

Vanguards: The World Waits for No One

by

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Introductory Essay: This Ability

I've been legally blind my whole life. It's barely something I think about since this is just reality for me, but there's no denying how much it's affected my life. Growing up, I couldn't play sports and I had to have adjustments made to my classroom experience so I could keep up with others, which made me feel alienated. Every summer, I'd attend summer camps for other visually-impaired kids – Camp Helen Keller and Camp Abilities – which showed me that despite limitations, people like me could still live full lives. These experiences have shaped who I am, how I treat others, and how I interact with stories. Through the lens of a disabled person, I aim to tell stories that can connect with all readers, but for the purposes of this essay and my Senior Project, I'd like to focus on the disability narrative.

My parents and teachers have always told me I was creative, so at a young age, I knew I wanted to do something creative in my life. I bounced between mediums as I grew up, from drawing dumb comics on printer paper in elementary school to learning about the art of video games in middle school, then high school where I tried to learn how to write my own anime. It was only in senior year that writing became my main medium. After a semester of a dedicated Creative Writing class the previous year, I had already begun considering it. My English teacher

for the year, Mr. Gershfeld, then gave us a long-term assignment about halfway through the school year to write a multi-chapter historical fiction short story. Though I took a while to pick out a time period for it, I hit the ground sprinting on that project once I got to writing the story. I could blow through chapters and assigned word counts in a single night. By the end of the project, I had almost double the minimum page requirement. It's thanks to that assignment that I am where I am today.

From there, I began to read deeper into the stories I watched or read, and from there came my realizations about disability in stories. When I was a little sticky-fingered gremlin of a child, I watched plenty of cartoons, and one of my favorites, for many reasons, was *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. One aspect of it that always stuck out to me was the character Toph, who is fully blind. She had her limitations like anyone would, but her character is based around the idea that through these limitations, workarounds can be found that will not only help you achieve your goals in some way, but may end up changing the game as a whole. Seeing someone like me not only kick serious ass, but do it pretty much because of her disability, excited me. It's the same excitement I felt years later as a sticky-fingered gremlin of a teenager when I learned the superhero Daredevil, another blind askicker, would be getting his own Netflix show.

It was these characters that made me realize how much I enjoyed stories with disabled characters where they're treated with respect into my mind, but there is a specific pair of manga that made me think critically about how to build such a story — *My Hero Academia* and *Black Clover*. Both of these stories feature worlds where superpowers are innate, but feature star characters that have none. These protagonists are, in their world, disabled and have lived

their lives with abuse, mockery, and, if nothing changes for them, their dreams will be out of reach. The difference in these two stories comes from how this change in the characters manifests in the first chapter. Midoriya, the protagonist of *My Hero Academia*, is given a power that allows him to chase his dreams. His disability is effectively cured, leaving readers like me realizing that he wouldn't have been able to chase his dreams and live how he wants if he stayed disabled. The protagonist of *Black Clover*, Asta, also gains a power that lets him chase his dreams, but his power is based around his disability and couldn't be done by anyone else. A new path of life was formed out of the workarounds needed, and his friends were there to help him when those different paths weren't possible.

Realizing the discrepancy between these two stories helped me form the ideas about how a disability narrative should go, greatly affecting how I've written my Senior Project — *Vanguards: The World Waits for No One*. This first book of what I hope will become a long series introduces the reader to a fantasy world, Rave, that's so dangerous that most of it is still uncharted and unstudied. Because of that, there exists the Vanguards Organization — a multinational association of explorers that go out into these unknown lands in order to study them, using physical prowess and magic powers to survive the harsh environments. This book follows Dina Carroll, a physically weak but intelligent teenage girl as she participates in a test to determine whether or not she'll be accepted into a prestigious school that trains Vanguards. This is made all the more difficult because of her disabilities; she's grown up with severe depression and anxiety. She could never bring herself to train physically or with Magic because these disabilities held her back mentally. As part of the assessment, she must participate in five-day battle and wilderness survival test relying only on her smarts while trying to adapt and

find ways of keeping up. Early on, she's able to team-up with two other girls to take the test together; the headstrong-but-kind brawler Tala and the serious, stoic swordswoman Najida. Over the five-day test, Dina grows from a nervous, self-doubting person to someone confident enough in her strengths to stand up for herself and her dream.

When I talk about disabilities, I mean both mental and physical. Depression, PTSD, Autism – these are all conditions that can affect someone's life and what they're able to do as much as being blind or in a wheelchair. I want to strike a balance between physical and mental impairments, which aren't always immediately noticeable. That's why, while her two closest allies seem untouchable at first, we eventually see that both of them have their own handicaps they're contending with. Najida is afflicted with severe PTSD that keeps her from trusting others and showing weakness of any kind while Tala is visually impaired and will one day lose her sight entirely, which makes her impulsive and cocky to compensate her feelings of helplessness over her future. It's through each other that the girls realize that they aren't weak for being flawed humans like everyone else, and that by working together, they can achieve their dreams and become Vanguard. Their disabilities don't go away, even if they're all in a better place mentally by the end. Instead, they find ways to live with it, or even to make it a strength.

This overarching disability narrative ties back into one of the story's main themes – the world waits for no one. Time marches forward, you grow older, opportunities come and go, etc., so what should someone do about this? Especially someone with a disability? The character Rosalita, the principal of this Vanguard school as well as head proctor of the test, is herself Neurodivergent. Her attitude is that the inherent unfairness of the world won't change

and that people just need to power through difficulties to reach their goals even if it hurts them in the long run. The impact of this attitude is shown through her being overly cynical, distant, and putting on a cold exterior. Dina's growth challenges this viewpoint, showing that while working hard to achieve your goals is needed, you shouldn't have to struggle tooth and nail. Reaching out to others and asking for help while offering them help in return can lighten your load and help you flourish without having to ignore your limits.

Disability is just one aspect of my cast, though, as a diverse cast has always been my mission. Race, culture, sexuality, gender, religion, and disability; I want my cast to be realistic in that you can see a variety of people represented. Even though this aspect of the narrative is based around disability, I want anyone to be able to pick up the book and feel connected to the characters. For disabled kids, that kind of feeling comes less easily than others, but hopefully, this can let readers everywhere know that they aren't lesser for being different. That no matter what stands in your way, there's always a path that will get you where you want to go.

Chapter 1: The Dream Team

It's hard to put the spirit of adventure and discovery into words. That feeling when you want to walk further than you've already gone because you don't know what's ahead or putting together pieces of a mystery you hadn't realized were laid out. It's a raw, human instinct to dive headfirst into the unknown, no matter what it may be. To those who give themselves over to this feeling and let it guide their life's path, they are given the title of Vanguard.

— Leon Blackmore, *Year 2 of the Rave Calendar*

To be a Vanguard – a professional explorer – a courageous soul is lauded as the premier aspect needed. Dina Carroll, a freshly 18-year-old girl from the Territory of Ebury, knew what was truly most important in becoming one – strength. Strength to endure the world that a Vanguard are tasked to travel and study. A world with ferocious beasts beyond anything she could imagine. A world where the weather could shift from monsoons to tornados to sandstorms in the blink of an eye. A world that has claimed the lives of Vandguards many times over, yet still called out to those who yearned to see it.

That world, so rich in history and culture and possibilities, called out to Dina as well, and the value of strength, in both physical hardiness and Magic, is what stood in her way. Despite a lifetime of reading and studying, her lack of prowess in either kind of strength was an immeasurably large roadblock to her goal – acceptance into the Vanguard Academy in the city of Chorus, Neutral Ground.

Or so she thought. To her surprise, she had passed the initial entrance exam, which consisted of a written test and physical examination, and was invited to take part in the second part of the test; a practical test that would decide her placement in the different ranks of classes – Basic, Intermediate, or Advanced. That’s why, when she traveled by train from Ebury to the port city of Aqualung on the western side of Neutral Ground, her credo was this: *Don’t waste this chance.*

The night before this practical test began, the participants were gathered for a street fair near the docks of Aqualung. All down the road were students packed between decorated booths for food and games and lounging in front of local businesses. This festival wasn’t only for the students to relax, but for alliances to be formed for the test. Students had been advised that for a test involving strength, smarts, and surviving a harsh environment for nearly a week, having teammates would increase their chances of passing. As such, the incoming students did what they could to show themselves off. Some of the fair games Dina had seen like the strength tester and shooting range were set up to help this, but most students opted for a more direct showcase in sparring matches set up all down the road.

Dina looked down and chided herself once more for the clothing she had worn – a rose-pink shawl with white fur lining held closed by a pink bow, a white sweater underneath, a long

red skirt with a pink ruffle along the hem, dark red boots, and a red bow in her massively curly blonde hair. After comparing everyone else's sturdy-looking clothes and her attempt at looking "presentable," she was fearful of sticking out like a sore thumb. This idea had been what made her retreat from the crowds so many times. That, and her repeated failures at approaching her peers.

She was sitting on a bench at the edge of the street fair, grinding her boot's flat heel into the concrete. In the many times she had left the crowd, this bench had been her refuge. In the empty parking space next to her, she watched through big blue eyes a trio of her peers finalizing their own alliance for the test. They were complimenting each other on the power each had displayed in the sparring matches, comparing scores on the entrance exam, and discussing the provisions and survival gear they had brought. They seemed especially rugged, decked out in tough clothes and even bits of armor. One had a sword on his back while another carried a staff and a third had gauntlets. They looked ready for an adventure; ready to answer the call of the world.

Dina considered joining the conversation, but when she tried to stand, her body turned against her. Her knees buckled, her face became red and sweaty, and her breathing sped up. She stopped and took some deep breathes, but by the time she calmed down, the three students were long gone.

I can't keep chickening out like this, Dina told herself. She clenched her fists, rose to her feet, and marched herself left towards the crowd of her fellow test-takers.

She turned right around and retreated not a moment later.

Plopping herself down on the bench, Dina buried her face in both hands and groaned. "This is getting me nowhere," she admitted to herself. In her desperate attempt to motivate herself, her older sister came to mind. *What would Hazel say if she walked by and saw me like this?*

Hazel Carroll, currently on the other side of the fairgrounds, had been in Dina's position seven years prior. After a high score on both the entrance exam and this placement test, she graduated in the top class two years later and went on to earn her Vanguard License. What confused Dina was Hazel's decision not long after graduation. Only a year and a half into her planned career path of studying the plants of newly-discovered lands, she had settled into a more peaceful job in the Vanguards Organization – the school nurse of the academy in Chorus. It was a baffling move to Dina at the time; how could anyone give up studying the world and making discoveries out in the unknown? Hazel's answer was concise – "I wanted to stay put for a while." It didn't help Dina understand, but she had no reason to question what her sister did with her life. And now, despite Hazel making it clear that she had to be impartial as a test proctor, her presence was an assurance that Dina was immensely grateful for.

From her skirt pocket, she retrieved her cell phone. Her sister's contact info was already on the screen from her last attempt to call her. Dina clicked the call button and begged that her sister wouldn't be busy this time. The phone rang a few times, but this time, Hazel did pick up.

"Dina, hey," Hazel greeted quickly. "Sorry I didn't call back. The first-aid tent has been packed all night. I swear, these kids are like wild animals."

Dina could hear the fatigue in Hazel's voice and considered hanging up and blaming a misdial, but one look back at the street fair made her take the chance to talk. "That's fine. I'm sorry to call while you're so busy."

"it's fine. It must be important if you're trying again so soon."

Dina checked her call history and grimaced when she saw it had been less than 10 minutes since her last attempt at calling. "Well, not *that* important," Dina said. "I need a pep talk."

"Another one?"

"J-Just a quick one," Dina swiftly pled.

"It's alright, I'm not judging," Hazel assured just as quickly. "You're just socializing right now; you don't have to do any sparring. Just talk about your score on the written half of the entrance exam. People are sure to want someone as smart as you."

"What if they ask about the physical half?" Dina fretted into the receiver. "What if they don't want to team with me because I'm so weak?"

"Then they're missing out. You may be inexperienced and a little weak, but you got that big brain of yours. A seven out of 50 on the physical half is bad, sure, but it's not the absolute worst—"

"It was a one," Dina reminded her, quiet enough that no one would overhear. "I got a one out of 50."

Hazel's line went dead quiet. Dina had to check to make sure she hadn't hung up. "Just talk about your written test score," she advised again. "Hey, I've gotta go. Some girl's leg is

bent the opposite way and I have to make sure she can walk to the boat later. Come see me in a little bit, OK?”

Dina’s eyes went wide at Hazel’s reason for hanging up and looked warily back to the crowd. “A-Alright,” she said, swallowing a pit in her throat. “Thank you, Hazel.”

“No problem, and good luck. I believe in y— Kotsu, not like that! Gotta go! Bye!”

With that, Hazel hung up. Dina was left staring at the screen in silence. *I’ve only got about thirty minutes left before the street fair ends. My last chance for a team to take the test with...*

Her boots knocked against the concrete, keeping her mind from wandering anxiously as she entered the street fair once more. Even with her time on the bench, she had seen enough of the sparring matches to scout some possible teammates. *Perhaps that Guppy Merfolk boy hasn’t found a team yet?* Dina looked around and found the boy with the orange and white fins on his forearms across the street, but crossed him off her list when she saw him with three other students. *Maybe the scythe-wielding girl and that muscular boy would let me join up with them?* After a bit of searching, she spotted the pair in question, but they were leaving the street fair and heading for the docks already. *There was a Harpy girl who had an interesting Magic Ability. Maybe she’s still available?* Dina’s hopes for this teammate were high when she spotted a pair of blue feathered wings in the crowd. The Blue Jay Harpy girl was talking to the scaly, sharp-toothed boy Dina had seen earlier. *That boy’s an Iguana Saurian. How fascinating.* She approached swiftly, but before she could make it, a pair of boys popped out of the crowd in front of her. They blocked her path and chatted up the two non-human participants without even noticing her behind them.

“Excuse me?” she managed to squeak out. “E-Excuse—”

When one boy’s arm accidentally bumped her back, Dina lost the nerve she had built up. She turned and walked to the other side of the street, letting out a whimper of failure. Defeat had just elbowed her in the shoulder; to her, nothing in the world was more obvious.

Once she reached the sidewalk, though, her eye caught on a girl standing alone, leaning back on a storefront with her arms behind her head. Dina remembered watching the girl sparring earlier, but hadn’t considered searching for her in this last attempt. *I would’ve sworn up and down after seeing her sparring matches that she’d be on someone’s team by now.* The thought that she’d want to work alone crossed Dina’s mind, but desperation was a powerful push on Dina’s back and she stepped quietly towards the lone girl.

She was half a head taller than Dina with peachy skin and toned, athletic muscles that stretched her tight outfit – a dark blue jacket with black edges and a coattail off the bottom, a pair of matching pants, black gloves, and tall black boots. Most of her dirty blonde hair was gathered in a thin ponytail, leaving only her bangs loose in a sideswept fashion, and over her brown eyes was a pair of chunky black goggles with thick lenses.

