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Illustrator
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I Tried to Lie Low in the Battle of the Classes

but Wound Up Fighting the Legendary Final Boss



FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER



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Finding Avalon



Character Affiliation



The Narumi family

Daisuke Narumi

Piggy's father and a middle-aged man who runs a general goods store.

Sayuki Narumi

Piggy's mother and a beautiful woman with a youthful appearance.

Kano Narumi

Piggy's younger sister. She's a hyperactive girl with a natural talent for adventuring.

Souta Narumi / Piggy

The protagonist. He was originally one of DEC's villains, but now...?

Satsuki Oomiya

A friendly, prim student who always looks out for her class.

Risa Nitta

The intelligent and sly second player to appear.

Kaoru Hayase

Piggy's dignified, beautiful childhood friend.

Yuuma Akagi

DEC's original, charismatic protagonist.

Naoto Tachigi

An intelligent student who plans out Class E's strategies.

Sakurako Sanjou

A popular heroine from DEC, notable for her pink hair. She's nicknamed Pinky by her fans.

Hiroto Majima

One of the strongest students in Class E.

Takuya Tsukijima

The third player to appear. He acts unconcerned about the world.

Kotone Kuga

A petite, aloof girl secretly working for an American intelligence agency.

Class E

Isamu Kariya

The leader of Class D and a cunning thug.

Tadashi Manaka

While unimpressive, this boy has sway with Soleil thanks to his brother.

Class D

Masakado Takamura

Leader of Class C. He and Class B's Suou have a complicated history.

Meiko Mononobe

Takamura's retainer, whose bare forehead is cute!

The Masked Man

Mononobe's older brother. He wears a mask to conceal his identity, so is he pretty famous...?

Class C

Kouki Suou

He is an influential noble student commanding a squad of archers.

Class B

Kikyou Sera

The stunning beauty with the best grades in her year group. She will eventually become the student council president, and the Holy Woman organization assists her.

Akira Tenma

A girl who wears a full suit of armor at all times. Her black butlers serve her without question.

Class A

Akagi's Party

Team EEE (Triple E)



“You should join us too, Narumi.
You’re by yourself, aren’t you?”



“Huh?”



Piggy

The former overweight villain Souta Narumi.
He plans to support Class E in the
Battle of the Classes discreetly.
Will all go to plan...?

Kikyō Sera

The talented, beautiful, and dignified perfect girl.
She stands out as the top student in Class A.

Kotone Kuga

An introverted grump in Piggy's class who is
spying for an American intelligence agency.

Akira Tenma

A childlike and cheerful quirky girl in Class A
who is always wearing a heavy full suit of armor.



**A girl was sitting alone
away from everyone else,
slurping on cup noodles.**

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Chapter 1: The Gathering of the Fallen

Before us stretched a flat, dry plain as far as the eye could see. The evening sun had dyed the landscape orange on the fifteenth floor of the dungeon. Kano and I were here on a raid.

Unlike the maze of tunnels and corridors that comprised floors 10 to 14, floor 15 was a wide-open area with no obstacles to obstruct our vision. Regardless, it definitely wasn't the sort of place to sit and enjoy the view. From a distance, we could spy undead monsters squirming between the small hills and scattered crumbling gravestones. The corpses of hanged criminals swayed beneath leafless trees planted along the roadside against the backdrop of the bloodred evening sky, an unsettling combination.

Kano examined our surroundings and frowned, looking uncomfortable. "I, um, don't think I'd want to come here by myself..."

"You'd be perfectly safe at your level, but I get what you mean," I replied.

Spending time with swarms of undead monsters was about as far as you could get from a relaxing experience. But there was a gate and a sweet raiding spot on this floor, so we'd be coming down quite regularly. She'd just have to get used to it.

"Bro, the wraith is coming toward us!" yelled Kano.

"That's actually a ghost, one step up from a wraith," I informed her. "Ghosts have more magic resistance than ordinary wraiths, but they're still no match for us."

The *thing* approaching us was a white, translucent figure in the form of a human. Its main attack was Drain Touch, a skill that would drain your life force if it touched you. Physical attacks would pass right through the monster's spirit body without inflicting damage. But they were still relatively easy to defeat using magical attacks because they moved slowly.

"We'll take it down with magic, like we planned!" I said.

“Kay!”

Kano had only learned the Fire Arrow skill, so we were using this as an opportunity to practice the basics of magic. Because of the skill’s slow projectile speed, enemies could easily dodge Fire Arrow if you fired it from a standing position at long range. Thus, it was necessary to increase said speed while running to boost the projectile with your own momentum or perform the skill with a throwing motion.

However, quickly firing a projectile wouldn’t increase its power. For some strange reason, there was no relation between speed and kinetic energy with magic, even when the magic involved objects with mass. One couldn’t view magical phenomena through the lens of ordinary physics. Imbuing the arrows with more mana would increase their power, though. Pumping in more mana wasn’t the most efficient way to use it and gain power, even if it could be a powerful tool in the right circumstances. You’d need to consider your current intelligence stat, total mana, and your opponent’s resistance stat in order to set your mana output to the optimal amount for the encounter. The only way to learn how to do that was to practice.

Using Automatic Activation, Kano cast Fire Arrow. A cluster of fire the size of a ping-pong ball appeared in her hand, and she flung it at the ghost. The projectile seemed to travel faster than two hundred kilometers an hour, whizzing through the air and striking one of the ghost’s legs.

“I hit it!” cheered Kano. “Oh, but it’s not dead yet. Or, no more dead than it was to begin with, I guess.”

“You’ve staggered it,” I said. “Use that sword to finish it off.”

Kano slashed the ghost with the Sword of Volgemurt in her right hand. The special one-handed sword that the seventh floor boss Volgemurt had dropped could drain HP from its target, still causing damage to opponents impervious to physical attacks. It wasn’t as strong as an elemental weapon, so we needed to attack more times to get the same amount of damage.

After Kano’s fourth slash, the ghost released a high-pitched scream and dissolved into the air. A magic gem, several centimeters across, fell to the ground.

“Ooh, a big one,” remarked Kano. “The color’s pretty too. What’s it worth? How much?!”

“The going rate at the guild is six thousand yen for one,” I said.

“Six thousand a pop?! Hoo hoo, we’re gonna be feasting on some fancy beef in tonight’s hot pot!”

Learning the value of the magic gems helped my money-minded little sister instantly recover from her fear of spooky monsters. She even looked excited to carry on the raid. The magic gems dropped by monsters on the fifteenth floor were worth much more than the gems on the previous floors. It was possible to profit even if you had to share your spoils among a large raiding party.

“So, where are we gonna raid now?” asked Kano.

“An execution site called ‘the Gathering of the Fallen.’”

“An exec— Do we really have to go there...?”

Long ago, a baron and all his attendant knights were executed for a crime they didn’t commit at that particular site. Even death couldn’t quell the baron’s grudge against his wrongful accusation, so he returned as an undead monster.

DEC developers had added the execution site in a DLC, making it likely that most people in this world didn’t know about it. In other words, we could have it all to ourselves. There were a few other reasons the Gathering of the Fallen was a good raiding spot.

“Monsters will only spawn in a few spots there,” I explained. “When they spawn, they slowly crawl out from the ground. That makes it easy to get the first strike. Some people call it whack-a-mole.”

“Whack-a-mole?” repeated Kano. “Do they pop in and out like in the game?”

Two kinds of monsters would spawn there, both level 16. There were skeleton knights that carried a large shield and a one-handed sword alongside corpse warriors that wielded two-handed swords. They were one level higher than the average for monsters on the fifteenth floor, but they wouldn’t be a match for Kano and me since we were level 19.

If we could also collect twelve copies of a specific item that those monsters

dropped, we could place them in the center of the Gathering of the Fallen to summon a special monster called the Bloody Baron, which made things more exciting.

“The Bloody Baron... I’m guessing that’s the baron that got executed?” mused Kano.

“Yep,” I replied. “He drops an item that we can trade for twenty lir at Granny’s Goods. The knights that spawn with him drop mithril alloy equipment too, but it’s usually beaten up.”

“Beaten up? What do we want with junk?”

The knights dropped heavily dented armor or bent weapons with blunted blades. None of their drops were in good enough condition to equip, though you could melt them down and use their high mithril content to forge high-quality mithril alloy. My main objective for today’s raid was to gather dungeon coins and mithril from the execution site for equipment we could use on the twentieth floor and below.

As we marched over the gently sloping hills, blasting away any ghosts that approached with magic, the sunset sky suddenly grew dark. Thick black clouds swirled in a massive vortex above us. We had entered the DLC zone, where everything was gloomier. The shrieking wind blew through withered, lifeless vegetation. In the distance, I could spy what looked like a farm enclosed by about fifty meters of fencing. And so we had reached our destination, the execution site called the Gathering of the Fallen.

My sister and I approached the fence to examine what lay beyond. There were no buildings or structures inside, only a few small raised mounds of earth.

“I don’t see any adventurers,” I stated. “So we should be able to keep this place all to ourselves.”

“For a place called the Gathering of the Fallen, the guest list looks pretty slim,” said Kano. She’d probably expected more monsters inside than just the two undead we could see shuffling around.

Her intuition was half-right. Monsters would spawn in the execution site in such a way that there were two monsters inside at all times. As soon as you

slew one, another emerged. But the spawning monsters would slowly dig their way out of the ground. It would be simple to kill them while they were defenseless as long as we could deal with the active monsters first.

In *DEC*, players had worked out a simple system for this raiding area: players would camp by each of the twelve fixed spots monsters could swarm from and would slay the undead as soon as they crawled out. Kano and I would have a slightly harder time because there were only two of us, and we'd have to race over to the monsters when they appeared. We'd be fine if we took periodic breaks to preserve stamina.

"That one closest to us holding a shield is a skeleton knight," I informed Kano. "The fleshier one farther back is a corpse warrior."

"And you said skeleton knights can use one of the Knight skills, right?" she asked.

"Yep, they'll use Shield Bash on you. That's the one you want to watch out for. If you take a hit while the skill is active, you won't be able to move for a few seconds."

"Gotcha."

We put our things on the ground and prepared for battle, putting on the rucksacks containing the special weapons we'd brought for the occasion. Today's raid was just a test to see how things worked out, so I wasn't too anxious about being perfect.

"I'll take the corpse warrior, you take the skeleton."

"Okay," replied Kano.

I gave the signal, and we launched toward the monsters. Kano ran faster than me, reaching her target a second sooner. The skeleton tried to block her initial attack with its shield, yet she swiftly moved into its blind spot and unleashed a slashing attack. The level difference between them was huge, so she could defeat it without a problem.

My opponent was the corpse warrior, who dragged a longsword across the ground as it walked. The longsword was wider than a single-handed sword and heavier, yet level 16 monsters were strong enough to swing weapons like this

with one arm.

The corpse warrior noticed my presence from within thirty meters, then it growled and charged at me. It closed the distance between us in an instant, stopped five meters short, and swung its longsword up at me, sending sand and dust flying into the air as it dragged through the earth. Correctly judging the weapon's trajectory, I dodged and hurled a Fire Arrow at the monster with a sidearm throw. Despite my irregular throwing posture, the Fire Arrow still reached a speed much faster than an ordinary person could throw. My attack struck the corpse warrior in its flank and was more than enough to stagger it, and that was enough. Now, it was my turn.

I closed in on the monster and activated my weapon skill before it could recover. The corpse warrior desperately tried to guard with its longsword, but it was too late.

“Let this tear you in half! Slash!”

I used Slash, the first weapon skill that Fighters learned. Kariya had also used this skill in his duel. Because he'd used Slash with a longsword, his reach had been longer, and the attack was more powerful at the cost of a longer activation time for the skill. But I was using Slash with the thin, lightweight sword in my right hand, allowing the activation time for the skill to be nearly instant.

The monster was too slow to protect itself entirely, and my Slash dug into its unguarded left flank. I sliced the corpse warrior perfectly in half at the waist. Both halves fell as the monster turned into a magic gem.

I looked over my shoulder and saw that the skeleton knight had become a magic gem too. Kano had finished it off instantly.

“Cool. The next ones will appear in about thirty seconds, so get ready to strike them down,” I said.

“I see why you called it whack-a-mole! We just have to thwack them with these huge weapons, right?” exclaimed Kano.

Kano drew a one-meter-long mace from her rucksack. It was a Morning Star, a kind of mace with a heavy, spiked ball attached to its handle. Ordinary people

would have trouble carrying this twenty-kilogram weapon. My sister was strong enough to swing it around with one hand, although it caused her to sway a little. The mace was so massive that it could survive a little rough treatment, even though its steel wasn't particularly strong.

The execution site was a great place to raid because you could attack your enemies when they were completely defenseless, crawling out of the ground. However, you would have to fight the monsters properly if they got out, so you needed to ensure your attacks finished them off before this happened. Heavyweight blunt weapons were better than swords for killing armored enemies quickly.

I equipped my own Morning Star and tried swinging it around with one hand. I was more than strong enough to carry the heavy weapon, but I needed to dig my feet into the ground whenever I swung it, or my body would fly. I'd need some practice to get the technique right.

While I thought about that, I saw a bony hand shoot out from the ground to my right, likely a skeleton knight.

"It's coming, bro!"

"Watch closely, Kano. This is what you do."

The skeleton's hand clawed at the ground as the monster tried to unearth itself. Monsters took ten seconds to emerge, just like in the game. I raised my mace aloft and brought it down as hard as I could on my defenseless enemy.

"Take this!!!"

A huge cloud of dust puffed up as my weapon landed with a thud. The skeleton's bones spread across the ground and soon melted away, leaving only a magic gem behind.

The attack didn't put as much strain on my hands as I'd expected, perhaps because the ground was soft or my physical enhancements strengthened me more than I thought. Thanks to this, I knew I could put more power into my attack with the mace next time if I wanted. There'd be no need, though. My first attack was already enough to kill it in one blow.

These monsters had a small probability of dropping accursed entrails, the

quest items needed to summon the Bloody Baron. The ones we'd killed hadn't dropped any, though. Of course we wouldn't be so lucky.

"Wow, that was awesome! Oh, look, one's coming out over there!"

"Let's keep on killing them and see how it goes. Oh, one's coming out for me too."

The thud of our strikes thundered over the next few hours as we ran back and forth across the decrepit execution site, slaying all the monsters that emerged.

Chapter 2: The Bloody Baron

I swung my Morning Star down hard on a corpse warrior as it tried to climb out of the ground. When the dust settled, I saw my sister gingerly retrieve a dropped item and store it in a garbage bag.

“That makes twelve!” she exclaimed. “Now we can summon bloodstained Barry or whatever his name is.”

“The Bloody Baron,” I corrected her. “But I don’t know... The plan was to test this raiding site, not to go straight to the boss.”

Inside the garbage bag were twelve chunks of flesh resembling internal organs. We’d amassed the number required for the summoning ritual after crushing a few hundred skeleton knights and corpse warriors. This raid had produced a fine result, given the low drop probability.

The chunks of flesh were far more gruesome to behold in reality than they had been in the game. Most disgustingly of all, they’d pulsate now and then. It was nearly vomit inducing. Kano was faring no better; she’d used a large branch to pick up the flesh like she would with dog poop she found on the side of the road.

“If we summon him, we’d better sit and work out our strategy. But first...” I gestured with my finger, and Kano turned to look at what I was pointing at.

“Ooh, we’ve got company.”

A desiccated hand rose from a mound of earth. The constant churn of monsters made the execution site inconvenient for a conversation. I decided that we should step outside to work out our plan.

We jumped over the boundary fence, found a nice level patch of ground, checked that no monsters were nearby, and laid our mat down. I poured some tea from the flask I’d brought along, took a sip, and let out an appreciative sigh. The gloomy DLC zone was no less eerie than before, but it’s surprising what you could get used to.

“How do we summon him again?” asked Kano cheerily while munching on one of her favorite Japanese snacks. “We have to put these chunks of meat somewhere?”

“Yep, above the pattern in the center of the execution site.”

At said spot was a crude, childlike drawing of a sun with a spiral inside. We could start the Bloody Baron’s summoning ritual by placing the twelve chunks of flesh we’d gathered atop that symbol.

In *DEC*, the summon had taken place during a cutscene. The twelve organs would pulsate in unison as they connected. Soon after, the throbbing flesh grew and expanded until it formed into a zombie. The whole scene had taken about thirty seconds to play out, and the ritual should take the same amount of time in this world.

Would we have to twiddle our thumbs and patiently watch the ritual or could we do something in the meantime?

“The Bloody Baron won’t be able to move when the ritual begins while he’s forming his body. So we—”

“Can attack him?”

“That’s the idea.”

While players in the game had no choice but to sit through the cutscene, those rules didn’t apply to us. The ritual would be bonus time for us to get in as many attacks as we wanted, as long as we could move.

“Hmm... Thirty seconds isn’t very long,” noted Kano. “How strong is he?”

“He’s level 20. He’s basically a floor boss, so his HP and vitality will be pretty high. Normal monsters won’t spawn in the execution site while he’s around, but his twelve guardian knights will spawn with him.”

“You’re kidding! The knights that got executed at the same time as him? I can’t take on that many at once!”

The Bloody Baron’s guardians were an entourage of level 16 undead monsters called Bloody Knights. Each knight carried a distinctive weapon, ranging from projectiles to large short-range weapons. You needed to implement a unique

fighting style for each one.

Even at level 19, taking on twelve such enemies simultaneously would be no easy feat. Under normal circumstances, that is.

“Leave the guardian knights to me,” I said. “I’ll use Shadowstep as soon as the summoning starts.”

“Oh, that’s the skill where you move so fast you look all blurry! I wanna learn how to do that too!”

