, and had absolutely no aura of majesty.

"I had the blood of a legend in me?! I was a descendant of the legitimate royalty?! I had the unparalleled talent to command sorcerers?! My overwhelming power as an Essence Thief was the light of hope?! And that's why I should be the one to lead the fight against the South?! Selfish! Too selfish! No, no, no, no! I wanted to refuse! I really wanted to refuse! I was so, so anxious I couldn't bear it, and I wanted to refuse it all!!!"

Titee stamped her feet on the ground as she screamed. She was finding fault with everybody else, even as she cried. Her tears were no longer individual drops, but were pouring out of her eyes like a waterfall. Hundreds of years' worth of tears were overflowing all at once, and they showed no sign of stopping. The amount of tears was so great that I felt like she would continue to cry and be full of regrets forever.

I wanted to hear directly from her what she should do to get over those regrets. "So why didn't you refuse, Titee?" I asked, hoping that would stop the crying.

"W-Well...because that stupid Ide had expectations of me... He thought I was the strongest and noblest person of all; it's not like I could tell him any different," Titee answered. Now she was turning the blame on Ide because of his expectations. "It wasn't only Ide. Everyone had expectations. They forced a young child to do it all!"

Now she was placing the blame on all of the citizens of the country, whom she hadn't been able to refuse with all eyes on her. But soon, Titee bit her lip and shook her head.

"No, that's exactly what was wrong. I know it's just an excuse. It's my own selfishness. I wanted to be a cool sister for Ide. I played an impossible role just for the sake of my own appearance. I acted like an adult to meet expectations that I couldn't meet as a child. If I could've told Ide just one thing at that time, it would've been that I was just putting up with playing the role of the Sovereign Queen

Lorde. But I wasn't able to tell him that. That ended in the destruction of Viaysia. Not just the destruction of this country, but the whole of the Northern Alliance—it was all my fault. Even if their curse completely crushes my soul, I can't complain. Even if that's wrong, it's my responsibility as their ruler. Yes, this situation is a responsibility. I understand. I know that." Titee finally stopped turning away from her responsibility, even as she continued crying. It seemed that she was such a kind girl that she couldn't leave this place.

"Don't give up, Titee. Face it all now. It's not too late," I said, reaching my hand out to save the gentle girl. If it only took one or two failures to end a life, mine would've ended a long time ago. But I'd made it this far. As long as I didn't give up, I could start over. But Titee wouldn't accept my words or my hand.

"No, it's too late. It's all too late. I've lost everything. Everyone's left me... No, they've run away from me. There's nothing in this place anymore. I have no choice but to remain freezing in the depths of hell." She looked down again as the tears fell.

"It's not too late! Not too late at all, Titee! I'm here to help you!" I said, my throat constricting as I looked at her. Before the battle, she had told me that the Guardians were waiting for me and that I had a duty to fulfill their lingering attachments. So now I would fulfill one of those requests. "Shout it out again! Even louder! Make sure it reaches everyone you've ever met! Say everything you weren't able to say before! Reject all expectations! Don't regret the past! Let me hear you say it!" I shouted.

I tried to cast *Dimension: Calculash—Recall* again, but looking at my stats menu, I saw my MP was empty.

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[STATUS]
NAME: Aikawa Kanami
HP: 26/289
MP: 0/1165
CLASS: Diver
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My body screamed in protest as I tried to construct a spell that was beyond my limits. But I'd grown accustomed to the pain by this point. The fact that it was a known pain rather than an unknown one gave me a sense of comfort. My organs were lacerated, and blood rushed up my throat. Along with the blood loss, I could feel that many other important things were fading. It wasn't just my maximum HP, it was as if my soul itself were melting away. It wasn't my physical body, but the magic gem inside me that was being affected. However, I wouldn't stop constructing the spell.

This all-out spell had allowed me to see the future and the past twice now. However, I knew that neither time had it been cast at full power. I believed that the true value of this spell was to connect those two things.

"Kanamin, what are you...?"

I concentrated my Dimension magic on the sky above the meadow. The front and back of floor sixty-six overlapped, and magic gems were now floating overhead. I cast my spell on each and every one of them, and pale flecks of tiarlay rained down. The light particles that fell on the grassy field gradually expanded to form the silhouettes of human figures. It was just like the moment when monsters appeared in the Dungeon.

This was the magic that Kanami the Founder had applied to the whole Dungeon, and it was one of the spells that Saint Tiara, who had saved the world in the past, had used to bring happiness to everyone.

The world was flooded with light. As a seasoned mage, Titee must've understood that each light was a soul. She looked up, her eyes full of tears.

"E-Everyone?" She could make out the shapes of her people as the light dimmed. Of course, I could see them too, if I focused. Inside the innumerable points of light, I could see human silhouettes. Titee was awestruck by the sight but quickly shook her head in denial. "No! It's not real! Everyone here has been asleep for more than five hundred years; their souls were worn out! They're all just actors following their assigned roles!"

"Don't make light of this, Lorde! I'm the Thief of Dimension's

Essence! You'll have to take a better look at the brilliance of these souls before you can make a decision! If you say they're worn out, I'll just rewind time! I don't care if it goes against the logic of the world! Now, I'm going to give it everything I've got!" I shouted. If all the souls went to sleep five hundred years ago and couldn't be recovered, then all I had to do was connect to the past through magic! "*The future and the present are connected! The present and the past can connect! Before you realize it, we will arrive at a time where you remember!!!*"

I cast the spell again, feeling all of the magic gems in the space. The magic gem of the painting I used to evoke Titee's childhood memories was mixed in with them too. Using the same technique as the Dungeon's Re-Collection Drop system, I pulled out the past from a distant timeline.

"*Dimension: Calculash—Recall*!!!"

From the silhouettes inside the dancing lights, the vague shapes of the people of Viaysia began to appear. Furthermore, a cityscape overflowing with natural greenery overlapped the grasslands. In the distance floated the vague yet imposing shape of Viaysia castle. Titee began crying again as she saw it.

The shapes began to firm up and the people of the city returned. One woman began speaking, and the atmosphere of floor sixty-six shook. "Lorde—no, it's Titee, isn't it? I'm sorry, we never realized..."

The woman called the Sovereign Queen Lorde "Titee." The people who'd been turned into magic gems in the sky had also apparently been affected by the vision of the past that Titee and I had seen. They seemed to have felt a part of Titee's life, even if not as completely as we had. That was why the woman's voice trembled with heartfelt apology.

"Is... Is it really...?" Titee asked, her own voice trembling. She was truly surprised that the people who had supposedly disappeared were coming back. Meanwhile, one after another, flakes of tiarlay fell from the sky, restoring the time that once was.

It was the most fantastic and magical sight ever. Every time and place in the northern countries overlapped into the small space of floor sixty-six. As many dimensions as there were individuals were

created, and the figures of more than ten thousand people were all within view. Most of them could only be seen in shadowy outlines, but sure enough, the entirety of the Northern Alliance was about to return.

Then, residents of the Viaysia castle town called out individually.

"My queen, there's no need for you to apologize to us. The destruction was due to our dependence on you; it wasn't your fault. On the contrary, you prolonged the lives of the dying nations. You have shown us hope by grinding down your own soul. We are grateful for that, and there is absolutely nothing to blame yourself for!" one said.



"I'm sorry, my queen. No, I shouldn't call you 'queen' anymore. Titee, you were always with us. You were just a child," added another.

"We are dead. Just souls called back into being by Master Kanami. But to this soul, the screaming of our queen resonated within me," said a man.

Titee stood still, stunned. I guess it was because she realized that I really was playing with time and forcibly bringing back souls from the past through my spell. Seeing the look on her face, I vowed to keep up the magic no matter what. Even if this was tampering with life, sacrilege to the dead, and outlandish magic that was destroying the natural order of everything, I didn't care one bit.

Then I heard the voices of the vassals and knights of the castle.

"I am truly sorry. It is because of our own weaknesses that we wanted to believe that our queen was stronger than anyone else. And it was also because of our own weaknesses that we wanted to believe that our queen loved the North more than anyone else. Such weaknesses were a burden to you, and it crushed you in the end," said a knight.

"I thought that as long as we left everything to you, it would all be okay. And I thought that as long as we had you, the country would be safe. Even though you scolded me to fight my own battles, I relied on you until the very end," added another.

"We knights alone could have fought the South, but in the end we were counting on our ruler. So when you left the north, the country crumbled..." said a third.

Countless voices echoed around the Dungeon. The castle, the city, the orphanage and village from so long ago—all the places Titee had ever seen layered over one another.

She began to cry again. Her voice quivered as she spoke. "E-Everyone...can you hear me?"

"Yes, we can hear you. Can you hear us?" the first woman to speak answered on behalf of everyone.

"Yes, I can! I can finally hear your voices now!" For the past thousand years, time had moved too fast for Titee to say anything, and she hadn't been able to hear anything either. But finally, after

wasting away for all those years, sound moved through her throat and ears. Her voice echoed clearly across the grassy field of floor sixty-six.

Perhaps because of the abundance of light in the sky, I almost felt as if I were on the surface even though I was underground. It was a strangely liberating feeling and an oddly comforting meadow.

"I will say to you now what I couldn't say for a thousand years! Please listen to me!" Titee shouted the words out with all her strength, and everyone heard her. "I really wanted to apologize to everyone, but I wanted to complain even more! I wanted to complain about everything! I hated being queen! I *HATED* it! I hated it from the very start! I wanted to refuse!!!"

She was finally showing her true feelings. She continued spewing her bitterness without stopping.

"Being queen started out as a game of make-believe! You shouldn't call a child by a name as grand as Lorde! You're all adults! Aren't you ashamed to call a child 'queen'?! My name is Titee! I'm just a child! There's no way I could be queen! There's no way I could save everyone! I was always the one that wanted to be saved!"

Freed from all binds, Lorde spit out her feelings. Having emerged from the depths of hell, what she had been suppressing for so long was finally exploding.

"You're all more mature than me! So you should be helping children! But none of you acted like adults, so I ended up having to play that role too! Even though I was still a kid!"

It wasn't just her voice that was exploding outward but her magic as well. Green particles flew like confetti, and Titee's wings flapped in time with her words.

"Don't expect anything from me! Don't dream about me! Don't burden me any further! I'm just a kid, and it's too heavy for me to bear! I'm just a coward who runs away at the first sign of unpleasantness!"

Her words resonated with everyone present. No one would ever be able to call this ungodly wailing and ranting girl the Sovereign Queen Lorde again.

"All this time I was just imitating a queen! I was never going to

grow up, I was never going to become an adult! Because I haven't lived as myself ever since the day I became an Essence Thief! That's why I wanted to do it over again! I always wanted to live as Titee!"

She finally, clearly, gave voice to her true lingering attachment. And she once again told everyone the rules for her own death.

"I didn't ever want to be queen! I just wanted to go home and be Titee! That's what I've always wanted! All along! That's it!!!" she shouted, overcome by some unbearable urge to speak now.

Everyone listened to her cries.

"I'm sorry, Titee. All those years, I failed to see your suffering. Your power was so strong that we were foolish enough to be blinded by it and couldn't see who you really were."

"I am so sorry, Titee."

"Titee, I'm sorry!"

Everyone already knew what was going on with the Dungeon. Everyone knew how Guardians worked. So everyone reaffirmed that she was Titee, even as their faces were twisted with emotion. They were gradually erasing their own queen.

"We thought peace in this country was your long-cherished desire. We thought that a world where you could laugh with us was your desire. But it was *our* selfish desire, wasn't it? We wanted to believe that because it was convenient."

"We came all the way here to ask you to be our queen, and you did your best to fulfill our wish. Yes, our wish came true, but not yours. You weren't able to disappear."

"It was very naive to think that you could finally disappear after us. Even though everyone knew that you were a little strange, no one thought too much about it. We just assumed that you would be fine."

Her former subjects all reached out to her. The truth was, they probably had at least one thing they wanted to say back to her. But as adults, they suppressed it and did their best to comfort the crying girl.

"I'm so sorry, Titee. And thank you. I want to apologize to and thank not the queen, but the little girl Titee."

Titee tried to answer all of the people, but the tears she'd been

holding back for so long began to flow again. In the meantime, several people turned to look toward me.

"Of course, we are grateful to you, as well, Commander of the Queensguard. You were the only one to notice her suffering. And then you made it your priority to create this place for her. I apologize for what we said before. We forgot ourselves and spoke out of bitterness." The semifer knights I'd fought with in town earlier all lowered their heads.

I shook my head. "No, please don't apologize. I think my past self left this place incomplete. Since I left it unfinished, Titee suffered more than necessary. It caused problems for you all as well."

"No, don't worry. We're grateful. Even incomplete, without this place, I don't think this day would've come."

"Thank you for saying that," I replied. Combining the memories of Titee that I saw here with the memories I had regained aboveground, I had no doubt that the world I'd made for Lorde was incomplete due to the interference of the Apostle Regacy. But no one blamed me for my inadequacy.

"I am grateful to you, Commander, for everything you have done for us. Thanks to you and Titee, we can pass away happily. In a very real sense, our long-cherished wish has finally been fulfilled," said the semifer knight, who must have once been an acquaintance of mine. Then he smiled, as did the people around Titee.

"Thank you so much, our dear Titee!"

"Titee, you've worked plenty hard enough! No one expects anything from you anymore. All we have left is gratitude."

They were all ready to send this crying girl off with smiles and never burden her again. They would leave awe and expectation behind them and face Titee with only gratitude.

"E-Everyone..." Titee sobbed, but gradually her tears began to dry. At last, the presence of the Sovereign Queen Lorde that had rested on her shoulders was gone, and she was clearly feeling lighter. I could see her sadness easing little by little.

While everyone was calling out to Titee to send her on her way, I spotted one woman looking at me.

"C-Commander..."

It was Beth. My throat tightened when I saw her. She'd made it just in time too. Before the shattered particles of her magic gem melted into the world and disappeared, my *Dimension: Calculash—Recall* had managed to pull her soul back.

Beth lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Commander. You didn't abandon Viaysia. You were just trying to help the child who was suffering the most here. It was obvious when I saw this place. And yet, I continued to resent you..."

"No, I should be the one apologizing. Please raise your head, Beth."

In the end, I didn't remember her. I was sure I hadn't been able to save her. If Beth had been saved in this place, it hadn't been me but someone else.

"You apologized well, Beth." An older semifer man appeared behind her and placed a hand on her head. There was no way I wouldn't be able to recognize that voice. I'd wanted to see them both this whole time.

"Grandpa... I'm not a child anymore..."

"Oh, I suppose that's true," Reynand said as he removed his hand. Then, scratching his cheek, he came toward me. I thought I'd said goodbye permanently to him. Now that he saw me again, though, he seemed a little uncomfortable.

"Mr. Reynand..." I said. I felt the same way. It was hard to get words out.

"So, we were able to meet again, Kanami. Honestly, I'm a little surprised."

"I tried my very best. Um...did I keep my promise?"

"Yes, in the best way. I can't express my gratitude in words."

"I'm glad to hear that. But I don't need words of gratitude. You've already given me so many important things."

"I see..."

Mr. Reynand seemed satisfied. He nodded once and then turned away from me. He must've known that his time was limited. Before the effects of the magic wore off, he hurried to the girl who had worried him half to death and called out to her. But his words to her were faltering as well.