“Good evening,” Dina greeted, finally getting the girl’s attention as she approached her side.

The girl tilted her head to get a good, long look at Dina and grinned at her. “Oh, hey, it’s you.”

Dina’s polite smile faded in her confusion. “Pardon me?”

“You’re the girl who’s been creeping in and out of the street fair all night.”

Dina's mind froze and her face turned beet-red. She backed away with mechanical stiffness, spun around, and made a mad dash out of the street fair. She went passed her previous sanctuary of the bench and into the small alley between shops nearby. Only when she stopped and put her back to the wall did she realize she was trembling. Her whole body felt hot and clammy, slick with anxious sweat. What worried Dina most, though, was her inability to catch her breath. All of these thoughts were just background noise to what dominated her mind.

Have people been watching me this whole time? Do I already have a reputation as the creepy girl? Did they overhear me talking to Hazel? Oh God, I just want to curl up and die here!

"Hey, I'm sorry about that." A voice from the alley's exit broke through Dina's panic. The goggle-wearing girl was standing there with a worried look. "Really, I was just trying to break the ice. Guess I blew it, huh? Seriously, I'm so sorry."

Dina took a deep breath and pushed off the wall to stand upright. "I-It's alright, I'm fine," she fibbed. "I'm sorry for running away so rudely."

"Hey, no worries," the girl shrugged. "Did you want to talk to me?"

"I did, yes." In an odd way, Dina felt calmer than she had been all night. Chalking it up to the sudden release of her nervousness, she left the alley and walked with the girl to her bench. Sitting down slowly, hands folding on her lap, she watched the girl put a hand on the back and vaulted the bench, landing with her legs splayed out before crossing them lazily.

"Let's start with names, huh?" the girl suggested.

"Of course. My name is Dina Carroll."

The girl gave a thumbs-up and nodded. "Gotcha. My name's Talaria Herma, but everyone just calls me Tala."

"Alright then." With introductions out of the way, Dina found herself blanking on how to continue the conversation. After more than an hour of trying and failing to talk to others, she was eager to get to the point and request they team up, but being so forward felt rude.

"So, um, where are you from, Tala?"

"Right here, actually. Born and raised in Aqualung. How about you? From the look of you, I'd guess Ebury. Those fancy clothes fit the style."

"That's right. I'm from Troyer Gates in Ebury."

"Makes sense. That's a ritzy place if I'm remembering right." Tala leaned her head back and rolled it along the bench, staring at Dina from the corner of her eye. "Ebury still has titles and nobility and stuff, I think. You're some kinda rich kid, yeah?"

"It's not like those things really mean anything anymore," Dina said, raising her hands defensively. "I'm just a normal girl, really. Those are just silly titles and some old money."

Tala looked unconvinced, but shrugged. "True, true. Even if it did still mean something in Ebury, it's not like that stuff matters now that you're here. If you're really trying to be a Vanguard, you've gotta forget stuff like titles or classes."

"Quite right," Dina nodded. "I must say, that kind of mindset is admirable. Vanguards truly seem freer than most."

"Yeah, and they kick so much ass," Tala added. "Going out into the great unknown and fighting wild animals and monsters and stuff. That's the life, huh?"

“It’s certainly a lively profession,” Dina agreed, “though for me, the research aspect is much more enticing. Exploring uncharted lands and studying the geography, the animals, the plants, the weather, the *culture*; I’m all aflutter just imaging in it.” Dina stayed in her daydream only momentarily as she realized soon that this was her segue into the question that had been waiting on the back of her tongue. The fear of rejection made her skin crawl just like it had all night, but she bit the inside of her cheek and pressed on. “We’re both here so that one day, we can be Vanguarders. That’s why I had approached you, Tala. I... well, since we were all advised to try and form an alliance for the placement test, and you seem very strong, so, well—”

“You wanted to team up,” Tala said, snapping her fingers at Dina.

Dina nodded and looked to Tala hopefully.

“I figured. I was hoping to get an offer or two after sparring a bit and showing off my Magic Ability, but I didn’t get many, and the ones who did ask me were total losers. Go figure.”

Tala curled her legs up onto the bench, resting her chin on her knees. “So, Dina, would this alliance be just the two of us or have you recruited anyone else?”

“Just us,” Dina quietly answered while twirling a curl of hair around her finger. “I’ve tried to ask others, but I, uh—”

“You bailed before making any headway?”

“Maybe,” Dina blurted out, averting her eyes from Tala.

“Right. I get the picture now. Good on you for sticking with it, though. You lasted long enough to pique my interest.”

“You mean you’ll join me?” Dina’s voice came out higher than normal and her fists balled up in anticipation.

“Slow your roll there, girly. Let’s lay out what our strengths are. From the look of you, I’d say you’re the brainy type. I mean, you don’t look all that ready for a fistfight, but you got this far.” Tala stretched out and changed her posture again, now leaning back lazily with her hands behind her head. “We’d balance out if you’re the brains and I’m the brawn. I got a 48 on the physical half of the first entrance exam, just so you know. As for the written half, I only got a 22. Not great, but 70 is way over the 50-point minimum, so I’m pretty proud of myself.”

“It’s a good score,” Dina nodded. “You’re right to be proud. As for myself, you’re right in thinking I didn’t do well in the physical half, but on the written half, I got a 50.”

“A perfect 50?! Hot damn!” In what felt to Dina like the blink of an eye, Tala leaned in and put her arm around her shoulders. “You’re a real smarty-pants, ain’tcha?”

“W-Well, I, uh, just read a lot of books, I guess,” Dina stated modestly. “I’m most knowledgeable in history and literature, but my sister has told me that those are very important subjects for a Vanguard to know. Still, it’s nothing special.”

“Oh, give yourself some credit! Geez, a perfect 50. That’s enough to pass all on its own.” Tala chuckled at her observation, coupled by Dina’s nervous laughter.

“Ah-hahaha, wouldn’t that be crazy?” Dina agreed before hastily shutting her mouth and considering a permanent seal on it.

“OK, now that I know what we’re working with, let’s make this official.” Tala snatched Dina’s hand off her lap and shook it excitedly and tightly. “For the next five days, you and I are partners! Sound good?”

“Yes!” Dina’s response was immediate. She gripped her new comrade’s hand as tightly as she could and shook back. “I’m glad we could come to an agreement.”

“Yeah, same here, but we shouldn’t stop now.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that just the two of us may not be good enough.” Tala swung her legs up and down, hurling herself upright. “We should recruit one more person. I’m thinking a team of three would be best. The split in points wouldn’t be as big as a larger team, but we’d have another person to watch our backs and help fight the other competitors. We’ll get someone to balance us out.” She extended a hand to Dina and winked. “Besides, I may just fall for you if it’s just the two of us.”

After a moment of surprise at the proposition, Dina accepted the hand and stood up. “Whatever you say,” she responded, unsure of what else to say. Tala seemed to move on just as quickly and walked off.

“Let’s get to scouting. Since you’re not too good with socializing, I’ll handle the small talk. How’s that?”

“That’s just fine with me. Thank you for—”

“Right, you’re welcome. Come on, come on. We’re burning daylight. Or moonlight, I guess.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Dina followed her new partner back into the crowd and they watched over more sparring matches. A steady swath of silence was their third teammate so far as Dina was unsure of how to start another conversation. Beyond talking, she could barely keep up with Tala’s movement; she seemed to bounce from match to match with no warning.

“See anyone you like?” Tala asked, looking over her shoulder at Dina.

“No one in particular, but they all seem strong.”

“Yeah, but no one’s really jumping out at me, y’know?” Tala crossed her arms and clicked her tongue in disappointment. “I’ll defer to your judgement, smarty-pants.”

“Me? Alright then. Let’s see...” Dina stood on her toes to try and see over the crowd. As soon as she did, the ring closest to her seemed to burst before her eyes. A thunderous rushing sound and harsh wind came over everyone watching, sending a disoriented Dina falling into Tala’s embrace.

“Woah, what the hell?” Tala yelled.

“What is this?” Dina could feel a fine powder pelting her all over as Tala helped her stand back up. Once she could open her eyes, she saw a yellow-brown twister in the ring, overtaking shops and streetlights in height. “It’s sand,” Dina realized. “Someone in that ring can use Sand Magic.”

“Wait, seriously?” Tala questioned, sticking her head over Dina’s shoulder for a closer look. “You’re sure? Elemental Magic is supposed to be crazy difficult to learn and use, isn’t it?”

“I’ve heard the same thing,” Dina confirmed. “Attacking, defending, evasion, controlling the battlefield – Elemental Magic is devastating in combat if mastered, not to mention all the applications it must have outside of a battle. This enormous funnel tells me we’re dealing with someone who’s been well-trained.”

“For real?” Tala asked, leaning forward in excitement. “OK, we’ve *gotta* try and recruit this person.”

“Agreed.” Dina looked back at the ring while Tala bounced and tapped around next to her. Past the other spectators, the funnel was swirling just within the chalk circle marking the

ring. On the right side, someone fell from it and out of the ring, clutching a large cut on their right side. "It looks like the match is over."

"Wait, look." Tala pointed to the other side of the ring where another student tumbled out. "It's not a one-on-one fight. I think this person's is taking on a whole group. Man, I'm getting goosebumps!" she squeaked, whipping her arm over Dina's shoulders. "If we get this person on board, we're totally set!"

Two more competitors were thrown out of the ring, and just after, the sand funnel began to slow down and shrink. Dina pushed Tala's arms off and stood up straight to see the twister cave in.

When the sheet of sand had fallen away, she saw a girl standing in the center of the ring. Her head was hidden behind white veils, leaving only a pair of bright green eyes visible. Over her body was a light purple tunic with white edges and white laces up the center, forest green pants, and an emerald green sash. In her right hand was a curved sword that Dina recognized to be a scimitar.

On the girl's command, the sand around the ring was called back towards her. It flowed across the ground and slid up over her brown shoes and white socks, across her pants, and slipping up into the wooden scabbard held in her sash. Once it was all gone, she sheathed her sword.

"She must have conjured all the sand with her own Magic Energy. It returned to her through the scabbard," Dina said, leaning over to Tala. "With the amount of sand conjured, plus controlling it to form that funnel, I have no doubts she's extremely skilled. We may not get a chance to recruit her before she's swarmed by everyone else."

“Dina, do you believe in love at first sight?”

“...What?”

“Joking! I’m joking,” Tala claimed, waving her hands as if trying to wash away Dina’s memory. “Why say something like that? I wouldn’t. That’s why.”

“...Alright.” Once she refocused, Dina noticed that no one was attempting to talk to the match’s victor. As the girl left the ring, opposite of where Dina and Tala stood, everyone immediately parted to let her through, staring at her with both awe and nerves. “No one’s approaching her.” Dina whispered to Tala. “Should we follow and ask while everyone else is intimidated?”

“Yes. Yeah. Let’s do that. Absolutely.”

Dina shot another curious look at Tala before pursuing of the veiled girl. They sped through the crowd and caught up to her as she reached a less-populated part of the street.

“How should we do this? Tala?” Dina looked right and realized Tala had already left her side. When she turned forward, Tala was far ahead and waving down their target.

“Hellooooo,” Tala greeted in a sing-song voice.

The girl looked at Tala for a moment and then faced forward again, never breaking her stride. Once Dina caught up with Tala, they approached her from the side again.

“Excuse me,” Tala began, “do you have a partner? For the test, I mean; not like a partner as in— never mind. Anyway, uh... what’s up?” Again, no response. Not even a glance this time.

“I-I’m sorry about that,” Dina said while slipping in front of her teammate, trying to keep pace with the veiled girl. “This is Talaria Herma—”

“Just Tala’s fine.”

“—and my name is Dina Carroll. We were very, *very* impressed with your performance in that match and we wanted to extend an offer to join our team for the test.” After waiting a few seconds, Dina realized she wouldn’t be getting an answer either. Her mind told her to back off, but ignored it after thinking of Tala making another attempt. “If you’d like to stop and sit, we could discuss—”

“Stop.”

Dina immediately shut her mouth. She nearly ran away, but at the last second, she grounded herself and put on her best smile.

The girl finally stopped walking and looked to Dina and Tala. Her brow was furrowed and her eyes were narrowed, matching perfectly to the single word she had said. “When the last team who asked if I’d join kept hounding me, I told them I would if they could defeat me. As you saw, they could not. I don’t feel like fighting any more tonight, so if you’ll excuse me—”

“What was your score?” Tala asked, zipping into her path. “Your entrance exam score. What was it? Humor me.”

The girl waited a long while, but gave in soon enough; albeit with an eye roll. “If you must know, I received an 85 – 45 on the physical half and 40 on the written.”

Tala whistled and gave a thumbs-up. “Impressive. That’s a high score there, but both me and Dina have got you beat in one category each. Tell her, Dina.”

“A-Ah, yes, that’s correct. On the physical half, Tala received a 48, and on the written half, I received a 50.”

“See? We’re a good brains and brawn combo,” Tala continued, “but you’ve got both. You can be our middle ground – the perfect final piece of a perfect trio.”

The girl stared blankly at Tala, who’s positive demeanor didn’t change at all. Dina, however, was nearly boiling over with nerves. *She hates us. Any second now, she’ll get angry and yell. This was a bad, bad idea.*

“...Why should it be you two instead of anyone else here? What’s the benefit of you two over those four I just defeated?”

Wait, is this working? Dina wondered.

“Uh, ‘cause we’re *awesome*.” Tala pumped a fist as if she had nailed her pitch already. It took a pleading stare from Dina for her to continue. “And, you know, working as a team this size has a lot of benefits. We can lighten our individual luggage weight by dividing up things to carry, we can split up to complete separate tasks and save time, we’d have three sets of eyes and ears on our surroundings so we probably wouldn’t be ambushed when we’re together; don’t discount the power of teamwork.”

“That’s right,” Dina began, poking herself back into the conversation. “The test’s goal is to gain as many points as possible to get into a higher-level class, so it’d be easier with teammates—”

“It may be easier to gain them, but they’d be worth less,” the veiled girl interrupted. “A single student needs 50 points to be eligible for the Advanced Course, so a team of three would need 150. Winning a challenge worth, say, five points wouldn’t make as much of an impact.”

“Hey, every little bit counts,” Tala claimed. She opened her mouth to speak again, but seemed to be lost for the right words. “Uuuuuh, Dina, tell her.”

“Tell her what?”

“Challenges! Points! Explain why this is a good idea,” she begged, shaking Dina’s shoulder with both hands.

Dina brushed the hands off and cleared her throat, taking the moment to summon her courage against the judgmental stare on the girl. “We’ll be receiving points for fighting our fellow test-takers and doing special challenges, yes? Maybe there will be a footrace challenge that you wouldn’t win, but Tala could. Maybe there will be a challenge where they ask questions about history that you won’t be able to complete, but I can. Maybe they will make us fight a powerful beast that neither of us could defeat, but you could cut down with your sword. It does look quite strong.”