“Focus on maxing out the job level of all the basic jobs first.”

Shadowstep was an incredible skill that raised your movement speed and evasion success rate. Every top player in *DEC* treasured it. You could learn the skill from the advanced job Shadow Walker but had to pass a long list of criteria. It would be some time before Kano would be able to learn the skill.

“Anyway, pummel the Bloody Baron as much as you can in the thirty seconds of the ritual. This’ll also be a good opportunity to try using Manual Activation, the thing I showed you the other day.”

“Hmm, I’m not very good at that yet,” murmured Kano, still practicing the skill motions I’d taught her.

I’d had a tough time with Manual Activation at first. Enough practice and study let me reach the point where I could seamlessly switch between regular attacks and this method. Kano would benefit from getting her body and mind used to the peculiarities of Manual Activation for future raids.

“If time runs out or there are any surprises, we’re getting out of there. Got it? We don’t have to take any risks today. But running means the baron will disappear.”

“What?! Then we’ll have spent so long finding all those bits of meat for nothing!”

The Bloody Baron was a special boss whose high HP made him a tough foe. Yet his many skills and magical abilities were what made him truly formidable. My player skills would likely let me defeat him if I wanted to put my body through that, but there was no need to go to great lengths.

“Let’s go over the plan again. Kano, your job is to keep attacking the Bloody Baron while the ritual is in progress. I’ll distract the twelve Bloody Knights that spawn around him and try to defeat them. We’ll go in for the kill if we can get the job done in thirty seconds. If not, we’ll retreat with no hesitation.”

“Got it!”

Before we could carry out the plan, I wanted to finish the snacks we’d brought. I wondered whether Kano would let me have one of her candy bars... They looked tasty!

After we finished the important break to recover our stamina, aka snack time, we returned to the execution site. We made short work of the two undead monsters that had spawned and walked up to the summoning circle in the center of the area.

Victory against the baron would be a great achievement for us, opening up a new route to gather dungeon coins fast. That would allow us to provide ourselves with level 20 equipment and items. I could barely contain my excitement as I continued giving Kano instructions.

“You’ll start your attacks as soon as the twelve accursed entrails clump into one.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best!” Kano entered her usual Dual Wielding fighting pose, holding the Morning Star in her right hand and the Sword of Volgemurt in her left.

I could tell she was nervous, but I reminded her that she did not need to be anxious because we’d just run away if things went wrong.

It was time for the final preparations. I traced the complicated magic circle for Shadowstep perfectly. I’d used this skill so much in *DEC* that the motion was second nature. The tests that I’d continued performing after reaching level 19 confirmed that I could use the skill without putting too much strain on my body.

Once I activated the skill, my vision grew darker, and I noticed flickering afterimages by my feet. This sight reminded me of my days fighting other players in *DEC*, which excited me and got me into the mindset for combat.

I’m in the zone, I thought.

I glanced at Kano, and she nodded to confirm she was ready. I pulled the accursed entrails out from their garbage bag and dropped them onto the ground, spacing them out evenly. A vermilion light soon shone from the grooves in the sun-shaped symbol on the ground, and the chunks of flesh began to writhe.

“They’re moving! Oh God, why do they look so gross when they’re squirming?”

The chunks of flesh inched like caterpillars toward the center of the magic circle, where they merged into one and began to throb. At the same time, twelve mounds of earth swelled up from the surrounding ground, and monsters started digging their way out. These were the twelve Bloody Knights.

“It’s go time! Hit the baron like there’s no tomorrow!”

“Here I go!!!” yelled Kano, swinging her Morning Star at the boss. She used enough force to summon a gust of wind, creating a cloud of dust. The clump of meat continued to throb, unaffected. At least our guess was correct—our attacks wouldn’t halt the summoning ritual.

The Bloody Knights were technically passive monsters, which was unusual for the undead. But this was a pointless distinction because they’d become aggressive as soon as you attacked the Bloody Baron. Still, it was crucial to be the first one to strike.

I ran over to the closest earth mound cautiously, minding that I could see where my feet were moving even with Shadowstep’s afterimages obscuring them. Then, I ramped my speed up to the max. I was keenly aware of how much my agility stat had risen since my fight against Volgemurt. My current stats allowed me to use Shadowstep at almost full capacity.

Without dropping my speed, I plunged my sword into the mound using all the momentum of my charge, then twisted it as hard as I could. I heard a feeble moan from beneath the ground, signifying that I’d slain the first of my foes.

Raising my eyes, I looked at the next closest mound in front of me. A longsword was protruding from the earth, and the monster beneath was using this weapon to dig its way out. I sped toward this one in another mad dash and stabbed the monster when it rose. The knight’s head was in the perfect position

for me to kick, which finished my second foe off.

About twenty meters to my right, a monster had unearthed half its body. I lifted the battered longsword from the ground and lobbed it at my enemy. My attack obliterated the knight and the mound it had risen from. That made three.

Even farther to the right, I saw a hatchet protruding from the earth. The monster was facing the opposite direction from me as it climbed out. The fool! Not one to miss an easy kill, I swung my sword down, assuming that I'd effortlessly dispatch my fourth opponent. But the knight blocked my blow with its hatchet, an astounding feat of agility for a half-buried monster!

"You knights don't go down without a fight," I remarked. "But how will you stop this?"

The monster had surprised me by twisting its upper body around and blocking my attack. Fortunately, the knight couldn't react to all my quick attacks without using its lower half. I jumped over to its blind spot, swung my sword, and severed the zombie's head. That was my fourth.

I sensed movement to my rear. A knight had dug itself out of the ground and advanced toward me. I spun around and struck it. This Bloody Knight was muscular and held a large double-headed axe above its head. As a feint, I jabbed at the monster from the other side of its attack and used the time I gained to get close. I was twice as fast as the knight, meaning it couldn't keep up with my attacks. I moved around constantly, ensuring I was always in one of its blind spots, and continued attacking. Before long, the monster turned into a magic gem. Five down.

"Seven...left," I said, panting. "I thought I'd do better."

I had aimed to kill six of the knights before they joined the battle, but they'd been quicker to dig themselves free than I'd expected. Playing the game, I would've had to take all twelve on at once, so taking five out before the real fight began was still a bonus.

The remaining knights had different weapons: shortswords, knives, bows, huge maces, and scythes. Battered flesh clung loosely to their skulls, and their equipment was in tatters. Yet their steadfast determination to defend their baron shone in their empty eye sockets... Rather than me, they pointed their

weapons at the person attacking their leader.

“Aaaaah!!!” screamed Kano as she struck the Bloody Baron with all her power over and over, not minding the clouds of dust she was creating. Despite this, the summoning ritual continued as the mass of flesh formed a humanoid shape and became a complete flesh zombie.

We still had half of the ritual, but could we slay the high-HP boss before time ran out? It’d be a close call. Blood was spurting out of the flesh mass, and its limbs had twisted in unnatural ways. Part of this enemy was collapsing, showing that Kano had reduced its HP by quite a lot. Seeing this, some Bloody Knights howled and menacingly brandished their weapons. They weren’t happy with how we were treating their beloved master, and I couldn’t blame them.

However...

“It’s nothing personal, but you’re not getting closer to her. You’re going to help us get stronger!”

Chapter 3: A Nostalgic Taste

An occasional gust blew through the execution site, whipping up whirlwinds of sand and dust. In the middle of it all, I faced seven Bloody Knights who wielded all kinds of weapons, big and small.

I picked up the two-headed axe on the ground, dropped by one of the knights I'd slain. The weapon weighed about twenty kilograms. Though it had lost its cutting edge, it could still smash through armor and paired well with my rapier. I had never assigned Dual Wielding to my skill slots in my *DEC* days, but I'd spent most of my game time as a Weaponmaster. It was a job that had given me mastery over many weapons in various circumstances against different enemies. Using a rapier and a two-headed axe simultaneously wouldn't be too much trouble.

As I adjusted my grip on the axe to get a feel for it, two of my foes moved toward me. However, they set their sights on Kano. I wouldn't let them—

"I won't let you pass!"

While I monitored the archer's line of fire and Kano's position, I used Shadowstep to speed up and close in on my enemies. The closest of the two advancing toward us raised his shield, but I brought my axe down on him.

The shield shattered with a thunderous screech of metal, and the Bloody Knight flew.

I sliced at the sword-wielding knight by his side with my rapier. The cut wasn't deep, and the knight remained standing. He swung his sword at me, so I dodged and activated the Slash skill to attack him again and sliced him in two. Now there were only five left.

"Oops, gotta be careful!"

During the momentary pause after I'd slain those two, I heard an arrow whizzing through the air. I jolted my head to one side, escaping the arrow's path. With that, all five remaining knights charged at me. They'd realized they

needed to get rid of me to save their liege. It was clear what I had to do—

—run away!

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I won’t take you all on!”

Things would be different if I were at a much higher level than them, but our levels were nearly equal. Fighting all five at the same time would be incredibly difficult. I didn’t have to fight them; what mattered was keeping them away from Kano. When I’d caught their aggro, and they’d switched to targeting me, I’d accomplished my main objective. All I had to do was buy time and watch out for their projectiles. Shadowstep increased my movement speed, so I was confident I could outrun them.

I ran in a zigzag around the execution site while looking at Kano, who used Manual Activation to use Slash and cut into the Bloody Baron. From the state of the baron’s battered body, I could tell that Kano had reduced his HP to a third of its maximum. We didn’t have much time left, though. Should I join Kano in attacking him?

Keeping watch on how close the pursuing Bloody Knights were to me, I changed directions and led the train straight toward the Bloody Baron.

“Kano! I’m gonna hit him with a skill! Don’t get hit when it activates!”

“Gotcha!” replied Kano cheerfully, continuing to lay into the baron.

I wondered what skill to use. Perhaps one that could take advantage of the two-headed axe I’d picked up? I sheathed my rapier and gripped the axe with both hands. And so I gathered mana as I ran. Then, I rotated my body twice like I was performing a hammer throw, swinging the axe with me. It was the skill motion needed to activate Full Swing.

At that moment, I got close. Kano saw me and jumped out of range. Perfect—now I could let loose.

“I’m gonna hit you with everything I’ve got! Full Swing!!!”

Using all the centrifugal force of my axe and the momentum of my approach, I struck into the mass of meat slowly forming a humanoid figure. There was a thunderous boom as my attack landed, but the enemy was still in one piece and

continued to throb. Its ability to withstand damage was off the charts.

I continued moving after the attack to keep my distance from the Bloody Knights chasing after me. Soon after, I added some variety to my day's skill slots by learning the Backstep skill and a few others, allowing me to fight in the same way I had in *DEC*.

"We're...running...out of...time though," I said, panting.

The fleshy mass was getting closer to the baron's human form, and I could sense powerful magic beginning to resonate within his body. He would fully materialize in this world before long. Would it be better to run away and take no risks?

"Kano, we're getting out of here! We're out of time!"

"But he'll vanish if we leave! We're so close to killing him, so let's make it mean something!"

The baron's remaining HP couldn't be any higher than twenty percent of his maximum. That was low enough that we'd have a shot at taking him down in a proper fight, but we'd need to survive the powerful skills he could use. Kano had never fought the baron, so it'd be too much for her. I could handle it, only if I didn't have to worry about the Bloody Knights. In that case...

"So be it! Take care of the Bloody Knights, and I'll handle the Bloody Baron!"

"Will do!"

Kano ran past me toward the Bloody Knights. I saw the archer knight take his aim off me to target her, so I launched a Fire Arrow at it as I spun around.

"Take this!" yelled Kano. "And! Taste my Slash!!!"

She struck the reeling archer knight with her Morning Star, then activated Slash with the Sword of Volgemurt, taking it down along with another nearby knight. This attack drew the aggro of all three remaining knights to her.

"That's it! Now you just have to run around the outside of the execution site! I'll be in the center fighting the baron!"

"Gotcha! Give him a thrashing for me, bro!"

A whirling column of magical energy shot up from the center of the execution site, and the resulting pressure wave caused a strong gust of wind. The summoning ritual had concluded, and the newly born Bloody Baron turned his dead white eyes at me as I approached. In addition, the baron raised his arms and channeled mana into two magic circles in front of his hands. The magical energy was so intense that space distorted around him. This passive skill was Parallel Incantation, which the baron possessed and allowed him to cast two spells at once.

The baron roared and yelled, “Flame Strike!!! Flame Rain!!!”

“Oh, you’re going all out from the get-go, are you?!” I retorted.

A three-meter-wide magic circle materialized several paces in front of me, shining radiantly before exploding. He’d cast Flame Strike—a spell that summoned a massive column of fire—and positioned it ahead of me so that I’d run into his trap. I suddenly stopped beside the flames and avoided running into it. But the heat carried by the pressure wave was unbearable. The bastard had burned my eyebrows!

Barely a moment later, a ten-meter-wide magic circle appeared above me. It was Flame Rain, a spell that caused a rain of boiling lava to fall over a vast area. The temperature of each droplet was over two hundred degrees Celsius, meaning the rain glowed white rather than lava’s characteristic red. Even the slightest contact with my skin would lead to severe burns.

I jumped backward immediately, using the Backstep skill and my momentum to escape the spell’s range... But I wouldn’t make it in time. I raised my axe to shield myself from the falling lava and rolled as fast as possible.

“Phew... So damn hot! It melted part of my axe!”

“Bro! Are you okay?!” exclaimed Kano.

“I’m fine. Hair’s a little singed, but that’s all.”

I looked over my shoulder to examine the damage. Plumes of black smoke were rising from molten sand. *Wow, expert-level magic really packs a punch.*

We’d reduced the baron’s HP so low that he’d skipped the initial stages of the fight and gone straight to using the big guns. Magic that extreme was usually

reserved for the final stages of boss battles. It was good I'd known beforehand which skills the baron knew. Otherwise, I would've suffered a huge amount of damage.

The baron calmly peered at me, the adventurer who'd escaped both of his spells. I could tell that he was badly hurt; he was bleeding all over, there were deep gouges in his arms and legs, and the baron moved less smoothly than he would have at full health. It looked painful, so it was time to put him out of his misery and give Kano a chance to rest her legs.

I saw a longsword on the ground near me and decided to use it by stomping on the sword's tip with my heel, causing the weapon to fly into the air. There, I caught it by its grip and whirled it around as I smiled at the sound it made. The blade was dull, but that wouldn't be a problem since it could overpower others with its mass.

"Let's get back to it, Bloody Baron. I'll put you out of your misery."

The baron growled. We walked in a circle, not taking our eyes off of each other, and waited for someone to make a move. After his tenth step, the baron launched a Fireball with his left hand. With no pause, he extended his right arm and began chanting a different spell. Inside the magic circle that appeared were the silhouettes of several red swords. I recognized this as the circle for Flame Tongue, a spell that summoned a blazing blade. The baron plunged his hand into the magic circle and began to wrest a sword from inside.

I wouldn't let him get it out.

After I dodged the Fireball, I kicked off the ground with all my strength and darted straight toward him with my sword ready. I'd expected the baron to stop his chant and dodge or attempt a counterattack. Instead, he continued trying to retrieve his magical weapon. He was leaving himself open to attack, and I was more than happy to oblige by slicing into his shoulder.

Unfortunately, the baron's decision not to dodge allowed him to fully retrieve his sword.

In his decaying right hand, he gripped a Flame Tongue, a blazing sword a meter long. The powerful blade could inflict more fire damage than an ordinary enchanted weapon. Its main drawback was the amount of mana it consumed.

But the baron's mana reserves were so enormous that this wouldn't matter.

The baron roared with murderous rage as he charged, dragging the blade of his fiery sword through the ground. At once, he swung the sword up with flames laced around the blade.

I held my longsword horizontally to block, but the force of the baron's attack nearly knocked me off my feet. I knew then that he had a higher strength stat than me. And it was so hot! When he attacked, the heat pricked my skin. My hair was getting even more singed. At this rate, I'd have none left!

That attack was only the first of many. A crazed flurry of blazing blows came at me, my foe grunting with each one. The baron was using his high strength stat to overpower me.

"But your...attacks...are too...predictable," I said, pausing each time I blocked. "And I'm faster than you... So you don't stand a chance!"

The baron's attacks were powerful and came at me from every angle, yet none of his attacks were feints. That made it simple to predict where he would direct each one, letting me block and dodge easily. I realized that the best way to defeat him would be to use the same strategy from the game: focus on close-range physical attacks rather than use magic.

I kept moving while striking with my sword to attack constantly from the side. Suddenly, I saw Kano run up from behind me as she brought the Bloody Knights with her.

"Have a taste of my secret weapon!" she screamed. "Take this!"

Although I wasn't sure what she was planning, I knew the Bloody Baron wouldn't attack her because he'd focused entirely on me. So, I decided to let her take a shot and used Backstep to get out of her way. Kano then pulled three shining bottles from her belt.

"Kano, wait, not that!"

"Up it goes!"



The three bottles were healing potions, which could deal devastating amounts of damage to the undead. Each potion was as powerful as an average weapon skill from a basic job... And she'd just chucked all three of them at the baron.

All the bottles shattered on the ground near the Bloody Baron and sprayed their pink liquid contents. Bloodred smoke fumed from the baron's body where the liquid made contact, and he let out an earth-shattering roar of agony. When his roar stopped, his skin blackened and hardened, cracks emerged, and the baron disintegrated. The Bloody Knights stopped chasing Kano and disintegrated as well, meeting the same fate as their master.

"Oh, my god!" cheered Kano, amazed at what her three healing potions had done. "Who knew healing potions were so awesome?!" This was her first time seeing potions used against the undead, so her surprise was understandable.

"Kano, do you have any idea how much..." I started, but then I caught myself. "Actually, I suppose it's a decent way to reduce risk."