“Hey... I’m sorry that I called you crazy earlier. I’m not good with words, and sometimes they come out wrong. So I never knew what to do...”

Titee, who had been crying the whole time, reacted to Mr. Reynand’s voice. I guess she knew that he was the only one she truly had to answer to. If I remembered from the earlier memories, General Reynand Vohlz had worked for the queen until the very end.

“N-No, it’s o-okay... I get it. You stayed until the very end for my sake... I’m not just talking about this place. Even in my past life, you always cared about me. I’m...” Titee choked on her words.

“You’re wrong. In my past life and here, I did it all for my granddaughter,” Mr. Reynand said with a snort. He was the same as everyone else here. He was trying to erase the girl’s burden and send her off with a smile. Titee understood the sentiment and smiled broadly back at him.

“Even now you can’t be honest, old man?” she said with a laugh.

“You’re calling me dishonest? I think you’re referring to yourself!” Mr. Reynand replied, also beginning to laugh. The gloomy atmosphere, which had been filled only with apologies, finally cleared up. Like the sky after a storm, Titee and Mr. Reynand both looked refreshed.

After their laughter subsided, Mr. Reynand patted Titee’s head where she was kneeling, and asked, “It was a long time, huh?”

“Yeah... It was short and long...” Unlike Beth, Titee accepted the action without getting irritated.

“But it looks like someone’s finally come for you. You waited a thousand years...”

“Yeah... A thousand years...”

“Then don’t hesitate any longer. Jump over the past and go forward into the future. At last, Titee, our gardener, the hands of your clock have begun to move. But don’t forget that not all the people of Viaysia are here,” Mr. Reynand said in a voice as solemn as a father’s.

“I know.” And Titee clearly meant it. I understood what he meant too. Now, the long-cherished wish of the queen, who had lived for a thousand years, was coming true. However, the magical power of

the Thief of Wind's Essence was still strong and showed no sign of disappearing.

"Your brother Ide is on the surface. He's waiting for your return, Titee," Mr. Reynand said.

"Yes, there's still Ide..."

"Perhaps it's now only Ide who's still expecting the Sovereign Queen Lorde. He must still be preserving the idea of a flawless ruler in his heart. So go refute that expectation as soon as possible. Go home and tell him that you are no longer queen. And then you two will be happy together. Understand?"

"Yes..." Titee nodded, still on the ground. In response, Mr. Reynand took her hand, made her stand up, and gave her a hard push on her back.

Titee emerged from the light of all the souls.

"Go on, go!" Mr. Reynand said.

Titee came to stand next to me as the smiling faces of the people she'd protected all those years sent her on her way. I took Mr. Reynand's place, gently holding the hand of the girl entrusted to me.

"I promise I will take good care of her. So you don't need to worry," I said. I gave a small wave to the overflowing light. Seeing Mr. Reynand nodding back at me, I made one genuine, final invitation to Titee. "Titee, come with me to where Ide is. Then you'll truly be able to become an adult."

"Yes!" Titee finally agreed without hesitation. Then she laughed, tears still staining her cheeks. "Yes! Yes, yes, yes!" If the tears she'd just cried were the result of a thousand years, that smile would be for the next thousand years. With a smile as bright as a blooming sunflower, Titee waved a hand toward the light just as I had.

"I'm going home! Goodbye, everyone!!!" Her farewell was imbued with Wind magic, and it reached every single person there. With that, the last bit of my spell was broken. The time I could spend defying the logic of the world was over, and everyone had returned to their rightful places. People said their farewells as they turned back into particles of light.

"Yes, see you later, Titee!"

"Blessings on your journey, dear girl!"

"Take care on your way! Be happy no matter what!"

Everyone knew that this time there would be no sorrow and no regret. That was why the light of the souls filling the meadow could fade away. Like dandelion seeds blown on the wind, they turned to light and floated into the sky.

"Don't get lost again! Don't even come back here until you've gone home! Don't take any detours!"

"Commander! Please take care of our Titee!"

"We can't go with you, but we'll be praying for your safety from here! We'll be praying for you from this paradise that you made for us! We'll pray for your happiness!"

One by one they shouted their farewells and waved as their bodies slowly faded away. Former vassals, knights, citizens, young and old, male and female, everyone gave their parting words to Titee.

"Bye-bye, big sis!"

"Thank you for everything you've done for us! It's because of you that we've reached paradise! So please reach your own paradise too!"

"No one will call you queen ever again, Titee! Live freely!"

"Everything's straight ahead! Just keep going, Titee!"

The words seemed to lighten Titee's body. The voices urged her along from the underground to the surface. Or rather, from the past to the future.

"Titee! Everyone is so grateful to you! We can't even express how grateful we are! I'm sorry that all we can do is see you off!"

"Go be with your brother and find that most precious thing again!"

"Thank you for playing with us for all these years! You're the best big sister we ever could've asked for!"

"Have a safe trip back home, Titee!"

The diffusion of lights and words painted the empty black sky. As if to show how full Titee's heart was now, the space became a meadow with a pleasant breeze blowing across it.

Then, standing in that meadow, Beth looked back at us as she waved. "Goodbye, my dearest friend and sister! Take care!"

At the same time, Mr. Reynand took her hand and they disappeared into the light. They were the last. The entire dimension of the Northern Alliance began to fade away, and more than ten thousand people returned to the distant paradise where they could be at peace. There were no more stars or magic gems left in the sky.

Titee's heart was no longer weighed down. Shaking her lightened body, she shouted her last words to the paradise that could no longer be reached. "I'm off!"

Her voice became wind that rustled the grasses. There was no doubt that this was a permanent parting. But next to me, Titee laughed. She shook off the last of her tears and looked straight at me.

"Kanamin! Get me out of here! Just like last time, but I won't do it wrong this time! I won't make any mistakes!" she said, pointing at the spiral staircase in the center of the floor. "My one wish is to go home! I want to go back to my childhood home in the meadow! But that home isn't this place! You and Liner can't replace my family! I want to see him again! I'm not going to see Chancellor Ide, I'm going to see my brother Ide! And so ends the story of Lorde Titee! This time it really will end!"



Titee grasped my hand. Her answer was a thousand years late, but it had finally come. She believed what I had said, that it wasn't too late, so I did my best to respond in the same way.

"In the name of Aikawa Kanami, I swear to you I will make your wish come true. My promise from a thousand years ago still stands," I said, grabbing her hand back.

"Thank you, Kanamin," Titee said, smiling. "Thanks to you, I feel a little more grown up."

"Me too. Because of you, I've grown up a bit too."

Now the two of us were able to accurately feel the passage of time, without acceleration or stagnation. Titee seemed extremely moved by a world where every second counted. I was deeply moved as she shook my hand. This was how people gradually became adults, I thought. We both took that first step at the same time.

I, too, was moved by the fact that our long underground life had finally come to an end, and that we could now move forward. All that was left was to get out of the Dungeon, and the Trial of the Thief of Wind's Essence would be over.

"Okay! Let's go, Kanamin!"

There was one thing left that I had to do. "All right, but—"

A flash of light over the meadow cut me off before I could finish my sentence. The light was different from the one that had appeared earlier, and it was far more ominous. The overlapping of the front and back sides of floor sixty-six must've caused another battle to move as well. Before I could react, the figures of a boy and a girl appeared a little ways from us.

"What is this? Lorde, what happened?!" Nosfy asked as she looked at us shaking hands. She looked more shocked by the transformation in her friend than the transformation of the world around us.

"Wait Nosfy! I won't let you get away!" Liner shouted from behind her. He was covered in wounds. My knight had done his job well, just as I'd known he would.

I turned toward him, still holding Titee's hand, to show him I was okay. Liner's expression relaxed a little.

In contrast, Nosfy's voice grew tenser as she shouted, "Lorde!

Your friend is asking you what happened! Answer me!”

The one thing I had left to do was finish things up with the Thief of Light’s Essence. However, I was already perfectly on the path that my *Future Sight* had shown me. The scene before me was a reenactment of what I had seen in the spell.

Liner, Titee, and I stood encircling Nosfy. The tables had now completely turned. Nosfy seemed aware of that fact as she approached Nosfy.

“Lorde...do you plan on leaving me? Are we not best friends? Did you not promise to fall with me? Did we not promise each other that we would live like children? You would not go back on your word and pretend to act like an adult and be understanding, right?” Nosfy asked.

“I’m sorry, Nosfy. I’ve decided to return to my brother. I want to tell him I never wanted to be queen. And then it’ll all be over. Everything will be over. I remembered that I never wanted anything else,” Titee replied.

The direct answer stopped Nosfy in her tracks. “And you do not regret your choice?”

“No. I’m going to make up for having regrets before.”

“Ohhh. Of course that is it. You are throwing me away. After all, we have always been on opposing sides. We were never friends at all!” Nosfy said, covering her face with both her hands and beginning to cry.

“You’re wrong, Nosfy! I loved you as a friend! I can’t keep living with you like this, but I still think of you as my friend!” Titee let go of my hand and took a step toward Nosfy.

“If you claim to love me, then let us be unhappy together! Suffer more with me! Please, Lorde! I do not want to be alone anymore! Are we not friends?!” Nosfy howled, looking up at Titee, her eyes full of tears.

Titee stiffened at the ghoulish figure before her, but after a moment she shook her head. “I can’t do that,” she said. “I must go to Ide and shake off the past. It’s just like you said a little while ago. I’ve decided to move forward.”

“You are horrible! You told me that you would always be here

with me, and now you are breaking that promise!”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. But I’m sure, on the surface, Ide is in the same situation that I am. So I have a mission, as his sister, to save him. That’s why—”

“As his sister?” Nosfy cut her off. “What good is a blood connection? It has no value, no meaning! It has nothing to do with life!”

“Ide and I aren’t related by blood, but we’re still family. And because we’re family, I have to go to him!”

“Why?! What is so important about family?! Your friend is crying right now and you say you love your family more? That is just stupid! Just a delusion! How do you not understand that?”

“All I can do is apologize to you,” Titee said. “I’ve said goodbye to Viaysia, and now I have to go to Ide. I know I sound like a coward. But I hope that you’ll be able to move forward with your life too, Nosfy.”

“How can you be so awful?! No matter how much I tell you I love you, you don’t care for me at all!” Nosfy covered her face in her hands again and began to sob.

I had no doubt that Titee had no intention of remaining inside the Dungeon any longer, but she also wasn’t so heartless as to just cut Nosfy off in this state. She was clearly still worried about her friend, and it left her flustered.

Titee continued to remain at a loss, Nosfy continued to cry, and Liner and I continued to keep a watchful eye on the pair of them. After half a minute of that situation, Nosfy suddenly stopped crying. She stood up easily, as if she had just been faking it—and maybe she had been.

“Well, it seems like that will not work,” Nosfy said. It was exactly the reaction I had expected. I gripped my sword so I’d be ready to fight at any moment. The same was true for Liner across from me.

“Well then, this is where I will bid you farewell, Lorde.”

“Nosfy?” Titee’s confusion only increased at Nosfy’s sudden composure.

But Nosfy ignored her friend’s confusion. Actually, she likely didn’t even view Titee as her friend anymore. “I really thought you were

my only friend in this world. I thought you would make mistakes with me. But, heh, you have a brother. Everyone has their own family familyFAMILYFAMILY! How stupid! That is such bullshit!" Nosfy began laughing.

"Nosfy, what are you—"

"Sure enough, I only have Master Kanami left," Nosfy said, continuing to laugh. It seemed like she'd completely lost interest in Titee. Her gaze was fixed on me.

"Nosfy, you..." I broke out in a cold sweat at what I could feel dwelling deep in her eyes.

"Of course it is you, Master Kanami. Unlike Lorde, you seem to know better. Yes, even if it comes down to three against one, I will not give up, will I? Because it is so interesting here, where the past lasted for a thousand years. It would be such a waste to throw it away! There is no way I could do that!" With those words, the banner of light in Nosfy's hands grew brighter. This was proof that she still had enough magic power left to fight by herself.

"Are you really going to do this under these circumstances?" I asked.

"Yes, of course! Because if you break Lorde's heart again, then the reverse side of the Dungeon will be brought back! That is the way you made it! So there is still a way to bring it back! Any number of ways, even!" Nosfy cried, laughing.

I couldn't stop the sweat dripping down my forehead. I understood. On the outside, Nosfy was laughing, but inside it was the opposite. Even just understanding that a bit made me freeze with fear.

But Titee, who couldn't understand how Nosfy truly felt, continued to try to persuade the other girl.

"Wait you two! Just talk it out! You can do now what you couldn't do back then! There's no need to repeat the past!" Titee cried.

"Oh, Lorde, you betrayed me, but I am grateful for it! Thanks to you and Master Kanami, I have finally become honest! I have realized that I am a dirty person!"

"Nosfy..."

Conversation was no longer possible. Even in the depths of her

madness, I'd been able to hold a conversation with Lorde, but this girl in front of me now was sane but unable to hold a conversation. And the fact that we held different values was driving a wedge between us deeper than madness ever could.

Nosfy ignored Titee and continued talking, her words coming out faster and faster like a machine gun. "It just makes me laugh that I am considered a Saint. The Thief of Light's Essence? I was just given the leftovers since Rands had already taken Darkness's Essence. I thought it was wrong. I thought it was very, very wrong while I was alive. Yes, it *is* wrong! It is, it is, it is! I was wrong, the world was wrong, everything was wrong!"

Nosfy's poker face had delayed my realization, but now I was certain. Behind that perfect smile was pure anger. She was laughing, but she was pure rage inside. Without realizing it, Titee had stepped on a land mine in Nosfy's heart.

Nosfy's light, laced with murderous intent, spread out over the meadow of floor sixty-six.

"Because," Nosfy continued, "my light is so black. Black, dark, and dirty."

Her light expanded like an explosion, and it slowly turned from white to black. The light was pitch-black, and yet it was still shining. It was a fantastical and corrupt flash of light, bright yet dark and full of contradictions.

My brain couldn't process all of these contradictions, and I was overcome by a wave of anxiety. But more than anything else it was the emotions imbued into that light that sent chills down my spine.

"Nosfy...do you really hate me this much?" I asked. I could tell immediately that her rage was directed at me.

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "Of course not!" she said, laughing. "I love you, Master Kanami! I love, love, love, loveloveLOVE you! So how could I possibly hate you? That would not change, even if you were to kill me! That is right, it did not change! Because genuine feelings are eternal. Neither Lorde nor Master Kanami can escape from the eternal past! Let us live together in the unchanging world for ten thousand years, suffering meaninglessly, going mad without realizing it, and having fun! I am sure I can make

you suffer so much that you go crazy over and over again! It makes my heart pound with excitement just thinking about it!”



I couldn't understand her pleasure at all, even though she was clearly seeking validation for it. Of course, I couldn't grant her that. I was at a complete loss for words.

Suddenly, reddish-black mist began leaking from Nosfy's body. I'd seen it before—it was the same kind of magic that Lastiara and Snow had used.

"*Aikawa Kanami / Aikawa Hitaki*!"

It was Fresh Blood magic. This kind of magic had brought Snow closer to becoming a dragon and Lastiara closer to becoming a folkloric figure. The activation of the spell changed the color of Nosfy's chestnut-brown hair, which turned black like the light around her.