“It’s a sword-wielder’s strength that makes a sword strong,” the veiled girl claimed. “It is a powerful blade on its own, though. My ancestor is said to have cut down a 30-year-old Armored Tiger with a single slash.”

Tala whistled in amazement. “That’s impressive. Sounds like you’d be a good addition to the team.”

“You still haven’t addressed my concern about how points are divided. A large team means more points are needed to reach the threshold for each class. 50 points would get a single participant acceptance into the Advanced Course, but a three-person team would be put in the Basic Course with this score.”

Dina nodded to the girl and thought again for the right words. “Let’s say one person could do about five challenges in one day on their own. That is about 15 challenges for a team

of three, but by relying on others to watch your back, you're not only in better shape for your next one, but you'd have the energy for even more."

"Yeah, there's so many extra opportunities," Tala agreed, patting Dina's back.

Dina's logic and Tala's emphatic backing made the girl cup her hand around her chin. She closed her eyes and exhaled softly. "I refuse to settle for any placement lower than the Advanced Course. Can you guarantee we three can get 150 points by Friday?"

"That we can. You're not the only one who's gunning for the top class," Tala confirmed. "Right, Dina?"

"Yes, well, that'd be wonderful to achieve," Dina began. "I'd be fine with just passing and getting in, but if you're both so eager for top marks, then I will try my very best."

"C'mon, you can give a better answer than that," Tala prodded. "Better to shoot for the stars and make it halfway than shoot for halfway itself. Besides, if you're not that good and don't have a lot of points, the proctors may just take back their offer."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Despite wanting clarity, Dina had a feeling similar to seeing a car driving straight towards her.

"If you get a bad score and, well, aren't that good at stuff, they may just say 'nope, you're not good enough' and that's it. You're not coming to school at the start of next year. They don't talk about it much since it rarely happens, but hey, sometimes people that can't cut it slip through the cracks. It's not like that'll happen to us, but keep that in the back of your mind. It's good motivation."

Instead the back of her mind like Tala suggested, Dina had put this fact in the very front of her thoughts. Despite her internal panic, she knew to respond like this was no big deal and

pretend like she hadn't just begun to sweat buckets. "Aha, yes, how silly of me to forget! You are very right, Tala. In that case, we're all on the same page! I will most certainly be aiming for the very top score. Working together is a surefire way of netting entry into the Advanced Course!"

While the girl pondered to herself, Dina cursed herself for such an unnatural response. She was certain that this would be the last straw and their prospective third would leave.

But instead, she stayed. "To tell you the truth," she began, "I was told before coming here that taking this exam with others would be 'good for me.' You're the first group to approach me that's actually piqued my interest. The groups that have approached me so far had test scores far below my own and insisted they could 'show me their actual strength' in a match. At least you two came to me with a pitch and could prove we're on a similar level, so... I'll agree. For now."

"Hey, that's the spirit!" Tala cheered, reaching out for a hi-five. The girl ignored this and Tala was left hanging until she quietly pulled away. "Glad to have ya!"

"I hope we work well together... I'm sorry, but what is your name?" Dina asked, hoping her rudeness would be forgiven.

"Najida. My name is Najida Zaiba."

"We're very glad to work with you, Najida Zaiba," Dina said, finally letting the tension escape her body. After a long and arduous night, she finally had a team; and a powerful one at that. "I'm just glad we don't have to fight you for your companionship like those others."

"Why is that?" Najida asked. "Are you not confident in your own Magic Ability and fighting skills?"

“N-No, it’s not that—”

“Oh yeah, I totally blanked on asking about that,” Tala realized. “What is your Magic Ability, Dina? What about combat training; anything cool?”

Despite forcing her mouth to keep smiling, Dina felt like she was imploding. *What do I say?* she asked herself. *I can’t tell them about my abysmal score on the physical test. I couldn’t possibly say that I’m just a beginner in using Magic.* The curious faces of Tala and Najida were quickly making her mask of calmness crack, panic ready to burst out and ruin this burgeoning alliance. Dina started to speak without truly knowing what she’d say.

“Well, my Ability is... incomplete, you see. I’m embarrassed to say that I haven’t the skill to fully create my own Magic Ability as of now. I just couldn’t make it work in time for this test.” While not the exact truth, Dina hoped this dance around the answer would be enough.

“Well, what kind of ability were you trying to make?” Tala questioned. “Creation-type, like forming a weapon or tool from Magic Energy? Maybe an Amplification-type, like making your energy cut like a sword or pumping up your body’s strength or speed?”

“No, nothing like that—”

“Were you trying to create a Control-type that could manipulate other living things?” Najida asked. “That would be quite helpful in a test with so many opponents.”

“How about Transformation type?” Tala suggested. “Changing up that scrawny body to have, like, wings or blades or spikes would be awesome. Was that it?”

“Was it an ability to use in combat, or did you try to make a more supportive ability like healing wounds or something to help gather information?” Najida wondered.

“It was incomplete,” Dina repeated, barely keeping her voice from cracking. “I had an Ability in mind, but I couldn’t make it work. Why does the nature of the power matter?”

This sloppy embezzling had sharpened Najida’s stare, but it was thankfully diverted when Tala spoke up.

“Oh, I get it now,” she claimed, sending a chill up Dina’s spine. “You were trying to make your own Specialist-type Magic. Rookie mistake. I can see why you’re trying to hide it.”

“Yes!” Dina fibbed. “I asked my older sister for help but she told me the Ability was impossible to create on my own. If I had really wanted to master that kind of power, I’d have to receive it from someone with such an ability, but I had no time to do so between then and now. Oh, I was such a fool,” she said with a light laugh.

“That’s quite a hindrance,” Najida interjected, and Dina’s blood froze from the icy tone. “Can you at least do the basics like attacking with your Magic Energy directly? It’s an inefficient means of fighting in the hands of a novice or someone with a low amount of Magic Energy, but by doing that, you can at least provide back-up for us in a fight.”

Dina dug through her mind as best she could, but found no way of side-stepping the question. Either she’d tell them the truth and say she could not do so, or lie. This was her crossroads, but the only outcome she could focus on was being abandoned by the only two people she had been able to talk to all night.

“Of course, I can! Don’t worry about me!” Under the calm outer shell, Dina’s heart was squeezed with guilt. *What have I done?*

Najida looked to Tala, who gave a thumbs-up, and nodded. “Then I suppose we’re set.”

“Alright!” Tala cheered while sticking her hand out flat. “Najida, Dina, hands in!”

“Fine.”

“Right.” Dina held her hand out over Tala’s and Najida placed hers on top.

“Let’s all do our best! We three are gonna rock this test and make it to the Advanced Course! You know why? Because we got ourselves a dream team!”

Chapter 2: A Tried-and-True Vanguard

Dina had expected that, having formed a team, she'd be able to visit her sister with good news, then go to the ship taking them to their testing location, and finally go to sleep. Tala, however, had insisted they stay at the street fair and "show everyone else what they were dealing with," insisting that Dina put off her meet-up with Hazel until they had done this. Dina had no clue what this entailed at the time, but after 10 minutes of Tala playing nearly every carnival game set up, she had figured out Tala's goal: satiating her need for entertainment and finding some way to impress Najida. Her latest attempt was the Punching Machine, which she kicked instead to net a spot in the high score list.

"Fourth highest? You're kidding me!" Tala yelled. Her raging against the machine drew a crowd, prompting Najida to pull her away. Dina followed, her face buried in her hands, hoping their game-hopping had ended.

"Have some self-control," Najida scolded.

"No fair," Tala pouted. "Maria, Jordan, Sunny – whoever they are, I'm gonna mop the floor with their faces."

"At least you did better there than the shooting range," Dina complimented.

“Yeah, that one was a bust from the start. Sharp-shooting isn’t my thing,” Tala shrugged. “What time is it?”

“A little after 9:30,” Dina told her.

“Great, we still have some time. I’m all fired up, so help me find someone still sparring.”

Dina was taken aback by her teammates hot-blooded request and quirked a brow at her. “You seem to really like fighting, don’t you, Tala. If you don’t mind my asking, why is that?”

“It’s fun,” she answered without missing a beat. “In a way that a smarty-pants like you could think about it, it’d be like beating someone at a strategy game like chess. You out-manuever them and think outside the box. With chess, you’re just working your brain. In a fight, you’re thinking and moving.”

“I see.” Dina stopped and looked out to a fight happening just across the street. Two boys were in a fistfight, dodging and throwing blows back-and-forth, and like Tala had said, they seemed to be enjoying it. Dina thought about the comparison to chess and watched a while longer before she heard Najida approach from the side.

“Are you coming?” she asked. “Tala found an opponent.”

“Oh, already? Where is—”

“Hey! *You!*”

“Right there,” Najida said, bobbing her head in the direction of Tala’s bombastic shout.

Dina and Najida slipped and pushed, respectively, through the other spectators towards their teammate. Once they reached the edge of a chalk-outlined ring, about 20 feet in diameter, they saw Tala standing with her back to them.

“I heard someone say you’ve got a pretty big win streak, guy,” Tala said, pointing at a boy across from her. “I wanna impress some cute girls and work out some anger, so I’m gonna kick your ass!”

The boy in the ring said nothing, even to Tala’s assertion of victory. The streetlight behind him made it near impossible for Dina to see his face, as it blended with his chin-length curtain of straight black hair. His clothes were pure black as well, except for the crisp white edges down the middle of his laced-up shirt and on the ends of his sleeves and pants. He stood with his hands in his pockets, statue-still across from Tala’s performance of stretches.

“You ready to rock and roll, guy?” she asked.

The boy finally raised his chin and looked straight at Tala, his bone-pale face showing very little life to it. Dina felt a crawl on her back looking in his listless brown eyes.

“Fine by me,” he said. “You’ll be my 10th victory tonight.”

“Got a name, stranger?” Tala asked.

“Sunny.”

“Sunny? Yeah, you sure look like a ‘Sunny.’” She finished her stretches and looked back at her teammates, giving a cheeky thumbs-up.

As Dina hid herself behind her hands from the stares of the other spectators, she saw Tala had finally gotten a reaction out of Najida – another roll of the eyes.

“Let’s do this!” Tala called out, and right then, the battle began. In what felt to Dina like a flash, both fighters were in the center of the ring with their legs raised for a kick. Their attacks clashed with similar strength, leaving them in a stalemate. Tala let Sunny’s leg slip past hers and she pivoted to try for another kick, but Sunny kicked as well and knocked her leg way.

From there, a series of kicks were thrown from both fighters, each one countered, blocked, or dodged by the other.

“Gotcha!” Tala jumped and whipped her leg around to strike Sunny’s head, but his arm flew up and blocked the attack. Not giving up, Tala followed through and pushed him away with her strike, sending him skidding along the pavement.

“I didn’t think I’d have to use my arms,” Sunny told her. “I’ll have to take you seriously.”

“You can’t bluff me or out-kick me!” Tala boasted. “Time for you and everyone else here to see why I’m gonna be in the top class!” Squatting down into a runner’s position, Tala flashed a wicked grin at her opponent, and only a second later, she disappeared from sight. Around the ring, everyone watching felt a swirling wind assault them.

“So, she uses Speed Magic,” Najida said, raising her voice slightly and standing firmly. “She must be very skilled to have so much control in a tight space.”

“That’s right,” Dina said as she recovered from nearly being thrown flat on her back by the high-speed moves. “She’s wonderfully strong.”

“Yes, but her opponent is too. He knows where she’s going.”

“He does?” Dina squinted and tried to find Tala, but couldn’t place her position at any point. Once she looked to Sunny, she saw his own eyes darting around with no urgency behind them. “How can he follow her movement? Is that his Magic Ability?”

“No. He must be a well-trained and experienced fighter,” Najida explained. “Can you not follow her, even as a spectator?”

“You can?” Dina asked. Najida squinted back at her, but looked back to the fight after only a moment.

Just then, Tala reappeared. For a split second, Dina saw her on Sunny's right side with her foot rocketing towards his head. Then, Dina blinked, and after she did, Tala was curled forward over Sunny's outstretched left arm.

After Sunny's hand dislodged from her stomach, Tala dropped into a wobbly crouch. Though she was coughing and gagging, she forced herself to stay on her feet and jumped backwards to the other side of the ring.

"There. Are we done?" Sunny asked.

Dina looked closer and realized it wasn't a simple punch that stopped Tala. Sunny's pointer and middle fingers were extended. "Did he stop her with just those fingers?"

"If his body can handle it, it's a valid way of fighting," Najida told her without averting her eyes from the ring. "Using all of the force of a punch in two small points like fingertips. The finite force of the hit will be devastating, especially if it hits a tender spot."

"What the crap was that?" Tala asked, still panting. "You freakin' poked me! How— why— wha—"

"Do you want to surrender?"

"Hell no." Tala stood upright again and cracked her knuckles, glaring down at Sunny.

"One way or another, I'm gonna knock you out of this ring."

"You'll have to get a little closer," Sunny dared, making a vein on Tala's forehead bulge out.

"Oh, I'll get closer," she growled. After swiveling her neck and rolling her shoulders, Tala began her march closer to Sunny.

“Watch carefully,” Najida whispered to Dina. “Once they’re both within range of each other, this fight will be over.”

“How can you tell?”

“Experience.”

The crowd was breathless as Tala approached Sunny, silent and stone-faced like her opponent. She was six feet away.

Though he had started the bout with his hands in his pockets, Sunny had shifted into a perfectly-balanced fighting stance. Now, five feet away.

From the sidelines, Dina gulped loudly and switched her focus between her teammates. Four feet away.

Najida’s eyes were on the space in between the combatants, so Dina watched there as well, hoping to see what she had nearly missed before. Three feet.

Finally, they both made their moves, stepping forward at lightning-speed, and just as quickly, they stopped. Tala’s right leg had whipped into Sunny’s side, nearly knocking him off-balance, but she was kept from following through by the fingers jabbed into her abdomen. When her left leg began to buckle, Sunny kicked at her side and sent her flying from the ring, over the heads of her teammates.

“I told you so,” Najida murmured.

Her mouth agape, Dina forced her body into motion once Tala disappeared from sight. “E-Excuse me! Pardon me!” Dina said while squirming her way through the other students. To her surprise, another pair of students had caught Tala and set her down on a nearby bench, which Dina thanked them for.

“Goddamn,” Tala gurgled, “that poking guy is gonna pay. I’ll kick his shins—”

“Just calm down. Don’t move too much,” Dina told her. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I think I’m good. Just gimme a minute to remember how breathing works.” Tala coughed a few times and curled up on the bench.

Dina put her hand on Tala’s shoulder, unsure of what else to do, and then heard Najida’s soft footsteps behind her.

“Hey there,” Tala greeted. “So, uh, that didn’t really go as planned, but, y’know—”

“It’s fine,” Najida told her. “You fought well, Tala. I can say with certainty that I trust your strength as a teammate.”