The potions had spread over a larger area than I'd expected, which increased their potency. With an outcome like this, it would be a good idea to instruct my family to keep a few healing potions on their person for the next time we played whack-a-mole here. The added safety more than justified the extra expense.

"Wow, his magic gem's huge!" Kano chirped. "Ooh, and what's this? It's all black and squishy and icky."

She pointed at a small ball of black mist near the magic gem. I approached and inspected the ball. Something resembling a face appeared and disappeared inside it, and I could hear the faintest screams from within the mist. It was an accursed soul, the remnants of the baron's soul, with all his grudges and regrets still locked inside. The item was tradable; we could sell it at Granny's Goods for twenty lir.

I wrapped a bag around the ball to retrieve it, as I didn't want to risk getting cursed by touching it directly. While I could handle touching creepy objects in the game, like with gore, it felt even more disturbing in the real world.

“Whoo, I’m beat,” I said. “Let’s go trade this in, then head home.”

“Hey, bro, I feel like my attacks aren’t hitting as hard as I want them to,” said Kano. “Do you think I need to improve my strength stat or get a better weapon?”

“All you need to do is keep practicing Manual Activation until you can use it without thinking.”

Kano nodded and practiced the skill motions I’d taught her. Getting better at Manual Activation and fighting in general would improve her performance in combat far more than relying on weapons or stats. I made a mental note to set some drills for her to practice.

Kano hummed an out-of-tune melody as we walked back to the fifteenth-floor gate. Both of us were carrying several mithril alloy weapons that we’d looted from the Bloody Knights. We passed through the gate and arrived at a place not too far from Granny’s Goods.

“How much mithril will we get from all these?” asked Kano. “Will there be enough to make a pure mithril weapon?”

“Not a chance. We’d need to kill the Bloody Baron ten times over for that much material,” I said.

“What, so these weapons have barely any mithril in them?!”

Items could have as little as 0.1% mithril content and still be high-quality mithril alloy equipment. Understandably, you’d need to gather a ridiculously high number of mithril alloy weapons to scrape together to make a pure mithril weapon. Carrying that many weapons around sounded horrible, so I hoped to get my hands on a magic bag soon.

After a minute of walking, we reached the familiar cubic building that was Granny’s Goods. Per usual, the fiendish owner was sitting in an old chair out front, enjoying smoking her pipe.

Furufuru stood up gracefully and greeted us. “Oh, hello there. Have you brought what I asked for?” She’d told us before that she had trouble

remembering human faces but could apparently remember us.

“I have,” I replied.

In that instance, Furufuru referred to the accursed soul that the Bloody Baron had dropped. She asked this because I’d accepted her quest before venturing to the execution site.

I’d only ever exchanged this item for dungeon currency when I played the game, so I wasn’t sure what else I could use it for. So many other players brought it here to exchange, perhaps because Furufuru could do something if she had plenty of them. I wondered what use she could have for something so ghastly.

As soon as I confirmed I’d brought the accursed soul, Furufuru began fidgeting.

Deciding to hand it over and see what happened, I pulled the accursed soul from its bag and showed it to her. I took care to avoid touching it directly. Her eyes, usually so calm, widened even more than I’d ever seen. She snatched the accursed soul from my hands. What was her deal?!

“Oh my goodness, it’s been so long that I’ve almost forgotten the taste!” she exclaimed.

“Th-The taste?” I repeated, taken aback.

Licking her lips, Furufuru raised the accursed soul to her mouth and bit into it. An ear-piercing scream rang out from the accursed soul and filled the room. Furufuru chewed on the soul, appearing to savor the taste. Neither Kano nor I could do any more than watch in baffled silence.

Hang on... You can eat that?!

Once she’d finished, Furufuru gazed down at her empty hands longingly. Of course, she requested that we bring her another.



Chapter 4: Beacon of Hope

“All right, guys, we can start our meeting to strategize for the Battle of the Classes.”

Today’s homeroom had ended, and the students of Class E had stayed behind in our classroom to plan our approach to the Battle of the Classes.

Hiroto Majima was speaking at the lectern and watching our classmates closely. They had voted for him to lead our class during the event. He spoke casually, but his privileged, noble upbringing was evident in the short crop of his waxed hair and impeccable posture. Plus, he and Akagi were the students that everyone else in Class E looked to for leadership.

“As you know, the Battle of the Classes is a weeklong exercise in the dungeon where all the classes compete against each other. It’ll be tough, I won’t lie. The upper classes have a big lead on us in experience, but I don’t want to see anyone use that as an excuse to slack off. If I see any of you not taking this seriously, you’ll have to answer to me. I’ve warned you.”

Majima exuded an intimidating Aura when he made this last remark. I estimated that he was only level 5 or 6 based on its intensity. However, this was a higher level than most of my classmates, and his Aura had its desired effect on them. Everyone who had relaxed and loosened their postures when homeroom had ended was now sitting bolt upright.

In the game, the Battle of the Classes had been an opportunity to complete in-game events, which would either unlock new events or progress your relationships with the game’s heroines. I was more interested in lifting Class E’s spirits, so I planned to help a little here and there without drawing attention to myself.

“We’ll begin by going over the format for this year’s Battle. Tachigi, if you’d be so kind.”

Majima turned his head to the intelligent-looking student with glasses

standing behind him. It was Tachigi, the strategist for the protagonist's party and current assistant leader. In other words, our classmates had decided that Majima and Tachigi would be the two students to lead our class during this exam.

"Thank you, Majima. Please take a look at the documents we've handed out."

Our classmates all stared at the printed pages they had received before the start of the meeting. The pages contained descriptions of the tasks that would appear during the Battle of the Classes. Those tasks included reaching a particular area, slaying specific monsters, getting to the lowest floor reached, completing a predetermined quest, and amassing magic gems.

The Battle of the Classes was the first exam that measured our performance as a class. We'd need to split ourselves up into teams and try to score more points than the other classes in each of the above five areas.

"I'll now go into detail about each of these objectives."

For the first task, the school would designate a location inside the dungeon, and we would receive points once we made it there. A GPS terminal that the school provided exclusively for use during the exam would determine our success or failure. The first class to reach said spot would receive five points, the second four, and so on, with the last group taking only one point. We would be awarded no points if we failed to reach the area.

The goal location would change each day to a new area on a deeper floor that was harder to get to. No one expected Class E to reach tough spots. So we could stay competitive, our class needed to snag as many points as possible in the first few days while the goals were on the earlier floors.

"All the other classes will probably use groups of students with stealthy skills, such as those with the Thief job, to reach the designated areas. We'll try to get more of you to change jobs before the exam starts so that we can do the same."

It would be impossible to reach the goals in time if you had to fight every monster in your way. Hence, the Stealth skill was important for this objective; it reduced the likelihood of monsters detecting you. Unfortunately, Class E had to accomplish this task without the advantage of the Stealth skill because so few

of us had changed jobs.

Tachigi explained the following task: slaying specified monsters. The name made it clear what we had to do, but a new monster would be designated each day, like with the first objective. Said enemies would also grow stronger throughout the week. As a rule, the school wouldn't designate monsters if only one copy of it could spawn at any time, so it didn't matter which class slew them first. For this reason, students assigned to this task needed to slay each monster safely and consistently.

We could record our results by touching the magic gems that the designated monsters dropped to our terminals, and this would automatically calculate our point scores.

"The group we form for this objective must be proficient in combat tactics to ensure we can defeat strong monsters. As such, Majima and I will likely pick out the members ourselves."

Throwing more people into a party would usually increase the party's combat potential. Having a small, elite party was better when facing strong opponents or needing to ensure success, safety, and speed. Assigning this task to Akagi's or Majima's existing party made sense when considering this tactic.

Afterward, we'd have to carry out the next task and head to the deepest floor we could reach. The farther down your class went within the time limit, the more points you'd receive. But the length of the return journey wouldn't affect said path. We could follow the main streets for the first seven floors without encountering any monsters, but so could all the other classes. Even if we didn't stray from the main streets, the farthest we could possibly reach while avoiding battles would be the tenth floor. Because of this...

"We'll probably come last in this task, even if we send our best," explained Tachigi. "Although we'll give up on many points, our only goal should be to avoid disqualification."

Our class wouldn't be able to compete with the upper classes in the race to the deepest floor. Class A was packed with high-level adventurers. Even Class D had a few students like Kariya, who were level 10 and higher. It made sense to settle for last place here and allocate our resources elsewhere.

The deepest floor reached also had a particularly harsh rule: your class would get disqualified if the deepest floor it ended up at was less than half that of the class in first place. Based on the levels of the Class A students, we could estimate that we'd need to reach at least the eighth floor to avoid disqualification.

Why assign any student to this task? Why not assign everyone to one of the other four? The reason was that the school required at least one person from each class for each task. Basically, someone would need to draw the short straw. How did Tachigi plan to deal with that?

The fourth criteria was completing prearranged quests, which usually followed the formula of retrieving particular items. Even the Adventurers' Guild often put out quests like these. For example, they might ask us to retrieve some drop items from a monster or dungeon ore. Accomplishing these quests would require combat ability and dungeon knowledge. Students could freely use their terminals during the exam, so we could look up any necessary information.

In the final task, each class had the total number of magic gems they acquired counted, and this task had the most points at stake. Achieving first place here would net the winning class with twice the points of any other task. For Class E, this was the one that mattered most.

Magic gems would be ranked on their quality and quantity, so we could gain more points by gathering large numbers of small magic gems or those that fetched high prices. But Class E would need to focus on quantity because we could only defeat weak monsters.

"Even if you're not assigned this task, any magic gems you find will count toward the total. Whichever task you're on, be sure to collect magic gems in your spare time."

In addition, there was a special rule for this task. The class that found the best magic gem would obtain bonus points. Of course, Class E had no chance of defeating a monster strong enough to drop such a gem, making the bonus points meaningless to us.

"Thank you, Tachigi," said Majima. "Now, on to how we'll assign you to groups. I want you all to write down your preferences."

On Majima's signal, each student received a small form. The forms instructed us to write our names and the task we'd like to participate in.

Which one should I go for? I thought. I was leaning toward volunteering for the gem-collecting group. It sounded like that'd be best for me since I could blend into the background. On the other side of the spectrum, I wanted nothing to do with the specified area task. It'd be too much running around!

"But who would be dumb enough to volunteer for the deepest floor reached team?" a student asked. "They'd be doomed to failure."

It was a justified objection. Class E stood no chance of scoring well in this criteria, and Tachigi had admitted as much. The plan was to avoid disqualification, essentially just getting a participation trophy. Traveling to a floor deep enough to get the bare minimum of points would be dangerous.

"I think we should send someone who wouldn't do any good in the other teams," someone suggested. "If they attach themselves to a group from one of the upper classes, they should get far enough to score last place."

"If we want useless people," another student piped up, "that'll be either Kuga or Piggy."

"Wait, actually, it says Kuga's now level 6."

I hated where this was going. The class had narrowed down the candidates to Kuga and me, but she had apparently altered her stats using the Fake skill to show her level as 6. *Is she not worried she'll raise suspicions with such a sudden jump up?* I wondered. *Well, whatever. Her problem, not mine.*

"No way?" said someone, gasping. "So she just hadn't updated the database? Cool, Piggy it is, then."

"We're counting on you, Piggy," another student said. "Do it for the class!"

"Hey!" interrupted Satsuki. "Everyone, hold on a sec—"

However, Risa snatched Satsuki's hand, stopping her. She then looked at me and nodded. Was she urging me to accept the role of exploring the deepest floor?

In *DEC's* version of the Battle of the Classes, players could choose which task

to follow. Even in the game, the deepest floor task had been the most difficult. Victory would increase the heroines' affection scores. But players couldn't hope to succeed against the best students of the upper classes at such an early stage in the game. Fans had agreed that going after this objective should be reserved for the second playthrough, just like the Kariya duel.

Of course, I knew that Risa wasn't suggesting that I score first place. What *was* she after? I had no idea.

Majima clamped his hand on my shoulder. "Narumi, how about it? Our class's future is at stake."

"O-Our future?" I repeated. *However grandly you put it, you're just handing me the job no one wants!* I felt like an intern ordered to go into a viper's nest.

Regardless, *somebody* had to do it. My classmates might think better of me for accepting, which couldn't hurt.

Plus, I wouldn't have to worry about others watching me because I'd be alone. I could deposit my terminal in a locker by one of the floor entrances, then go off and do my own thing until the exam ended. The more I thought about it, the more attractive this task looked.

I smiled with my best expression of selfless sacrifice and agreed to handle the deepest floor task.

Majima cheerfully patted me on the shoulder. "You're our beacon of hope." As the class's leader for the exam, the choice of who to send for this objective had probably been a source of concern for him. If I'd lifted a weight off his shoulders and allowed him to focus on the other tasks, then that made accepting worth it.

"Could everyone except Narumi write which task you want to get assigned to? When done, you're free to go!"

Majima would likely try to balance people's preferences and abilities when he assigned them to the tasks. He explained that once he had finalized the teams, each would gather and discuss its strategy. Being a one-man team, this didn't affect me.

Various students called out to me as they filed out of the room.

“Thanks, Piggy!”

“You’d better get the points for last place at least!”

“I’m glad we’ve sorted out what to do with the deadweight!”

It felt good to be recognized. As I cleared my belongings and got ready to leave, I began humming a tune I’d heard from my sister.

“Hey,” someone called out. The tone sounded annoyed, but the voice itself was clear. I recognized it as belonging to my childhood friend, Kaoru.

I turned around, and sure enough, Kaoru was looking at me. She was crossing her arms and had her pretty eyebrows knitted together. She didn’t look pleased.

“Do you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

She appeared worried I had agreed to tackle the deepest floor task without thinking. But I knew I could get the points for last place with ease, so there was no cause for concern.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I’ll tag along with the upper classes and bring back the points for last place.”

She said nothing for a few moments. “You might die if there’s a fight. You do know that, don’t you? Have you thought about what that’ll do to Kano?”

In all fairness, she didn’t know I was stronger than the level I’d recorded in the school’s database. If my level were that low, traveling deep enough to score points for last place would be dangerous.

Kaoru could appear aloof from Piggy’s perspective, but she was naturally inclined to look out for other people. I felt guilty for causing her to worry.

“I’ll be heading to the seventh floor on Sunday for practice,” she said. “How about you join—”

“Kaoru, let’s team up together for the Battle of the Classes!” someone interrupted in a silky-smooth voice.

When I turned around, I saw a boy approaching and running his hands through his long, blond hair.

“I don’t mind what task we choose,” continued Tsukijima until he noticed me. “Oh, is he creeping on you again? Give me a shout if he pulls anything funny. I’ll knock him out!” He thrust his fist toward me.

What do you mean “again”? I thought. I haven’t been inappropriate with Kaoru even once since joining high school. At least, I don’t think I have.

Kaoru’s expression told me that her irritation was soaring rapidly. From the looks of things, he’d made no progress in winning her favor. DEC’s heroines tended to be easy to woo though, so he might still get her to change her mind.

His boldness surprised me as he wasn’t trying to hide his advances toward Kaoru from me anymore. The remnants of Piggy’s mind were screaming at top volume. I thought Piggy’s affection for Kaoru had simmered down since the start of the year due to distancing myself from her, but I was wrong.

I began considering whether I should head home so I wouldn’t have to deal with Piggy’s insecurities. Then, I heard Risa and Satsuki’s cheerful voices calling me from behind.

“Hey! How’s it going, ‘beacon of hope’?” said Risa, giggling.

“I can’t believe they all threw you under the bus for that task!” remarked Satsuki.

The two girls had been friendly around me inside and outside the dungeon since we’d made our secret pact. Their arrival instantly dispelled the awkward atmosphere and reinvigorated me. I was so glad they were here.

“Anyways, do you have any plans on Sunday?” asked Risa. “I was thinking we could go shopping together.”

“Oh, hi there, Hayase and Tsukijima,” said Satsuki, noticing the two of them. “Sorry, were you talking about something?”

“Nothing,” replied Kaoru. “I’m leaving.”

“Hey, wait up, Kaoru!” yelled Tsukijima, chasing after her.

Watching the pair depart, I began feeling uncomfortable again.



Chapter 5: Tachigi Naoto - Part 1

Tachigi Naoto

Once we finished talking to the class about the Battle of the Classes, I began packing my belongings in my school bag. Most of my classmates stayed behind in the classroom, discussing with their friends which task to volunteer for.

We had handed out slips for them to write their preferences, but we'd already decided which tasks most of them would get assigned. I would lead the specified quest team, Yuuma the specified location team, and Sakurako and Kaoru would jointly head up the gem-collection team. Each planned to assign students to the teams that would benefit the most from their abilities and personal combat styles. We also decided that Majima's elite party should handle the monster-slaying task. The remaining students who didn't possess vital skills would go in whichever teams had space left.

The biggest surprise of today's session came when I learned that one of our problem students, Kuga, was level 6. Improvements like that didn't happen overnight, so she'd probably not updated her level in the school database for a while. This was fantastic news; we'd need to reassign her to a new team to leverage her abilities.

I turned to look at our other problem student, who was sheepishly talking to Kaoru. Majima had charmed him into accepting the most hopeless of the five tasks, likely seeing this as a risk-free decision. We weren't losing anything. If we were lucky, we might get the points for last place. But I knew how dangerous it would be for a level 3 student to dive deep enough into the dungeon to get those points. Hopefully, Narumi understood the dangers and wouldn't act recklessly. Otherwise... Kaoru was surely worrying about the same thing.

I heard that he and Kaoru had known each other since they were children, but I'd assumed they'd fallen out of touch because I never saw them talking in class. The concerned look on her face made me question that, though.