She'd used both my name and my sister's in her spell. Just as the name implied, she began to look more like me. Her eyes grew black to match her hair, and Dimension and Ice magic mingled in the air.

Nosfy giggled as she chanted my name over and over again. She attacked before I could get my bearings. Her first step was so fast that it seemed as if space had shrunk, and the flash of her banner was so sharp it felt like she could slice the heavens apart. The move surpassed anything I'd ever seen from her before.

I was too slow to react. But the banner didn't reach me.

"Kanamin, are you okay?!" Titee had met the banner with her bayonet, protecting me from the wild attack.

"Y-Yeah, thanks!" Reassured by the presence of an ally, I adjusted my grip on my Crescent Pectolazri Straight Sword. However, Nosfy's expression twisted even more grotesquely when she looked at us.

"Oooohhhh, Looooorrrrde! So, you are taking away my master Kanami again! Why do you always do that?! You homewrecker!" Nosfy shouted. The smile that had previously been clinging to her face disappeared.

"I'm not gonna take anything from you, Nosfy!" Titee shouted back. "If you'd hit Kanamin with that attack just now, he would've died!"

"What nonsense! Kill? Him?! No way! What you just saw was me confirming something important with Master Kanami. So will you just get out of my way now, Lorde?!" Nosfy shouted, raising her banner

again. She waved it at Titee like she was trying to smash an annoying bug.

Titee grimaced as she faced the onslaught. Although they were both Guardians, they were clearly at two different levels of power. Titee, who'd already gotten rid of half of her lingering attachment, was fading away. The difference in the total amount of lingering attachment left was directly proportional to the difference in power between the two of them. Titee was about to be overwhelmed.

She'd be in danger if things continued this way, so Liner and I rushed in to break up the flurry of blows. Seeing us approaching, Nosfy broke through Titee's defense and then threw a roundhouse kick at her.

Titee managed to defend against the kick with her bayonet, but she was flung straight into the air.

"*Light Arrow—Blaue Nacht*!" Nosfy followed up with a spell with tremendous speed.

What appeared was too thick to be considered a light arrow. A spear of light, as big as a tree, formed in the air, and with terrifying speed it flew toward Titee in the sky above us. But it didn't reach her. A dark gray wall formed between her and the spell.

"You...saved me?" Titee asked. It was the wind dragon Elfenreize who had intervened on her behalf. He'd been motionless in the sky, watching, this whole time.

The spear of light struck the dragon's abdomen and pierced all the way to his spine. He'd stopped it with his powerful muscles, but now he was gushing blood like a waterfall. Elfenreize groaned with pain.

"Yeah, okay! I finally remember! Thank you!!!" Titee manipulated the wind and landed on the dragon's back. Her position now made it impossible for Nosfy to pursue her.

Nosfy glared up at her. "Another interruption!"

"Don't forget about us either, bitch! I don't have much magic left, but I can still fight!" Liner shouted, attacking. I swung my sword from the opposite side.

"Don't overdo it, Liner!"

But Nosfy folded her banner of light, turning it into two and

blocking both of our attacks.

"Hellvilleshine! How annoying! Why not go somewhere else?! You are utterly repulsive! *I am the light of the world*! *I am the hope of all mankind*! *Dimension: Calculash*! *Miragemension*!" The light leaking from Nosfy increased. She waved the two halves of her banner like a pair of swords. Liner and I were both about to take a hit.

"*Wynd Arrow*!" Titee cried from above, firing a covering shot from her place on Elfenreize. Her arrows were aimed precisely at Nosfy. However, Nosfy twisted and turned, artfully dodging the spell. I knew because I often used it myself for the same purpose, but *Dimension: Calculash* was incredibly strong against long-range attacks.

At this rate, it would be difficult to wear her down. The Thief of Light's Essence was *strong*. But I'd known that from the beginning. Neither Liner nor I would be able to take her down.

"Liner! Leave this to me! You go help Titee! Together the two of you can be strong here! Go make her realize that!" I shouted at Liner. If anyone could do it, it would be Titee. This meadow was still her world; that hadn't changed.

"O-Okay! I get what you mean!" Liner said, understanding instantly. He stopped his attacks and put some distance between Nosfy and himself.

"I am so glad it is just the two of us now, Master Kanami!" Nosfy tilted her head, unable to parse what Liner and I were talking about. But then she laughed again. Apparently she wanted a one-on-one fight. She ignored Liner's retreating form and increased the pace of her attacks on me.

"Sorry, but I have no intention of doing that! *Dimension*!" My eyes couldn't keep up with the speed of her banner anymore. My spell was weak due to my diminishing magic power, so I was mostly relying on *Responsiveness* at this point. I stumbled every time one of Nosfy's hits landed. Blood gushed from my wounds, and I was almost unconscious. But I knew that I had to fight here in order to achieve the victory I had seen in *Dimension: Calculash—Realize*. I would hold on until Liner reached Titee.

"Lorde! Use *Level Up*!" Liner shouted.

"*Level Up*?! But ever since that day, my body—"

"Don't you get it?! This whole place is here to help you! It *wants* to help you! Do it!"

"Everyone?"

Elfenreize swooped low and Liner jumped up on his back. At the same time, he started incanting.

"*Prithee take heed and introspect*! *Inscribe the fleeting, flickering light of life*!"

"Everyone's magic? E-Even yours, Elfenreize?"

Innumerable particles of light were floating over the meadow of floor sixty-six. It was all that remained of the magic of everyone who had disappeared. They were no longer souls. They didn't have anything resembling consciousness, but they were all being absorbed into Titee's body.

It was Elfenreize who answered her question about this impossible miracle. He nodded his huge head at her. "Everything on this floor is yours, Lorde. *It be mine, it be thine*! *Now is the time to overcome your past and grow*! *Blood has not led you here, but your soul has*! Now, Lorde—*Level Up*!!!"

All of the particles of light converged on Titee as the incantation ended. The power of over ten thousand people flooded into her body. Elfenreize began disappearing as well from underneath her, unraveling like a thread. But looking into the dragon's eyes, even I, who didn't understand his language, could tell that this was what he wanted. After all, the whole floor was a space where everything, inside and out, had been made specially for Titee.

With all that help, Titee finally leveled up. "Oh, so that's what it was all about! All right then, I'll use everyone's power! Oh, and Liner! I'm not Lorde, I'm Titee!" She jumped down from Elfenreize right before he disappeared completely. Confused, Liner jumped down after her.

The two started to cast a spell as they fell toward Nosfy and me.

"Let's go, Liner! Just like I taught you!" Titee cried.

"Yeah! I'll do it just like you showed me, Titee!"

They synced their breathing as they worked together to construct a single spell. The Wind magic flowing out of their bodies mixed

together as they fell. It wasn't a spell that just added their magic together but one that brought out the individuality of their magic powers and multiplied them.

"*Tauschaus Wynd—Grand Fall*!" they shouted together. A spear of wind, the same size as Nosfy's earlier spell, appeared in the sky above me. But there was more than one this time. Countless spears of wind filled the sky and were about to fall like rain.

Nosfy, who was fighting me on the ground, sensed the magic in the sky above and prepared to block it. I tried to attack to prevent her from doing so, but she flicked my sword out of my hand and pushed me away. She moved away from me, then put her banner of light back together into one piece and stuck it into the ground.

"With that much magic, I have no choice! *Light—Variant Wall*!" Nosfy cried. A dome of black light formed around her and caught the spears of wind.

The whole of floor sixty-six shook as the two superpowered spells clashed. Sparks flew as the spells pushed against each other. Titee and Liner's Resonant magic and Nosfy's Defense magic were evenly matched. However, under the force of all the magic of this place, Nosfy was unable to move. All that was left, then...

"Go, Sieg!" Liner threw a sword at me like a boomerang. I caught Lorwen in my hand.

"I'm good at clearing a path! I'll open a window for you! *Sehr Wynd*!" Titee shouted, shooting magic out of her rifle at the dome of light. It was a simple spell, but it wasn't just any wind that came out of Titee's gun. It was the Thief of Wind's Essence's *Wind of Freedom*, and it dissolved everything in its path.

A hole appeared in Nosfy's defensive dome. Finally I could see the path to victory with my eyes and not just with my magic.

"Thank you, Titee! Liner! I'll take care of the rest!" I shouted. Holding the sword I'd gotten from Liner in one hand, I pushed forward along the path Titee had opened for me without hesitation. I closed the distance in a single breath and was suddenly right next to Nosfy.

She was defenseless. She seemed to have her hands full dealing with the spears of wind and was only managing to stand because of

her grip on her banner that was thrust into the ground. I mercilessly slashed at her with Lorwen. Just as it was about to slice into her flesh, a sudden reverberation, like I'd struck rock, rattled up through my sword and into my hands.

The blade was stuck a hair's breadth from Nosfy's shoulder, blocked by an almost imperceptible layer of black light. It was blocking both Titee's *Wind of Freedom* and my sword like an extra layer of skin. Nosfy, who'd been clutching her banner and looking downward, began to laugh. Her shoulders shook for a while before she finally looked up at me.

"Ohhh, how UNFORTUNATE! Hellooooooooo, Master Kanami!!!"

A thin wall of light deployed behind me as well, trapping me inside the dome with her. Then, she made another huge dome of light, easily engulfing the wind spears. I could tell from the look of pride on her face that I'd fallen for her trap.

"Your magic is all gone, is it not, Master Kanami? But I am so happy that you are so close to me! I can feel your love! But it is unfortunate, is it not? It is *so* unfortunate! Feelings that seem to reach you but cannot. I cannot believe that you lost when you were so close to victory! You worked so hard! But you have LOST! How does that make you feel? Please tell me! Really, I would LOVE to get a good look at the tortured expression on your face!"

Nosfy seemed convinced of her victory. She let go of her banner and reached out to touch my cheeks. But I laughed. Not in a defeated way, but in a defiant way. The corners of my lips curled up.

"What are you talking about, Nosfy? Even if I'm running on empty, it's not over yet!" I said.

Her eyes widened and she stopped moving when she saw my smile.

"*I am going to leave you*. *We will inherit the sword you have left behind*!" I incanted. This was the epitome of spell construction, the quintessence of the magic that led to becoming a Guardian.

"This feeling! Is this... No! It's impossible!" Nosfy seemed to understand, but she still shook her head in denial.

Common sense said it couldn't be done. I could understand Lorwen's life at the Brawl because of my connection with Reaper, but

now I was cut off. I was missing a lot of things to make this work. But I was confident I could do it. I had just done it with Titee, so it would be easy to replicate. I didn't have to connect with Titee's soul this time, just with the soul of the sword in my hand. That's all I had to do to incant that life. In the truest sense of the word, I used my friend.

"This carries the power of all of us! My final attack!" I shouted. "*Dimension: A Wraith*!!!"

I slashed down.

Twisting reality, stealing the essence of the world, the light of my attack transcended all barriers. I exerted all my power, combining everything I'd gained aboveground with everything I'd learned here underground.

The light reached Nosfy and she groaned as it cut her left arm off at the shoulder. I was going to cut her again diagonally through her torso, but she anticipated the Arrace technique and twisted out of the way to minimize damage.

Blood gushed from her wound, but Nosfy immediately stopped the bleeding with her magic, grabbed her detached arm, and leaped backward away from me. She must have been worried about the second shot of my spell. The expression on her face showed that she thought that the sword's reach was the most dangerous part.

Nosfy had lost a lot of blood and grown quite pale. Even if she had been strengthened by her unresolved lingering attachment, it seemed like I'd given her a life-threatening injury. Her face contorted as she spoke.

"Wh-Why? How have you beaten me when you have no magic left? Even your Status... I-It is too wrong. No matter how you look at it, it is wrong!"

She finally looked away from me, as if her draining blood had calmed her down. Then, she activated her magic.

"*Dimension*!" It wasn't Light magic she chose but Dimension magic. She frowned and began to concentrate on the basic spell.

I tried to catch up to her, but my feet were unsteady and I couldn't really move forward. What's more, even if I got close to Nosfy, I wasn't confident that I could use *Dimension: A Wraith* again.

Behind me, Titee and Liner were also exhausted, and it was going to be a long time before they could cast another spell with Resonance magic.

"I knew it. This wrongness is because of Master Kanami's magic. There is no doubt about it. But this strange technique... Could it be a spell to draw in a good future?" Nosfy muttered, sounding angry.

It seemed like in that short amount of time, she'd sensed something. I could tell she'd used *Dimension* to analyze the magic around her. She'd said she was familiar with magic and warding, but I was surprised she could sense a spell I'd cast so much earlier. Or perhaps it was that *Dimension: Calculash—Realize* was a particularly easy spell to sense. When I'd used it before the fight, I'd felt it seep into the world.

As I was calmly analyzing the situation, Nosfy suddenly shouted in frustration. "You cannot be serious! This magic is like controlling someone's destiny! Strength and weakness no longer apply here!" She was acting like I'd cheated at a game. If what she said was true, then it wasn't unreasonable for her to be angry, but from my understanding, the result of my *Realize* spell couldn't be considered *good*...yet.

"You're wrong, Nosfy. The start of it may have been a spell, you're right about that. But it wasn't that useful of a spell. It was just a little bit of *Future Sight*. It just shows you what's possible. I think it's thanks to my own power that I was able to grow through the various Trials that I've gone through, and that I was able to bring this situation to where it is today. I've learned from so many different experiences and people," I said.

People from the past, including Mr. Reynand, had taught me. And so had the late Mr. Hine and Ms. Wyss. In addition to that was the influence of the Guardians I'd defeated up until this point. From Tida I'd learned I shouldn't be defeated by absurdity. Alty had taught me not to pretend to be something I wasn't. From Lorwen, I'd learned not to make mistakes about what my desires were. From Palinchron, I'd learned that no matter what happened, I was who I was. Lorde had taught me not to run away from the past. I believed it was the numbers behind the numbers that made me strong.

"It's thanks to everyone," I said. "Because of the people who helped me, I was able to fail over and over again and still keep moving forward, even when I felt lost. I grew little by little and became this strong. *That* power is what has now surpassed yours."

"What are you even saying?! What do you mean it is thanks to everyone?! It is all, without a doubt, the power of your magic! That's right, you are without a doubt the most powerful Essence Thief now!"

Although Nosfy considered me an enemy, she seemed oddly fascinated by me and seemed to believe I was capable of such a thing. Since the battle wasn't yet over, I was at a loss for words, not wanting to correct her overestimation.

"I see. So this is the true value of the Thief of Dimension's Essence. This is what the apostles were talking about when they said that Master Kanami was approaching completion. You have overcome despair and seized the magicbane with just the strength of your spirit. This is a realm that even Mistress Hitaki could not reach. I thought it was just a bunch of nonsense, but I guess I have to believe it now."

Apparently she'd complimented me enough to feel satisfied, as she waved the banner in her hand and it disappeared. The light leaking from her body dimmed, as did her will to fight.

"Well, I guess it cannot be helped," Nosfy said simply. "I admit that I have lost. From the very moment you used Dimension magic in this fight, I lost. I'm not going to fight anymore now that I know that I cannot get a sure victory. Any more Light magic incantations would be dangerous. Ha! I guess my lingering attachments have increased again."