“Aww, you don’t have to butter me up like that! C’mon, knock it off! You’re making me blush— Ow, pain! That’s a whole lotta pain,” she groaned. “Where’s the first-aid tent, Dina?”

“It’s down the street. Najida, would you help me get her up?”

“Sure.” Together, Dina and Najida hoisted Tala onto her feet and put her arms over their shoulders. With how late it was, moving as a group was much easier as many students had left for the ship.

“Man, I still can’t believe your sister’s one of the proctors,” Tala commented. “I almost didn’t believe you. Think she’ll sneak us some bonus points or anything?”

“Certainly not,” Dina answered. “She’s made it clear she’ll be remaining impartial in grading me and any allies I have.”

“I’m more surprised they still chose her as a proctor,” Najida said.

“She told me it was a close decision, but her power is quite useful and versatile, and the principal vouched for her, so they let her come with a just a warning about scoring fairly.”

It wasn't long before they reached the opposite end of the street fair from where they had first joined up. Set up on a small, emptied parking lot was a white canvas tent that the three girls entered. Inside, they found two rows of cots, about a dozen in total, with the few students left getting ready to leave. In the back of the tent, they found a fresh cot that Tala laid down on.

“Now, this is a surprise,” Dina heard just behind her. “You finally snag some teammates and one needs my help already.” She spun around and was face-to-face with her sister.

Hazel was a youthful 24-year-old woman whose resemblance to Dina was great, but still carried many differences. They shared a soft, round face and kind smile, though the eyes behind her rectangular glasses were a vivid hazel color rather than blue. She carried herself with proper posture and poise, but with an older, more robust body, she came off as mature over demure. Her hair was the same shade of blonde, but instead of a mass of unwieldy curls, it was straight and shorter, hanging loose in the front with the rest contained in a long braid slung over her left shoulder. Her clothing style was in a similar state of great similarities and differences with a tie-dye scarf around her neck, a loose green shirt with rows of tassels, green wristbands with blue peace signs, and a floral wrap skirt that ended just above her brown sandals. The small flowers wound into her braid and the large daisy perched from her right ear completed this natural look.

“Don't worry, we won't make a habit of it,” Dina assured her.

“Or will we?” Tala joked.

“We’d better not,” Najida warned.

“I’m guessing you’re the one who needs my help?” Hazel asked Tala. “Well, you’re in good hands. I’m Nurse Hazel, one of your proctors. Are you two in an alliance with Dina?”

“We are. My name is Najida Zaiba.”

“I’m Tala. Some guy poked my gut and now it hurts bad. I know it sounds dumb, but—”

“No, it doesn’t. You’re the tenth person tonight who’s come here because of him.”

After giving Tala a look-over and feeling around her stomach, Hazel told her, “you’ll be fine once my assistant comes back with a restock of my special supply. I can use my Magic Ability to fix that injury in only a minute.”

“Really? Sweet! Thanks,” Tala said. “I guess that’s how skilled a Vanguard is, huh?”

“That’s right,” Hazel nodded. “You’re looking at a tried-and-true Vanguard, girls.”

“Yeah, I could tell just by looking at you,” Tala claimed. “I’ve met a few before and they all give off a similar vibe.”

“Agreed,” Najida said. “Even at first glance, Vanguards always look quite worldly. It figures, since you’re all privy to knowledge about the world that normal civilians aren’t.”

“You make it sound like we’re keeping lots of dark secrets,” Hazel said, pulled up a chair next to Dina, who sat down beside her. “The information exclusive to Vanguards gets put out into the world sooner or later once we know enough about the subject. New land masses and islands, new species of animals and plants, new kinds of people—”

“Kinds of people?” Najida repeated.

“Sure. There are plenty of places out there, from small villages to big towns, that we’re processing and making a part of Rave as a whole. It never stops, really. Almost feels like for

every new group of people that change from Unofficial World status to being a part of the Official World, we find two more out there to start processing. It's like wrangling the heads of a Hydra Snake."

"Have you actually done that?" Najida questioned. "I've hear they can grow larger than houses."

"I've got the scar on my back to prove it," Hazel bragged. "My friend Lochan had to rescue me once or twice, but after an hour, I was able to wrestle that thing to the ground and claim the reward—."

"You fought that kinda monster for an *hour*?" Tala asked in disbelief. "That's crazy! Hey, did it happen *out there*? You know, in the Unknown World?"

Dina shuddered just hearing the term be used. The Unknown World – the culmination of everything a Vanguard yearned for. The vast, uncharted world of incalculable possibly. Far beyond the clear borders and relative safety of the Official World, and the lands of the Unofficial World that were still being studied and mapped out, there was the rest of the world. The land that she wished to someday see.

"That incident wasn't in the Unknown World, no," Hazel clarified. "I may have my license, but I'm still relatively inexperienced, so I've never actually been that far. Outside of extraordinary circumstances, that kind of work is reserved for more seasoned Vanguards. Stepping into uncharted lands sounds like a breeze until you really do it."

"Seriously? You need *experience*?" Tala whined. "I wanna do it right after I get my license. No fair, no fai— ow! Hurty-pain!"

“Stop thrashing around like that,” Hazel ordered. “Sit still for now until my assistant returns. Geez, where is that kid? He’s been gone for a while now—”

“I’m back! Sorry!”

Across the tent, Dina saw the entrance flap open and a red-clothed figure enter the tent, only to fall and tumble just after entering. A stuffed-up black and gold messenger bag came flying across and landed in Hazel’s arms.

“Speak of the devil,” Hazel said before tossing the bag back.

The boy on the ground popped up from the ground in time to grab the bag and nervously removed the green purse from his shoulder to throw to Hazel. Once it was in her hands, the boy took a breath and stood up calmly, sliding his own bag over his head to sit by his right hip. He was a short, scrawny boy with tan skin and a mop of black hair with bangs that ended just above his yellow eyes. Dina could tell from his clothing that he was from the Territory of Hinode, wearing traditional garments like a red coat with long, wide sleeves, a yellow robe-like top with thick black edges, billowy black pants, and white socks with black sandals.

“Sorry for taking so long,” he told Hazel in a soft, fretting voice. “It took me a while to get on the ship and then back off, and your special stash was hard to find and—”

“It’s alright, you’re fine. Just take a breath,” Hazel told the boy. “Girls, this is Kotsu Matsushima. He’s my apprentice in learning medicine and first-aid, but he’ll be taking the test like you, so make sure to get on his good side. He’d be a tough adversary if you don’t.”

Kotsu grew red in the face and rubbed the back of his head. “I wouldn’t say that,” he claimed, looking down at the floor. “I’ll start packing up the supplies, ma’am.”

“Right, go ahead,” Hazel told him. As he walked off to begin, Hazel leaned closer to Dina’s group. “He’s just being modest,” she whispered. “He’s more than skilled enough in Magic to get into the Advanced Course by himself.”

“Really? He’s kinda puny, but whatever,” Tala said.

Dina nodded in agreement, but found herself watching Kotsu. He did seem meek, but someone like him had his skills praised by Hazel. Dina kept watching him merrily clean up the tent’s supplies until Hazel’s voice caught her ear.

“Here we go.” From her bag, Hazel produced a single yellow seed. Tala and Najida looked on with curiosity while Dina smiled at the familiar sight.

“What is, what is?” Tala asked.

“Just a little something that’ll fix you up,” Hazel explained while reaching out and holding the seed over Tala’s stomach. “A seed from the Miracle Ivy plant – the best natural curative out there. Usually, they take a year to sprout, but we won’t need nearly that long.”

From Hazel’s fingertips, a dark green light shone on the seed until it glowed as well. It split open, expanding into a series of delicate vines with dark green leaves hanging off. Tala’s stomach was soon wrapped in these vines and their glowing shifted from bright to soft and low.

“Hazel’s ability is always so beautiful to watch,” Dina said.

“It looks quite useful,” Najida commented.

“Woah-ho! That’s awesome!” Tala praised. “I’m already feeling better. Hey, can you do this too, Kotsu?!”

Tala’s sudden call made Kotsu flinch hard enough to knock a cart’s top halfway-clean of supplies. Tala had to clamp both hands over her mouth to hold in her laughter while Najida

rolled her eyes. After recovering, Kotsu laughed nervously and knelt down to pick of what he had thrown off. “No, no, I’m simply learning basic medical skills. My own Magic Ability isn’t nearly as amazing.”

“Don’t be so self-deprecating,” Hazel told him.

After a minute, the vines around Tala’s stomach began to wither, prompting Hazel to cut them with a pair of garden sheers. Tala twisted around on the cot, then rolled right out and landed in front of Najida. “Pain’s gone!” she announced. “Thanks, Nurse Hazel.”

“You’re very welcome. You three should get going now. The ship will be leaving soon.”

“Crap! We gotta get to the docks!” Tala realized. “What time is it?”

“We still have 10 minutes,” Najida calmly explained. “Besides, they wouldn’t be leaving without one of the five proctors, so as long as we arrive before Nurse Hazel, we won’t be left behind.”

“Right, but you still shouldn’t be late. Shoo, shoo,” Hazel urged. “Except you, Dina. Hang out for a minute, I need to give you something.”

Tala and Najida complied and exited the tent, saying they’d wait for Dina, who was listing off everything she had packed for the test in her mind. With her bag having been taken to the ship after she had checked in at the street fair, she couldn’t think of a guess until Hazel reached into her purse and removed a small plastic bag of white pills.

“I remember you texting me saying you were running low on medication, so I got a refill on your prescription at the pharmacy here.” Hazel checked to around quickly before making a discrete pass to Dina. “Not that you wouldn’t do fine without them, I’m sure you’ll do great, but, well—”

“Thank you.” Dina gripped the pill bag and slipped it into her skirt pocket. Hazel had put on a smile, but Dina could see a twinkle of worry in her eyes. “I’ll be going now.”

“Good luck.”

Dina held the pills steady in her pocket, making sure they wouldn’t make too much noise. As she passed Kotsu, he nodded courteously and continued with his task. She tried to smile back at him, but faltered. At the threshold of the tent, she squeezed her other fist tightly. *This is my big chance to change my life, she told herself. I’m not going to let myself fall deeper into this depression. No more laying around and wasting away. I’m going to be happy.*

Chapter 3: Departure

After leaving for the docks, Dina and her companions wasted no time planning for their trip, starting with who would carry what. “OK, I’ll pack our first-aid kit and supplies of that nature too,” Dina said, trying to work out her bag’s space in her head. Monday morning to Friday morning meant five days’ worth of supplies had to fit in bags they could trek the island with. “Yes, I think I can fit that all.”

“Nice. Thanks again for taking most of the stuff,” Tala said with a hearty slap on Dina’s back that nearly knocked her off her feet.

“Oh, yes, of course. I figured you two would rather travel light if you’ll be doing most of the fighting.” In the corner of her eyes, she saw Najida flick her gaze to her. Instantly, Dina put her hands up and tried to smile confidently, though she could feel how crooked it actually looked. “N-Not that I, uh, won’t be doing anything. I’ll take care of myself.” Much to her relief, the answer seemed to appease Najida, who faced forward once more. Dina felt her weak muscles tense up as she remembered her earlier fibs. Before she could fall down the chasm of worry, though, she rung out her hands and focused instead on the sound of Tala’s voice.

“Oh hey, before I forget,” she began, “don’t eat too much on the boat tonight. You won’t wanna stay up all night seasick.”

“I’ll be fine, thank you,” Najida confidently answered.

“Is seasickness common on your first time?” Dina asked.

“Depends on the size of the boat, I guess. For big ships, you’re not as likely to get it since you won’t feel much rocking. You haven’t been on a boat before?”

“I haven’t. I’ve never even seen the ocean before,” Dina admitted.

“For real? Oh, you are in for a treat,” Tala decided. “It’s big, it’s blue, it’s got fish — you’re gonna love it. Right, Najida?”

“It’s all of those things, yes,” she answered offhandedly.

“C’mon, be a bit more excited for your teammate. Give us a smile!” Tala jovially suggested. “...Are you smiling under there?”

“if I said yes, will you stop talking?”

“Oh, try and make me,” Tala requested, matching Najida’s sidelong glare with a devilish smirk.

“Let’s change the subject!” Dina hastily suggested, trying her best to preserve the burgeoning foundation of their team.

“Sorry, sorry. Back to business,” Tala said. “You should be fine for the night even if it’s your first time. I’ve got some antacids in my luggage if you need, but I think you’ll be good.”

“If you say so.” Once they made their next left turn, the trio was suddenly assaulted by a strong wind. Dina was nearly blown away, but luckily bumped into Tala, who steadied her.

“Caught you off guard, eh?” Tala asked, pushing her back upright. “This street always has a harsh sea breeze. We’re almost to the docks.”

Dina found it hard to hear her companion with the sudden gust rushing by her ears. Once she was steady again, she saw Najida walking ahead with a hand keeping her veils steady. Tala then gave her a push on the back that helped her start walking again. The sea air blew her massive pile of curls around, forcing Tala to move up out of its way.

“You’ve got way too much hair,” Tala said with her own ponytail lashing around like a whip.

“It has been a while since it was trimmed,” Dina admitted as her eyes instinctively squinted against the salty breeze. She took a deep inhale, tasting the ocean on the back of her tongue. Her breathing slowed down, letting her take in the smell, and her walking steadied against the sea wind. With a little effort, they moved forward until the squall died down, as they were reaching a wooden incline.

“It’s kinda dark, but there it is,” Tala announced.

Dina’s boots thumped against the planks of the dock. She moved spryly, faster than she had moved in a long while, to the thick rope fence across the way. Now at the edge of the dock, she looked out into the black sky dotted with lights and the wavy pitch below it. In the corner of her eyes was a half-lit moon, sending light to the endless water. Below her, clear and calm waves that carried soapy flotsam lapped against the wooden supports. A whoosh of wind whipped up a salt spray that popped up and misted Dina’s face, producing a peep of surprise.

“Yeah, windy nights are gonna spritz you like that,” she heard Tala say as she came up on her right. “What’s the verdict, huh? Is it ocean-y enough for you?”

Dina blinked a few times, letting the heavy sound of waves fill her ears. “It’s honestly a bit overwhelming,” she answered. “I can’t take it all in, but it’s really amazing.”

“Speaking of overwhelming, check out what’s behind me,” Tala snickered.

Finally turning her attention away from the sea, Dina looked right and immediately went wide-eyed, making Tala giggle. At the dock closest to them was an enormous, sleek white ship with a navy-blue stripe across hull. It looked more like a cruise liner than any battleship she had seen in books or online. A line of people was going down the dock next to it, ending around the back of the ship where it’s turbine stuck out of the water.

“Is that what we’re sailing on? It’s massive!” Dina exclaimed.

“Looks that way!” Tala chittered. “Even if it is just a one-night trip to the testing island, they’re giving us a sweet ride.”