Shortly after, Tsukijima barged in and interrupted their moment. He often

acted up in class, and he'd been hounding Kaoru recently. I made a mental note to have a word with him if his behavior continued.

Right, it's time, I thought. Time to head into the lion's den. You can do this.

I slung my school bag across my shoulders and mentally prepared myself for what I was about to do. Just then, I heard a cheerful, angelic voice ring out. My eyes swiveled toward the source, and I activated my Super Hearing skill.

"Hey! How's it going, 'beacon of hope'?"

"I can't believe they all threw you under the bus for that task!"

I saw Nitta, an intelligent girl who seemed both mature and childlike, as well as Oomiya, a powerfully empathetic girl who worked twice as hard for the sake of Class E than anyone else. Both were talking to Narumi like friends. Seeing this, I remembered that I'd noticed Nitta sitting and chatting with Narumi at the recent practice session. I couldn't get it out of my head!

"Anyways, do you have any plans on Sunday? I was thinking we could go shopping together."

While I packed my things and wondered how well they knew each other, I heard something so important that I inadvertently slammed my desk. Nitta had the brains to score first place on the test we took the week before. And yet, she was hanging out with Narumi. His STEM grades weren't too bad, but he was middling. His performance in the dungeon was awful, and he wasn't exactly nice to look at. Until now I'd assumed she talked with him out of pity. Oomiya was chatting with him too. She was (after me) the third smartest in the class! They seemed very close as well. She looked much more cheerful than she had a few days before when she announced with grim determination that she'd create a study circle. Was there something about Narumi that I wasn't seeing?

Get over it. Focus on what you're about to do.

I cleared my mind. If I let my mind wander, our true objective would be at risk. I stepped outside my classroom and headed toward my ultimate destination, knowing how much lay at stake.

I followed the tree-lined street that ran through the school grounds and headed toward the northern area. The high density of club buildings and training facilities here had students wearing tracksuits and armor working up a sweat in their activities.

Shortly after, I turned right and walked eastward for a few minutes. The scenery here was completely different since this was where the facilities for the clubs with “first” in their name were. First-time visitors to this area often grew nervous when they saw the clubhouses here, which were luxurious mansions with tall fences enclosing their large grounds.

Wow. Even if we made our own club, how could we ever go up against the sort of people that train here? I thought.

The cost of maintaining these properties would be mind-boggling, only possible through the generous donations of celebrated nobles and organizations. I passed several such buildings before I reached my destination.

This is the place, the clubhouse for the First Magic Club.

Through the gaps in the stone fence, I could glimpse a Western-style house with fabulous white walls and an emerald-colored roof. A man in a suit stood in front of the iron gate. He must have known to expect me because he opened the gate after a single glance in my direction and curtly ordered me to follow him. I did as I was told.

Bamboo grew along the path leading to the house’s entrance, making it shaded and the air was dry. Magical lights illuminated the bamboo from below, imbuing the area with a fantastical ambience.

It’s surprisingly quiet, I thought.

The clubhouses I’d walked past moments before on the way here had been filled with the shouts and conversations of many training students. Some soundproofing spell was preventing those noises from reaching inside. The man in the suit led me inside the mansion. I went up the stairs, walked along the colorful carpet, reached the second floor, and entered the parlor. A petite woman with long red hair braided over her shoulder sat comfortably on a sofa, smiling at me. She wore a dark cloak with floral embroidery that glowed with a mysterious purple light.

“It’s nice to see you, Nao.” Her voice was soft and warm as she called my name.

It was Lady Otoha Isshiki, the heiress to the viscount whose house my family had served for generations. Currently a second-year student in Class A, she was the president of the First Magic Club and one of the Eight Dragons. In other words, she was the preeminent magician of Adventurers’ High and the leader of one of its most powerful factions. There was something oddly awkward but pleasing about hearing someone so influential call me by the same nickname she had when we were younger.

She motioned toward the sofa opposite her with her hand, on which she wore black lace gloves. After bowing, I sat down.

“It’s been a long time since we last met, my lady,” I said.

“Quite so. Four years, I believe,” replied Lady Otoha.

Approximately four years had passed since Lady Otoha left home to join Adventurers’ Middle School. Despite it being a long time, it didn’t feel like that. I wished I’d had the time to arrange our reunion properly.

I took in the sight of her. Lady Otoha’s complexion looked healthy, previously sickly and pale when she left. The physical enhancements from leveling up had revitalized her.

“And I’m glad to see that you look well. I hear news of your accomplishments wherever I go.”

“There’s been a lot for me to work on, I admit.”

Lady Otoha was a celebrity known not only in Japan but also in the world. Her talent was so rare that many believed she would one day earn the title of count after she had inherited her father’s viscount title. All that made her a very busy woman, making it hard to arrange an audience. To meet me privately, she had to cast her Teleport skill to return home from the depths of the dungeon, where she’d been raiding with her comrades in the First Magic Club. She was the person who always had servants surrounding her, unlikely to appear in public with a Class E student like me. For some time now, I’d been waiting for a chance to come and see her when her clubmates weren’t around.

“And how are you doing, Nao? You mentioned that you had a concern.”

“Yes, there’s something very important that I’d like to discuss with you. But...”
Time was of the essence, so I wanted to begin the conversation. Yet a man and a woman in suits stood behind Lady Otoha. They appeared to be in their twenties, so they weren’t students. Who were they?

“Oh, don’t mind them. They can keep a secret.”

“Very well. In that case...”

I had come here to appeal for Lady Otoha’s help with Class E’s dire situation, and none of the upper classes or older students needed to find out what I was doing. They might target me if news got out that I’d petitioned Lady Otoha. Since she’d vouched for her two attendants, I decided to talk openly in front of them.

As such, I explained the discrimination Class E faced. I informed her of the scornful behavior of the upper classes toward us at the club fair and that their bullying was growing more violent as time passed. I also told her that the school administration was ignoring the problem.

She looked down as if in thought once I’d finished. Although I felt guilty about using her compassionate nature to my advantage, I had no other option. I would tell her everything.

“I see. Is there anything else you want from me?”

There was. I asked whether she could pull some strings to let Class E create a club. The upper classes had forbidden us from creating one after Akagi had lost his duel against Kariya. Oomiya had gone to the student council for help, but they’d slammed the door in her face. If a member of the Eight Dragons, like the First Magic Club president, were to take action for us though, things would be different. While the student council might be powerful, even they couldn’t ignore a request from Lady Otoha.

“A duel? Oh yes, that’s something of a tradition for first-years at this school,” said Lady Otoha.

A tradition? I thought. *Don’t tell me this happens every year!* This admission cemented my suspicion that Class D was acting on the orders of someone more

powerful behind the scenes. Perhaps Lady Otoha would know, given her position as a club president.

“Okay, I see how it is. By the way, Nao... What do you think this school’s purpose is?”

The school’s purpose? I struggled to see how this related to the matter at hand, so I said, “To cultivate the very best adventurers to benefit the people of Japan, as the principal said in his speech at the opening ceremony.”

“Indeed. However, there is another purpose.” Lady Otoha slowly rose from the sofa and somberly stared out of the window.

What purpose could there possibly be besides preparing students to become adventurers?

“You’ll first need to understand the current state of our country.”

We lived in an era of upheaval. Once upon a time, economic might, military strength, and access to resources had been the driving force in world politics. But artificial magic fields had given powerful adventurers a voice on the stage, disrupting the balance of power and bringing chaos to the world.

Naturally, every country had heavily invested in raising adventurers, and Japan was no exception. Our country had poured enormous sums of money into adventurer training programs, resulting in many powerful adventurers. The most famous example was Kotarou Tasato, the leader of the Colors Clan, who had risen to the rank of baron. The government bestowed titles upon adventurers whose skills and achievements were exceptionally notable in the hopes of buying their loyalty to the state. This was essentially the central tenet of our country’s adventuring program. These newly ennobled adventurers, collectively known as the new nobility, were rapidly amassing power through the wealth and human resources of the Assault Clans they led—and the government approved this.

On the other side, the nobles that could trace their roots back to the Meiji period and before, referred to as the old nobility, still kept their noble rights and privileges. Many companies depended on the old nobility because of these privileges, which gave the nobles vast amounts of power. Recently, these organizations had switched their allegiances in droves to the rising stars of the

new nobility. Even the former samurai lords who served as retainers to the old nobility had changed sides. This shift was a terrifying threat to the old nobility and their ideals of blood rights and tradition.

They had decided on two courses of action in response.

First, they'd resolved to raise their heirs as powerful adventurers to rival the new nobility. The old nobility would use their vast wealth to buy the best equipment and hire strong adventurers to power level their heirs on a scale that no commoner could equal. That was why so many nobles at Adventurers' High had brought their attendants and retainers to school with them.

Second, they ensured no more adventurers like Tasato would rise to the new nobility. They infiltrated the schools and academies that trained commoners and either crushed them before they realized their talents or subordinated them. To this end, the old nobility had seized control of Adventurers' High's Board of Directors.

"This is absurd!" I shouted after Lady Otoha had explained all of this to me. "They're jeopardizing the future of the country!"

"Yes, but to go to such lengths proves how perilous we believe our current situation to be."

The old nobility valued the continuation of their lineages above all else—lineages that might die out with the rise of the new nobility. Vested interests and special privileges held their influence in place, though it was a shaky foundation at best. To retain their power, they would stoop to underhanded methods. The duel at the Arena, the restrictions on joining clubs... Everything had come about due to the old nobility and their allies. At the same time, they were reinforcing their status and influence within the school. The Eight Dragons had formed for this very purpose.

Lady Otoha slowly exhaled after explaining all of this. "That is the school's second purpose."

Of course, the old nobility had laid even more traps in Class E's path.

"The Battle of the Classes will start soon," Lady Otoha said. "By the way, do you know about the unspoken rule?"

“The unspoken rule?” I repeated. “No, I can’t say that I do.”

“I thought not,” she said, nodding. “Very well, then. I’ll let you in on the secret. There’s a rule that allows students to have help with completing the tasks. The many nobles in Class A will probably bring plenty of their attendants into the dungeon. Nao, is there anyone whose help your class can enlist?”

“What?! How can you call that fair?! Oh... I see. The exam isn’t supposed to be fair...”

The school could only monitor students in the dungeon through their terminals, so there’d be no way of knowing what they were actually doing. It made sense when I thought about it. Under those conditions, students could get away with anything. The exam’s design was not to be a fair contest between classes.

I felt my knees go weak as despair flooded over me. All of our hard work and determination until now suddenly seemed pointless. No matter how much effort we put in, we could not claw our way to the top.

“Oh, but there is a way to claw your way up,” declared Lady Otoha like she had read my mind.

“Th-There is? How?” I asked with a pleading tone.

Lady Otoha gestured to the two servants standing behind her with a flick of her wrist. The servants immediately drew their sleeves back, revealing tattoos on their arms.

“Mark these symbols into your skin and pledge your loyalty to me. If you do so, the board of directors must leave you alone.”

Such was a forbidden variety of contract magic etched directly onto people’s bodies. These contracts were outlawed internationally for infringing on human rights, and the government strictly enforced their prohibition. Why did these servants have them?

At that moment, the girl in front of me leaned forward with a smile playing at the corners of her lips. Her dark eyes stared into mine, and her voice was gentle and tempting. “I can get you a place in Class D. I can get you into the First Magic Club... What do you say?”

The beautiful and kindhearted Lady Otoha I'd known as a child looked more like a monster now.

Chapter 6: Hungry for More

“Wow, it’s really here!” exclaimed Satsuki. “You were telling the truth!”

“I do like how quiet it is,” said Risa, “but it feels empty with nobody else here.”

“I can’t wait to see what bargains there’ll be today!” chirped Kano.

We were in the square outside the tenth-floor gate room. Satsuki and Risa had tagged along today so that they could change jobs. Kano had invited herself—she loved browsing the shelves of Granny’s Goods.

“Hello again, miss!” Kano called out.

“Oh, hello there,” replied Furufuru. “Have you brought...the goods?”

Furufuru’s shoulders slumped when she realized we hadn’t brought any accursed souls with us. She clearly had an addiction. I’d once asked her why she didn’t get them herself, and she told me that she could only travel to certain dungeon floors. So, she needed to get adventurers’ help when she wanted something. Unlike in the game, few adventurers visited this shop, meaning we were probably the only ones who’d ever defeated the Bloody Baron. She’d be on our case every time we visited, pressuring us to bring back more. We couldn’t bring an accursed soul each time we went to the store. Defeating the baron took too much effort, especially with all the preparatory work needed to gather the items to summon him.

I explained this to Furufuru. When I finished, she pursed her lips and thought for a moment.

“Just a second,” she said, disappearing into a back room. She returned carrying a cartoonishly huge hammer.

I recognized it as a magical weapon called a Boost Hammer. If you channeled your mana into the hammer, an explosion from the back of its head would propel it forward as you swung it. The weapon also pulsed with a red glow, indicating a flame enchantment. The cost would be a thousand lir at least, much

more than we possessed at the moment.

“This hammer will make short work of any undead on the fifteenth floor,” explained Furufuru.

“I’m sure it will, but we can’t afford... Wait, you’re giving it to us?”

Furufuru nodded and requested that, in exchange, we bring her ten more accursed souls. Her desire for those creepy souls knew no bounds...

I was happy to accept because it resembled a quest, except we had received the payment upfront. Now that we had the Boost Hammer, I could get my mother and father to raid the execution site earlier than planned.

Trying my luck, I asked Furufuru whether she could give us another hammer. To my surprise, she did, asking for another ten souls in return. *She just can’t get enough, can she?*

While I reformed my plans for our whack-a-mole raids, I heard a shrill cry from Satsuki from the other side of the shelves.

“That’s not fair!”

“Oh, you can bet they’ll all be bringing lots of help, especially Class A,” said Risa.

“But we’ve put so much work in... We’ve been training so hard... And everyone was so eager to do well!”

It appeared they were discussing the Battle of the Classes’ unspoken rule. Everyone kept it a secret from Class E, but the school tacitly approved the participation of outsiders in the event. Their justification was that networking and forging bonds with high-ranking adventurers was a skill, although this was just a pretext. The real reason the rule existed was to ensure that the noble students could make use of their many retainers to ensure victory. Even so, the school hoped this would hinder Class E. None of us had any connections to rely on or retainers to summon.

Kano wandered into the fray, spying a chance to get involved.

“But if you can call in help, do you think you’re allowed to call me in?” she asked, tilting her head.

“You should stay out of it,” I said. “There’ll be some dangerous people there.”

“Satsuki! Risa! Bro wants to exclude me!!!”

There she goes again, I thought. Kano had a bad habit of running and crying to the two other girls, making me out to be the bad guy.

“If the other classes are getting outside help, I don’t see the problem with us getting Kano,” said Risa.

“Kano could make a big difference for us,” agreed Oomiya.

Having won their support, Kano hugged the two girls and then flashed a mischievous grin that only I could see. But I couldn’t give in to Kano this time for one particular reason.

“Kano, Kaoru’s in our class. We’ll get caught if she sees you.”

Kano humphed and spat, “*She* wouldn’t know a true adventurer if she saw one. I’m coming, and that’s that!”

I tried to impress on her the risks involved, but Kano wouldn’t relent.

“This is the experience I need to prepare for becoming an adventurer!” she argued.

Realizing that she’d sneak in without telling me if I didn’t meet her in the middle, I found a compromise: she could participate for a short period if she accepted a few conditions. To this end, I decided to purchase an item to conceal her identity.

“I wonder how tough Class A will be, though?” asked Satsuki nervously.

“People say they’re super high level.”

“Satsuki, Class D are the ones we need to worry about, remember?” said Risa.

“Oh, yeah, of course. One step at a time.”

Every Class A member was at a much higher level than Class E, and they had the added benefits of more experience, better equipment, and more powerful skills. They could completely dominate Class E in every way. Even if Class A didn’t have outside help and I took the exam seriously as a level 20 adventurer, we wouldn’t stand a chance of beating them. We didn’t have to worry. Our

primary concern was finding our footing and taking out Class D.

“Who do you think Class D will call on to help?” asked Satsuki.

“There’s that clan they’re always mentioning,” responded Risa. “You know, the one they keep bragging about in our classroom. What was their name... Soleil?”

“Soleil?” Kano repeated. “The knuckleheads that cut my leg?!”

Class D students had a habit of coming to our classroom and bragging that their friends or older siblings were in the Assault Clan Soleil. It was the clan that I’d sworn vengeance on for injuring Kano to use as a decoy while they ran away. They’d probably forgotten all about us, but I’d make them pay if I ever ran into them again. There were a few Class D students that I wanted to get even with... This might be a chance to settle several scores at once. On that note, I looked for an item to either block appraisal skills or interfere with recognition.

I ran my eyes across the various weird items on the shelves, hunting for one that did what I wanted. The first item I grabbed was a commonplace, unimpressive-looking magical clown mask that shielded its wearer from appraisal skills. While the mask repelled Basic Appraisal entirely and offered some protection against the more advanced Appraisal, you had to be careful because it would shatter after a handful of uses.

There was also an item called the Dark Hopper, a dark brown robe made from the skin of a giant frog. The cloak would shroud its wearer’s existence, making the wearer hard to perceive or remember. The effect only worked against other people, not monsters. In *DEC*, the cloak was a must-have item for beginner PKs.

I’d gone without purchasing these two items because they were of little use in raids, but they would be good to have now that PVP was becoming more likely. Once I’d bought them, I ordered Kano to wear them during the Battle if she wanted to participate.

“Those ugly things?! I won’t be seen dead wearing them!” shouted Kano. “This so-called mask is basically just a plank of wood with eyeholes, and the brown one is just a big rag of frog skin with a hole for my head! Find me something cute to wear!”