But Nosfy didn't look that regretful. She seemed rather happy as she looked at her wound, and despite what she said about her lingering attachments, her body looked a little more transparent. It may have only been a little bit, but she was still slightly less solid. While I was thinking about the reason for this, Nosfy cast a spell.

"*Connection*. I will give myself some time to prepare and think about countermeasures. It is not only disadvantageous to go head-to-head with your Dimension magic now, it would be too absurd to

try," she said. She made a doorway of light in the meadow and retreated, pointing her banner at me.

We could have gone after her if I'd wanted to, but I was sure that if we pursued her now, one of the three of us would die. I had already used two of my most powerful spells, but Nosfy still wasn't taking this seriously. By digging into her life itself, she likely had enough magic left for a final spell, and it was likely to be an unavoidable instant death spell. Titee was likely the only one who could deal with it, given how much magic she had, but even that wasn't a guarantee. That was how much of a difference there was between the strength of their lingering attachments.

For now, I should count myself lucky that Nosfy was retreating from the effects of my magic, since I was completely tapped out.

"Well then, Master Kanami," Nosfy said. "I will be waiting for you on the surface. I will be waiting for you to fulfill that oath you once swore to me. Please do not forget that the sins of the Northern Alliance have been atoned for, but the sins of the Southern Alliance still remain. Please, please, do not forget me."

"There's no way I could forget. We'll meet again someday," I said.

"Yes. Until then. I will bring you down, body and soul." Then, as if the fight earlier had never happened, Nosfy bowed with a gentle smile on her face.

The next time we met, it would no doubt be for a fight, but she still left with a show of goodwill. She passed through the door of light and disappeared. After the light fizzled out, I immediately checked my surroundings carefully. My repeated experiences of constantly being ambushed after something important happened made me cautious. After confirming that my enemy was definitely gone, I fell down in relief. My body was at its limits.

"Finally...it's over. Somehow, I won... No, it was a draw..." I sat in the meadow and heaved a sigh at the ceiling.

"Sieg! I'm going to cast a restorative spell on you right now, so don't move!" Liner said as he stumbled over to me once the coast was clear.

As he worked, I called out to Titee. "Do you know what Nosfy's true lingering attachment is?" I asked.

"No, I don't. I have no idea what could've happened in the Southern Alliance back then. At the end when we faced each other, we weren't able to have any sort of conversation," she replied.

"I see."

Titee looked frustrated. She was a kindhearted girl, and she probably blamed herself for not being able to understand her friend's suffering.

"We'll worry about that later, Titee. We need to get up to the surface first," I said. I forced myself to stand up.

Liner, working his Holy magic beside me, hurried to stop me. "Sieg, your wound isn't completely healed! Rest a little longer—"

"No. If we don't head straight to the surface, we'll starve to death. The town here on the reverse side was completely destroyed," Titee replied, seeming to sense what I was thinking. She'd shifted emotional gears and was agreeing with me now. But her light tone caused a vein to bulge in Liner's forehead.

"You're the one who destroyed the city anyway, Titee! And all of Sieg's wounds are from Wind magic! Why are you acting so self-important all of a sudden?!"

"You don't have to be so angry, Liner! I can cry now! I cry super easily!" Titee responded.

"Of course I'm going to be angry! We have to start all over from floor sixty-six because of you!"

"Don't worry about that! From now on, I'm going to be helping you with your Dungeon dives! With my help, we'll clear it in no time! I'm sure we've got plenty of time."

"I haven't forgotten that you were the reason we were surrounded by monsters yesterday..."

"Well that's... That doesn't count, right? From now on, I'm going to be my real self."

I started laughing as they argued, releasing the tension that had built up. I felt a strange sense of nostalgia even though it had only been a short time since I had met Titee. It felt like I was finally back. Thinking about it, it felt like I'd somehow fallen much deeper than just floor sixty-six. It was like I had finally crawled up from the depths and returned to the starting point. With a smile, I stepped

between the two of them.

"Liner, calm down. She's not wrong; we have to hurry," I said.

"Well, if *you* say so," Liner grumbled reluctantly as he continued to cast his Restoration magic.

Thanks to his spells, our bodies recovered at least to the point where we could walk again, although my bones still hurt to their very core. I led the two of them out into the meadow. I went over what we needed to do again as we slowly made our way toward the spiral staircase at the center of the floor.

"We're going back. We left a lot of things on the surface that we have to hurry back for," I announced.

Family members were waiting for all three of us on the surface. We'd all left important people behind when we'd come here. That was more than enough reason to hurry.

"Got it. I'll follow your commands," Liner said, a little dissatisfied.

"Okay, Kanamin! Yes, sir!" Titee said, elated.

They nodded in agreement as they fell into step behind me. My body may have been covered in wounds, but my heart was very light. The display reflected the change in our circumstances.

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[PARTY]
Lorde Titee has joined the party.
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When I saw those words, I felt as if everything I had fought for in this underground battle had been rewarded. Perhaps that was why my walking speed naturally increased. There were no more obstacles to floor sixty-six. The three of us climbed up the spiral staircase in the center and reached floor sixty-five. It was a labyrinth of stairs, weaving into the sky in every direction.

There were many of the labyrinth's denizen monsters, Lizard Fliers, floating around. The closest one to us, sensing an enemy, nimbly approached.

"Leave it to me! *Wynd*!" Titee said, easily catching it with her magic.

"Leave these small fry to your knight! You just keep resting,

Sieg," Liner said, slashing it with his sword and turning it into a magic gem.

Seeing that the battle was over in an instant, I clearly sensed a path to the surface, even without using magic. The path that had felt like a precipice not long ago was now nothing but flat and easy. If this was the case, the remaining sixty-five floors would be just like the current battle, and it would be over before I knew it.

"Liner, Titee, let's go! We're almost at the surface!"

Thus began our final dive so that we could be, once again, beneath the wide open sky. We were determined never to return to this place again, so we pushed onward and upward through the Dungeon.

Chapter 5: Epilogue

The second day since the battle with the Thief of Wind's Essence and the Thief of Light's Essence ended. In those twenty-four hours, we hadn't once seen the sunlight, and we'd constantly been fighting off the monsters that were trying to kill us. We continued to climb up through the Dungeon without eating or drinking.

Finally, we reached the end. When I saw a light in the distance, I naturally started running. After stepping onto the magic gem-lined Pathway Proper, we ran down the final corridor connecting the first floor of the Dungeon to the surface and out the entrance.

At once, a reddish light filled my vision. It wasn't the dim light of the Dungeon or the bright white of magical light—it was natural light, and it enveloped us. Just that one thing made my whole body tremble.

"We... We made it!" My voice spilled out of me, unbidden. "We made it out! The blue sky—well, red sky I've been dreaming of! It's a sunset, but it's still sunlight! Finally! Finally!!!"

My eyes strained against the light of the sunset, making me feel like I might start crying. Now I felt the same emotion as when I'd first wandered into this other world and came out on the surface. I spread my arms out like I was photosynthesizing, trying to feel the world with my whole body. Behind me, Titee came out with a nearly dead Liner under her arm. Her reaction was the same as mine.

"Ooohhhh! Ohhhh!!! The surface? Is this the surface?! Can it really be?! Can I shout out that we've made it to the surface okay?! It's the SUUUURRRFAAAACE!!!"

"Yes, Titee! This is the surface! Outside! And a street! And sidewalks! If you keep going, there's a town! There're no monsters!"

"Wow! You're right! So there's a city ahead?! The Dungeon Alliance, right?!"

We were doing our best to process everything through our

conversation, probably because of the overwhelming emotions we were feeling.

Other Divers walking near us looked at us with disdain as we stood shouting in the entrance. Honestly, they looked at us like we were sad and pathetic in multiple ways. I knew they were staring at us; I could feel it. But I couldn't stop. There was no way I could stop. Because even the gazes of others were now a source of inspiration. After all, we hadn't slept for nearly two whole days. Supposedly, the less I slept, the stronger I was and the more focused I was. Titee was probably experiencing the same phenomenon. In other words, we were now so excited about everything in the world that it was becoming unbearable.

As we shouted at each other with smiles on our faces, the Divers around us slowly began to move away. From among them, only a boy and a girl approached us.

"You two act like you've been in the Dungeon for a really long time." A boy with dark-brown hair approached Titee from behind and called out to us. He looked to be a little younger than Liner. He was twelve years old and his name was Al Quintas. He was wearing tanned leather armor that looked easy to move in, and he had a small sword at his waist.

He looked like a novice diver, but his level was surprisingly high: 14. He seemed like a promising young man. However, his eyes were no different than those of the other Divers around us, and he looked like he'd rather be doing anything other than having a conversation with us. But he was patient enough to stay with us. The reason was simple: We were paying him to stay.

On the way to the surface from floor sixty-six, we'd found a boy and a girl who looked friendly as we passed floor twenty, so we'd stopped them and asked them to share food and water with us.

Titee turned around as Al called out to us. She was so caught up in the moment that it looked like she was about to lift Al into the air and toss him like a little kid. "That's right! It's been almost a thousand years since—"

Sensing where that sentence was heading and that it would cause more trouble than it was worth, I kicked her hard in the back

to get her to stop talking.

"When you're in the Dungeon for so long, it really can feel like a thousand years!" I said, but my excuse sounded a bit forced.

"You're really interesting, huh? You look like you're about to keel over, but you're acting like this..." Al said. Luckily, he seemed to think that our banter was amusing.

I regained my composure a bit and began walking down the road as we talked. "Well, we're used to crises of this magnitude. Besides, now that we're on the surface, we're pretty much safe..." I said.

"You're used to being *almost dead*? Wow...so that's what people mean when they talk about how the Divers capable of making it past floor twenty think. I'm learning a lot from you."

Well, that was certainly one way to put it. I wasn't lying about being a Diver per se. However, standing next to me was the boss who was supposed to appear on floor fifty, puffing out her cheeks in annoyance that I'd just kicked her. But I still wasn't *lying*.

"No, it's a bad example, being used to almost dying, that is, so don't imitate us. Always be as safe as possible. That's the foundation of the Dungeon," I said.

"Okay! We'll devote ourselves to becoming Divers like you one day!"

"No, don't imitate us. We're really... Well...just don't."

"Huh, well, I'm sure you're really good at what you do!" Al said, chuckling as he looked at us with respect.

Even though we'd traveled up the Pathway Proper from around floor twenty on, it was inevitable that we would have to fight monsters. There were several times when Titee and I had helped the young pair fight. Even though we were holding back, Al seemed to understand how strong we were after just a few battles and kept praising us.

But that praise was quickly interrupted. It was the voice of the girl, the last of our escape party. "Um, thank you for your encouragement, but instead of talking, you should probably go somewhere to rest soon. That guy looks like he's really dying..." She pointed at Liner who was groaning in Titee's arms.

"O-Oh yeah, you're right. Sorry, I forgot. Thanks, Emily," I said.

Emily had silver hair and dark eyes, giving her a distinctive look. She seemed to be a mage and protected Al's back with Holy magic.

"No, I'm the one who should be so sorry for speaking so impertinently," she said.

"No way. Really, thanks," I replied.

Emily turned away, although I couldn't tell if it was from shyness or embarrassment. I looked at her face in profile and took another look at her Status. Doll Body was written in her Skills section. There was no mistaking that her awkwardness came from the fact that she was a Jewelculus. When I'd probed Al about it, I had been surprised by his response that Jewelculi weren't that unusual. It really showed just how much things had changed on the surface over the past year. The other reason I'd asked the two of them to accompany us all the way here was to avoid any problems caused by being one year behind the times.

"Now that we're on the surface, Al, I'll pay you...although I did pay most of it in advance..." I said. I took money out of my Inventory by pretending to take it out of my breast pocket. I realized that I'd missed doing this action a bit, actually. It made me really feel like I'd made it back to the Dungeon Alliance.

"Are you sure? You paid quite a bit in advance," Al answered.

"Don't worry about it. Consider this added hush money," I explained. I really wanted to give him more, but I was holding back, so the amount was just barely reasonable.

"Then I will accept it. I won't ask your name, nor will I tell people I met you. I wish you the best on your journey," Al said.

"Thanks. Well, we'll be on our way to Vart. Thank you very much for the escort. Good luck to you too. I'm rooting for you," I told him.

After I handed over the reward, we said our goodbyes. It seemed that Al and his partner were going to Whoseyards to do some shopping with their extra income.

"I wish ya all the best too!" Titee called. We filled our hearts with magic and sincerely prayed for something divine to watch over them.

"Thanks! Well then..."

"Please excuse us, sir, miss," Emily added. The pair shuddered as if a curse had been placed on them and left.

I watched them walk away until they were out of sight, and even after they disappeared, I picked up their conversation.

"All right, Emily, let's hurry to Whoseyards. We still have a lot to do."

"Yes. But thanks to those kind Divers, our plan to get new gear was shortened by ten days, so there's no real need to hurry, is there?"

"It wasn't our effort that shortened the time. We just got lucky. If it was a mistake, we'll be the ones who have to do the hard work later."

"O-Oh, yeah. I might have let my guard down a little."

"We've decided that we're going to rise together. Let's just keep our heads held high until that day comes."

"Yeah...okay."

Their conversation was so innocent. I think I'd been like that once too, even though it had only felt like about a month to me.

Following the example of the rookie Diver's initial thought, I started walking slowly after checking around us to make sure we wouldn't be caught off guard. Titee followed close behind.

"Wow, the surface sure has changed a lot! The strange clouds are gone; it's like a different world." Her surprise was natural, given she hadn't been back here in a thousand years.

"Yeah, it really is different," I said, not having been back in a year myself. Steeling my heart again after our interactions with the newcomers, I took a large cloak out of my Inventory and put it on, ensuring it covered my face as much as possible, then examined the world that had changed so much in just a year.

First off, the Pathway Proper that we were following had changed considerably. In just a year, it had been extended from floor twenty-four all the way to floor thirty. Furthermore, it was obvious even at a glance that the materials used for it had been replaced with ones of higher quality.

After a quick expansion of *Dimension*, which wasn't too physically demanding, I also found that Vart was no longer the same town I'd left. There were clearly more buildings and streets, and more people. There were an unusual number of houses under

construction, and the nature of the people who passed by had changed. I felt that there were many more who seemed kinder than before.

And the most surprising thing was the city's leyline. There was a boxy railroad car on it. It wasn't a steam engine but some sort of locomotive made of magic gems. It could probably only run on leylines, making it rather inconvenient. From the looks of it, it had other limiting conditions as well.

There had been horse-drawn carriages and ships using magic gems before, so it wasn't completely unexpected. Once the technology of the wheel caught up, the groundwork was in place for widespread use in the city. But it was still weird to see it suddenly existing like this—like it was completely natural.

Everywhere was full of vitality, and even the faces of those who made their living doing rough work were cheerful. The world had changed so much that words like "frontier days" or "rapid-growth period" came to mind. *Responsiveness* sensed the distortion that lurked within the drastic changes of the city. I felt as if I were looking at a piece of art on an unstable pedestal, something that was out of place and incomplete.

My discomfort wasn't limited to the visible part of the world. As the bright outward part of a city grew, it was only natural that the world behind the scenes would grow as well. In the shadows, I saw something that looked as if the debt from a year of rapid growth had accumulated. Clearly, the number of poor people had doubled. The air was tense, and the hot-bloodedness of the backstreets had doubled. There were many slaves who had probably been abandoned by their masters. Among them, there were a few who looked like Jewelculi.