Once Dina realized how long she had been staring, she followed her teammates in joining the line to sign in. Dina checked in last, handed her cell phone over on request, and was given three things – a room key, a ID card with her name, picture, and a serial code, and a smartphone in a white case with two side-by-side rectangular screens that opened like a book. The ID card, as she was told, was to be kept into the front of the phone’s case so it’d be always visible. Once she finished, she joined Najida and Tala near the ship’s entrance with her attention squarely on the phone.

“Even if it is just for the test, I can’t believe I’m holding a Tome of my very own,” she said, closing the device again and looking at her card inside the case, only to open it once more.

“We can register as a team on here, right?” Tala asked, squinted at the screen she held close to her face. “Is this it? Or, uh—”

“Done,” Najida said, closing up her Tome and slipping it into her pocket. “You should receive the team-up request from my Tome shortly.”

Dina had just finished entering her information into the device when she received Najida’s message. After a few taps, the prompt was answered and their trio was made official. She closed up her Tome and slipped it into her skirt pocket before entering the ship behind her teammates. They followed a series of signs and arrows to a set of carpeted stairs and climbed up to the top deck, where they found festivities comparable to the street fair. The atmosphere seemed far less excitable and tense, as everyone had either formed an alliance or had chosen to go solo. People kept to themselves or to their groups, simply enjoying the night before they began the competition in the morning.

“Man, I’m beat,” Tala yawned. “I dunno what time tomorrow morning we’ll get to the island but I wanna watch the ship pull up to it, so I’m gonna hit the hay early.”

“Good idea,” Najida said, steadying herself against a support beam. “I’ll be going to sleep as well.”

“What’s wrong? Is the boat rocking a bit too much? Are you—”

“I’m not,” Najida insisted, pressing a fist against her veiled mouth.

“I’ll head to my room soon,” Dina told her partners. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah, sweet dreams,” Tala responded, strolling away behind Najida.

After waving them off, Dina was once again alone. Stepping towards the edge of the deck, she leaned on the guardrail and stared at Aqualung blankly. *I’ve made it this far, but...* Dina’s mind returned the lies she had told at the street fair. One hand squeezed the cold railing while the other went to her mouth. She chewed her fingernails without realizing or caring.

How can I tell them? When can I tell them? What will I do when they leave me? Her thoughts were beginning to spiral; a familiar sensation. She saw scornful looks, heard hateful accusations; before she knew it, she was shivering where she stood. *Maybe it would be better if I got off the ship right now. Maybe I should just...*

“Are you alright?” What finally pulled her free from these thoughts was a voice; a shy, meek one. Kotsu was standing a few feet away, approaching the guardrail further down from her.

“Just nerves,” she claimed.

“Well, you’re not alone in that,” he said. “We’ll all have to make a good impression on the proctors or that’s it. Everyone must be nervous.”

“Yes. Right.” Dina pulled her fingers away from her mouth and brushed them on her skirt absentmindedly. “Kotsu?”

“Yes?”

“My sister told us you were very adept at using Magic,” she recalled. “She told us that you could probably make it into the Advanced Course singlehandedly.”

Kotsu head conked to the side curiously. He smiled and twiddled his fingers bashfully. “That’s nice of her to say. I don’t know how truthful that will be, but I would say I’m well-practiced in using Magic.”

Dina took a breath before resolving to her request. “I’ll be blunt: I need some guidance.” She stepped closer and Kotsu stepped back. “Just a little on the basics.”

“From me?” Kotsu asked. “I don’t know if I’m cut out for that.”

“Please,” Dina pled. “I did something bad, Kotsu. I made a promise that I can’t keep as I am. I’m begging you; just one quick lesson.”

“What about?” Kotsu asked, hesitantly stepping closer.

Dina recalled the scant practice in using Magic that she’d ever done. “I’m able to bring my energy out of my body, but using it in any way is beyond me. Attacking directly with Magic Energy is supposed to be a basic skill, but I’ve never been able to do that. I lack control. If I can muster something, can you tell me how I can attack with it?”

“I mean, I could try.” Kotsu finally moved closer, though respectfully remaining out of her personal space, and leaned in slightly. “Start with what you know. Move some of your Magic Energy into of your dominant hand and then out through the palm.”

Dina nodded and held her right hand out. The advice given by her sister long ago about this step came back to her mind. *Deep breathes. Focus on your abdomen first. A tingling feeling means you’re on the right track.* She felt this prickling between her chest and stomach. From this core of Magic, she forced this tingle to move up towards her right shoulder, then down her arm. When it reached her hand, she saw her palm glow faintly.

“Looks like moving energy your body isn’t especially hard for you. That’s good,” Kotsu said. “Now move it out of your body.”

Dina nodded and strained the muscles in her arm. Like water from a showerhead, thin streams of white Magic Energy leaked from her palm. Suddenly, Kotsu recoiled and put his arm up, blocking his face with his coat sleeve.

“What’s wrong,” Dina asked, barely able to shift focus from her training.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t expect it to be so bright,” Kotsu admitted as he uncovered his eyes. He looked over her, but soon returned his gaze to her hand. “Now, let’s see if you can shape it. Try and make a sphere or ring with your energy.”

Dina’s fingers shook as she forced the particles of energy towards each other. A pebble-sized orb appeared, but it shook and shivered until finally dispersing. The energy particles fled from each other and disappeared in the air around them. Dina dropped her arm. “Dammit,” she cursed under her breath.

“Don’t be sad. You had it,” Kotsu assured her. “If you can keep its shape, just hurl at your opponent and it’s sure to do something. You did very well—”

“But it’s not good enough,” Dina replied, feeling tears well in her eyes. “I’m not... I’m not ready to take this test. I’m too far behind everyone. I only came because I thought this would be my best chance.” She turned back towards the railing and reached both hands out to it, tightly gripping the cold metal. “I made promises I can’t keep just so I would have some tiny semblance of a shot. I’ll fail outright and lose out on my dream if I do this alone. I should’ve at least waited a year, but what good would that do? I wouldn’t have done anything; I would’ve just sat around feeling sorry for myself, because that’s all I can do.” Dina heaved out heavy, uneven breaths following her rambling, and the floodgates holding her tears back were close to breaking.

“...If you don’t mind my saying,” Kotsu began, fiddling with the strap of his bag, “I think you being here already is proof enough that you have your own strengths. If you can focus on those, you’ll find ways to help your team. I’m sure you’re not useless.”

In listening to Kotsu's soft, caring voice, Dina felt the weights of her anxiety shrink. Her sadness receded and she rubbed away the tears waiting just under her eyes away with her sleeve.

"And also," Kotsu continued, now fighting through a cracking voice and a blush as red as his coat, "I think you have plenty of potential in using Magic, so maybe, by the end of the test, you could do something really great. Five days doesn't sound like a long time, but I think you'll be able to grow from it and amaze everyone. So, don't give up before you really start, OK?"

Dina was astounded by his confidence in her. Before she knew it, her worries had retreated to the back of her mind and she gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you very much, Kotsu. You're such a kind soul."

Kotsu leaned back and laughed nervously, his flushed cheeks not even close to fading. "Um, you too, also," he muttered. "I'll go now, I should go, but yeah, good luck."

Dina nodded in response as Kotsu made a hasty retreat. Now alone and calmed, Dina set herself up on the railing once more, balanced on her elbows, and watched the pitch splash against the docks. A few minutes later, the deafening blare of the ship's horn made her arms slip and nearly crack her chin on the rail. The two long horns caused cheers to come from the other students on deck. Dina steeled herself as she watched her only escape from the next five days of testing move further away.

Now, there was no going back.

Chapter 4: Arrival

The next morning, Dina was up by 9 A.M. — her earliest wake-up in recent memory — and was showered, dressed, and ready to go by 9:30. After quadruple-checking everything in her pink and white messenger bag, which rested by her left hip with its strap under her shawl, she left her room and went to the stairs. After arriving on the top deck’s lobby, she immediately went outside, going to the spot where she had talked to Kotsu. The morning brightness made her shield her eyes with her hand, letting her see the blue and white waters swaying in the sunshine.

“Beautiful,” she whispered, though she couldn’t stay watching for long. With only about half hour left before their landfall, she assumed the testing island — or, at least, a specific part of it — would be in sight. As she walked towards the bow of the ship, her knees shook in anticipation. The white clouds drifted lazily above, and in the spaces between them, Dina saw a vibrant green instead of blue. The ship’s deck was packed with students also on the look-out, but Dina was able to slip through and find a spot at the railing. There, she and the rest could see their destination — Four Seasons Island and the World Tree.

Standing more than a mile in height with a proportionate width, the World Tree flowered above the clouds in long bows and giant leaves on top with thick, stubby branches dotting its trunk. Dina's eyes went down the colossal tree to the island below. Presented first was a pristine yellow-white beach with palm trees at its edge and flat-topped Acacia trees further behind them. Peeking out beyond those were leaves of orange and red to the right of the World Tree, while on its left were bright green and pink foliage. Finally, behind the behemoth trunk, slivers of white-capped mountains were showing themselves. Dina leaned forward on the railing, trying to capture an unblemished image in her memory. The anxiety of last night felt years behind her. Excitement welled in her lungs. *This* was the future she hoped for.

She could have stared the whole way there, but the rumbling of her stomach drew her mind away. Before leaving the edge of the deck, she pulled out her testing Tome and, after some experimenting, found the messaging feature. She sent a group message to her teammates that she was topside and received a reply back from Tala soon after.

Tala: We'll be up later. I'm bringing Najida some food. She was seasick all-night XD

Najida: I was not seasick.

Even in text, Najida's all business, Dina thought. She stashed the Tome in her bag and, making sure the view wouldn't suck her back in, left for the breakfast buffet across the deck. Still, the island's majesty had an iron grip on her thoughts. 277 years of history in this one tree, and even more on the island itself. I'll be stepping where so many great Vanguard's have walked.

These grand thoughts are what led to her collision. As soon as she was out of the thick of the crowd, someone rushed the opposite way and they crashed into each other. She let out an unrefined “Ou-gahk!” as she crumpled to the deck and bent under the other person, who was curled up on her lap.

Before she could get a good look at the person, he sat up. Dina’s vision was obscured by a head of fluffy hair colored an odd purple. “Sorry about that!” a boy’s voice said quickly. Below the messy hair was a boyish smile and purple eyes. “Totally my fault. Here, let me help you up.”

Before she could say a word, the boy was on his feet and pulled Dina up with both arms. She stumbled forward, planting her head on his chest before she could steady herself. “Excuse me,” she mumbled while fixing a few out-of-place curls in her hair.

The boy had already turned away, looking over the crowd easily with his impressive height. “OK, I think I lost her.”

“Lost who?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the boy said, the purple cape over his shoulders swooshing as he turned back towards Dina. Under this simple cape, Dina saw a long-sleeved blue shirt, baggy brown pants, and thick black boots. In his left hand was a brown duffel, while the right held something more eye-catching – a wooden staff resting against his shoulder. Dina’s eyes followed it up to the large star carving at its tip, then back to the boy’s smiling face just next to it.

“Well, um, you should watch where you’re going,” Dina meekly reprimanded.

“Yeah, I’ll do that. Sorry again,” he said with a smile. He peeked over his shoulder once again, and this time turned back with wide eyes and a nervous smile. “Hey, uh, I was never here, OK?”

“Wha—”

“Just deny,” he said while turning his back. “Deny, deny, deny,” he repeated while speeding into a thick part of the crowd. In only a second, he was gone.

Dina was dumfounded, but suddenly felt very unsafe where she was standing. What made him so nervous that he’d flee so readily? The urge to escape hit her like a softball to the face. It almost made her sprint, but the packed crowd forced a slower, nervous shuffle across the deck. She had made it under the large awning that covered the sitting area, almost reaching the buffet, when a tight hand grabbed her shoulder.

“Which way?” a girl’s voice asked.

Dina squeaked in fear, but forced herself to smile politely. “Which way towards what?” she asked while turning to face her interrogator, only to be met a ring of wood in her face. Dina fumbled and backed herself into a wall, then put her hands up. A wooden staff was thrust up to her face.

“Where did Nash go? I saw you talking to him.” The girl was almost as short as Najida, but the harsh questioning made Dina feel like she had shrunk to half her size. Her staff was thin and over half her height, just like the boy’s, but the carving topping hers was a simple circle. Past that circle, Dina saw a shoulder-length bob of ginger hair with a pale, freckled face and large, pouty lips inside. Beneath that was a small body hidden by a long-sleeved green dress

that reached the floor, a red scarf knotted at the back of her neck, and a matching wrap around her hips.

“I don’t know anyone named Nash,” Dina said, trying her best to simply skirt around the truth. After the previous night, the thought of more lying made her itch all over. She looked around and saw a few people had noticed, but none were making a move to help yet. The rulebook’s forbiddance of fighting on the boat re-entered her mind and explained their hesitation, but even a word of defense would have been appreciated.

“The boy in purple with a staff like mine,” the girl clarified. “I saw you talking to him. Which way did he go?”

“I didn’t— H-He could be anywhere by now—”

“Point me in his direction. *Now.*”

As Dina’s arms became speckled in goosebumps, the girl’s grip on the staff tightened. Dina clenched her eyes in expectation of an attack, but after a few moments, nothing happened. She opened her right eye first and saw, to her bafflement, only white.

“No fighting on the ship.” It was a woman’s voice; a mature, low one that Dina didn’t recognize. When she opened her left eye, she saw the girl’s staff had another hand on it; this one pale and boney, but still firm strong-looking. It came from behind the wall of whiteness that Dina now realized was merely the back of a tall, cloaked person.

The ginger girl pulled back her staff, bowing her head slightly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Save it for the test or you won’t take it, Cecelia Weiher.”

“I understand. My deepest apologies.” She bowed her head again and walked away. As she turned, she gave Dina a nasty look that reminded her the apology wasn’t sent in her direction.

Dina stepped away from the wall and looked to the cloaked woman to say her thanks, but she was already leaving. Dina was left feeling deflated, exposed, harassed, but most of all, hungry. She rushed to the spread of food, grateful for the lack of interruptions this time around, and began fixing herself a plate of breakfast foods. By the time she reached the end and got herself a drink, she heard a boy’s voice just beyond the table.

“I’m really sorry about that.”

Looking to her right, Dina found the purple hair boy had returned, now sporting a sheepish grin. “Nash, I’m guessing,” she said. “If you don’t mind, I don’t feel especially safe around you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Cece’s probably gone off somewhere to cry. Always happens when she gets scolded.”

“Cece?” Dina asked, now taking her plate towards a small, empty table near the awning’s edge. Nash spun around and walked with her. “Why was she searching for you so vigorously?”

“It’s, uh, complicated,” he said with a slight cringe of embarrassment on his face. “A family matter, let’s just say. I feel bad you got wrapped up in it.”

“It’s perfectly fine. That is, if you’re sure she’s done with me.” Dina set her plate on the table and sat while Nash stopped and fished his Tome out of his pocket.