The items weren't the height of fashion, yet I explained to Kano that cute outfits would draw more attention to her and defeat the purpose of wearing stealth items. We argued for a while until she grudgingly relented. I didn't have many lir, so I bought one of each, enough for Kano.

Kano continued to sulk for a little bit but perked up when Satsuki started talking about changing jobs. I smiled, watching Kano brighten up.

Just then, Risa crept over and whispered to me, "Strange to think that the mask and the robe were useless in the game, right? I might get a set too, just in case."

"There's no sense taking risks when your life's on the line... Actually, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Yeah?"

Risa's mind often worked two or three steps ahead of the rest of us, so sometimes she would say something or make a gesture, making her intentions get entirely lost on me. As such, it was important for me to understand her thinking to better coordinate in the future.

"When we were deciding on teams for the tasks, why did you want me to go for the deepest depth?" I asked.

Satsuki objected when the rest of the class tried to set me up for the deepest-depth task. But Risa had grabbed Satsuki to stop her from objecting and letting me be assigned.

Risa chuckled. "Partly because I think you're the best man for the job. But also... I bet the valedictorian is gonna be in Class A's deepest-depth team. Don't you think? I want you to be there so we can find out which path she's going down."

"I see. You want to know whether she'll become the student council president heroine who fights for our side... Or the final boss and Pinky's rival."

Kikyou Sera was the highest-achieving first-year student and the girl who would become the student council president. She descended from one of the few Holy Women that had ever existed in Japan and belonged to a noble house of marquessate. As an aside, she was my waifu when I played the game and had

been arguably the most popular heroine. Players could follow her romance route whether they'd chosen to play as Akagi or as a custom male character. But players often faced her as a formidable adversary if they played as female characters, such as Sanjou or a custom female character.

Currently, I wasn't entertaining the idea of winning over Sera romantically. Admiring her from afar was more than enough for me, and if Akagi or someone else ended up with her, I could live with that. However... Sera might wreak havoc if this world's true protagonist was a woman. I'd missed this possibility.

"You only ever played guys, right?" asked Risa. "So you're missing a lot of info."

"Yeah... Too late to do anything about that now, though."

I was truly lucky to have Risa here, who knew all about *DEC*'s BL mode and the female characters' storylines. Without her, I might have ended up screwing up and risking this world's safety.

"And while you're at it," Risa said, "you can get the valedictorian to scry on you."

"Oh, I'd forgotten she had that skill."

Sera boasted several powerful skills that earned her the title of the strongest heroine. One of them was Clairvoyance, a skill that granted her visions of other people's futures. She used the skill liberally, often scrying on people she'd just met and telling them what she'd seen. Risa hoped Sera would use it on me to see what lay in store for us.

I couldn't deny that I was interested in finding out since Clairvoyance could give detailed readings of the near future. The skill had been a lifeline in the game for players who wanted to find out how well their characters were progressing and how close they were to completing storylines. Risa probably wanted to know her future but sought to keep her distance from Sera in case this world viewed her as a female protagonist. I admired her caution.

For a brief moment, I wondered what my future would look like. Would I do well in school? Were there any girls waiting in line to profess their love for me? Would I be expelled before I had the chance to find out?!

“Although, *he* will probably be there too. You know the one I mean, the guy from Class B. Be careful, okay? Things might get messy,” said Risa.

“I know,” I replied. “It’s Akagi’s job to defeat him. I’ll just keep an eye on him.”

Risa was referring to one of the chief architects of the bullying against Class E, Kouki Suou from Class B. He was an elitist who believed wholeheartedly in the superiority of nobles, had connections with several factions in the Eight Dragons, and was the one who’d ordered Kariya to start trouble with us. The reveal of Suou as the bad guy was supposed to happen gradually throughout a playthrough. As former players, we knew all about him. He was an antagonist in every game storyline, frequently contending with the player’s character. The protagonist would grow stronger mentally and physically with every victory against Suou. Hence, I didn’t plan to step in unless Akagi seemed like he’d lose.

At present, Suou was focused on the valedictorian rather than on crushing Class E, so I wouldn’t need to do more than observe him during the Battle of the Classes.

“I plan to get the points for last place, then do what I want with the time remaining,” I said.

Risa chuckled again and said, “It’ll be a piece of cake for you, Souta.”

The deepest-depth task would be tough if you wanted to snag first place from the valedictorian and her Class A team. Just doing well enough to earn a participation trophy would be no trouble for me. In fact, I was looking forward to it. I would get to spend some quality time with my game waifu! My heart was beating fast.

“Bro, look, I’m a Rogue now!” said Kano. “Uh, bro? What’s with that look on your face?”

“I still can’t believe Rogue is a real job!” remarked Satsuki. “You’re amazing, Kano!”

Kano had become a Rogue because she had desperately wanted to learn its Shadowstep skill. Satsuki’s eyes sparkled as she looked at Kano. Rogues were DLC additions, so few people in this world were aware this job existed.

“Guess I’ll change my job too,” I said.

“I think I will too,” added Risa.

The Battle of the Classes was right around the corner. I wondered whether Akagi and Kaoru could make it through unscathed. All my classmates had put so much effort in, and I really hoped their hard work would be rewarded.

Chapter 7: A New Manual Activation

“To the dungeon!” bellowed Majima as soon as homeroom finished.
“Specified monster team, follow me!”

The most elite party in Class E followed their leader, Majima, who had taken this party into the dungeon many times. Parties with a long history knew each other’s strengths and weaknesses and how to coordinate together in battle. This group was sure to bring down some harsh foes.

“Let’s get going!”

“Yeah!”

“I wish I’d been picked for Majima’s group...” a girl sitting near me complained.

Majima was a high-level student with a knack for leadership, making him popular in the class. There was no end to the number of students hoping to join his party.

“At your level?” another girl retorted. “No chance. The specified monster task is almost as difficult as the specified location task!”

“Okay, but they could’ve at least put me in Tachigi’s group for the specified quest, right?!”

Akagi’s party was the other popular party in the class. For the Battle of the Classes, the team would divide their members to lead the various teams for each task. His party comprised quick-thinking, responsible students and made this plan sensible.

The Class E students gathered around the desks of their team leaders. Tachigi was leading the specified quest team, Akagi the specified location team, while Pinky and Kaoru were both in charge of the gem-collecting team. Incidentally, Risa had been assigned to the specified quest team and Satsuki to the gem-collecting team.

As I inspected the makeup of the various teams, I could see that careful planning had gone into their distributions. Each student was in the team where their abilities and level would be most useful. I suspected that the forms the students had recorded their preferences on were just for show; Tachigi had likely devised the team assignments.

Speaking of Tachigi, he looked glum for some reason. His eyes were vacant. He jumped when Risa approached him and poked him in the cheek. This kid was always hard at work behind the scenes, so it was only fair to let him zone out now and again.

After school, my classmates remained in the classroom. Team members eagerly suggested and debated strategies and training plans and some teams got so excited that they headed straight from school into the dungeon. I was fascinated by how enthusiastic and energized they were about the upcoming event, hoping it would work out for them. They'd come far from the melancholy the other classes had forced us into.

As for me... I didn't have much to prepare for my task, and nobody was expecting much. Thus, I could probably stand up and leave with nobody noticing. I was, as ever, the class loner.

Just kidding! I actually had a lot to do. And I wasn't lonely. No, honestly, I wasn't.

Once out of school, I headed straight to the Adventurers' Guild. The guild building was next to the school, so stopping by was no trouble. I stood on one of the dozen or so lanes of the escalator in the first-floor lobby and climbed to the second floor. At the top, I found the armor shop where I'd bought my demon wolf leather armor.

A brawny bearded man who looked like an outlaw stood at the entrance wearing an ill-fitting smile to attract customers. I wondered why they didn't just hire a part-timer to do this. They would bring more customers in than this scary-looking guy. I kept that thought to myself and called out to him.

"Hello, I ordered some armor from here the other day."

The man grunted as he looked at me. “Hmm... Ah, you. Yeah. Pops, we got a customer!”

“Keep your voice down. I ain’t deaf!” shouted back another man just as loudly. A grumpy old man with gray hair emerged from a back room dressed in a boiler suit. Professional metalworkers who focused on dungeon metals regarded him highly.

“Hello,” I said. “Is my order ready?”

“It is, it is! C’mere, it’s in the back.”

The old man led me into the back room. Two pairs of gloves strung together with many cables sat atop a workbench. Their silvery surface gleamed powerfully with reflections, then the old man speedily removed the cables to hand me one of the pairs.

“I had to burn through a lot of magic gems, but they turned out very well and were worth it. Put them on and see for yourself.”

These were gloves made of pure mithril that I’d ordered. Kano and I had gathered a large amount of mithril alloy from all the undead we’d slain for Furufuru’s quests. My original plan had been to order high-quality mithril alloy weapons. Since we obtained so much raw material, I’d splurged and ordered pure mithril items.

Refining mithril required large amounts of mana, but you could find it in abundance in the magic gems dropped by level 16 monsters. I’d handed over plenty of these gems, and the old man had used a magical tool to extract mana from them and pump it into the forging process. Mithril’s melting point was too high to forge equipment by simply melting the metal down.

“Gladly,” I said, taking the gloves from him. They were extraordinarily light and felt like I was holding plastic toys. I’d heard that mithril was light enough to float on water, and now I believed it when I put the gloves on. Items like this resized themselves to fit their wearers, so the fit was naturally comfortable. “This is great. I won’t have to buy a new pair after I slim down.”

“I can’t tell you how long it’s been since I last worked with pure mithril. Thanks for letting me get some good work done, kid.”

He explained that few people would request mithril equipment from an old man with no clout. Adventurers could only start mining mithril ore from the dungeon's twentieth floor and below. Unfortunately for him, the few adventurers who could raid this deep usually belonged to large clans that retained their own smiths.

"You asked me to change its color if I remember right."

"Indeed. The metallic look will stand out too much. Do you mind?"

"I suppose I can use a magical tool to coat it. I'll coat both pairs. Come by tomorrow to pick them up."

Those with a keen eye could discern pure mithril equipment because the metal was as reflective as a mirror. Because gloves like these were worth over ten million yen, I could get in trouble if anyone saw them for what they were. As such, I asked the old man to give the gloves a less conspicuous coating. The old man had a magical tool to alter a metal's surface texture and reflectivity, so I'd asked him to use that on the gloves. One pair would be for me, and the other for my sister.

The brawny man from the entrance joined the conversation while the old man filled out my order form for the coating. "It amazes me that the boy who came here not too long ago looking for demon wolf leather armor is snatching up so much mithril alloy."

What could I say? Boys grow up quickly. The Narumi family would have pure mithril equipment if we continued playing whack-a-mole at this place.

"I stumbled upon a good raiding spot," I elaborated. "Are you happy to take more refining and smithing requests if I come into any more mithril alloy?"

"You betcha," said the brawny man. "Ain't that right, pops?"

The smiths I remembered from the game were all skilled but tended to be eccentric weirdos. Otherwise, they'd be involved in something that would end up causing trouble for the player, making me glad I had found this store. The owner didn't ask inconvenient questions.

With that job done, I wondered what to do with the rest of my time. Perhaps it was time to run some experiments in the dungeon.

I arrived at the entrance rest area of the first floor of the dungeon after thirty minutes of queuing, and it was packed with adventurers. I began walking with no destination, escaping the suffocating crowd.

The experiments I wanted to run were tests of the new Manual Activation technique Risa had told me about. I'd tried it out a few times in my room but kept bumping into things and breaking them. And so I wanted to experiment somewhere with a bit more space. The first floor seemed perfect; there were no active monsters, and I could run and jump as much as I wanted. Still...

Even after walking around for a while, other adventurers had taken every room that was big enough, each one as busy as a park on the weekend. Ordinary adventurers who didn't belong to Adventurers' High would often come into the first floor of the dungeon and snatch these spaces up.

After ten minutes, I eventually found an empty spot in a room of thirty square meters with a few slimes inside. I decided to use this place.

Eager to get started, I activated my Aura. With Automatic Activation, my body would emit an irregular stream of Aura. But using Manual Activation, I could control and direct the output.

Behold, my original skill! "Aura Missile!" I yelled.

Aura would usually extend to fill out a twenty-meter radius, though you could double that if you channeled it in a particular direction. Using this method, I directed my Aura toward a slime, which jumped, startled, and ran away. This was pretty fun!

"You are no match for me, slime! Mwa ha ha! Okay... Enough messing around."

Next, I tried restricting my Aura to emit from only my right arm. A dense cloud of Aura covered my arm, which looked like my arm was burning with a blue flame. I'd only mastered this technique a few days ago. Then, I gently pressed my hand against a nearby wall while my arm was in this condition. Cracks ran through the rock wall with a loud noise when my hand made contact, and my hand dug several centimeters into the wall.

“Wow, advanced skills are pretty awesome. They suck a lot of mana, but their power is immense.”

This move was the Magical Warfare skill available to the advanced job Aura Master. I hadn't learned this skill; Risa had taught me how to manipulate my Aura to activate it. And I got to use it without wasting a skill slot! Another great thing.

Striking enemies in this state would grant extra damage due to the Aura counting as a raw magical enchantment. The part of my body shrouded in blue Aura would also benefit from a higher defense so I could use it to attack and guard. This skill would help if I ever had to face a tough enemy. The downsides were the skill's heavy mana consumption and the restriction that you could only shroud a single body part with Aura. I could overcome these drawbacks if I used the skill correctly.

“I think I'll try Hide next,” I said.

I sat down in the center of the room, shut my eyes, and began manipulating my Aura in a new way. Both humans and monsters usually emitted trace amounts of Aura at all times. The Hide skill completely blocked Aura emission, rendering the user imperceptible. One good use of this skill was to hide from monsters.

“I'm not here... I'm not here... Wait a second... How do I know if it's working?”

I was pretty sure I was doing it right, but I could not confirm this assumption. While I was wondering what to do about this, a group of ten or so people wearing protective equipment entered the room. They were wearing the badge of Adventurers' High on their chests. Which class were they from?

“This place will do,” said a handsome, confident man. He was tall and red-haired, standing in the center of the group. “Mei, if you wouldn't mind.”

“As you wish, Lord Takamura.” The girl called Mei then shouted to the rest of the group, “Okay, guys, we'll be setting up here!”

The red-haired man was Masakado Takamura, the leader of Class C. He was the son of the man who'd founded the Ten Devils Clan. They were famous for their violent rivalry against nobles and occasionally appeared in the game's

story. Mei, who stood by his side, was likely his retainer, belonging to a former samurai family. She had short hair that showed off her cute forehead. It looked like Class C had chosen this spot for their practice.

That left me in a difficult situation.

Can they not see me? Because I'm using Hide?

The stealth skill had proved to be more powerful than I'd imagined. While I debated whether I could reveal myself, another group showed up. The man leading the group was someone I recognized very well.

On his Adventurers' High uniform, he wore the golden badge of the grand nobility, a badge marking his adventurer class, and a slew of medals. His face was neither masculine nor feminine, and his long, straight hair fell to his waist. The look on his face was foul and villainous.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the *former* valedictorian."

"Suou..." murmured Takamura.

Facing off against each other were Takamura, the leader of Class C, and Suou, the leader of Class B...

Right. In front. Of me.

Oh God, get me outta here!

Chapter 8: My Front-Row Seat

In a spot on the first floor of the dungeon, Suou and Takamura were staring each other down. Suou and his Class B underlings piled into the room.

Takamura was the son of a major clan's leader, and he had even aced the entrance exam for Adventurers' Middle School, scoring higher than any of his peers. He made headlines with his debut in Adventurers' High but got demoted to Class C in the years since. Repeatedly falling victim to Suou's schemes had been the cause of his downfall. The other Class C students glared at Suou with hostility; many had suffered the same fate as Takamura.

Then, Suou's underlings stepped in front of their master and glared back at the Class C students. They clearly knew the history here. Unlike their counterparts, however, these underlings were smirking.

"It would be a shame to waste such a fine location on the likes of you," mocked Suou. "It suits *us* better."

The girl with the cute forehead shot back at Suou. "We were here first, and don't boss us around!" The other Class C students started shouting angrily. The sharp tension in the air had given way to red-hot fury, a powder keg ready to explode.

Umm, actually, I think you'll find that I was here first, I thought.

Class C's reaction seemed irrational to me. Sure, I'd be annoyed too if another group showed up and tried to kick me out of my spot. But it'd be a better use of their time to leave and find somewhere else to practice rather than fuss over nothing. The best way for them to get their revenge on Class B would be to outperform them in the Battle of the Classes.

Even if Takamura's faction might've been stronger at the beginning of middle school, Suou's was even more powerful. Suou's strength was on par with the valedictorian future student council president, Sera. He was also one of DEC's major bosses, so Class C would be reckless to challenge them without a plan.

The smug looks from the Class B students told me they were well aware of the strength differential at play. It wouldn't surprise me if the whole encounter was part of one of Suou's schemes.

Takamura had the chance to show his vigor as the leader of his class... But he simply remained glaring at Suou, unmoving. I didn't fully know what had transpired between him and Suou because the game had only touched on it briefly. Still, I expected his pride as a noble to prevent him from walking away. That pride seemed pretty ingrained.

Okay, and what should I be doing?

The two classes were shouting at each other, their anger encouraged by their leaders. I stood in the middle, concealed by my Hide skill. Soon, the tensions would reach a boiling point, and a brawl would break out. Although I wanted to get away before I got caught up in it, moving would dispel the skill's effect. I was in a tricky situation.

"By the way... Who is that disgrace standing in the middle of the room?" asked Suou, pointing at me with disdain.