Seeing this environment firsthand, I understood that it was easy for a duo like Al and Emily to be born. Al was a former slave who'd been released from his contract on the mainland, and Emily was a Jewelculi who'd been discarded by her country. A year ago, that would have been an absolutely impossible combination.

I recalled the two of them in the Dungeon. Their Statuses still displayed "Slave" as their occupations, and the magic they'd used

was unfamiliar. Even more concerning was the fact that the percentage of semifer in the Dungeon Alliance seemed to be decreasing. There was a strange increase in the number of knights dressed in white and silver, and the glow of the magic gems that adorned the city seemed a bit sickly.

It didn't feel like only a year had passed; it felt like a whole era. And I could think of only one person who could instigate such a world-tilting change. It was likely...

"Hey, Kanamin," Titee said, interrupting *Dimension*'s focus. "I know you want to see the sights, but my stomach has reached its limits, y'know?"

"Oh, yeah. My stomach won't stop growling either. The provisions Al gave us weren't really enough, huh? If we don't get something better in our stomachs and get a good night's sleep, this high will wear off and we'll all be like Liner over there," I said, pointing at the boy in question. He'd reached his limit earlier than we had, so we'd knocked him out because he'd become too high-strung to deal with. But we'd likely be in the same state soon enough.

"Well, we'd better get somewhere before that happens!" Titee said.

"I'll lead the way. It's a good thing we ended up coming out of the Vart entrance. I know the place pretty well, so it'll be easy to find a restaurant."

Honestly, Titee and I could collapse at any moment. I quickly used *Dimension* to find somewhere for us to eat. Incidentally, the place where my house used to be was a beautiful empty lot. Perhaps because of its poor location near the Dungeon, a new house hadn't even been built in its place.

Yeah, it was definitely because of the bad location. Although it was surrounded by colored ropes and treated like a crime scene, it must have been empty purely because of its location. Anyway, with my house out of the running, there was only one place that was both accommodating and close.

"All right, got it. I know a pub near here. We'll go there," I said.

"Sounds good," Titee replied.

Even though it was due to an act of God, I was technically a store

employee who'd run away without the manager's permission. Furthermore, everything that had happened in Whoseyards might have caused trouble for the restaurant. Still, if I had to rely on someone, I wanted it to be the people in that tavern. I remembered the faces of the manager and Ms. Lyeen, who I'd last seen during the final of the Brawl in Laoravia. I'm pretty sure they'd been cheering me on back then. So even though I knew it would cause more trouble, I wanted to see them again.

Of course, there was the possibility that they would be shocked and curse me out for my audacity in showing up again. If so, I would pay back what I could and look for someplace else. Whatever the case may be, there was no way I would discard the pub as an option while visiting Vart.

I was used to walking the route from the Dungeon to the pub. Even if the scenery had changed a little, I got us there without getting lost. I was greeted by the usual sign and door. It was the same as I remembered. The sun was about to set and the evening was turning into night, so we hurried through the front door. As soon as we entered, we were greeted by a pleasant voice.

"Welcome! What would you like to order? Huh? Oh, please, sit here. Wait, what?!"

Ms. Lyeen, the poster girl for the pub, was the one to greet us. She glimpsed my face peeking out from my cloak and did a double take. And yet, as a professional customer service representative, she still managed to welcome us.

"It's good to see you again, Ms. Lyeen. If possible, could we have the table in the corner?" I asked, moving my cloak a bit so she could clearly see my face. She would probably be able to recognize me by the burn scars on my neck.

"M-Mr. Sieg?"

"Yes." I nodded.

She made a cute squeak of surprise and covered her mouth with both hands. "Wow! It really is you! You... You don't look like you've grown at all over the past year! But still! The same as always, huh, Mr. Sieg?"

"Um, do you think you could be a little quieter?"

I really didn't want to stand out, but that may have been impossible from the start because of Titee standing next to me. She was a tall, beautiful woman carrying a blond boy under her arm. In addition to that, she had an aura that was usually associated with important people, probably because she used to be a ruler. As a result, some of the eyes of the patrons in the busy pub turned toward us.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Sieg. I got a little overexcited," Ms. Lyeen said.

"No, it's okay. It really has been a long time. Also, I'm sorry I've been absent from work for so long..." I said, bowing my head deeply.

"What? You were worried about that? After everything that happened?" she asked.

"I was very worried about it. It's not good to skip work. It's something that just shouldn't be done."

"Well, I mean, you *did* ask for permission to continue Dungeon diving, so we weren't really surprised when it was unclear if you were alive or not."

"Well, now that you mention it, I guess I did ask..." I'd entered the store feeling quite self-conscious, but it seemed that I'd been worrying needlessly. After all, nothing good came of overthinking. I was very glad I'd decided to come back to the pub.

"This slightly out-of-sync aura about you makes me sure that you're the real Mr. Sieg. There've been people pretending to be you lately, but I know you're the real deal!"

"Oh, there are imposters?"

"Because you're *that* Mr. Sieg, you know?"

I felt like I didn't want to know much about "*that* Mr. Sieg." I had a very, *very* bad feeling about it.

"I'm sorry, but can we take time to make small talk later? I'm too hungry to do much besides say hi," I said.

"Oh, sure! This is a pub, and you are customers!"

"We haven't eaten well in the past few days, so I'd like three hot meals that are easy on the stomach. I'm also looking for a place for us to stay tonight. I've got plenty of money to cover it all."

"Oh, is that right? It's true, the three of you are in shambles. Is

that kid even still alive? I understand. I'll go tell the manager too," Ms. Lyeen replied.

"Thank you."

After taking our order, she led us to a table in the most unobtrusive corner of the pub and then dashed off to the kitchen. If we took a break here, we would surely get some nice hot soup.

I sighed.

"Kanamin, everyone's looking at us," Titee said. She'd propped Liner up like a doll in one of the seats, which drew even more stares. Thanks to *Dimension*, I knew what people were saying without having to look around. Among the crowd were even a few Divers who had recognized me.

"Hey, is that...?"

"Yeah. Is that really Kanami? He's got black hair and eyes."

"Wasn't his full name something like 'Aikawakanami Sigfried Vizzita Vartwhoseyards von Walker'? I feel like it was something pretty long."

"Come to think of it, isn't it rude not to include 'sir' in front of names in some countries? Also, don't we have to include 'Leader of Epic Seeker' and 'Dragon Slayer' in front of his name?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah! There were a whole bunch of titles..."

I didn't want to admit to any of it, so I stopped listening. I had no idea how I'd ended up with names like that. I looked down to hide my rapidly reddening face.

"Seems like there are quite a lot of rumors about you, Kanamin," Titee teased. "You might even be more famous than me! Maybe you should've been a little more careful!"

"I'd like to think it's not about me, since they're referring to a name I most definitely don't go by."

"That's a path I've taken as well. It's a title, an appellation, and usually an unfavorable one at that. You're just like me!" Titee said, laughing. Seeing as she'd formerly been called the Demon Queen, she seemed happy to find a kindred spirit. I was seriously frightened, since I'd recently learned what misfortunes lay at the end of receiving an unwanted title.

"I really don't think I want to be just like you in regard to

anything," I replied.

"You're stealing my lines again! Being the same as you is definitely a bad omen for me. You always look so unhappy."

"I look unhappy? Seriously?"

"Seriously! If you were left by yourself, you'd always look gloomy," Titee replied.

I used *Dimension* to look at my own face. I did look a little depressed. Come to think of it, I believe I'd been told something similar when I'd had my physiognomy and palm reading done in my original world. I'd been told that I looked like I was born with a lot of misfortune, so I should buy this jar or something that the reader was selling me. I hadn't thought much of it at the time and refused, but now I wondered if maybe I really should've bought it. Maybe if only I'd bought the jar, I wouldn't have been called to another world, brainwashed, had my personality taken from me, or switched bodies with my sister. In *this* world, there were indeed such things as blessings, so perhaps the jar really would've worked. In that case, had I denied myself the possibility of salvation? And on top of that, I just couldn't trust anyone else—

"Hey!" Titee interrupted my thoughts. "You're getting lost in your thoughts again, and that's no good! You're probably thinking up all kinds of nonsense. You should be more careful, Kanamin."

"You're right; it's a bad habit of mine. Thanks for calling me out, Titee." I felt like I was thinking more stupid thoughts than usual, probably because I was way past my hunger and exhaustion limits. A jar? What was I ever thinking about? Maybe I would just buy one when I got home. Just in case I needed it for an exorcism or to ward off bad luck or something. Yeah...just in case.

"It's a good thing we're working together now since we're the same, Kanamin! If you ever have any problems, just talk to me about it!" Titee said, patting her ample chest.

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

Although she would deny it, Titee's ability to lead was very encouraging. Thanks to her, my fears about the future were instantly drowned out.

While we were chatting about such trivial matters, a man

approached our table. “I thought the pub was louder than usual, and now I see why. You must be that newbie from a while ago. It’s been a while.”

“Oh, Mr. Krowe. It has been a while,” I said. He was the warrior who had taken care of me when my level was in the single digits. A year ago, he’d always taken his meals at this restaurant, and that still seemed to be the case.

“I’m surprised you remember me. I’m touched,” Mr. Krowe said.

“I’d never forget what you taught me about the Dungeon,” I replied. I stood up, shook his hand, and urged him to take the empty seat at our table. The buzz of the people around us grew louder at this. The presence of someone who knew me clearly confirmed their suspicions.

“Hey, it’s really him! Sir Aikawakanami Sigfried Vizzita Vartwhoseyards von Walker!”

“Wow, you’re right. He’s a real hero, right? It’s the first time I’ve ever seen him.”

“I thought there was a reward for bringing him back to the Walker family?”

“He’s the winner of the Allied Nations’ Brawl. How would *we* be able to take him down? I don’t think even Krowe could beat him.”

I wish they’d stop with all the gossip. It seemed like there was a bounty on my head, after all. However, the atmosphere was not that of an immediate attack, but rather very calm, as one would expect from a bar in the vicinity of the Dungeon. The patrons seemed to be accustomed to the presence of criminals. Only I wasn’t accustomed to the name Sir Aikawakanami Sigfried Vizzita Vartwhoseyards von Walker.

I looked down again, my face growing even redder, and Titee continued laughing. Then, cutting through the buzz was the owner coming from the kitchen.

“Quiet down you lot! He came here because he relied on me and this pub. I won’t let anything happen to him! Then again, on second thought, the newbie is probably already stronger than me,” the manager said, raising his voice and coming to my aid.

This was something I’d missed. I’d been saved like this before

when I'd worked here.

"No, that's not true. You're not only strong but also have the dignity of an adult. That's why I feel safe here," I told him.

"Ah, there it is. That suspicious way of talking. You sound like our newbie, all right. It's been a long time."

I looked down again, a little shocked at being called suspicious. "Y-Yes, it's been a while. Um, I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

"You're not troubling anyone. I told you from the start that even if you disappeared, we wouldn't have a problem. So don't be so full of yourself, newbie. I've got a lot to tell you, but you eat first. I just whipped this up."

Even though my position had changed in many ways, the owner was the same as always—fearless. I figured he knew my personality well enough after having worked with me for a little while. That was the best response I could have asked for.

He placed two plates on the table, and Ms. Lyeen came out of the kitchen with another. There was a bread bowl with slightly bland soup and a salad of soft, boiled vegetables. The soup was milk-based, and the salad dressing was a low-oil citrus type. The slight aroma of pepper on the salad stimulated our stomachs and made us drool. The smell was even enough to wake Liner.

"Thanks..." Moving like a zombie, he lifted a spoonful of soup to his mouth.

"It looks delicious! Don't mind if I start before you, Kanamin!" Titee, on the other hand, began devouring it energetically.

The owner stared at the two of them with a slightly concerned look in his eyes. After all, it seemed that a person of his stature would know what the pair was capable of.

"So, who are these two? More bad news?"

"Um, well, they're a former knight and a traveling entertainer from Whoseyards... Uh, they're my friends who go into the Dungeon with me," I said, trying to get in an introduction before either of them could say anything.

"I'm...Liner... Sorry for being...rude..." Liner managed, his mouth still full of soup.

But Titee's mouth popped open in shock. "An entertainer?! I'm former royalty, you know!"

"Nope, you were just yelling how much you hated being called queen," I said.

"Huh? Oh, I guess you're right. I wonder why... I guess it's the psychology of being sad about having to let something go. Ah, it's a mystery. Anyway, this soup is hitting the spot."

The manager's delicious cooking had made me very tired. Maybe the fatigue of the past two days, or perhaps a thousand years of fatigue, was catching up to me.

"Just stop talking. Your hunger's making you spout nonsense," I said.

"Okaaayyy, yes, sir. Nom nom." Titee, perhaps realizing that she was confused, fell quiet.

I pointed at her now that she was engrossed in her salad and continued my introductions. "That's Titee, a traveling entertainer."

"Did she just say something about royalty? No, no, that's okay. You just got back. No need to go into detail," the owner said with a wry smile, clearly sensing that he didn't want to get into it.

Mr. Krowe, sitting across from me, and Ms. Lyeen also laughed.

"You're right," Ms. Lyeen said. "We won't ask any questions. We know you're a good guy, Mr. Sieg, and you'll be able to solve any problem that gets thrown your way, just like you did with Lastiara."

I stayed silent. Lastiara. At the mention of her name, my body, which should have been weak, lit up with heat. My heart rang like an alarm bell, and the flush in my cheeks deepened. I knew that feeling. The emotion from *???*, which had been sublimated into *Double Covenantor*, was coming back beautifully. They were definitely feelings of love. That's why I grew restless at the mere mention of her name.

I remembered the gleam of her silver hair. The girl who was as magical as morning mist, as beautiful as a naked blade, and as gentle as sunlight. And her smile...

"Um, do you happen to know where Lastiara Whoseyards is now?"

"Hm? I imagine she's in the cathedral. But isn't that because you

escorted her back home, Mr. Sieg? At least, that's what I heard," Ms. Lyeen said.

It seemed unnatural that I didn't know where Lastiara was. I had to get a grip and start gathering information.

"Do you think you could tell me more about what happened?" I asked.

"*You* want to know what happened, Mr. Sieg?" Mr. Krowe asked. "You were so concerned about the life of the living goddess that you kidnapped her from the cathedral, didn't you? After that, I heard that you negotiated with the priests of Whoseyards to change their treatment of her. So when she had had enough of exploring the outside world, she returned to the cathedral satisfied with her role and is now doing that work voluntarily. Or so I've heard."

"I see." I had no memory of any of that. But it seemed better to drop it. If there was one thing I couldn't accept, it was the fact that Lastiara was back in Whoseyards and cooperating willingly. After all, the passage of a year seemed to be significant. I had asked Snow to take care of everyone that day, but I wasn't sure if that had been enough.

Lastiara had been weak and vulnerable when we'd parted. How much of an impact had that had on the world over the past year?

"Kanamin, don't get lost in your thoughts again. Let me hear what's on your mind," Titee said in a serious voice, stopping me from descending into my bad habit again. She really was dependable. I didn't think anyone could beat her in terms of raw ability, with her combination of past and present skills.

"Lastiara Whoseyards. She's my friend."

"Whoseyards? Could she be related to Nosfy?" Titee asked.