“In any case, I feel like I owe you a favor, at least.” He held the screen in Dina’s face, letting her see the 10-digit number. “Here’s my Tome’s number, so if you need anything at all, call or message me.”

“Anything?” Dina asked, to which Nash nodded. “If you say so, then alright.”

With his offer given, Nash closed the device and walked off alone. Despite her hunger, Dina felt it prudent to remember the number. She pulled out a pen and pink notebook and jotted it down, labelling it with his name.

“Well, look at that,” she heard beside her left ear. “Someone’s popular with the boys.”

Dina flinched in surprise, finally noticing Tala looking closely over her shoulder. A woozy Najida was not far behind and immediately took another chair at the table.

“You would not *believe* the morning I’ve had,” Dina told her comrades. “I’m too hungry to explain, but for now, we have a favor from that boy.”

“A favor? Oh-lá-lá, you little heartbreaker, you.” Tala slapped Dina’s back lightly and took the remaining seat while giving Dina a look-over. “You’re still wearing that fancy outfit?”

“Is that a problem?” Dina wondered.

Tala smiled, but stayed quiet as if she was holding something back for her own amusement. “I guess not. Your call,” she half-laughed.

As hunger was grabbing the last of her attention, Dina shrugged at Tala’s reaction and dug in. She offered Najida a cup of tea, but was refuted, so the trio simply watched from their seats as their destination got closer.

When it was nearly 10 and the ship was preparing to dock, a loudspeaker turned on and silenced the chattering across the deck. “Attention,” it began. “This is your Principal and the

head proctor for this test, Rosalita. As we are about to make landfall, I will be giving you a brief overview of this test's rules one last time."

Dina recognized this stern, authoritarian voice almost immediately as the cloaked woman who had saved her earlier. She reached into her bag and took out the thin rulebook she had received in the mail weeks ago. Despite reading it cover to cover too many times to count, she wanted to read them over with the announcement just in case something had been missed.

"From 11 A.M. today to 11 A.M. on Friday, you will be camping out on Four Seasons Island. In these five days, your goal, besides simply weathering the conditions, is to gather points. The ID card you were given with your Tomes is worth three points each, so everyone will start with three. Taking another's card is one way to gain points, but combat and attempts to steal cards at night is discouraged. We'd rather you use this time to work on your ability to set up camp and survive in the wilderness. You can also earn points by completing pre-set challenges that can be taken at specific locations and at certain times. On your Tome is the challenge list that will update throughout the week.

"A score under 25 points by the end of the test or the time of your surrender will mean you're only eligible for the Basic Course, and that's if we decide to admit you at all. If your score is over 25, you're eligible for the Intermediate Course, and 50 or over will give you a guaranteed slot in the Advanced Course. You must also stay until the test ends and cannot drop out early to be eligible for this course.

"As a final word of caution, I will once again remind students that while any lethal force will result in immediate dismissal and punishment, this test and all combat that takes place

during is self-regulated. You are here of your own volition and have signed the required forms stating that you know the danger you will face. That said, I'd like to assure you that no students have died taking this test in decades, so do not let this worry you. That is all."

As abruptly as it began, the announcement ended. To Dina's surprise, any anxiety over the dangerous combat that she could face was held at bay by the principal's insistence that they not worry. She reviewed her rulebook one last time and found everything to line up, so she packed it away and stood along with her teammates. The crowd had begun to move off the top deck. It was time to disembark.

"Aw yeah, here we goooo!" Tala squealed, bouncing on her heels. "I'm so freakin' pumped! Let's go!"

The girls followed the crowd downstairs and joined the line to go ashore. After having their IDs checked, they walked down the gangplank and stepped onto the pier. Only a short walk from there was dry land.

"Land ho," Dina said quietly as she walked onto the green grass and firm soil.

"Yeah, land ho!" Tala echoed, slinging an arm around Dina's shoulder. "Let's get it, girls!"

"Calm down," Najida told her. "Now that we're here, we need a plan. We can't stay around here. As soon as the test starts, everyone who's eager for points will start attacking whoever they can find."

"You think so?" Dina questioned, now checking around herself with great caution. "Right from the start? Everyone?"

Najida nodded. Again, she seemed to give Dina a once-over with her eyes, though Dina was too preoccupied to take note.

“We should start walking so we’re not caught up in some big melee, don’t you think?”

“I’m with the smarty-pants,” Tala said. “As much fun as it sounds, we should avoid getting swept up in a huge battle right at the start. Let’s pick a direction and just walk for now; get accustomed to this island.”

“Oh! I can help with that,” Dina said while pulling out her notebook. “I memorized the basic lay of the land from the map available on the internet, so I can draw us a rough map. As we explore, we’ll be able to fill it out with landmarks.”

“I guess the rule about not bringing one for ourselves was for just this purpose,” Najida guessed. “Vanguards must map new areas out themselves.”

“That’d be sweet,” Tala said with a thumbs-up. “Give us the details. What’re we looking at?”

“It’s very straightforward.” Dina sat on the grass and sketched the island’s outline with Tala and Najida looking over her shoulders. “While it isn’t perfectly even on all sides, the island is basically a short rectangle divided into four quadrants – the spring section in the southwest, the winter section in the northwest, the fall section in the northeast, and the summer section in the southeast. The borders between these quadrants form a plus sign with the World Tree in the center, so if you’re ever lost, you can easily find your way by looking to it. Since we disembarked in the summer section, we’re currently at the bottom-right corner of the rectangle.”

“OK, makes sense. Which way should we go?” Tala asked.

“The direction doesn’t matter, but for now, let’s stick by the coast so we don’t get lost,”

Najida suggested. “How about we go west?”

“Spring section then? Sounds good to me. Dina?”

“That’s fine by me. Let’s head out.”

Chapter 5: The Test Begins

After sketching her rough draft of the island, Dina and her companions began trekking along the coastline towards the spring quarter of the island. The initial Savannah-like area of the summer section had turned into a jungle partway along and remained that way when they crossed into the spring section. Their journey was quiet, with only Tala making the odd comment here and there. Dina didn't respond to her much; her mind was preoccupied by what could be waiting for them in the forest.

Fighting right away? Are we really going to be attacked out of the blue?

Once 11 O'clock was only minutes away, the girls turned their backs to the coast and prepared to enter the heavy forest. "Staying by the shoreline is too dangerous now," Najida claimed. Not far behind them was the steep cliff that dropped into rough waves smattering its face. "A single surprise attack could send us flying into the ocean."

"Probably," Tala agreed. "We've covered a lot of ground, but others could've gone further than us. We may find some opponents right off the bat." Despite making it sound like a warning at the beginning, Tala's voice became excited as she spoke.

“Let’s move stealthily for now,” Dina suggested. With their eyes and ears perked for signs of other students, the trio entered the forest on a small dirt trail. After a few minutes of walking, a message appeared on their Tomes declaring the test’s beginning. “Here we go...”

Far to the east, the sounds of battle erupted. Dina broke into a cold sweat thinking about how close they might actually be.

“They’re too far to reach us,” Najida said behind her, making Dina jump. “If we do find trouble, let’s run west.”

“Right, yes,” Dina sputtered. She couldn’t relax, however, as the sounds of distant fighting had spread out. “Hey, are they getting closer?”

“Yeah, I hear some coming,” Tala confirmed. She cupped a hand by her ear and put the other up to keep her teammates from speaking. “I hear their footsteps. A team of four is moving through the trees from the east. There’s another three coming from the northwest towards us.”

“Your hearing is quite impressive,” Najida said, sounding more like an observation than praise.

“Wait, already?” Dina quietly fretted. “They’re after us already? What do we do?” Seeing that Tala was too focused on listening for the potential opponents to respond, she turned to Najida in desperation. Instead of a comforting answer, a look of confusion came instead.

“You sound afraid,” Najida said. Dina’s heart nearly leapt into her throat, but Najida’s gaze thankfully turned away. “With those numbers, that’s understandable. We shouldn’t get

involved, even if they're coming for us specifically. We should go further west and hope these two parties intersect. They'll focus on each other while we slip away."

"Right," Tala agreed. "Ready to run, Dina?"

"Um—" Her answer was cut off when Tala roughly grabbed her wrist and yanked her through the brush. No more than a second later, she heard a large explosion where they had been standing.

"They found us," Najida calmly stated. While Tala dragged her onto a larger path, Dina watched Najida leap up onto a branch and catapult herself into the treetops.

"It sounds like the two groups just found each other too," Tala reported while letting go of Dina's wrist. "Still, let's gain some more distance." Even without using her Magic, Tala left Dina in her dust.

By the time Dina made the first turn on the path, she had lost sight of Tala. She looked to the treetops in hopes of spotting Najida, but had no such luck. As the realization hit her, Dina's jaw dropped and her knees nearly gave out under her. *They left me behind!*

Another boom from far behind quickened her pace, but her stamina was draining fast and she was forced to stop. Legs weak and lungs tight, she frantically sucked in air while whipping her head around, praying that she'd spot one of her teammates. She nearly called out for them, but realized just in time that she'd just be giving her location away.

"OK, don't panic, don't panic," Dina quietly chanted while fanning herself. "They'll realize I fell behind and come back, right? Tala seemed to be following the trail, so I should just follow on my own and wait for them to come back. That'll work. I'll be just fine. Th-They'll come back for me." In a stiff walk, Dina journeyed west, assuming that at any moment, Tala or

Najida would appear before her. As she walked, she was constantly looking over her shoulder, praying she wouldn't see any other competitors. "They'll definitely come back for me," she convinced herself, unable to think past her fear and come up with a backup plan. "Where are you two?"

A rustling in the treetops made a squeak escape her mouth. It was followed by a sigh of relief when she saw it was Najida, who hopped down the branches and joined Dina on the trail. "Where's Tala?"

"She outsped me," Dina admitted. "I'm so glad I found you. Strength in numbers, as they say." She laughed a bit too nervously for her liking, making Najida raise an eyebrow.

"You've been acting strange since the test began. Is something wrong?" Never one to mince words, Najida had hit the nail on the head.

"No! Ah, no, just nerves," Dina said, hoping her teammate wouldn't press further. Najida nodded and shrugged, waving with a hand for Dina to follow. Unsure how she had kept a straight face, Dina resolved to not press her luck and followed the path quietly, trailing Najida.

Eventually, they found Tala further in the forest. She was crouched in front of a bush, peering through and slipping their tent bag off her back. Dina almost called out to her, but Najida hushed her quickly. As they approached, Dina heard people speaking further beyond the brush Tala hid in.

"What is it?" Najida whispered.

"Two. No one else around. Smarty-pants, take a look." On Tala's insistence, Dina stuck her head into the bush and found a parting to peer through. Ahead was a grassy clearing where a pair of girls stood having a noisy back-and-forth.

“Why did you stop me? We almost had him!”

Dina recognized the owner of the shrill, obnoxious voice immediately. Cecelia was in this clearing, turning her back on the other girl with puffed-out cheeks and puckered, pouting lips.

“We did not almost have him. He’s too slippery to catch. We need to refocus,” Cecelia’s partner lectured. This other competitor had brown skin and short black hair that was partially shaved on the left side. Over her sleeveless gray tunic and black tights, she had close-fitting bronze armor over her torso, leather straps arranged in a skirt-like fashion, and a short, dark blue cape. Strapped to her left arm was a circular bronze shield and at her hip was a short sword in scabbard.

“Maybe he’s too slippery for a tactless oaf like you,” Cecelia claimed. “I’m good enough to—”

“Don’t call me an oaf, you brat!” the armored girl demanded.

“Brat?! How dare you!”

As the pair launched into a full-blown argument, Dina studied their appearances closely from her hiding space. Without turning around or taking her eyes off the girls, Dina leaned back and began whispering to her teammates.

“The one on the right is from Hellas. Her equipment tells me she’s been trained in their military’s classical sword style. The other may be from a northern Territory – possibly Germanica. That staff must be her weapon and I’d guess she fights with long-range attacks. She’s doesn’t look dressed for combat.”

“Said the pot about the kettle,” Tala joked. “So, what’re we thinking? Do we fight and try to get their ID cards or leave them be? Najida?”

“I’d be fine with either choice, though I would like to start gathering points.”

“OK, then let’s—”

“W-Wait,” Dina requested while turning around. “We’re really going to fight already?”

“Do you have a problem?” Najida asked. She sounded more accusatory than before, making Dina’s throat go bone dry. “You promised that you’d give this test your all, so I expect you to keep your word.”

“It’s three on two, Dina. We should take this chance while we’ve got it,” Tala reasoned.

Dina couldn’t rebuff them, but still felt pangs of unease at the notion. Najida and Tala scuttled further into the bush to wait for the right moment to jump out while Dina stared blankly at the grass and dirt. *What now?*

“What the hell? Where’d she go? That armor girl just disappeared.”

Tala’s sudden question made Dina’s train of thought halt. Before she could turn back around and take another look, she saw a pair of gray boots in front of her. Her breathing stopped as she tilted her head and saw the armored girl before her. No words came as her gaping mouth, but she was able to nudge both teammates as her opponent unsheathed her sword.

“Oh crap!” Tala grabbed Dina and sprang forward, tumbling into the clearing. Najida followed close behind and landed with her sword already drawn. Tala hopped up and took a fighting stance while Dina cowered behind both teammates.

Cecelia didn't seem shocked by their arrival, even letting a chuckle escape her lips.

"What's this? A few lurkers? What an excellent find, Kyria."

The girl in armor, now known to them as Kyria, followed them out into the clearing with her sword and shield raised. Though she didn't say a word, the stance she took was voice enough to tell them she was ready to battle.

"Najida, let me take this one," Tala requested while pointing to Kyria. "I don't know how she got behind us, but I wanna find out if she's faster than me."

Kyria narrowed her eyes at Tala. "I'd rather fight your teammate with the sword than an unarmed opponent—"

"Tough luck. You're fighting me. Najida, Dina, take the other one."

"If you insist," Najida answered, turning to point her sword at Cecelia. "Dina?"

"Y-Yes?"

"Aren't you going to join me?" Najida asked, looking over her shoulder.

Dina gulped loudly and knitted her sweaty hands together. The moment she dreaded had arrived. Her body shook like a leaf in the wind. Her hair stood on end and her breathing grew sporadic and rough. "U-Um, ah, um—"

Najida kept staring. Tala glanced over as well. Even Cecelia and Kyria had taken pause to watch. With every second Dina didn't respond, Najida's eyes seemed to widen. Her arms started to slack a bit, lowering her sword. "Dina?" she repeated, her voice coated in disbelief. "You *are* going to fight. *Right?*"

"Hey, what's up?" Tala asked. "Najida, quit hounding her. Dina said she can take care of herself, so—"

“Tala, I don’t think she was telling us the truth.” As the scathing words left Najida, Dina’s head gradually lowered. Her fear gave way to shame. “Dina, I want you to be *completely honest* with me. Can you defend yourself in any way? Can you fight at all?”