I didn't think anyone could see me!

The students of the two classes turned their puzzled expressions toward where Suou was pointing, reacting with surprise when they realized I was standing there.

They've found me!

It didn't appear like he'd actively used a detection skill. Perhaps one of the many medals on his chest had a passive detection spell enchantment. Either way, it was time for me to run!

"I-I'll be on my way!" I said, breaking into a sprint to escape this messy situation.

"Wait!" shouted someone from behind, but I'd be doing no such thing.

"Phew," I let out, panting. "That was awful. It seems like every class in this school hates each other."

Just like Classes E and D opposed one another, Class B contended with the valedictorian's Class A and Takamura's Class C. There was probably a way to exploit that opposition to get the edge against the upper classes. But I wasn't the protagonist, so that was none of my concern.

"I'll just have to hope either Akagi or Pinky can sort it out for me," I said while walking around to find a new spot to practice. On the way, I noticed the familiar faces of my classmates. "Oh, they've come here too."

"Huh, was Piggy on our team?"

"No, he's on the no-hope-in-hell task, remember?"

"We should get him to carry our stuff since he's here. That's about all he's good for."

"Stop that! It's not fair," interjected Kaoru, saving me from carrying everyone's belongings.

If Kaoru was here, then this had to be the gem-collecting team.

Satsuki was also part of this team, but I couldn't see her. I saw Tsukijima, though. He was always with Kaoru, and he'd frighten off any other guys who tried to approach her. Kaoru didn't seem very receptive to his advances though. Most of *DEC*'s heroines swooned if the protagonist made the slightest of moves. Yet Kaoru's heart didn't appear so easily swayed. Regardless, I tried to avert my eyes when they walked together; it wasn't good for Piggy's mind.

"Sanjou, there's a free room to the south," said a boy. "I'll show you the way."

"Oh! Err, thanks," said Pinky.

"Here, let me take that," another boy offered, taking Pinky's bag. "It seems rather heavy for you to carry."

Many of the class's boys were vying for Pinky's attention. Her fluffy and cute looks, plus her timid nature, had fueled the protective instincts of the boys in the class and won their inexperienced hearts. As heroines, Kaoru and Pinky were extraordinarily attractive, even compared to the high standard set by the other students of Adventurers' High. I'd known from day one that the boys would be obsessed with them, but what I hadn't realized was how much the

other girls would resent them.

“Excuse me, maybe you can flirt in your own time? You’re supposed to be leading us right now, remember?”

“She thinks she’s hot stuff for being at a high level but only achieved that because she’s in the same party as Yuuma and Naoto.”

The two girls were bound to draw the jealousy of the other girls just for hanging out with the handsome Akagi and Naoto. Meanwhile, other boys’ infatuation with them compounded this effect. The game had thrown a lot of jealousy-based events at Pinky in the beginning. Failing to quell this jealousy would prevent her from securing the support of her classmates and present difficulties in the game’s middle section. What could I do to help? Not much. Cheer her on from the sidelines, and that was about it.

Aside from dealing with these thorny problems, Kaoru’s gem-collecting team was looking for a room big enough to practice in, like Classes B and C had been doing. I hoped they would get along, although I wanted to slip away from the group. Unfortunately...

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Kaoru, grabbing me by my shirt cuff.

Does she need me around for something? “Oh, err, to...train by myself?” I said, faltering.

“For what? You can join our team when you finish your deepest-depth task in the Battle of the Classes. And you can join us now for practice...unless you have anything better to do?”

Tsukijima then stepped in and said, “Hold on, Kaoru. What good is it gonna do for us to have Piggy around?” He seemed annoyed that Kaoru was talking to me instead of him. This wasn’t great; I didn’t really want to be around when he was flirting with her.

However, I thought getting to know Kaoru and my classmates better would be good. I could finish my experiments some other time. They weren’t expecting me to help out or become useful, but I could sit on the sidelines and observe things.

Kaoru handed out orders to the team as they moved on. I felt she really knew what she was doing and stuck with the group for the rest of their exercise, trying to stay out of sight.

Chapter 9: I'll Take a Tougher Future

I walked with the other Class E students as we wandered around the first floor of the dungeon, looking for somewhere to practice. Pinky walked at the head of the group with two boys beside her, carrying her belongings. The boys had practically snatched her bags, desperately attempting to seem helpful. My other classmates walked in the middle while Kaoru, Tsukijima, and I were at the rear.

"Y'know, I could find all the magic gems our team needs all by myself if I wanted," boasted Tsukijima. "Only, that would draw more attention to me than I'm comfortable with at the moment."

"Really?" said Kaoru robotically, sounding unimpressed. "I'm sure you'll amaze us all soon."

The funny thing was that Tsukijima probably *could* get high-level magic gems if he wanted to do so.

Risa was investigating what Tsukijima was up to but had made little progress. All she had discovered was that he spent most of his time hanging out with his friends from class and barely any in the dungeon. Despite that, he was still raising his level. Her report had confused me the first time she'd told me. But I was reasonably confident that I knew what was going on: he'd likely summoned a creature and instructed it to raid the dungeon for him. This method would allow him to increase his level without setting foot in the dungeon.

My hypothesis had plenty of flaws. Using Manual Activation to summon the sort of beasts or elementals high-level players usually summoned would require a colossal amount of mana. Low-level adventurers could not sustain the summoning spell for any meaningful period. In addition, I knew from *DEC* that most summoned creatures could only obey and understand simple instructions. Even if Tsukijima had found a way around these restrictions, wouldn't somebody have noticed a powerful summoned beast rampaging through the dungeon? To date, no adventurer had reported witnessing anything like this.

All my knowledge of *DEC* seemed to refute my hypothesis. But our current reality wasn't exactly the same as the game, meaning Tsukijima might have found a work-around. I'd developed a list of a few summoning spells that he could have been using, and I planned to discuss them with Risa to hear her thoughts.

While I was thinking about this, someone at the front of our group announced that they'd found a space large enough for us.

"Sanjou, this should be big enough, shouldn't it?"

"I think so," replied Pinky. "Let's set up here."

The space was large enough for about ten people to run around comfortably. We were lucky to find a spot so close to the floor's entrance. My classmates filed into the area, set their bags by the walls, and began getting ready.

Uh, what should I do? I wondered. *I brought nothing with me.*

Soon, the team split into two groups. One was with Pinky in the center, and the other was with Kaoru. The gem-collecting team was the largest in the class, so they'd likely decided to subdivide the members to be more efficient. I walked over to join Kaoru's group.

The students in the group were discussing which roles everyone would fulfill. Nobody wanted to volunteer for the role of tank. I could understand why; the role was dangerous and stressful. Plus, you'd need to let yourself become the target of all of your enemies' attacks.

"Sanjou and Hayase are the highest level, so they should be the tanks," said a girl.

"Right?" another girl agreed. "Otherwise, what's the point of having such a high level?"

While the girls were picking on Pinky and Kaoru, they had a point. In a party filled with Newbies and other basic jobs, the highest-level adventurer was the best suited to the tank role.

Kaoru and Pinky exchanged a glance and nodded.

"Fine," said Kaoru. "But understand that when Sakurako or I tell you to do

something, you must do it.”

The tank role wouldn’t be easy, but they had volunteered to keep their groups under control because that was likely their highest priority. The girls in the class would be tying their own nooses if they acted too defiantly, so they stopped their complaints once Pinky and Kaoru agreed to be the tanks. They realized that the whole class needed to act together if they hoped to go up against the higher classes.

Although that’ll all depend on how much Satsuki and Tsukijima take part, I thought.

Even if achieving first place wouldn’t happen, putting up a good fight would improve Class E’s morale, and that was something that mattered deeply to Satsuki. Tsukijima also had a reason to help the class. In *DEC*, performing well in the Battle of the Classes would increase the heroines’ affection scores for the player, which could help him win over Kaoru.

I would do my own thing during the exam since I had no interest in being promoted to a higher class or pursuing any of the heroines,

“Okay, let’s start practicing our formations and group tactics—” started Pinky until a shout interrupted her.

“Get lost, losers!”

“Class D is gonna use this spot now!”

A group of Class D students barged into the room.

This scene was an almost perfect repeat of the situation I’d witnessed only thirty minutes ago. Maybe all of the school’s bullies were copying from the same playbook.

I looked at the student at the head of the pack who had shouted and recognized him as Manaka. He and his brother in Soleil were at the very top of my revenge hit list. I was always on the watch for a chance to get payback on him.

“Don’t you think it’s unfair for losers like you to hog the best spaces?” taunted one of his cronies.

“What I wanna know is who you’re practicing to beat?”

“These dropouts aren’t seriously thinking they can beat us, are they?”

The Class D students hurled abuses at us the moment they walked in. It was the same as what had happened between Classes B and C, except that no one in Class E stood up for themselves. My classmates averted their eyes, saying nothing. The duel against Kariya had taught them how weak they truly were.

Tsukijima was keeping quiet too. He could be short-tempered, so I’d expected some reaction to their taunts. Maybe he was more levelheaded than I gave him credit for.

Class E’s submissiveness emboldened Class D to intensify their goading.

“If you want,” said Manaka, “we could settle the matter here and now. Don’t you wanna see if you can beat us? We’ve been looking for someone to carry our bags at the Third Swordcraft Club. Let’s see... You two, pink and blue hair, if your class loses, you will be our club’s new servants.”

Manaka wore a lecherous grin as he grabbed Pinky’s arm and pulled her closer.

The two boys carrying Pinky’s bags rushed over, furious.

“What?!” exclaimed one of the boys. “Only an idiot would accept those terms!”

“Sanjou, get behind me!” shouted the other boy.

Pinky freed herself thanks to their intervention. But Manaka kept his grip on Kaoru, who nobody had stepped in to help.

Come to think of it, I remember a scene like this happening in Kaoru’s route, I mused.

I recalled Kaoru’s route in the game. Manaka had tried every foul trick to make her subservient. This event had enraged Piggy, who’d accepted Manaka’s challenge. Losing would doom Kaoru to life as Manaka’s plaything, removing her as a romance option for the player and triggering a bad ending. Victory would bring the player several rewards, including a boost to Kaoru’s affection score. If Piggy won the challenge, his notoriety in the class would increase,

making everyone hate him. Since I was Piggy, there was no good outcome for this challenge.

Tsukijima was smirking at me, probably expecting me to act like Piggy had in the game.

Why isn't he jumping in? He fancies Kaoru, right? It's his golden chance to swoop in and save the day, so why is he just standing there? Just look at her! She's shaking! Manaka has grabbed her, and she's scared! She's probably still working through her issues from the duel where she saw her friend get beaten bloody and doesn't need this!

I took a deep breath to soothe Piggy's mind, which was screaming at me to help her.

Okay, I understand. Calm down.

What sort of man would I be if I let a woman get treated like this? I decided to step in, knowing that I'd have to live through a tougher future because of my choice.

C'mon, let's get this guy! "Um, hi, excuse me," I said softly, stepping forward. "I don't think she likes that, so could you—"

"Go oink somewhere else, you pig!" Manaka immediately threw his fist at my face.

Even though it would've been easy to dodge, I didn't want to draw any suspicion about my true strength. So, I let myself get hit and didn't think it'd do much damage either way.

"Oof!"

"Souta!" cried Kaoru.

The punch didn't hurt due to my high vitality stat, but its power sent me flying several meters back. Based on what appeared in the school database, Manaka believed he was hitting someone at level 3, who would suffer serious damage from a punch like that. He was ruthless. Until now, the other students had only mocked Class E, or used their Auras to intimidate us. Now, they'd crossed the line into actual violence. Should things go badly in the Battle of the Classes,

scenes like this might become commonplace in our classroom.

I brushed dirt from my clothes and stood back up, trying to parse what had happened. That was when I noticed that Kaoru was here. She'd broken free from Manaka's hold and rushed over. To be so concerned for someone she despised... She truly was a kindhearted person.

"Don't worry about me," I said. "We have bigger problems..."

"Y-You're right," she agreed. "Everyone, let's get out of here. We don't need to accept their challenge."

"Stop right there, you cowards!" shouted Manaka, blocking our exit while releasing his Aura. "We're not done talking!"

His persistence told me that he wasn't doing this on a whim; somebody had ordered him to force us into a contest. That clumsy attempt at intimidation was enough to cause Class E to freeze, though. Seeing me get punched appeared to have frightened them.

One person, apparently unfazed by the intimidation, walked away alone. It was Tsukijima.

"Hey! You think we'll let you get away?!" Manaka sent another burst of Aura at Tsukijima, who kept walking.

Enraged, one of the Class D boys tried to grab Tsukijima's shoulder. But Tsukijima effortlessly dodged the boy's grasping hand, grabbed him by the chin, and lifted him.

"Aaaaah!" the boy screamed.

"You've gotten it the wrong way around," Tsukijima said. "*I* am the one letting *you* get away."

Pained gasps escaped the boy's lips as he struggled in Tsukijima's tight grip. Class D was stunned into silence. How could they have expected the class of losers to fight back?

Putting up too much of a fight against Class D risked drawing their backers in Class B into the mix. All bets would be off if that happened. Class B was technically behind Class A in the rankings, but they were more or less an equal

match. Their leader, Suou, was the real deal as he possessed an arsenal of powerful skills and knew his way around combat better than almost any other student. Even I would have no chance of beating him unless I decoded the cheats my player status gave me. Tsukijima was also a player, so he'd know this as well.

Even if Tsukijima was strong enough to fight Suou and Class B, it wouldn't be enough to keep Akagi, Kaoru, and the rest of the class safe at the same time. Class B had plenty of students as strong as Kariya. All it would take was for one of my classmates to run into one such student when Tsukijima wasn't around, and that would be it. They didn't have enough experience yet.

Or maybe... Tsukijima had some plan? Yeah, right!

"What do you all think you're doing?!" called a Class B student sternly. He was trying to make it appear he'd just stumbled upon the scene. It sounded like an act to me because he'd probably been watching nearby to make sure Class D followed their orders.

The Class B student used his Aura to intimidate Tsukijima, but he remained composed.

Looks like that Class B kid must be somewhere between levels 12 and 15, which means either Tsukijima is around that level, or he's hiding how it's affecting him.

What was happening appeared to shock the Class B student.

Tsukijima released the boy he'd been holding with a scoff as though he'd lost interest in him. He then began walking away, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding drama. It was our chance to run away.

"Kaoru, we should follow Tsukijima!"

"Huh?! Oh, err, yes! Everybody, let's go!"

My classmates grabbed their bags and began to run, so I joined them in the escape.

Manaka's face reddened with seething rage.

"Who do you think you are...? I'll knock some sense into you!" Manaka

started running after us, but the Class B student stopped him. The Class B student had likely assessed the situation. He must have realized that Class D going berserk and injuring Class E students would disrupt their plan to destabilize us.

What a shame. I'd planned to get even with him if he'd followed us.

"Make the most of it, losers!" roared Manaka. "Wait and see what happens in the Battle of the Classes! We'll show you what hell is like!"

Manaka would probably bring in some Soleil members as help for the battle. Tsukijima could handle himself, yet I was worried about Kaoru and the others. I decided it would probably be best to prepare countermeasures in case they attacked us.

Chapter 10: Polar Opposites

Kaoru Hayase

“This is how the Battle of the Classes will work,” announced Murai, our homeroom teacher. He was standing at the lectern with a stern look in his eyes.

The class listened to him speak in anxious silence, nervous about the big exam ahead of us.

It was our third month at Adventurers’ High. We’d trained relentlessly in that time, facing hardships that sometimes made it difficult to keep hope. The Battle of the Classes would be the test to prove whether our efforts had been in vain. It mattered. We needed to do whatever it took to bring back a good result.

“As we’ve discussed, you’ll spend the next week inside the dungeon starting today,” he continued. “You can only take your tablet, clothing, weapons, and other adventuring equipment. You can exchange magic gems on particular floors to receive food, camping equipment, as well as shower and laundry facilities. Medical and sanitary necessities will be distributed for free.”

We could utilize special school facilities during the exam by exchanging magic gems. Moreover, we could also trade our magic gems for Japanese yen to use at private stores and stalls inside the dungeon. In other words, we could revel in hotels and dine on fancy meals as long as we had the magic gems to pay for it. I did not doubt that the upper classes would spend some of their magic gems on such luxuries. Every gem would count in Class E, so we’d experience a more modest life in the dungeon. I was fully prepared to sleep rough with my classmates.

“You will be disqualified if you leave the dungeon or can no longer continue the exam due to sickness or injury. So be careful.”

The Battle of the Classes graded us as a class, so we would receive points even if one or two students got disqualified. However, every student we lost to disqualification would hurt our chances of succeeding in the individual tasks.

We'd need to make sure everybody looked after their health.

"That's all," said Murai. "Once you've downloaded the exam app, you're free to go. You have an hour. Be at the square outside the Adventurers' Guild by 10 a.m."

The exam app on our terminals would both record and display the total number of magic gems we'd collected, stats on the monsters we'd defeated, and information about our class's location. We could also see the other classes' stats. However, the exam app's data would only refresh once per day at 9 a.m. Since the Battle of the Classes was long, these refreshes were frequent enough to let us know the entire year group's movements and inform our decisions to either hold back and rest up or push on. The plan was for Majima and Naoto to issue commands to the rest of us. I knew I could count on their bravery and wisdom.

"Let's get going! After me!" called out Majima encouragingly, and several classmates enthusiastically picked up the call.

"Come on, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

"Come on!"

They were the specified monster team. I knew they'd spent as much time in the dungeon practicing as they could in the lead-up to the exam.

The rest of the class stood up and left the classroom, their faces determined. If we fumbled here, we'd lose our shot at achieving the future we all dreamed of. But things might become desperate inside the dungeon, meaning we needed to buckle down and carry on.