"No. If anything, she was related to Tiara," I began to explain, letting myself rely on Titee.

"No, Sieg," Liner said, interrupting me. Food and rest had clearly revived him a bit. "The situation with the living goddess is complicated, so wouldn't it be faster if we went to see her and talked to her directly? Let's go to Whoseyards tomorrow. We're lucky she's close. If she rejoins our group, she'll be an incredible asset when we fight Dr. Ide. Let's finish eating and get to sleep soon."

Right now, Liner wanted to prioritize rest over information sharing. I agreed that seeing Lastiara would be the quickest way to get the information. After all, we were friends. It would be most efficient to have Titee hear it from Lastiara herself.

"Let's do that. Titee, is that okay with you?"

"Yep. I agree that I should meet her in person if she's a friend of yours, Kanamin. After all, it's better to see things with our own eyes than hear about them from others."

"It will delay us getting to Ide a little bit. Is that okay?"

"I'm feeling better now, so I could wait for another hundred years and still be okay."

Titee didn't seem to have a problem with it. She was able to answer with a sense of ease that was characteristic of an Essence Thief. Her patience was probably the best in the world, and that wasn't an exaggeration. After all, she had come this far after overcoming a thousand years of torture.

"Um, Mr. Sieg?" Ms. Lyeen said, a touch of concern in her voice.

"I haven't been back to the Dungeon Alliance in a while, so I'm going to go check on Lastiara tomorrow. We're good friends, so I should be able to meet up with her easily." It wasn't a bluff or anything, just the truth. At present, the security net of the cathedral shouldn't be a problem. It should be easy enough to meet her in secret.

"Good," the owner said, looking a little relieved. "It looks like that's settled, then. Don't worry about your lodging. You're all good thanks to Krowe there. You can stay here if you want, like you did before."

"Thank you very much. But I think it might be a little dangerous to stay here, so we'll find somewhere else. Somewhere nearby," I replied.

"Well then, I'm heading back into the kitchen. If you need anything, ask Krowe here. I'm sure he can help," the owner said.

Both he and Ms. Lyeen returned to their work. Mr. Krowe grumbled about being put on the spot as I immediately struck up a conversation with him. However, I didn't have much time for small talk, probably due to sleepiness and physical problems. I ended the

conversation quickly after asking him about a safe inn nearby and how to get there.

As soon as everyone had finished their soup and salad, we left the pub and said our goodbyes to Mr. Krowe.

"Thank you for everything today, Mr. Krowe," I said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm proud of you. You can brag till the day you die that it was me who taught you the basics of Dungeon exploration, okay? See you later. I look forward to seeing you again."

As I watched his form disappear down the dark streets of Vart, I realized how lucky I was to have met such nice people in such a nice place when I'd started diving into the Dungeon. If that wasn't luck, what was?

With renewed spirits, we started walking toward the inn we'd been told about. Titee was carrying Liner once more, as he'd reached his limit again and passed out. We arrived at a reasonably expensive and large inn and rented a big room for the night. At first, I wanted separate rooms based on gender, but Titee, feeling lonely, didn't like that idea, so I ended up getting a single room. I figured nothing could happen between the three of us, so it would probably be okay.

"So, this is what a modern inn is like? Not bad," Titee said, setting Liner down on one of the beds and sitting on the sofa nearby. I observed the room with *Dimension*. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary. There weren't any magic tools or traces of spells.

But there were a few things that caught my eye. The cleanliness of the room was acceptable to me even though I hadn't been concerned about hygiene when I'd stayed in Vart a year ago. I would call it an overpriced place, but the quality was strangely good for the cost. Clearly, the level of culture here had risen while I was gone.

"Don't furrow your eyebrows like that. It's become a bad habit. Relax, relaaax! Do what I do. Tomorrow I get to meet Kanamin's friend Lastiara! I'm kind of looking forward to it!" Titee said as I finished my safety check. She was right about not needing to be so cautious that I was unable to rest. If there was an attack of any kind, one of us would definitely notice it. I had my *Responsiveness* skill, of course, but Titee's and Liner's intuitions were also in the

realm of the extraordinary.

"I think you'll get along with Lastiara," I said.

"Oh, really? We'll get along? I'm even more interested now. Hey, Kanamin, do you think you could tell me a little bit about what kind of person she is?"

"Well, that's a bit difficult. But to put it simply, well..." This was going to sound very personal, but there was only one overriding impression that I had of Lastiara. So I would tell it like it was. "She's a very bright girl. She's also the girl I love."

I loved her. She was everything to me.

"So she's bright, huh? And you love her? I see. Wait... You...love her?"

"Yes, I love her. I can't wait to see her. And all my other friends too."

Having arrived at the safe haven of the inn and let out the words I'd been holding inside for so long, I immediately relaxed. My eyelids became heavy, and my body sank into the bed. My consciousness, which had been so preoccupied with everything, easily slipped away. I could hear Titee's voice in the distance, but I'd reached my limit. The sense of security separated my consciousness from reality.

I'd finally made it back to Vart. My friends were here on the surface. Lastiara, Maria, Snow, Reaper, and Sera. I had a lot to apologize for and a lot to talk to them about. And then there were the people I wanted to help and enemies I needed to fight: Apostle Sith, who'd kidnapped Dia, and the Guardian Ide, who'd taken my sister.

I had a lot of things I needed to do. But for now I had to rest. I would close my eyes and sleep, and when I woke up, a new battle would begin. It would be another battle I couldn't afford to lose.

But for now, I would rest.



Afterword

We've finally hit volume 10.

I think I've reached a milestone. There were many things that happened before I reached this point, but I feel that I have resolved quite a few of my (the author's) lingering attachments. However, the heroines still have some unfinished business, so I will do my best to run through it until I resolve their stories.

As for the contents of this volume, the Dungeon life section is completely finished. From the next volume, life on the surface will resume in earnest. It will be a gamelike development in which we'll finish our shopping in the Allied Nations a year later and explore a new world with a new heroine. Then, we will settle the score with the boss character, the Thief of Wood's Essence, Ide, who kidnapped our hero's sister. Without a resolution with Ide, I can't really say the Dungeon life is truly over.

My announcement is over and I have nothing left to write. My apologies. To be honest, I'm not good at writing afterwords. I can't tell a nice little story, nor can I give an interesting update on what's going on in my life. My only hobby is playing video games. And yet, after I write this afterword, there's an "afterword for the afterword" waiting for me. The only way to get through it is to list the games I am currently playing. It's truly a horrifying thing, but on the other hand, the hobby is in full swing. I am such a game lover, and *DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level* is being made with games as my sustenance. The next volume in particular will be a very gamelike book.

So, about the cover! This volume features Lorde Titee. It's a very bright cover. Since Nosfy was on the cover of volume 9, volume 10 absolutely had to be Titee. It's hard to put it into words, but my initial request, in which I had no idea what I really meant, was that this tenth volume should be like Titee's true self, and Ukai-sensei

responded to it beautifully, creating a wonderful frontispiece. I am deeply moved every time I see my outpouring of desire taking shape. I am truly surprised and grateful.

By the way, the otherworldly letters in the illustration were not my idea but Ukai-sensei's. I am so, so grateful.

Finally, thank you to those who have picked up a copy of this tenth volume, and thank you to those who have sent me feedback via the web. Thank you to everyone who has been involved. I believe that all of this has been put to good use in this volume.

So, this afterword was the usual announcement, apology, and thanks! That's all!





Lorde the Sovereign Queen **Chapter 3: The Defense of Viaysia**

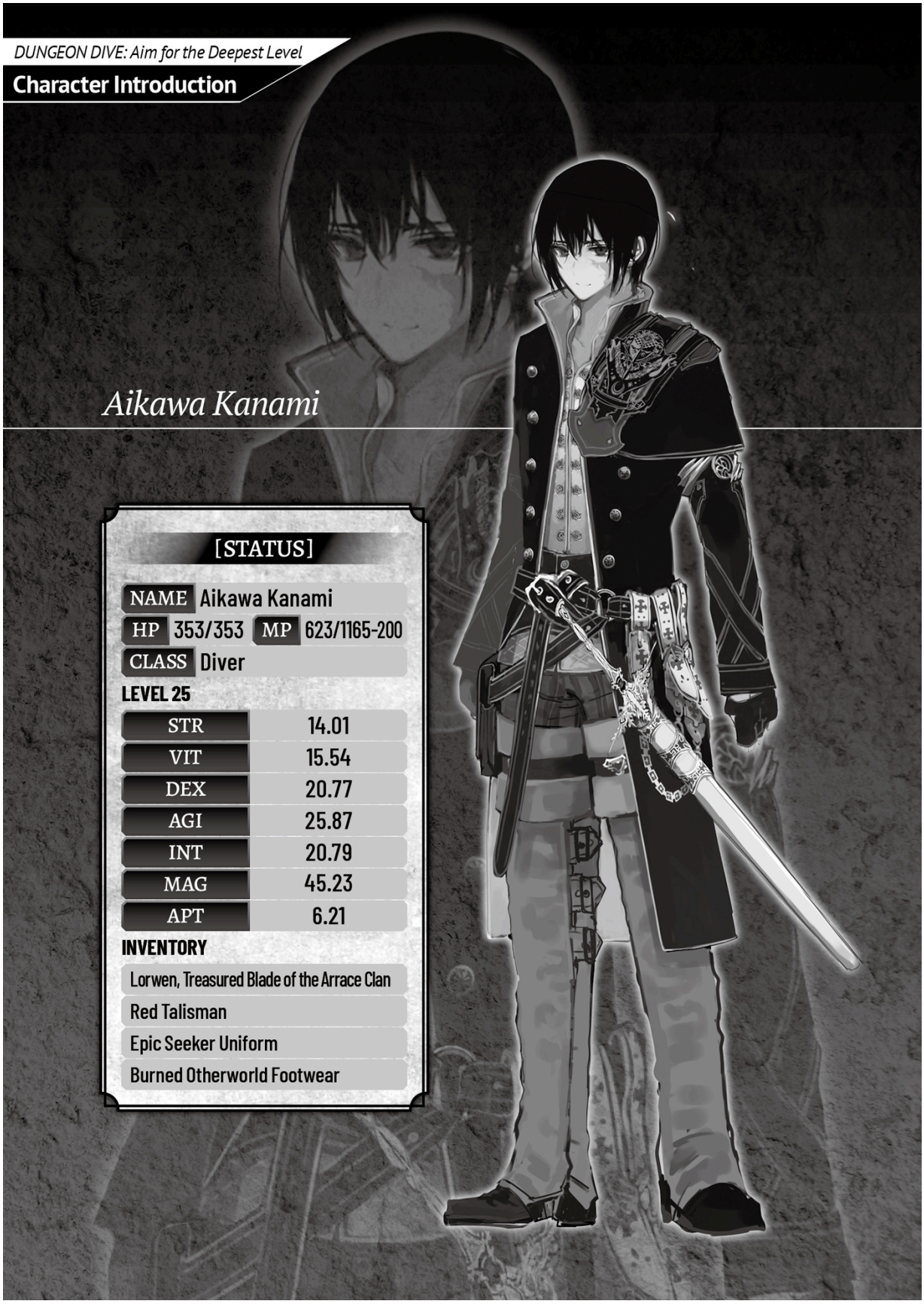


Lorde the Sovereign Queen **Chapter 5: The High Queen**



Lorde the Sovereign Queen **Chapter 0: Childhood**

Character Introduction



Aikawa Kanami

[STATUS]

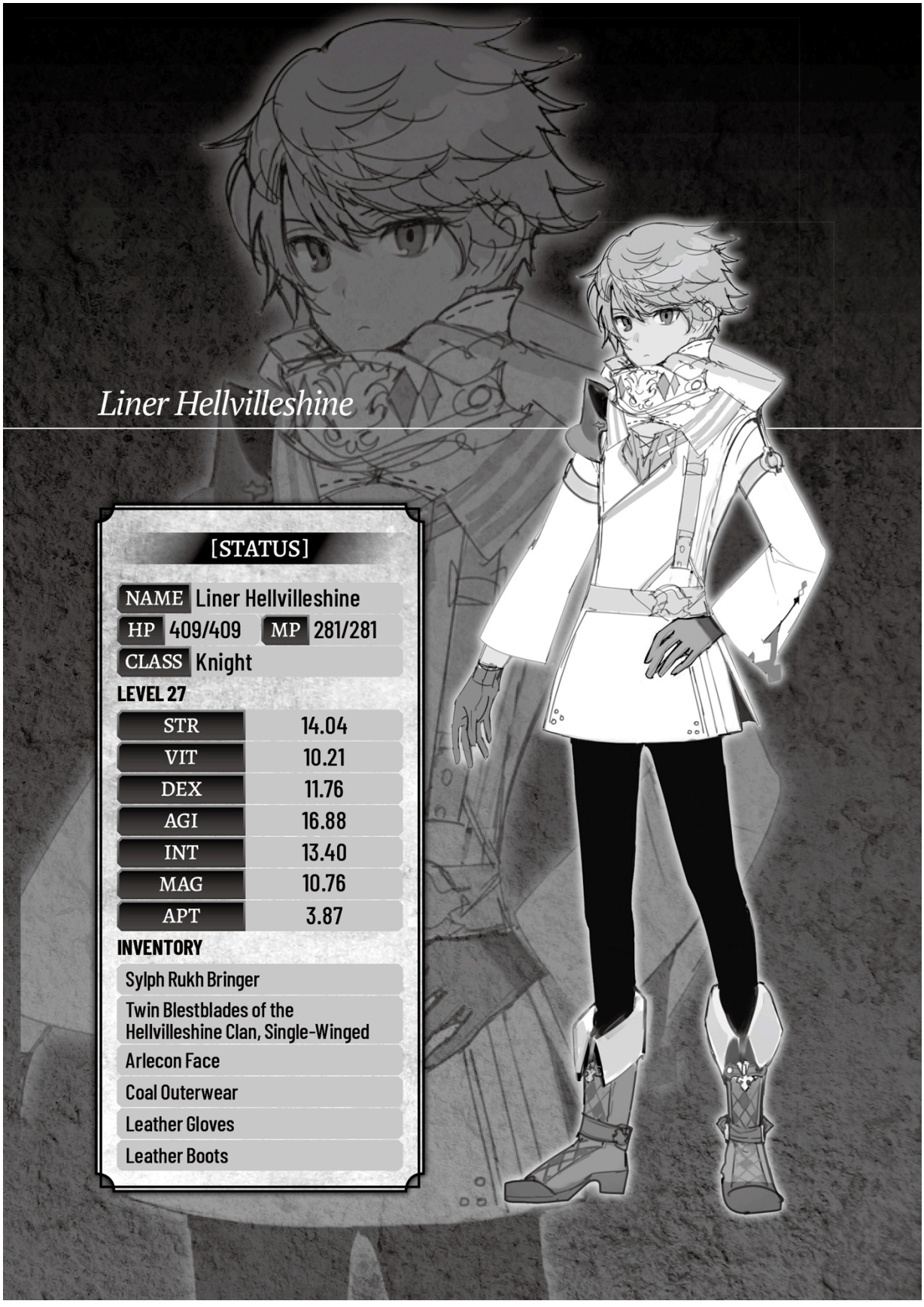
NAME	Aikawa Kanami
HP	353/353
MP	623/1165-200
CLASS	Diver

LEVEL 25

STR	14.01
VIT	15.54
DEX	20.77
AGI	25.87
INT	20.79
MAG	45.23
APT	6.21

INVENTORY

- Lorwen, Treasured Blade of the Arrace Clan
- Red Talisman
- Epic Seeker Uniform
- Burned Otherworld Footwear


Liner Hellvilleshine
[STATUS]
NAME Liner Hellvilleshine
HP 409/409
MP 281/281
CLASS Knight
LEVEL 27
STR 14.04
VIT 10.21
DEX 11.76
AGI 16.88
INT 13.40
MAG 10.76
APT 3.87
INVENTORY
Sylph Rukh Bringer
Twin Blestblades of the Hellvilleshine Clan, Single-Winged
Arlecon Face
Coal Outerwear
Leather Gloves
Leather Boots


Quinquagesimal Guardian,
The Thief of Wind's Essence
Lorde Titee
[STATUS]
NAME Lorde Titee
MAGIC
SPELLS Wynd 5.21
Sehr Wynd 1.21
Ix Wynd 1.07
UNIQUE SPELLS Lorde's Road 1.02


Sexagesimal Guardian,
The Thief of Light's Essence
Nosfy Whoseyards
[STATUS]
NAME Nosfy Whoseyards
MAGIC
SPELLS
Light 3.12
Light Arrow— *Blaue Nacht* 1.34
Light Rod— *Nosfy's Banner* 3.09
Light— *Variant Wall* 1.56
UNIQUE SPELLS

Bonus Short Stories

A Story That Isn't about Liner and Nosfy

Viaysia Castle was also known as the Demon Queen's Castle. I was currently walking through this place that I'd only read about in history books before. I'd left the room that the Essence Thief Lorde had loaned to me, and I was currently walking down a long, long hallway, passing hundreds of other guest rooms. It was the dead of night and, perhaps it was because even the plants were asleep, but the castle was as silent as a grave.