“...No. No, I can’t.”

Chapter 6: Dina's Battle

"Wait, what? Seriously?" Tala asked. "You said you could at least take care of yourself. You really can't fight? Like, at all?"

"No, I can't," Dina admitted again, unable to look at her teammates. "I can't fight at all. I have no physical strength or any useful control over my Magic. I'm... completely useless." Her face flushed with heat and humiliation, not helped by the haughty chortling from one of her opponents.

"I guess we're not really outnumbered, in that case," Cecelia laughed. "Kyria, would you take care of that weakling?"

"Why?" Kyria asked earnestly.

"What do you mean 'why'?!" Cecelia yelled back. "We're taking their ID cards! We have to beat them!"

"Then you can defeat her," Kyria replied calmly. "I'd never turn my sword on an opponent who's admitted to being defenseless."

“A gallant attitude like that will only hold you back. It’s not befitting a Vanguard,” Cecelia chided.

“Maybe not for the kind of Vanguard you’d like to be,” Kyria fired back.

“Just don’t show mercy on the others,” Cecelia demanded with a snappish stomp of her foot. By then, Kyria had already moved deeper into the clearing with Tala chasing after, wholly ignoring anything else her partner might have said.

With a showy spin, Cecelia held her staff forward and it started to give off a red glow. Across the wood was an array of symbols written in bright red light. “Fine then. I’ll start.”

“Those symbols,” Dina said. “I should have guessed; her staff has Runes to allow Magic Energy to be channeled through it. We should be cautious of what Ability—”

“If you can’t fight, then just stay back,” Najida ordered, glaring over her shoulder at her. “Make yourself scarce. If you get in trouble, I won’t be rushing to your rescue.”

The stern order pulled at Dina’s chest, but she could do nothing but relent with a lowered head. “I understand,” she said while backing away into the nearby tree grove.

Cecelia’s staff had begun to spark in the center of its circular carving. A ball of energy was being formed, growing from the size of a golf ball to a softball in only a moment. Najida saw this and took off in a sprint with her sword pulled back. Along the blade, emerald green symbols appeared in their own unique pattern.

I hadn’t realized her sword was a Runic Weapon too, Dina thought. Her Elemental Magic should put an end to this quickly. At least, I hope.

Both girls prepared to clash their weapons, but as soon as Najida began her slash, Cecelia disappeared from view. After following through with her cut, Najida ground her foot

down to stop and looked around for her opponent. Dina looked as well and found nothing until a red light appeared among the treetops.

“Above you!” she yelled.

Najida dashed back towards Dina once she heard the warning. In the spot she had been standing, the ball of red light struck the ground and burst. Najida was thrown off her feet by the explosive surge and crashed in the dirt.

“Are you alright?” Dina asked, mindlessly stepping out of her hiding place.

“Just fine.” Once back on her feet, Najida looked up and Dina followed suit. Among the leafy branches, they spotted Cecelia floating in mid-air, her dress now covered in Runes like her staff. “That attack is simple, but quite strong,” Najida noted. “Using two Runic Weapons at the same time with different Abilities is quite difficult as well. She must have been the one who wrote the array on them – we’re fighting a Runesmith with superb amounts of Magic Energy.”

“Oh, do go on,” Cecelia called down to them. “I’ll always accept praise for my talents!”

Another energy bomb appeared from her staff, prompting Najida to raise her free hand. When the attack came, Najida swiped her hand through the air and brought a thin wave of sand out in front of herself and Dina. Once they were blocked from view, she grabbed Dina’s wrist and dashed across the battlefield, yanking her as fast as she could go.

Behind them, Dina saw the attack pass through the film of sand and burst, making another powerful explosion. She tried to find Cecelia again, but Najida brought her into a thicket for cover that blocked her view.

“Stay here and out of the way,” Najida demanded. “We’ll discuss your lying once this battle is over.”

“Alright, I will.” Dina’s reply fell on deaf ears as Najida had already jumped into the treetops. Now alone, Dina had a moment to consider Najida’s word choice. There was no more dancing around it – she had lied to them. She could feel her mind rush into the worst possible scenario, but before she could ponder it in full, she heard footsteps rushing by. She peeked her head out from behind the closest tree and watched Tala running in circles, trying to keep up with her opponent.

Like before, Kyria was moving faster than Dina could see. When Tala tried to kick at her, she would circle around in the blink of an eye and swing her sword, aiming for Tala’s flank most often.

“Stay still!” Tala swung her leg up at Kyria’s head, but her shield blocked the attack. A sword strike came for Tala, and she jumped away. Now at a distance, she paused to catch her breath. “You don’t move like me,” she had realized. “What’s your secret, huh? How’re you zipping around faster than me?”

“No secret. My ability is plain to see,” Kyria told her.

In the brush, Dina narrowed her eyes and focused solely on Kyria. *If I can’t fight, then I’ll at least try and figure their powers out. It’s the least I can do.* Her analysis began when Kyria slipped out of her vision.

“This again?” Tala barked. She jumped forward on instinct, avoiding a slash from behind. As soon as her foot touched the ground, Kyria appeared in front of her again. Her sword was poised to slash. Tala dropped onto her back, letting the next swing pass over her, and thrust her foot towards Kyria’s chin. Just as her attack would’ve hit, Kyria moved suddenly across the field.

With Tala, I could at least see a blur, Dina thought. *Could this Kyria simply be using the same kind of Magic Ability but better?* She gave Kyria another close inspection in this brief lull in action. *She has the skill and demeanor of someone who's been trained well, but Tala can still keep up fairly evenly.* The fight was repeating itself in her mind, letting her comb for clues. *Kyria's swings aren't making contact, even when she moved so swiftly. Shouldn't her sword be moving as fast as her?* Replaying Kyria's last attack is what made the details finally click into place. "Tala!" she called out. "It's not speed! She's teleporting!"

"Oh yeah?" Tala hopped to her feet and looked back and forth between Dina and Kyria. "How can you tell?"

"Your attacks have added force and swiftness because of your Speed Magic. Her attacks don't have any added momentum like yours do. She's so fast because she shifts placement instantly—"

With only a swift change of her blade's direction, Kyria instantly forced Dina's explanation to stop. "You seem perceptive for someone who's claimed to be useless." The terse and sudden callout was enough to make Dina duck back behind the tree. "Knowledge is more useful than any weapon, so if you prove to not be ineffectual like you had claimed, then I'll consider you my opponent as well."

"G-Got it! Thank you for the warning!" Dina responded, cowering behind the tree again.

While her opponent was distracted, Tala sped forward and brought her leg up, aiming for her head. Kyria teleported away once again and appeared at a distance on Tala's left. Glimmering bronze Runes appeared across her sword, and from the blade's tip, a beam of light shot forward and struck Tala's side, throwing her across the grass in a tumble.

“Frick-frackin’-cheap-shottin’-son-of-a—” She crashed head first into a tree, but jumped to her feet after only a moment. “Yo, Dina! Got any ideas on how to beat her?” Tala asked, walking a few paces forward.

“None in particular.”

“Oh well. I’m out of luck this time, huh?” Tala claimed. “Dammit all. I’ll just have to sit back and wait for the final blow to come.” As she spoke, Tala stopped and stood still. She put her hands on her hips and waited for Kyria to attack.

Dina hid further in cover, but kept her eyes on the battle before her. Kyria held up her sword and the Runes appeared, but she put it down without firing an energy blast. *If Tala’s waiting for an attack, she could easily dodge a ranged strike like that*, Dina realized. It felt like the standoff between her ally and enemy would last forever, but in the briefest of moments, Kyria moved behind Tala. The blade was swung and Dina thought the fight would end with it.

But then, Tala moved. Her body leaned forward and let the sword pass over. Spinning her body around, Tala brought her right leg up with extreme speed. Like a whip, she struck Kyria’s head and sent her flying into the bushes.

“Dina!” Tala called out once she was stood up straight.

Though caught off guard, Dina was still able to reflexively blurt out, “Yes?”

“You said you don’t know how to fight, yeah? Let’s call this your first lesson,” Tala said with a punctuating point towards her. “Your opponent will always be at their most vulnerable when attacking, so if you need a surefire hit, then you either gotta be quick about hitting them during their windup or avoid the attack and strike right after. Got it?”

“Got it! I’ll write it down right now.”

“Good girl, get that knowledge... Wait, we’re in the middle of a fight! Don’t actually write it down right now!”

“O-Of course, I wasn’t being serious,” Dina claimed, taking her hand off the notebook in her bag. With the danger passed, she exited the brush, though some twigs catching her skirt made her stumble a bit. “What should we—” It took a moment to realize that Tala was long gone. “—do... now... Tala?”

After looking around for her teammate, with the occasional glance to Kyria to make sure she was staying put, she saw Tala was back where the fight had begun. Dina hurried over to her and became worried when she didn’t see Najida anywhere.

Once Dina reached Tala, she also looked up and gasped. Standing on a thick branch far above was Cecelia, holding out her staff that had a chain made of red light hooked to its circular carving. Below her, Najida was bound by a clasp at the end of the chain, pinning her arms to her sides and leaving her dangling high above the ground. Her sword hung limp in her right hand, but she hadn’t let go.

Hey! Do you need a hand, Najida?” Tala asked.

“I do not, and don’t come closer. I don’t know if she can make more of these chains, but I do know that it blocks out your Magic Energy.”

“Wait, seriously?!” Tala blurted out. “That’s like— she’s got, like, the levitating and those bomb thingies I saw, and now there’s energy chains— that’s BS! You’ve got too many powers, girly!”

“That’s just a perk of making so many Runic items,” Cecelia claimed with a flip of her hair. “A varied arsenal of powers is best, as you can see.”

“We’ll see about that!” Tala challenged.

“Stop! I said not to come closer!” Najida chastised. “Don’t worry about me. I can defeat her like this.”

“Oh, can you?” Cecelia asked. “I’d like to see you try!” She said these six words with her chin up, only taking her eyes off of Najida for a few seconds. In that short time, Najida made her move.

In only two swings back and forth, Najida swayed herself far enough to reach the closest tree. Finding a branch with one foot, she kicked off and launched up towards Cecelia. Once they were on the same branch, Najida tackled her into the trunk and pressed her shoulder against Cecelia’s throat.

“Did you see?” Najida asked as Cecelia choked and gagged. “If you don’t deactivate your ability, I’ll press harder.”

Cecelia’s gurgles sounded vaguely like a threat, but when Najida pushed her shoulder further in, she relented. The chain of energy lost its form and the red light dispersed into nothing.

With her arms freed, Najida put her sword up, but Cecelia slammed her staff down and forced the blade into the trunk. Her cocksure attitude returned for a split second, but Najida repelled it again when she took a hand off her sword and punched Cecelia in the nose. She pulled her sword free from the branch while Cecelia curled up in pain against the trunk.

“Agh! My face! *Diese schlampe hat mir fast die nase gebrochen!*”

“Whatever you say,” Najida said with a shrug, pointing her sword at Cecelia. “Hand over your ID card or I’ll knock you out and take it.”

“Damn, that was awesome,” Tala commented. Dina nodded in agreement, surprised at the brutal, desperate method Najida had used, but the victory impressed her all the same.

It felt to her that, when everything changed, it happened when she had blinked.

It didn’t register right away that Kyria had reappeared on the branch behind Najida with her sword drawn. By the time Dina knew what was going on, the sword was mid-swing. Without her being able to say a word of warning, Kyria’s blade slashed across Najida’s back. She nearly screamed when she saw Najida fall off the branch, but her fear quickly turned into confusion. Instead of blood, what leaked from Najida’s wound was sand.

Tala made her move as Najida fell. She zipped forward and waited with her arms outstretched. Dina followed soon after and made it in time to see the catch. Now with a closer look, she confirmed that not only was it sand falling out of Najida, but her entire back had become sand. “Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. It takes a great amount of my Magic Energy, but I’m able to transform my body into sand. The attack passed through me safely; I just lost my footing from the surprise.”

Dina looked down again and saw the sand on the ground gathering and rising back to its conjurer’s body, filling the gash left by Kyria. A moment later, it had reformed into flesh and cloth.

“You can put me down now,” Najida told Tala.

“You sure?” Tala asked hopefully. All it took was a glare from Najida for Tala to relent with a happy-go-lucky “Alrighty then.”

Dina's eyes went skyward to find Kyria and Cecelia. To her surprise, neither had moved since Najida had fallen. Instead of watching their opponents, they were yelling at each other once more.

"What made you think you needed to interrupt?!"

"I don't know, maybe seeing you crying with a sword in your face!"

"I was not crying! I never cry, *du osche!*"

"They're arguing again," Dina reported to her teammates. "I think we have time to come up with a plan."

"Good. That armored chick isn't gonna fall for my strategy twice," Tala said. "Best way to beat her is to double up. Najida, you and I are gonna take her down together."

"Can we afford to split our focus like that? We'll definitely be attacked by the other one."

Hearing her teammates planning their strategy, neglecting her presence, Dina felt shame wash over her again. She berated herself for being unable to help and wracked her brain desperately for an idea for how to help. Once again, she spoke before finishing her thoughts. "I can take her," she asserted. "The Runesmith, Cecelia. I can at least keep her occupied while you defeat Kyria."

"You already told us you can't fight," Najida said. "Why the sudden change? Were you lying again?"

"No. I really can't fight," Dina repeated. "I'm barely a beginner at using Magic, but I'm sure I can do something to keep her attention on me."

"You'll go down in a single hit," Najida predicted.

“Please,” Dina begged. “Let me do at least this much.”

Najida looked back to the treetops, then to Tala, then finally back to Dina. “That’s quite the risk you’re taking, but we may not have any other option. Seems as though their argument has wound down.”

Dina glanced up to see Kyria and Cecelia had finished their bickering and were staring back to them. Cecelia’s conceited expression was gone, now frowning from her damaged pride and face. Kyria vanished once again, returning to the grass right below, and held her sword and shield at the ready.

Najida held her own sword aloft as well. “Try me,” she dared Kyria. “That is, if you aren’t afraid.”

“That I am not,” Kyria answered coldly, and just then, she was in front of them. Najida slammed her sword into Kyria’s and the two swordswomen began their duel. Najida maneuvered the battle further back while Tala chased after. She stayed on the outside of the duel, but dove in with kicks when an opening was found.

This intense battle was beyond Dina’s comprehension; it felt like a heroic tale being played out with her as merely the audience; a spectator powerless to alter what could happen. When Cecelia floated into the corner of her eye, these thoughts left her. No matter what she was actually capable of, keeping Cecelia’s attention was her mission.

She was levitating on the far outskirts of the duel, taking aim with her staff. Dina hurried closer and summoned enough courage to shout for her. “Hey, you!” she hollered, getting Cecelia to spare her a momentary glance. “You’re... You’re not so great!”