Naoto had been in low spirits recently, though I knew he would regain his enthusiasm soon enough. After all, he'd been the one who had rescued me from the depression I'd fallen into.

It's time, I thought.

My party members, whom I could trust with all my heart, were here—Yuuma, Sakurako, Naoto. The team I was in for the gem-collecting task hadn't initially

worked well together. Before long, we started cooperating more ably. We'd all worked hard at our practice sessions. Whatever the future might hold, we could face it.

With that determination in my mind, I stood up.

However...

I spotted Souta in the classroom's rear, sneering to himself. The gravity of the task ahead of him clearly hadn't dawned on him. He'd been like this since I'd picked him up in the morning. Did he think he was going on a field trip? I hoped not! Given his task, he could lose his life if he wasn't careful!

Quite frequently recently, I'd tried inviting him to our training sessions. Each time, he'd refused and made an excuse that he was busy doing something in the dungeon. Mrs. Narumi had told me that he was always home by 7 p.m. in time for dinner, which meant he couldn't be raiding deep in the dungeon. You couldn't get much farther than the second floor's entrance in the time between the end of school and dinnertime. I had a hard time believing he was doing any serious training on such easy floors.

Regardless, he took his diet seriously and followed a strict exercise regime. The muscles beginning to show at his neck and shoulders were proof of this. Even his stomach had shrunk compared to the enormous size it had reached before he'd joined Adventurers' High. The change in his appearance made me remember how he used to look so long ago. Souta wasn't obsessed with me anymore either and was completely different from who he'd been before high school.

In that case, maybe...

Maybe if all the stars aligned, if the unthinkable happened, and Souta returned with good results in the Battle of the Classes, I should change my opinion of him. If that happened, I'd need to take some time to think about how he'd changed since joining the school and what had driven him to do so.

Now that I think about it, I did ask him whether he'd changed when I found him talking with my father at my house.

He had brushed off the question when I asked, and I was sure he'd do the

same if I tried doing that again. Perhaps the only way to find out would be to get closer to him. Repairing our relationship might lead him to agree to annul our nuptial grimoire.

I sighed deeply, probably because of the path my thoughts had wandered down. I didn't need such distractions right now. The Battle of the Classes was about to start, and I needed to focus so our class got the best results possible.

"Kaoru?" called out Sakurako softly from beside me.

She'd changed a lot since joining Adventurers' High as well. Where once she'd been sheepish, now she was as powerful as she was reliable. We'd need her to get the best results in the gem-collecting task.

"Let's go, Sakurako."

"Yep!"

I looked outside the window. It was only 9 a.m., but the morning sun had risen high in the sky and shone its blinding rays down on us.

Chapter 11: The Battle of the Classes

Once homeroom had ended, my classmates marched out of the classroom. They then headed to the gathering point to begin the Battle of the Classes, ready to give it their all.

Majima and his team were keen to show off the results of the rigorous training over the last few days inside the dungeon. Unfortunately, looking up their levels in the school database didn't inspire me with hope about their prospects. The rule of thumb in *DEC* was that the two protagonists, Akagi and Pinky, would need to be at least level 8 to perform well in the battle. Both of them had only reached level 6. I'd heard they'd been struggling to get the better of demon wolves, which was part of the problem, but the biggest thing holding them back was their inability to use the gates.

The upper classes weren't likely to let them off easy for having low levels either; everything I'd seen told me that Class D was planning something against us. I didn't know what that something was, though it would be too much for Akagi and the rest of them to handle. While I hoped they could survive through to the final day of the battle, I was worried they might not.

Although... Satsuki might be planning something of her own, I thought.

Risa, Satsuki, and I had discussed how much we should intervene in the Battle of the Classes. The two girls were level 12 now, already at a stage where they could start whack-a-mole. If they were to use their true strength, even Kariya couldn't stop them from getting more points than Class D. Performing too well would draw the attention of the higher classes and older students though, inviting more trouble. It wasn't right to teach our classmates to rely on the few powerful students in the class either; doing so would diminish the importance of their hard work and zap their enthusiasm. The best outcome would be for Class E to struggle through the exam. Their disappointment and frustration caused by their lack of power would drive them to strive for better, forcing them to form a united front. Helping our class defeat Class D would do us no

favours, but stepping in here and there to slightly improve the spirits of our class would be okay.

Thus, Risa would help Tachigi. The specified quest task would probably be the same as in the game, so she could give us an advantage by tipping Tachigi off with important hints about the quests using her game knowledge. Risa would decide how much information to divulge, and I trusted her judgment.

Meanwhile, I planned to do just well enough to get points for last place. I'd get that done and meet up with Kaoru and the gem-collecting team on the last day of the exam. Manaka and Soleil might try to hassle us, but I wouldn't need to do anything about that situation. I'd already made some arrangements in case this happened.

But I had more important things on my mind!

Fate had finally allowed me to spend time with the character I'd loved the most in the game! She was a pure soul who would treat everyone kindly, regardless of appearance or status! That surely meant she'd be open to talking to me too! Piggy's mind seemed eager to meet her, so we were excited beyond belief!

"What're you grinning about?" Risa asked me.

"Did something good happen?" asked Satsuki.

Both girls had noticed me smirking. Kaoru had thought I'd been acting strange this morning too. I'd need to be more careful.

"Oh, nothing," I said. "We should get going too."

"Let's all do our best!" cheered Satsuki, pumping her fist in the air.

Risa chuckled. "Sounds good. Let's get going, then."

Satsuki appeared excited to get going, but she'd need to hold herself back a little because she was even more powerful than Class E's average level. Risa was smiling in her usual, calm way, which reassured me.

Okay, off we go!

I discreetly pulled out a hand mirror from my breast pocket and checked that my hair and clothes were presentable. Once done, I went to the exam's

gathering point. I was so excited that I had to fight the urge to run all the way there.

At 10 a.m., the square outside the Adventurers' Guild was packed with adventurers about to raid the dungeon. You could call it adventurers' rush hour. Clan members wandered in their illustrious armor, peddlers went through the crowd selling food and magical items, and small carts filled to the brim with equipment formed long lines. It was a sight to behold.

We walked through the crowd for a few minutes until we reached the gathering point where our classmates were waiting. Risa and Satsuki left to do something, leaving me alone with nothing to do but watch the crowd.

My classmates were also watching the crowd, although they were whispering to each other about the higher classes. We'd hardly ever spent time with students from Class C and above; our classrooms weren't close, we took different lessons, and we raided different dungeon floors. As such, it was natural that my classmates would stand in awe at the sight of their equipment, which we'd never seen before.

"I know a lot of them are nobles, but how much money must they spend to get equipment like that?" whispered a girl.

"It's crazy, right?" another whispered back. "And look at that earring. I'm sure it's a magic item!"

I turned to see what the girls talked about and saw Class B. Most students wore either robes of felbull leather or mithril alloy armor, putting their level somewhere between 10 and 15. Equipment like that would easily cost a million yen, at least. The noble students also wore lots of jewelry on their wrists and ears. These were all likely magic items. Depending on their enchantment, the jewelry could also be staggeringly expensive. I'd be worried about getting mugged if I wore my money so openly like that on a raid, but they had their servants to protect them. Plus, few criminals in Japan would be so reckless as to attack nobles and incur their wrath. Laws didn't constrain the nobility, so their vengeance was intense.

"That glaive is DUX's latest model!" a student whispered.

“I read about it in a magazine,” another whispered. “Don’t know if it’s true, but apparently you can use it for ages before the blade gets dull!”

Longbows, glaives, wands... Their weapons had greater variety than the simple swords and maces Class E wielded. A few students carried weapons from the popular DUX brand, which showed their status. Most of our class’s weapons were rentals, far inferior to the brand-name weapons of Class B. It made no sense to worry about that; we wouldn’t need to fight them for at least another year, so our primary concern should be leveling up.

Class D had taken up position beside Class B. Although most of them wore demon wolf leather, some students like Kariya had mithril alloy armor—these would be students who’d passed level 10. This class had several powerful students who were hostile to Class E, and there’d probably be a fight if we ran into each other in the dungeon. I hoped that Risa and Satsuki could step in secretly if my classmates were in danger.

Class C was huddled in a circle some distance away from Classes B and D. Standing in the center was a student wearing Japanese-style armor—their leader, Takamura—and his attendant, the girl with the cute forehead. Miss Forehead sounded like a good name for her.

The students of Class C were mostly commoners, unlike Class B, and this difference in status was apparent in the quality of their equipment. Takamura’s willingness to associate with commoners made him an oddity among nobles. But their upbringing didn’t prevent them from subscribing to the same elitist beliefs about status and strength as the rest of the upper classes. They were no more fond of the external students of Class E than the rest. We’d need to take care if we encountered them.

While I observed the other classes, I heard a commotion among those gathered here. Class A had arrived. At the head of the group was Kikyō Sera, the first-year valedictorian, the future student council president, and most importantly, my biggest crush from the game. Her large, round purple eyes shimmered as her long, waist-length, lustrous silver hair swayed as she walked gracefully toward the gathering point. She was wearing only her school uniform, apparently preferring for people not to see her armor.

I have to say, she's gorgeous...

Sera's beauty in the game made her a contender for the most popular *DEC* heroine. But her magnificence in real life far surpassed that of her virtual avatar. Her beauty captivated all the boys and inspired looks of envy from the girls. Even the passing adventurers stopped to admire her.

Behind her followed other nobles and their attendants. Sera came from an old family of high-ranking nobles and was related to Japan's Holy Woman, so many of those with her were nobles from cadet branches of her family and descendants of samurai clans sworn to her. Their equipment was like that of Class B, although a few wore what looked like shrine maiden robes.

Toward the back of Sera's group was Tenma, the girl who'd started a conversation with me during a study session. She was lumbering after the rest of the group with a large double-headed axe. Light reflected in every direction off her polished suit of armor, making her stand out. Her family had only risen to the nobility recently, so they didn't have samurai descendants to serve them. The black butlers that served her instead would likely wait in the dungeon.

Every class had arrived. I believed Sera's Class A was the best to get first place. Her ability to support her team was second to none, and her class had large numbers of nobles and samurai who knew how to get the most out of their expensive equipment. They also had Tenma, who was an extraordinary fighter.

Class B might stand a shot based on what Suou did. But antagonizing Class C had given them more enemies, hurting their chances. Class A were the sort of opponents you'd need to concentrate your undivided attention on if you wanted to stand a chance of beating them. In a way, Class C could also reach the top spot if Classes A and B knocked each other out.

These observations didn't actually matter to me, but I couldn't help myself; I was used to looking at things like a player.

Oh! The teachers are about to say something!

A muscular man, the substitute principal, brought a megaphone to his mouth

and addressed us, “The Battle of the Classes begins now. Will the teams for the deepest depth task please approach?”

Come to think of it, I’d never once seen the principal, even in the game. I wondered what the actual principal was like.

Never mind that, I thought. He’s called me up, so I’d better get going.

“Get us those points no matter what, Piggy!”

“You’ll be okay! Just stick with the other classes! And don’t look behind you!”

“Don’t worry about meeting up with us either! You’d do more harm than good!”

“Good luck, Souta!”

I walked forward with my head held high, thanks to the cheers of encouragement from my classmates.

Now I wonder who the higher classes will be sending.

The deepest-depth task offered the most points at stake, so the classes would likely fill their teams with their best students...other than Class E. My class had no hope of winning this task, so I was their only token offering.

Then, the team from Class D stepped forward. I was surprised when I saw that it was the three kids that hung around Manaka rather than Manaka, Kariya, or both. This was unexpected. “What, all we get from Class E is the pig?” said one of them. “What a letdown.”

“They know they can’t win whoever they send, so you can’t blame ’em,” replied the second.

“You’re gonna carry our stuff for us once we’re inside, got it?” the third commanded.

These bastards had picked a fight the moment they laid eyes on me, and I had half a mind to take them up on it. I began simulating exactly how I’d take them down, but the sound of cheering students interrupted me.

“Suou, you’ve got this!”

“Lady Sera!”

“Be careful, Lady Sera!”

“Do your best, Mei!”

The two highest classes had indeed sent their best. Classes A and B had sent their leaders, Class C had sent Takamura’s aide Miss Forehead, and several retainers accompanied all of them. There was nothing surprising to me about this lineup.

Both class leaders approached each other and exchanged pleasantries, smiling.

“Well, if it isn’t Sera,” said Suou. “What a coincidence to find ourselves on the same task.”

“Suou,” replied Sera. “It’s a pleasure to see you.”

I highly doubted that it was a coincidence for Suou to be on the same task as Sera. He’d been extremely obsessed with Sera in the game, not out of admiration. The looks from the Class A students told me they weren’t happy to see Suou. He’d probably discovered that Sera would be on this task and ensured he’d be on it too.

Kouki Suou had knocked Takamura down from the valedictorian spot while they’d been in middle school, expecting to take the title for himself. But Kikyō Sera had proved to be a monstrous foe for him, outmatching him in talent, popularity, and noble rank. And she’d risen to valedictorian instead. He’d attempted to dethrone her over the years but had failed, the reason he was still in Class B. Suou was a walking, talking bundle of ambition, so there was no way he was content with his current position.

Sera seemed indifferent to the hostility he showed her, though. She bowed her head with a smile and carried on walking. It was odd that she could be so calm in his presence after the grim and bloody rivalry they’d shared in middle school. Perhaps she had looked into his future and knew what fate awaited him.

I think I’ll keep an eye on Suou, just in case, I thought.

The student with the second-best grades in our year, Akira Tenma, called out to me, her voice muffled as though I heard her through a phone. “Hey, Narumi, fancy seeing you here. Looks like we’ll be on the same task, so let’s wish each

other luck!”

“O-Oh, Tenma, hi. Sure...”

It seemed like overkill for Class A to put their two best students on this task. What were they thinking?

“We haven’t gotten to chat about diets since that first time!” continued Tenma excitedly. “You know, I’ve just been too busy to stop by and talk. So when I heard you were on the deepest-depth team, I thought, ‘That’s where I’ll go too!’”

“Y-Yeah?”

“We’ll have plenty of time to talk on the way! We won’t have much else to do.”

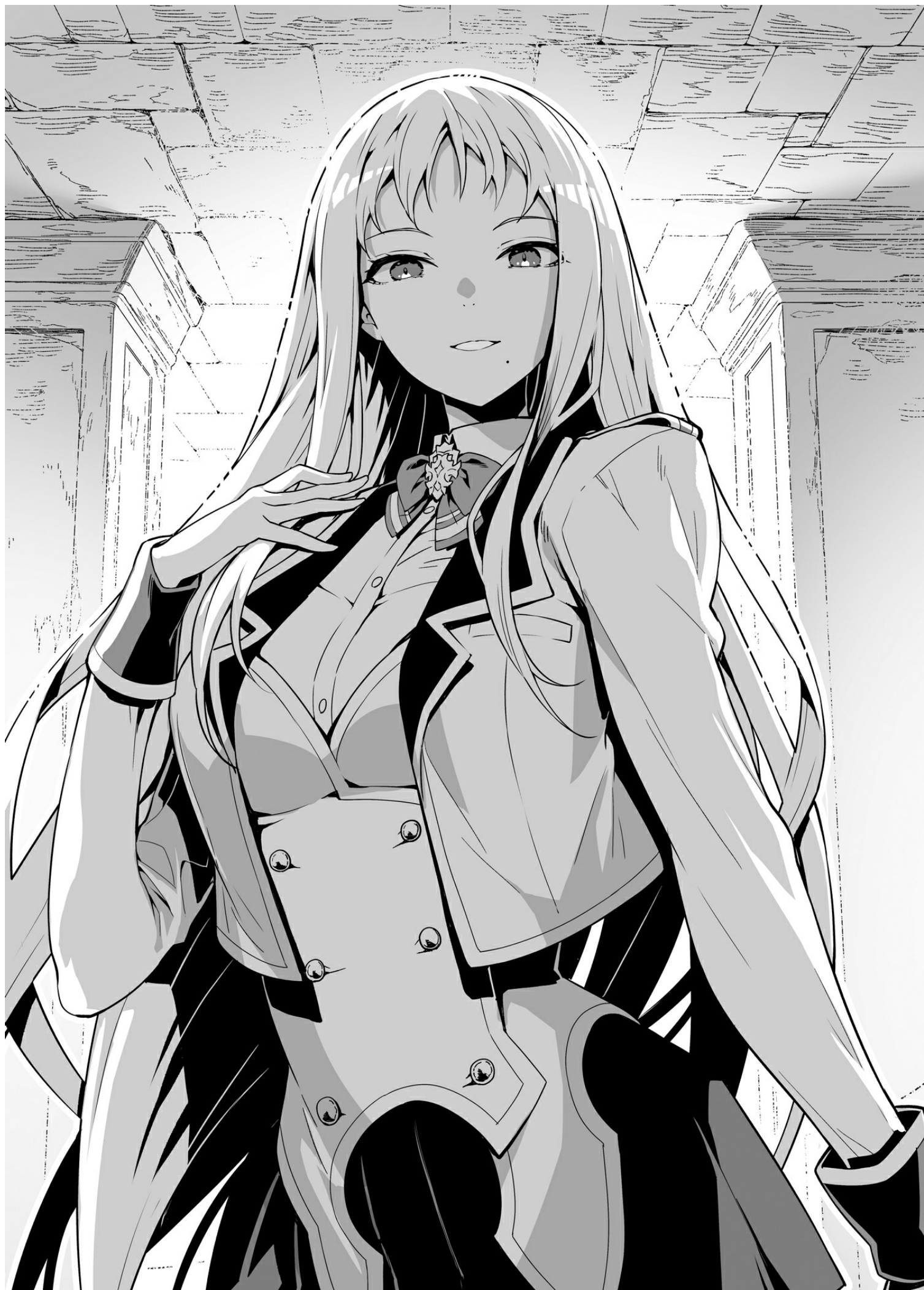
The game’s Tenma had spoken nowhere near this much, so I wondered why she behaved differently. Her lack of coordination with her class was the same as in the game, and it wasn’t long before her classmates admonished her.