I thought about the legendary Demon Queen, my footsteps the only sounds I could hear in the entire world. At Eltraliew Academy, where I'd been studying until recently, we were taught that a thousand years ago the ruler of the North had fallen into madness and murderous rage and become something of a demon. But the Lorde I'd met seemed the complete opposite of that. And even more than that, the impression I got from the Demon Queen's Castle was completely different from what I'd heard. It had been described as a terrible place filled with magicbane, but it was actually a splendid castle filled with nature. It was evenly matched with the castle I'd seen in Whoseyards. I actually had a more favorable impression of this castle, given its simplicity and sense of honorable poverty. It was a really beautiful and calm place, and I felt very comfortable.

"It's very pretty, even if it is a little too quiet," I said to myself. I was shocked by the difference between what I'd been taught and the reality of it. I also wondered why they were so different. Even if the victor, the Southern Alliance, was in control of the narrative, it still felt a little strange. Come to think of it, there hadn't been anything about the World Restoration Array that had been triggered a thousand years ago either.

Just as I was pondering the reason for some aspects of history

being hidden and others being emphasized, a voice called out to me.

"Liner Hellvilleshine, are you still awake?"

Nosfy, the Thief of Light's Essence, appeared from the depths of the corridor.

"You!"

"You do not need to be so defensive. All I did was call out to you."

Of course I was being defensive. She was, after all, also a legend: the Banner of Light who had led the Southern Alliance to victory a thousand years ago. And from the way things had been going, I was pretty suspicious about whether the glorious history of that Banner of Light was actually true.

"Do you need something?" she asked.

If possible, I wanted to have as little to do with her as possible. Even as reckless as I was, I knew that I didn't want to face her alone. "There's no way I could need anything from you," I said.

Nosfy looked a little sad, and I wondered if it was because I was being so guarded. Then her expression softened. "I understand. Well, would you mind telling me about Master Kanami's life aboveground?"

"Aboveground? I don't know much. Coming down here was the first time we worked together," I said.

"I do not mind if you do not know much. Please, anything will do."

Her request was sincere, and as a knight, I couldn't refuse. I could see the pure look in her eyes. I could tell there wasn't a guilty conscience hiding behind those eyes, so I began to dig back into my memories.

"I first met Sieg quite a while ago. At the time, I was a student at the Academy, and I was doing a Dungeon dive for an exam. I was losing badly against a monster that was smaller than I was," I said.

"Oh, an academy! So there's one of those on the surface now..." Nosfy said sagely, as if she were sorting through memories from her own past.

It felt a little strange, almost *too* normal. Perhaps it was because Sieg wasn't with us now, but I didn't feel the same intimidation that

I'd experienced when I'd first met Nosfy.

"And then, just as I was about to be eaten by the monster, Sieg appeared."

"Dashing in to face the danger! Amazing! That is exactly like him," Nosfy replied, her eyes sparkling like a child who had just met their hero. It felt like she was a little proud of him too.

I couldn't understand the meaning behind that, but I continued nonetheless. "Yeah, he just suddenly appeared. I had truly been ready to die then. So when he came and saved me, it felt like he was my guardian angel. I could practically see the halo glowing over his head. It made me believe that there really were heroes in the world. I was so moved. I truly looked up to him."

"Yes, I understand how you feel. When I met Master Kanami the first time, I too felt like I could see a halo over his head. That light is burned into my memory; I will never be able to forget it."

I was silent.

"What is the matter?" Nosfy asked.

"Nothing. I just expected you to laugh at me when I described him like that..." When I'd told this story to my classmates back at the Academy, they'd told me to go see a doctor.

"I would not laugh. I understand your feelings well, Hellvilleshine," Nosfy said, nodding.

I turned to look at her and could tell her empathy was genuine. This girl, like me, believed wholeheartedly in the existence of Sieg, or rather Aikawa Kanami.

"So, I fought Sieg a few times for various reasons, but the more I learned about him, the less I wanted to kill him. I was supposed to be pursuing him to avenge my brother, but before I knew it, he had become indebted to my brother. Eventually, I swore to protect Sieg as his knight, and that's how I ended up here."

"I see. The more I get to know Master Kanami, the more I get the impression that he is a very different person than before. You can't really see it from the outside, but he is someone who has walked a very hard road. After I learned of his hardships, I began to think that I would like to help him."

"I agree. Sieg thinks he's taking the super easy road and just

letting his talent carry him, but he's actually struggled a lot. But even though he's having a hard time, he's still a good-natured guy. I think someone respectable should support him."

"You are very perceptive, Hellvilleshine—more than I expected of you."

"So are you, Thief of Light's Essence."

In the middle of the night, Nosfy and I were in agreement about Sieg. From this conversation, I was convinced that we were very much on the same page about him, and *only* about him. I didn't say anything about it out loud. I felt that if I did, I would regret it. Perhaps she felt the same way. It seemed like no matter how many times we recognized the other's perceptiveness, that's all that would happen. That brought our conversation about Sieg to an end.

"Well, I guess I shall be going," Nosfy said.

"Yeah, I've got nothing else to talk about."

We avoided a long conversation with each other. But as we parted, Nosfy, with a strange expression on her face, seemed to have one last thing to say.

"I do wonder why that is, Hellvilleshine. I feel like you and I will be spending a very long time together."

I agreed but shook my head in denial anyway. "No way. You're gonna disappear soon. This whole world will." I was a person living in the present, and Nosfy was an Essence Thief from the past. I hoped that her final happiness was close.

"I see. Yes, you really are perceptive. Really. Well then, have a pleasant night." Nosfy looked at me in amazement, then smiled and finally turned away.

I stood alone in the corridor of the Demon Queen's Castle, vigilantly watching her power-wreathed form disappear from view. I could feel the strength of the legend from a thousand years ago and the fragility that lurked behind it.

The Day the Gatekeeper Was Assigned to Paradise

This is a story from the distant past. It's the story of a sister and brother who lived in a meadow in the far north a thousand years ago. Before they were caught up in their extraordinary destiny, the two were engaged in a great adventure that was second to none for the Sovereign Queen Lorde and her chancellor. Their adventures included more than a few escapades that almost cost the two of them their lives. On top of that, because of Titee's natural abilities, many of their adventures involved animals and monsters. This adventure is the one most representative of them all.

A carriage tore across the prairie that stretched across the northern country of Viaysia with a monstrous bird flying next to it. Its feathers were bloodred, its beak was crooked, and its calls, which escaped from the back of its throat, were ghastly. It was definitely a creature that was closer to being a monster than an animal. However, the eyes of this monstrous bird were so calm that they seemed out of place with its appearance. There was none of the strong killing intent in its eyes that was characteristic of animals that had been mutated by magicbane. That was because of the voice of the girl who was riding on the bird's back.

"Thank you very much! You can leave the rest to me!" Titee, her green hair flying behind her, jumped off the bird's back after thanking it. She stood in front of the oncoming carriage and shouted, employing her superhuman lung capacity to do it as loud as possible. "Stop!!!"

The word echoed across the meadow, and the carriage came to an abrupt halt. It wasn't the driver who'd brought it to a halt but the horses themselves who had obeyed Titee's command.

"What the hell, you little brat?!" The sudden stop clearly surprised the driver, but he immediately figured out it was Titee behind it. He jumped down with his sword in hand to eliminate the problem, and a few other men appeared from the carriage.

"Your actions may be legal in the South, but they aren't in the North!" Titee cried angrily.

The fight lasted only a moment. It wasn't that the men in the carriage were weak, but that Titee's talent was so extraordinary. It wasn't that she was invincible, but she certainly wasn't just a run-of-

the-mill bandit either. Titee's fists knocked out the men one after another.

"Die, bitch!" The last remaining man aimed an arrow at her back.

"Sister!" Ide called out. To compensate for his sister's recklessness, he was assigned to watch for enemies in her blind spot.

Trusting him completely, Titee whirled around blindly and hit the man with her tightly clenched fist.

Thus ended that adventure's battle. That day too, Titee protected the peace of the northern prairie. Ide was truly satisfied with this and went on with his work. He was to capture and identify the unconscious men.

"Sister, these aren't legitimate Southern merchants. They're just bandits," Ide said after checking the contents of the carriage.

Titee was catching her breath. "Huh, so it wasn't that big of a deal."

"No, it's because you're too strong. They weren't people we should've been able to apprehend with just the two of us. We should've waited for the arrival of the military police from the capital."

"But this time it was a family crisis, so just leave it alone," Titee said.

"You're right. I didn't think about stopping you this time. They're our colleagues and my family, after all," Ide said, looking at the carriage.

At the same time, Titee opened the door and flung her arms out wide. "My vassals! Fear not; I am here to save you!"

A wide variety of animals had been caged and held captive inside. The reason for this was very simple—animals that lived only in the Northern prairies sold for high prices in the South. Some were collected by the wealthy as a hobby, while others were used as experimental materials for research on magicbane. Incidentally, it was forbidden to capture rare creatures unique to the North. Nevertheless, once the animals were brought into the South, it was difficult to prosecute the smugglers. That was why Titee and Ide did everything in their power to protect their friends, the animals, and

took the risk of dealing with the smugglers into their own hands.

"There's all kinds of weird stuff in here," Titee said as she went around breaking the cages, but she stopped when she spotted an unfamiliar face among the crowd.

"It seems these bandits have been catching all sorts of things outside of their own areas," Ide said.

"Well, it's okay. Run, run everyone! The North is the land of freedom! But don't cause too much trouble for others. If you do, we'll have to come back and deal with you!" Titee said, choosing to let them all go without much thought. However, not all of the creatures ran away.

"They aren't really scattering. I guess it can't be helped. Let's take the rest of them to the woods near our place," Ide said.

This was also normal, and creatures that had fallen in love with Titee would end up living in the forest around their house. Ide, accustomed to his role, took the bandits to the capital for processing and then received the various permissions needed to keep the animals in the forest. Titee told the animals to all get along with each other, and the case was closed.

"Well, I guess we've done our job. Let's go back," Titee said.

"I'm sure grandma and grandpa will scold us severely if they find out about what happened," Ide said.

"Don't say that. Actually, it's better to not even think about it!"

They made their way out of the forest and back to the gabled house.

"Sister?" Ide said.

A lizard-like creature was tottering along closely behind Titee. It was fairly large, but from its movements, they guessed that it was still a baby.

"Oh, what's this? It seems strangely attached to me. Are you a lizard?" Titee asked.

"I haven't seen one of these in any of the books from the capital. It must be a rare species, sister," Ide replied.

"Oho! Hey you, do you wanna come home with me?" Titee asked the lizard, which nodded cutely in response. "No can do! We can't keep pets at home. It would cause problems with grandma and

grandpa! Shoo, shoo!”

Even though Titee was being harsh in trying to drive the animal away, it didn’t move an inch. She sighed, resigned.

“I guess I have no choice. Chancellor! The book!” she commanded her brother.

“Yes!” This was clearly also something that happened often. With a practiced air, he pulled out a well-worn book from his breast pocket. It was the heroic fairy tale of the Sovereign King Lorde.

“Hmmm, what would be a good name for you? What fits? Oh! I found it!” Titee cried. Then she bestowed a name upon the unreasonable animal. “You’ll be Elfenreize!”

She gave that name to the baby wind dragon who had lost its home and found its way to the Northern prairie.

“I have a task for you, loyal Elfenreize. As my vassal, I ask you to protect these prairies and forests,” Titee continued. “Please keep a close eye on them so that no other such villains like the ones today ever pass through here again. As long as you fulfill that role, I will surely come to visit you. I promise. But that won’t work, will it? Everyone in the forest is a good guy, aren’t they?” Titee said, looking the baby dragon directly in the eye. Elfenreize finally nodded after a moment and headed toward the forest, as if he’d found his place.

“All right! I’ve gained another vassal today!” Titee cried.

“I would expect nothing less, sister!”

With that, the matter was finally settled, and Ide and Titee laughed together as they headed home. That shoddy promise was probably an extension of her game of make-believe. However, it was certainly a genuine contract between the two. It would be a thousand years and only after she had lost everything that the girl would know the true meaning of it.

The Otherworld Heroines' Otherworld Massages, Part 6

This takes place after the end of volume 10, so be warned!

After the life-or-death battle on floor sixty-six, we finally made it back to the surface and rented a room at an inn in Vart. The following day, after alleviating the exhaustion of our mad dash to the surface, I was doing some flexibility exercises in the room before having lunch. I wasn't in bad shape, but my body still felt a little off.

"I feel pretty stiff all over," I muttered to myself.

The Thief of Wind's Essence, Titee, who was sharing my room, overheard me and came over, a worried expression on her face.

"You're stiff?" she asked. "I could give you a shoulder massage."

"N-No! I'm okay! I don't need a massage!" I stuttered as she reached out to me. I had a bad feeling and practically jumped away from her.

The reason for that was simple: Titee, naive woman that she was, was closer to the calamitous likes of Lastiara and Snow than the angels that were Dia and Reaper. My experience to date triggered my instinctive rejection of her offer.

"What? Don't be so skittish! I'll be gentle!" Titee, seeing my flustered state, crept closer to me, opening and closing her hands threateningly. This woman was definitely a disaster waiting to happen. I couldn't allow her to give me a massage.

"No, no, no, I really don't want one!" I said, shaking my head. But she sidled closer and tried to grab me. "No, no, no, nonono!"