Dina's failed heckling only got a sneer from Cecelia, who refocused on the actual battle. Another sphere of energy formed in her staff as she floated to a better vantage point. Dina thought for a moment that she had failed utterly, but then, she noticed Cecelia was steadily descending in trying to aim for Najida. Dina dashed after her, and just as Cecelia began to pitch the attack, she jumped and grabbed the hem of her dress

"Waagh!" Cecelia lost control and dropped like heavy sack onto Dina. Her attack was sent spinning up and away, dispersing on its own in the sky.

Dina's head felt hazy after the collision, but she came to her sense after Cecelia pushed off of her face to stand. Dina tried to grab her in a bear hug, but missed. When she was sat up, a staff was in her face.

"You're a pain," Cecelia said as her staff flashed to life with red lights.

Dina scurried away, backing herself into a tree that she used to climb to her feet. Cecelia's energy attack had formed again, shining and powerful just like before. As she prepared to swing, Dina got set to dodge. Once the orb was thrown, angled towards Dina's left, she dove to the right and the attack struck the tree, bursting on impact. Though she had avoided the direct hit, the explosion still threw Dina off her feet. She was sent flying straight into another tree trunk and her head cracked against the bark. Dina fell to the ground with a splitting pain on her forehead and saw blood trickle down over her left eye. Her frail body was shaking and sore from the attack.

But even with the pain and the blood, somehow, the fear of this battle was beginning to fade. She was hurt, but could still move. She was bleeding, but didn't feel like she'd die. Her attacker approached, but she wasn't rushing at unimaginable speed. She walked at a slow

pace. A human pace. This wasn't a monstrously-strong foe; she was facing a girl just like her. Beyond the training and knowledge, Dina realized, they were both humans.

Dina's hand found a stone. When Cecelia's shadow was over her, she flipped over and chucked the rock, landing a blow to Cecelia's forehead. A red wound had formed on her head in the same spot as Dina's. Whether it was true or not, Dina's felt they were even. The struggle to be victorious between them was now tied.

"You made me bleed," Cecelia stated coldly. The prideful indignation from before was long gone, replaced by a cold rage. Stood over Dina, she began gathering energy in her staff. "One attack should do it."

Past Cecelia, Dina saw her companions battling Kyria in a blistering, brutal fight. They whirled around the battlefield like rushing winds. Swords swung and crashed like lightning. Magic clashed like storming waves in their disorienting combat. Still, they weren't invincible. They were human, just like Cecelia, and just like herself.

"That it will." Dina narrowed her vision onto Cecelia. Her right arm raised slowly. Najida's description of Cecelia's attacks echoed in her mind. *Strong but simple*, Dina recalled. *I'll use every last ounce my Magic Energy. If there's only one thing I can do, then I'll do it.* Breathing deeply and slowly, she felt the energy in her body swelling in her center, sending tingles up her back like a cold wind had blown on it. As it rose up into her chest, the hairs on her head felt electric and stood at attention. Then, it slipped into her shoulder and made a turn into her arm like water sliding along the river's path. Her energy flowed up her arm and left goosebumps in their wake. Her stomach felt empty from the mass exodus of power, but she still scraped for every last drop.

“What the hell is this?” Cecelia questioned, regaining the heat in her fury. “You’re really trying to overpower me? The runt of this ragged litter?”

Dina said nothing to her opponent. She had reached the most difficult part – forcing the energy out of her body and shaping it. Recalling the previous night with Kotsu, Dina pictured a sphere in her mind and pushed. With her left hand grabbing onto to her wrist, she forced an intense white light out of her palm. It emerged and swelled to baseball size in an instant. Though she wasn’t directly touching it, as it was floating just above her palm, she could feel its density.

“You think that puny thing can outdo me?!” Cecelia squawked, offended by the idea of being contested by Dina’s self-proclaimed powerlessness. “Well it can’t! You’ll regret even thinking of fighting back! I’ll pay back your friend for that punch by taking you out of the contest!” Finally, she pulled her staff back to unleash a point-blank attack.

Dina heard Tala call her name and ignored it. The word ‘friend’ had grabbed her attention. *I would’ve like that; if we could have become friends. My first friends. If only I could be of use.* She no longer cared if her attack would have any effect or not. All she cared for was doing the job she had given herself. It was what little pride she had that was on the line; the miniscule part of herself that thought she could be worth something. Anything. No matter how small an effect she’d make, she had to give it her all to make it happen.

Dina released a wail of effort and let her attack explode forward.

The dazzling white light erupted from her palm in a giant burst, blinding all who saw it. Cecelia was swallowed up, letting out a scream that the explosive attack drowned out.

Branches overhead were stripped of their leaves, and the trees were then stripped of their branches.

All in the span of moment, Dina's single attack ended her fight.

"Holy crap!" Despite the ringing in her ears, Dina heard Tala yell out. The spots in her eyes faded after a moment, letting her see Cecelia lying like a rag doll across the clearing. Kyria teleported to her side soon after and, after checking her over, scooped her unconscious partner into her arms. She looked back to Tala and Najida and then, without a word, disappeared.

"Dammit!" Najida griped. "All that fighting and no points."

"Hey, so, what was *that*?" Tala questioned from afar. "Were you holding out on us or something?"

"I-I don't know," Dina admitted. The power was beyond anything she could have imagined. It had completely taken her by surprise; a fluke that she couldn't comprehend. Her arm dropped, numb and aching. Her thoughts grew foggier by the moment. Still, she found enough remaining strength to raise her other hand and gave her teammates a thumbs-up. "I did it." After this final declaration, Dina slumped forward onto the grass and felt her consciousness fade.

Chapter 7: Tell Me the Truth

When Dina began to awaken, the first thing she felt was sharp, deep pain in her right hand. A groan gurgled out of her throat. Her body was moving slowly, like an old car starting up.

“Hey, she’s coming around.” Tala’s voice passed by her ears, followed by approaching footsteps. “Hey, hey, can you hear me?”

“Mmmnn... Tala?” Dina struggled to open her eyes and had to turn her head to avoid staring at the sun. She winced in pain trying to move her arm, but this helped her to fully awaken. Eyelids fluttered, and after a moment of blurriness, she saw Tala crouched over her. “How... How long was I out?”

“Hour and a half, give or take.” Tala hooked her arm under Dina’s back and helped her sit up. “That move you pulled out was really something, but the recoil was a bit too much. You must’ve used every bit of Magic Energy in your body.”

“I did, yes. I didn’t know if anything less than my all would be useful.” As her vision sharpened back to normal, Dina looked down to her right hand and saw a red bandana holding a small piece of wood over her right hand as a splint. After feeling her hand with the other, she

concluded it was only a sprain and sighed in relief. “I didn’t know that expelling so much power all at once would be so detrimental.”

“You really are a newbie, huh?” Tala said. “Even if you’ve had a large amount of natural power this whole time, sending it all out at once is gonna feel pretty crappy afterwards. Plus, a huge burst like that is gonna have some blowback on you. You gotta learn about this stuff before trying it, y’know?”

The memories of their battle returned to Dina hearing that, and her guilt tugged down on her throat. She averted her eyes from Tala, only realizing then that they weren’t in the same part of the forest as when she had passed out. “Where are we?”

“We ran further west after those two girls gave us the slip,” Tala told her.

“Your big attack called a lot of attention to us. We had to flee and avoid others for quite a while.” Hearing Najida’s terse, cold, tone from behind made Dina flinch. Her approaching footsteps crackled and crunched the grass and leaves underfoot. “Now that you’re awake, Dina, there’s something we all must discuss.”

“O-OK.” A shiver ran down Dina’s back. She clutched at her shawl and stared straight ahead, eyes already watery. Najida entered her periphery with her arms crossed, not squatting down like Tala. A silence fell over the trio, leaving only the birds and bugs to be heard.

“I want you to be completely honest with me,” Najida finally began, “because it seems you haven’t been so far. You tell us last night that you can take care of yourself in a fight, and today, you tell us you can’t. Then, you deliver an attack far more powerful than someone who’s as helpless as you claim to be could perform. Do we all agree this is what happened?” She first looked to Tala, who grimaced and fiddled her hands.

“I mean... yeah, pretty much.”

Dina couldn't bear to match Najida's gaze and answered with her head down. “That's correct.”

“Then tell me the truth,” Najida requested, her icy voice still even and controlled.

“What are your abilities? What can you do?”

Dina took a deep breath and raised her head, just barely meeting Najida's gaze. She loudly gulped and spoke with a dry throat. “I can't do anything,” she admitted. “I lied to you last night, I admit it. I can't take care of myself in a fight. That huge attack was out of desperation and... well, even I had no idea where that came from. I didn't know my innate Magic Energy was that massive, honestly. But that's beside the point. Last night, I just... I panicked, and I got desperate, and I lied to you both.” Dina lowered her head and had to shut her eyes, barely keeping herself together. “It's not worth much now, b-but I... I really am sorry.”

Najida didn't have an immediate response, and in that window, Tala spoke up. “Can I just say, in defense of Dina, even if she couldn't fight, she figured out that teleporting girl's ability on her own just by watching. That was useful, I think. Plus, even if the attack's recoil did hit her bad, she defeated one of those girls. If the two of us had kept her partner from grabbing her and escaping, we'd have won.”

“One stroke of luck isn't enough to outweigh what we risk with someone like this on the team,” Najida rebutted.

“Someone like this?” Tala repeated, trading in her diplomatic tone for one filled with ire. “Listen, you may think you’re totally perfect, but everyone’s got weaknesses – myself included – so you should think about—”

“I don’t think that I’m perfect,” Najida growled. “All I’m doing is trying to figure out my best course of action, and if it’s one that doesn’t involve you two, then—”

“Stop it! Both of you,” Dina pled. She climbed to her feet and stood even with her tentative teammates. “You two shouldn’t fight like this. You work well together. I’m the one at fault, Tala.”

Tala stepped back and took a deep breath. Najida did the same, but didn’t react beyond that.

“Can I ask you something?” Tala said to Dina. “Why did you come here if you know you’re not ready? You could’ve waited a year or two to take the test.”

Dina folded her hands bashfully, unable to take her eyes off of the grass below. The time for humility was long gone. “Because... I thought it was my only chance,” she admitted to her embarrassment. “If I had waited, nothing would have changed for me. I’m still so weak, and I can’t change it, and I... I really can’t take it anymore.” Out of nowhere, Dina felt a flash of anger. Thinking back on her life, she couldn’t help but flare up. A few stray tears escaped her eyes. “I came here because I’m desperate, OK? Is that what you want to hear? That I’m a pity case barely scraping by? That I’m a leech trying to ride your coattails? Well, there you go, it’s out there! I just suck and that’s not changing!”

As Dina huffed the last dregs of her anger out, Tala and Najida said nothing. The outburst left them stunned long enough for Dina to collect her breath, rub the tears away with

her sleeve, and decided on what to say. "I'm sorry for that. That was... it wasn't about you," she assured them. "This is my problem, and you don't have to look after someone with nothing to offer. I don't want to be pitied. But, I still think I have skills to offer. As much as my brain tells me I have no use, I want to believe I can pull my weight in *some* way. I mean, I wouldn't have made it here if there was nothing I could do, right? Barely making it is still making it. I can put my brain to work and help bring in points. And this may be too hopeful, but perhaps I can find a way to control my Magic and fight alongside you. I won't beg you to stay with me, but I'd really appreciate the chance to make this up to you two."

She hadn't noticed while she spoke, but there was an excited, approving expression on Tala's face. All that was left was Najida, who's eyes carried uncertainty. It took a few moments for her to answer.

"It's almost 1:00 now," Najida began. "I propose we split up here and meet at the World Tree at 5. That gives us plenty of time to think things over. When we meet then, we'll decide whether or not we stay allied. Does this sound fair to you both?"

After bracing herself for rejection, Dina was shocked at Najida's offer. "That's far more than I deserve," she said. Then, an idea sprang up in her mind. The anxious side of her pleaded for it to not be said, but the possibility of saving this alliance had pushed Dina forward. "I can do better than just surviving until then," she challenged. "If I haven't earned any points for us by then, I won't bother showing up. I'll prove that I won't hold you back."

"Woah now, that's some big talk," Tala said with a few nods. "Alright. 5 O'clock sharp. I'll be there, so don't be late, you two."

“I won’t be.” Najida looked around for a moment before turning northeast, the direction of the World Tree, which poked out from the top of the tree line like a parent among toddlers. She started her solo stroll towards it, but stopped after a few steps. “Let me be clear,” she began, “that I’m not trying to be cruel. All I want to do is get into the top class.” She looked over her shoulder at Dina, glancing with softer eyes. “For what it’s worth, I hope you can live up to your promise.”

The tension knotted up across Dina’s body began to unwind and melt away. “Thank you,” she answered, nearly too stunned to speak. It took her a moment to tell herself that there was no need for surprise. “I know you’re simply looking out for your best interests. It’s very kind of you to give me this chance after everything I’ve kept from you, so thank you very much.”

Najida’s head jerked back forward, but not fast enough for Dina to miss the surprise in her eyes. She resumed her walk and soon left Dina’s sight.

“Well, that was tense, huh?” Tala zipped to Dina’s side and put an arm around her shoulders. “Still, I’m glad we’re all gonna stay together after this.”

“I’d hope so, but it’s not a sure thing yet. I’ll need to get some points for us.”

“Hey, look, listen,” Tala rambled while grabbing both of Dina’s shoulders and turning her to make eye contact, “that’s as good as a sure thing for me. I have total faith in you.”

Dina’s body tensed up hearing this, only for all of her remaining uncertainty to leave her. She almost began crying, but was able to keep herself together. “Th-Thank you, Tala.”

“Of course!” Tala pulled her into a tight hug that squeezed the breath from Dina’s lungs. She let go quickly, though, and began to walk backwards while snapping the strap of her

goggles with her thumb. “Everyone’s got some kinda weakness, Dina. Whether or not it can be fixed or overcome or even ignored, that doesn’t matter. Everyone’s got some kinda strength too!” With that last bit of advice, Tala turned and ran eastward, quickly escaping Dina’s sight. “See you at five!”

“Right! See you then!” Dina shouted back.

Now on her own, Dina took stock of her surroundings. The World Tree gave her a clear marking of direction, and with its distance from her position, she made a rough estimate of where she was. *I’ll have to keep an eye on the challenge list on my Tome.* From her bag, she removed her notebook and pen and turned to a blank page. Marking it as “fighting tips,” she jotted down the advice Tala had given her earlier. Then, she flipped to her basic map and the blank page across from it. *I’ll make notes on this area out and find some landmarks while I wait for a good opportunity for points.*

As her pen dragged across the paper, noting the types of flora she had seen, from Cycad and Rimu trees to Ivy and Venus Flytraps, she felt a rush of excitement she hadn’t gotten since disembarking. *This test is my first taste of a Vanguard’s life,* she thought, perking up her head to stare into the jungle ahead. *Studying the world around me, making new discoveries – this is all I want. I’m finally here, so I need to get excited. It’s time to see if I’m cut out for this!*