And somehow, that started a martial arts battle in the narrow little bedroom. The match ended easily. While I could beat her at Swordsmanship, I was no match for her when it came to martial arts. I kept her hands away from me for a little while, but before I knew it she had me in a full nelson from behind. She then dexterously swept my legs out from under me, pushed me to the floor, and pinned my right arm behind my back. I was successfully locked in what in my world would be called an "arm-snapping

crucifix" or something along those lines.

"Damn it! I can't win! Also, it hurts! Why do you have to be so extreme! You're gonna break something!"

"I figured it would be over quickest if I broke your arms and legs first."

"Broke them?! What kind of massage is this?!" I shouted, actually quite serious. But what was more troublesome than the pain was the sensation on my right arm. As I had thought earlier when she'd put me in the choke hold, she was so indifferent to her adult body that a voluptuous part of it that shouldn't be touching me was resting against my arm. Pushed by this embarrassment and guilt, I used real magic to escape my restraints. "*Distance Mute*!"

As my limbs turned transparent and I made my escape, Titee looked at me like she was hunting a piece of prey.

"Oh, you're good! But the more you run away, the more I'll burn! I'm not going to let something this interesting get away from me."

Somehow, her fighting spirit had been ignited. I knew she was hungry for a little fun but please, not during a massage! She just wouldn't stop, though. I immediately started thinking, trying to get my brain, which only ever spun uselessly in combat, to come up with a way out of this situation.

"Fine. Then I'll give *you* a massage," I said. I would change my position from receiver to giver. That way, I probably wouldn't be traumatized by it.

"Oh, you're going to give me one? That sounds interesting too! Okay, then!"

"Considering your age, this is more natural anyway. Lie down, grandma."

"Don't call me grandma!" Titee, as obedient as a child, immediately rolled over onto the bed and lay face down.

I straddled her back and began to massage her in my own way. It was the most basic of the basics: back acupressure.

"Kanamin, it's not effective at all! Do it harder!" Titee was less than impressed. I knew why.

"Your body's too hard. And don't you have a thin layer of magical protection on? This," I said, poking at her. Her physical durability as

the demon queen gave her an unusual muscular density. Furthermore, she always, unconsciously, had some sort of magic ward around her. I guess it made sense for a boss character.

"Don't complain to the customer! I'm just a little stiff!" she cried. Apparently that's all she would say on the matter of her impenetrable defenses.

I had no choice but to use all my strength to seriously penetrate Titee's body with my fingers. I wasn't too sure if it was a good idea or not, but nothing else would work on her. I was supposedly strong enough to hollow out rocks and iron plates.

"Are you trying to tickle me? I can't feel much else," Titee said.

"Are you serious? This kind of pressure would literally put a hole through a normal person and kill them instantly."

"Well, it's still not working! You're useless! You can't think like I'm a normal person! I'll show you a real massage!" Titee, filled with discontent, tried to get up.

Shit. If things continued like this, offense and defense would switch again. And what was more, her words sounded strangely confident and dangerous. I definitely wouldn't be able to recover from another traumatic massage.

"W-Wait! I've got it! Seriously! *Distance Mute*!"

"Oh? What...? It's coming from inside me?!"

With no other options left, I stuck my arm inside Titee and began to massage her very soul. It was a completely new kind of massage, but strangely, she seemed to appreciate it. I rubbed the magic gem that was Titee's soul as gently and carefully as possible, as if I were massaging her heart. The effect was so great that Titee, who'd been complaining nonstop, immediately got quiet and began to enjoy it. She let out a few groans of pleasure. However, that was a problem since I was still on top of her.

"D-Don't make such weird noises!"

"Mmmm, but... Ahhhhh..." Her body jerked, and with that, she went from face down to face up.

That naturally brought me face-to-face with her flushed expression. Moreover, right below my hands were her voluptuous—

"Hey, Kanamin... Keep going..."

I instantly released the spell. “Nope, it’s over. We’re ending here today. All done.”

“What?! But it was so good! You were just doing it for real!”

“Nope, I’m at my limit. I can’t do anything more.”

“Liar! You were inside me for a lot longer underground! Do it again! Again! Pleaaaaase!!!”

“No. I said no. I’m tired!”

“Just your fingertips! Just the tips! Again!!!”

We continued to quarrel as we scuffled on top of the bed. Thus began another wrestling competition in the room, but this time Liner spoke up from outside the door.

“Sieg, Titee, I can hear you from outside the door. From the start...”

That brought our battle to a sudden end. I grew pale. I realized that instead of avoiding the emotional trauma of a massage, my reputation here in Vart had been deeply damaged.

Titee laughed hysterically at the result, Liner was mortified, and I had tears of regret in my eyes. I vowed to myself that the next massage would be one that did absolutely no damage.

Let’s Aim for the Top of the Academy, Part 9

There were many arenas scattered around the Allied Nations’ Eltraliew Academy, and most of them were open for students to use no matter the time of day. Hence, our duels continued until midnight. My opponent also had the skills necessary to make that happen. No matter how many times I lost, Siddark was nice enough to never seriously injure me. He also had the motivation to meet my endless challenges. And as a result of this unfortunate turn of fate, red petals finally fell in the arena at midnight.

I breathed heavily, my breath smelling of blood as I watched the scene before me. My friends, Liner and Annius, were also witnesses to it. I was able to witness that miraculous moment.

“D-Did he win? Against Siddark?” Liner stuttered.

“No way! Did Kanami really win? Against the most powerful student this Academy has ever seen? And in just one month?” Annius asked.

Both of them stood there, mouths hanging open, refusing to believe what they’d just seen with their own eyes. Their reaction wasn’t that surprising. Those who attended this academy were well aware of the abnormal strength of Elmirahd Siddark. He was rumored to be the only man in the history of the academy to have mastered all forms of magic and was undefeated in duels. But now, a new Level 1 who had just transferred to the Academy had broken his legendary record.

“It’s not a lie, Annius. And, for the record, I didn’t take it easy on you, Kanami. This is the legitimate result. The duel is a contest between physical condition and situation management. As long as you have the basics down and don’t lose heart in the face of my power, these things can happen. Yes, as long as you can do the very basics of battle—that is, hold a sword, use a sword, and keep your opponent in check—then this is the natural outcome. Until recently, you relied too much on magic tools, Kanami,” Siddark said, apparently unaffected as he gathered up the petals that had fallen

from the flower attached to his chest.

Then Annius, the meekest but most well-informed student at the Academy spoke up. “No way; you dueled over a thousand times. I still didn’t think it would be possible with the rules for this kind of fight. But it happened so quickly...”

“It did happen much quicker than I anticipated. But I knew if Kanami understood the basics, then it wouldn’t be too long. After all, his memory is extraordinary. He can easily memorize all of our spells and tactics. And even though he may not have the same level of ability, he is able to prepare accordingly.”

All in all, El was probably right. But there was one point I took issue with. It wasn’t my memory that was unusual, but El’s teaching ability that was remarkable. He was really good at teaching and really good at making his students aware of what they were doing. He was good at leading students. Because he was well versed in all types of magic, he was able to give clear and simple explanations to students of any attribute without wasting time. To put it bluntly, he was the most qualified teacher in this Academy. However, that didn’t mean that his personality was suited to teaching.

“Yes, this defeat of mine was destined. And now, all the preparations are complete. Now it’s my turn to have fun!” El smiled wickedly, in a way that didn’t suit his princely appearance. And then he asked me to fulfill the promise I’d been repeating all throughout these thousand-plus duels. “Just as promised, you’re my next target, Kanami. If I raise my level in this state, my win rate, which was one in a thousand, will increase many times. And soon, without a doubt, I’ll be the best hero of the academy, or maybe even the continent! What you needed was neither a research fund nor a laboratory. It was the sword in your hand! All you needed was a swing of that sword!”

He really wanted me to be his rival. I’d promised him that I wouldn’t just be a romantic rival for Ms. Snow but also a competitor on the road to becoming a hero. I nodded back at him, feeling a little uneasy.

“Yeah. I’ve become stronger thanks to you, so I’ll repay the favor,” I said.

"Good answer. Now you can take off. The school's restrictions don't matter, and the protection of House Arrace isn't necessary. You can go anywhere and everywhere with just one swing of your sword, to realms that no one can reach. I can assure you of that."

El reached his hand out to me, the one he'd tempered into shape, and gave me an expectant look. I thought it was somewhat warped, but at the moment I had no choice but to take his hand.

"*Flame Arrow*!"

A magic arrow interrupted our handshake before it could happen. I turned away quickly but let go of my sword in the process, sending it flying. It skidded through the sand of the arena, coming to rest at the feet of the girl who had cast the spell. It was my employer, a girl with light-red hair, Karamia Arrace, who had been absent from the Academy ever since I'd announced my intention to challenge Snow.

"No," she whispered, picking up the sword. "Mr. Kanami doesn't need a sword. It's better if I hold on to this."

She was acting strangely. El seemed to sense it too and moved in front of me protectively.

"I heard you'd gone home," El said. "When did you get back to the Academy, Miss Karamia? Also, I'm the one who decides whether he needs a sword, not you."

"You're wrong. I'm Mr. Kanami's employer. I have the right to decide. He promised. That's right; we made a vow to each other. Here, in this letter." Miss Karamia unfolded the paper in her hand and held it out.

El stared at it with a furrowed brow and then immediately laughed it off. "It's a typical employment contract. It doesn't give you the right to restrict his life like that."

"Typical? Did you say typical? The bond between Mr. Kanami and me is *typical*?"

El's response had been light, but Miss Karamia's overreaction to it was strange. She stared at me with vacant eyes. And then the emotion I had feared all along exploded from her lips.

"We talked a lot that day, the day we made this promise. We confided our wishes and dreams to each other, exchanged our hearts and minds, and discussed everything together. All through the

night, in my room, just the two of us. The whole time you listened to me, so seriously. All night long!”

Lust oozed from her vacant eyes, and it was aimed not at El but at me. I knew that emotion; it was one I’d had on my face just recently.

“Everyone, if they knew my true nature, would have been frightened, given in, and given up on understanding me. But Mr. Kanami was different. He kept looking straight into my eyes and wouldn’t give up on understanding me the whole time. And finally, he became the first person who understood me. So he is my fiancé. He is my lover. He is my Kanami. Siddark, do you understand? This precious bond of ours is—”

“The story of you two being lovers was just a rumor.”

“It’s all true. It’s already been decided. Not only has the groundwork been laid at the Academy, but he’s already met the Arrace family. The fait accompli is perfect. All that’s left is a push. Just one push...”

She must have been longing for love. It wasn’t that uncommon. I’d been thinking about Snow so much that today I’d pulled off a miraculous victory over El. Karamia clearly felt the same obsession. That’s why I had to confirm with her that it wasn’t a mistake.

“Please calm down, Miss Karamia. You’ve made a big mistake in your goal right now. What you wanted was the Academy. So why did you hire me?”

“Yes. Domination by force is all I’ve ever wanted to do. But now, the order of my priorities has changed a little, and you’re at the top. That’s all, Kanami,” she said, smiling at me. She was the very embodiment of the phrase “love is blind.” The way she’d shifted her life’s goals and prioritized my domination was just...

“Kanami, your level will remain the same from now on. Level 1 will always be enough. You will remain my butler, my personal alchemist, and my greatest confidant, and that will be enough. There is no need for a hero under my rule. Of course, I will prepare everything for your happiness, so please don’t worry. From now on, you will stay with me under my control, forever at Level 1. I will decide everything for you. The time you go to bed, the time you

wake up, tomorrow's breakfast, lunch, dinner, morning greetings, evening greetings, the clothes you wear, the people you talk to, the people you smile at, the people you are kind to—everything about the time you spend, I will manage. That is happiness. That is *your* happiness from now on. So, please don't worry. You will be in my hands forever and ever."

"Miss Karamia!" I ignored her and shouted her name, stopping her. But my next words didn't come out. Because I understood how she felt. Although we were going about it in different ways, I could sympathize with her as someone who was also in love. I was equally in love with a girl named Snow, so now I was at a loss for words.

"Yes, you understand this feeling, don't you, Kanami? No, I don't need to ask. You understand me. If you recognized and accepted this feeling of wanting to dominate, then you understand! I want every inch of that body, forever and ever and ever!" Miss Karamia stepped forward, clutching the sword in her hand. Her magic was not something that a young student should be wearing. It was a frighteningly thick and sticky magic.

Liner and Annius nearby were overwhelmed and stiffened in fear. Only El kept his composure and continued to protect me, his expression cool. "So you don't approve of his emergence as a hero because you want to keep him to yourself, huh? I can understand that, but I can't tolerate it. After all, Kanami's current love interest is Snow Walker, not you."

"Don't say that name, Siddark!" Karamia shouted, becoming agitated for the first time at the mention of Snow's name.

Seeing that response, El sighed and repeated the provocation. "That's right; it's a common complex. It's really just jealousy, nothing new. It's so common that now I'm feeling discouraged by your banality."

"Elmirahd Siddark...I'll show you how uncommon it is. Let's settle it here—for Kanami."

"Fine, let's duel. If I win, then you'll help with my plan to make Kanami a hero."

Thus, a duel was about to begin in which I would subtly gain nothing no matter who won. Neither mentioned any rules. That was

proof enough that it was a real duel, not a game like the one I'd been playing with El earlier to knock the flower off the other person.

"You can't win, Rank Two. While you've been giving your power to Kanami, I've been converting his power into mine. As my personal alchemist, I made him create many magic tools to defeat you, all of which I am now wearing. And now I also have the best magic tools that have been handed down in my family. I will use all of them to beat you," Karamia said, showing off the bracelets and rings I'd made, and the sword, which was more disastrous than her own magic, that currently hung at her waist.

"I had heard that the Arrace family controlled cursed armaments from all over the continent. I had no idea that the heiress would get her hands on them and misuse them. The small fry sure are getting bold, Rank Three," El replied, not put off even a bit. He drew his sword. However, he didn't step forward. He instead took a few steps back toward me, and spoke in a whisper.

"Liner, Annius, take Kanami and get out of here quickly. Although I got her to focus on me through provocation, I won't be able to beat her. Obviously, the limiter has been removed by multiple cursed magical tools she's got." He'd preemptively announced his own defeat.

I couldn't accept this obvious bait-and-switch and shouted out loud. "El! Then you should join us!"

"If she catches you now, everything she said earlier will come true. She has the power and financial resources. Not only will you be easily married, but you'll be kept in captivity for the rest of your life. You just have to get the power to oppose that. Power enough to convince both Snow and Karamia, permanently. If you're my rival, you know what I'm talking about, right?" El said, stepping away from us again.

Liner took the hint and quickly pulled me away by the arm. "Good luck, El! C'mon, let's go!"

I wasn't going to resist. I knew that the only way to solve this situation was for me to raise my level and get more power than Karamia. But there was one question left in my mind. I wondered if raising my level and defeating her would really be the end of the

story. Because I knew the answer to this question already, I was thinking of a different path than El and the others as I left the arena. A path that only I could choose.

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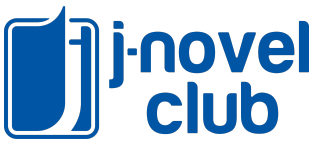
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DUNGEON DIVE: Aim for the Deepest Level Volume 10
by Tarisa Warinai

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