“Tenma, you need to stay with us,” one of her classmates said. “This way.”

“Oops, there I go again,” said Tenma. “You should join us too, Narumi. You’re by yourself, aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

Tenma grabbed my arm and dragged me over to Class A’s deepest-depth team. Before I knew it, I stood right in front of Sera. The breeze was blowing through her long, silver hair... My heart began to pound.



Take a deep breath! In. Out. Ooh, that smell is lovely... Ah, keep it together, me!

Being plunged into this situation had thrown my mind into disarray. I needed to cool my head, then I could inspect the group.

Class A's deepest-depth team consisted of six people. Every one of them sported a golden badge on their chest with the insignia of noble houses that marked them as members of the nobility. Besides Tenma, the badges all showed the diamond-shaped crest of Sera's family, demonstrating they all belonged to the same noble house. I was completely out of my depth.

All wore their unique armor, some Western and some Japanese, with varied colors. But the many jewels and precious metals spoke loudly of their noble prestige. Because I was nothing more than a lowly commoner, I had to fight the urge to kneel before them.

The nobles stood around Sera, speaking in hushed tones with narrowed eyes.

"Please be careful, Lady Sera. Suou is up to something."

"It won't be safe for you to travel with him."

"We should change our plans and head out ahead of the other teams."

It was customary for the various deepest-depth teams to travel through the first few floors together to build inter-class relationships. They'd planned to continue the tradition this year, but Suou was a dangerous student, and there was no telling what he was planning. For that reason, the nobles suggested that Class A should travel ahead by themselves.

Sera seemed a little surprised by this, but her confident smile remained.

God, she's so beautiful...

"Now, now, you're being unfair to him," said Sera. "This is a wonderful chance for us to enjoy getting to know students from the other classes." She suddenly turned to me. "Don't you think so?"

Her violet eyes changed to a glowing, magical red when she looked at me. The color change meant that she was using her Clairvoyance skill, which showed her visions of her target's future with high accuracy. Those red eyes that shone with

an arcane light bore through my eyes and into my soul, peering at my future.

O-Oh wow, I-I thought we'd maybe get to know each other first before letting you see my soul, but okay.

This was it. I would find out what joys awaited me! Would I become a world-famous adventurer? Would I be spending my school years surrounded by cute girls? Would I start going out with Sera?!

I'm ready to hear it all, my honey!

"Sexual harassment... Expulsion... Anything better? No... Hmm, you're pretty pathetic, aren't you? I'd give you three points, at best."

"What?" I blurted.

Sera looked away, seemingly disgusted by what she'd seen. Having lost interest in me, she walked away.

Tenma patted me on the shoulder and consoled me with her usual cheerful tone. "Oof. Keep your chin up, Narumi."

That hurt, Tenma. And also... What the hell is going ooooooon?!

Chapter 12: Akira Tenma Wants to Lose Weight

The Battle of the Classes had finally begun as the first teams to enter the dungeon were those competing in the deepest-depth task, which included me. Most of the higher classes had assigned their best students to this task because, out of the five, it was the one where the most points were up for grabs. One by one, the teams filed into the dungeon to the loud cheers of the other students.

Adventurers had crowded the first floor, so there were no monsters around. At most, we'd occasionally run into a slime bouncing around. There wasn't much to do besides follow the crowd down the main road.

Sera led the way with her noble cohort at a graceful, leisurely pace. A natural chatterbox, she'd strike up conversations with other students, only for her guards to scare them away with their scowls. She appeared oblivious to her guards' pleading expressions telling her to calm down.

Behind them walked Suou and his underlings, all dressed in shiny armor. Jewels and precious metals sparkled on their expensive armor, so they were probably all nobles. Maybe they'd worn such attire to avoid being shown up by Class A. But they weren't causing any trouble or starting any fights. Of course, fighting on such a busy main street wouldn't be practical anyway.

Next came Class C, with Takamura's retainer Miss Forehead—or Meiko Mononobe, her real name—in their center. Her classmates adored her, calling her Mei, and she seemed nice. The strongest student in the class, Takamura, was nowhere to be seen. From what I could tell from the school's database, Class C hadn't assembled their strongest students for this team. They'd likely diverted the best students to focus on the other tasks rather than waste their efforts fighting Sera and Suou, the two top students. In a sense, they were using the same strategy as Class E.

At the back were four students from Class D. They were the kids that would come to our classroom to mock us with Manaka, so Class E hated them. Whenever I saw them, they were usually kissing Manaka's ass, probably hoping

that it might help them get into Soleil. Those Class D students had been shooting looks at me since we'd entered the dungeon. They probably wanted to make good on their word and make me carry their bags, but they were wary of approaching me. Why? Because of her.

"Wow, so you can get results like that just from a low-carb diet?" asked Tenma. She walked beside me, furiously scribbling down notes and nodding as I spoke.

"Uh, yeah, I think so..."

Tenma had noticed how fat I'd been during the entrance ceremony and wanted to know every trick and secret about how I'd lost so much weight. This impulse was the entire reason she had signed up for the deepest-depth task.

"But how could you slim down so much so quickly?" she asked. "You had barely any muscle when I first saw you too, but now look at you! I can hardly believe my eyes. You *must* have a secret."

She relentlessly questioned me on my training regimen, which floors I raided, everything.

As it happened, I had built more muscle since I started raiding the Gathering of the Fallen, probably because of all the time spent swinging a hammer around. I'd also reined my insatiable appetite in by using the Flexible Aura skill that Risa had taught me to impede my Glutton debuff. Thanks to this, I'd slimmed down from being totally obese to just regular chubby—or so I hoped. Losing the flab from my face made my eyes look quite charming; I'd spent much time admiring the handsome man in the mirror. Weight loss had done wonders for my self-esteem!

"Ooh, I know, I bet you have a secret raiding spot!" said Tenma, wriggling with excitement beneath her heavy plate mail. "Let me in on the secret. I won't tell anybody!"

She was right, but I couldn't tell her that. I needed to come up with a believable answer, but she'd see through most lies thanks to her long experience with dieting.

What should I tell her? I wondered. *More to the point, dieting won't help*

Tenma anyway.

Tenma had tried plenty of diets over the years, and none had worked because she was suffering from a curse called Fairy's Blessing. Dieting and exercise wouldn't help her lose weight. She would have to draw out the spirits within her and defeat them or convince them to lift the curse. That would happen in a game event triggered after Akagi had befriended Tenma. It had been a difficult mission in the game, but completing it would allow Tenma to lose weight and return to being a cute girl. She'd then be a powerful ally to Akagi and become one of the game's heroines.

Perhaps I could trigger the event myself, though I would rob Akagi of an opportunity for personal growth. In addition, it could throw the rest of the game's main story off the rails at the points where Tenma had been featured, depriving me of my greatest weapon, the ability to know the future. I wasn't willing to risk so much to help her.

Due to my game knowledge, I knew the girl acting so cheerful beside me cried in front of the mirror each day when she looked at her body, cursed to look ugly, fat, and old. The reason she wore a suit of armor at all times was to hide her body from sight. I really wanted her to get better quickly but didn't know what to do.

"Everyone," called out Sera once the stairs leading to the second floor were in sight. "We're nearly at the second floor, so we should take a twenty-minute break when we get there."

We'd been walking for an hour since entering the dungeon, so some people would probably need to use the restrooms.

"I'm going to go use the restroom," said Tenma. "See you in twenty minutes!"

"Sure," I replied.

I wondered how she would take her armor off to use the bathroom until I saw the butlers following her and realized they probably helped her with that.

So, I decided to go to the toilet as well.

“Hey, pig! We wanna talk.” As soon as Tenma left, the class D students grabbed me by my collar and began dragging me away.

“Over here,” one of them said, pointing in a direction where there didn’t seem to be any other people around. They’d been waiting for their chance to get me alone ever since we’d entered the dungeon, shooting me dirty looks the whole time.

Hey, guys, you’re gonna miss your chance to use the bathroom, I thought. Oh, well. Best get this out of the way.

Most adventurers looking for somewhere to practice would choose the first floor instead of walking the extra distance to the second. After we walked a few hundred meters, we were completely alone. When I wondered how much farther they intended to take me, I sensed one of them throwing a punch at me from behind. I dodged out of the way and wouldn’t stand there to let them hit me!

“What’s your problem?” I asked.

“You were supposed to carry our freakin’ bags!” one of them shouted.

“Hit him a couple times!”

“You’re gonna be doing whatever we tell you, got it?”

Their intensity surprised me. Violence had always been off-limits, but they weren’t thinking twice about throwing punches now. Maybe Class B had issued new orders. Whatever the case, I wouldn’t roll over and comply with their demands. These were the guys who’d taken the most active parts in bullying Class E, and they had handled Monster Player Killers, putting them near the top of my revenge list. They wouldn’t be hitting me. *I* would be hitting *them*.

Just then, I noticed something.

They seem...unusually angry.

The bloodshot eyes and dripping sweat effusing from them told me they were in an excited condition, and I didn’t think picking a fight with me was enough of a reason to explain this emotional response. I suspected they’d been drugged or they might be under the effects of a mood-altering spell. The antidebuff skill,

Flexible Aura, could dispel status impairments over a wide area of effect, so it would make sense to try it out.

I jumped to the side to dodge another punch and placed my hand on my attacker's chest, activating the skill. Yet, I could feel my mana colliding with something. That confirmed they were under some sort of effect.

"Y-You bastard!"

"Surround him!"

However, I didn't notice any change in the boy after I used the skill on him. It was strange, seeing the skill had definitely bumped up against a status impairment... Perhaps whatever spell he was under continuously reapplied the effect on him. If he was holding a cursed item, that could do it.

The four surrounded me and attacked from all directions, but their moves were simple to read and follow. I couldn't expect any better from them. After all, the database stated they were only level 7.

As one was about to hit me, I pounced into his space and struck a blow to his abdomen. Another of them on the right of me tried to grab my hair, but I dodged and karate-chopped the side of his head. One more student on my left was trying to kick me, so I jumped back and hit him with a roundhouse kick. The three collapsed to the ground, leaving only one standing.

"Wh-What the hell are you...?!"

I had no intention of holding a conversation with them. So, I darted behind the last student and pulled him into a choke hold. He quickly lost consciousness. With this much of a level difference, four-on-one was a piece of cake.

"Right, let's take a look at what they're carrying around," I said.

Shortly after, I lined the four unconscious figures up and rifled through their pockets, not finding unusual magic items. I saved some trouble and peeled all their armor off.

"Aha!" I said after finding a necklace of strung-together teeth. "Mad rat fangs, eh? I thought it'd be a while until they started using these."

I checked the necklace with Basic Appraisal, and the readout explained that the teeth were the fangs of mice-shaped monsters found on the marshlands of the twentieth floor and below. The item would increase its bearer's strength and visual acuity for a reduction in intelligence and reasoning abilities. Simply put, it was a magic item that enabled humans to enter berserker mode.

In the game, Suou had given his subordinates this item to better fight the protagonist and his allies. But long-term usage of the item would permanently degrade its bearer's mental faculties, so it shocked me to see it used so early. Could he have only given these students the necklace to experiment with its effects? In that case, who was he preparing to fight against?

Part of me didn't care what happened to these thugs, even though I knew that their twisted personalities resulted from being exposed to the discriminatory and elitist pressures present in this culture. Moreover, they were used as lab rats for this experimental necklace without their understanding or consent. I couldn't help but pity them.

They hadn't been using the necklaces long enough to suffer permanent damage. Even so, it would be troublesome if they came back and fought me again. For that reason, I decided to make sure they'd sit the rest of the exam out. I withdrew a massive Boost Hammer from the small backpack on my back and smashed away at the necklaces. Once I was done, I tied the students up and left them there.

Goblins passing by might attack them, but it serves them right, I thought.

Break time was almost over, so I returned to Sera's group.

Chapter 13: The Pig's Tail Inn

I returned to the second-floor rest area. Tenma waved when she saw me, helping me find the group.

"Where'd you sneak off to?" she asked. "Ooh, were you off performing your secret exercise regime?"

I'd tried returning quickly, but I had kept the lady waiting. How impolite of me. But she didn't seem upset, instead greeting me with her usual cheerfulness.

"It's time to get going, but we seem to be missing the Class D students," said Sera.

"How dare they hold up Lady Sera!" fumed a Class A student.

"We only travel together because we choose to," said Sera. "If they don't wish to join us, then the rest of us can go on without them."

The kids from Class B talked about Class D's absence as well. Their expressions told me they were annoyed rather than concerned.

"They've gone off and left our bags behind," one of them muttered angrily.

"Who's gonna carry our bags now?" asked another.

"I don't want to make the people I've brought carry my stuff like they're mere servants. They're samurai that serve my father!"

No self-respecting noble would carry their bags, so they'd made Class D carry them instead. Those students were nowhere to be found, leaving the nobles furious and promising to punish the absent Class D students.

Sorry, not sorry, I thought.

The person they set their sights on to take over carrying bags was... Of course, me.

"You there, commoner. I charge you with carrying our bags. If it comes to it, you will lay down your life to protect our belongings." The cocky, high-ranking

noble speaking to me pointed to five rucksacks on the ground. They looked like they'd weigh between twenty and thirty kilograms.

The girl in the suit of armor beside me butted in to protest this unreasonable demand. "Why can't you just carry your own bags? And if you're determined to make someone else carry them, you've got a bunch of attendants to do that for you. There's no need to force this onto Narumi!"

"How dare you. These are our future vassals, not mere hired labor like your goons in black suits."

Tenma placed her hands on her hips and argued, "The black butlers are long-standing vassals of House Tenma as well, I'll have you know!"

I looked over my shoulder and saw several unusual groups of people. There were girls in shrine maiden robes from Sera's Holy Woman organization, Tenma's black butlers, and groups of samurai on horseback. Each of the nobles had brought outside teams to assist them. Based on their equipment and their demeanor, it was easy to distinguish them from the average adventurer you'd expect to find on the second floor.

A young man and woman beginning their adventuring career who'd come to hunt goblins cowered after one of the mounted retainers glared at them. I sighed at the sight. This excursion was supposed to be a school exam, so they didn't have to make such a fuss!

Anyway, I decided it'd be better to agree to carry their bags to avoid an argument. The weight wouldn't be a problem for me.

"It's okay," I told Tenma. "I don't mind carrying them."

"If you say so," replied Tenma. "But feel free to throw them down if it's too much work." Tenma mimed how to throw the bags away as she said this.

I appreciated her concern, but I wouldn't be taking her advice. For some reason, I felt it would start a big fight with the retainers following us.

We were outside The Pig's Tail Inn at the rest area by the fourth-floor entrance. Our group had walked here, stopping for short breaks here and there,

and it was a little past midday by the time we arrived.

“Let’s stop for lunch here,” suggested Sera. “We’ve already booked enough tables for everyone.”

Sera had called ahead to the hotel to reserve tables in their restaurant. The eight-story hotel had been designed around the crevices and protrusions of the dungeon walls and ceiling. Moreover, the restaurant on the top floor doubled as a viewing platform and catered exclusively to the upper classes. A person would usually need to present identification to be allowed in. On this occasion, the wait staff led us in without those checks.

Inside, the walls and floor were white marble as a massive, sparkling chandelier dangled from the ceiling. A large table adorned with a tablecloth and perfectly set dishes and cutlery that looked expensive dominated the restaurant’s center. The cost of a single meal here would likely burn through a week’s worth of the Narumi family’s food budget. Fortunately, Sera was picking up the bill for everyone.

“Please take a seat.”

“Sounds good,” said Suou, sitting on the nearest chair. “Don’t mind if I do.”

The rest of the group followed his lead and sat down, beginning to relax and enjoy themselves.

Sera spent most of the time during the meal speaking to Mononobe, apparently fascinated by her. Mononobe seemed a little taken aback by this, but she did her best to smile and keep up the conversation. *The two of them look so cute together... Maybe I should join in—*

“Narumi, let’s eat together!” bellowed Tenma, grabbing my hand and guiding me to the seat opposite her.

I wanted to see how she’d eat her food with her helmet on. Then, I saw her open a movable slot in her helmet beneath her chin to pass the food through.

Once everyone had found a seat, some soft music began to play, and well-dressed servers poured fragrant tea for us all. This display was unnervingly high-class for a commoner like myself, whose idea of a fancy night out was dinner at the local family restaurant.

“Oh, it looks like the results are in for the first round of the specified location task,” said Tenma. She was checking her terminal while the servers brought out the dishes. “Where did my class come...? Aha, first place!”

I checked Class E’s results on my terminal. We’d come in fifth place, which was last.

For the specified location task, various teams had a designated random location as a target and would compete to be the first to reach it. Because this was still the first day of the exam, said locations would be on the first two floors of the dungeon. Class E’s best student, Akagi, was leading our team. Despite that, we’d still come last and showed it was probably a tough fight.

Class A had assigned the better part of their strength to the deepest-depth task, but they still secured first place in the other areas. Maybe they really were better than everyone else. But luck was a major component in the specified location task. The level disparity wouldn’t influence the results for the first few days while the target locations were in the early floors, so Class E would have more chances to score points. They’d just need to keep their spirits up and try again.

“Luck and level disparity does play a part,” said Tenma, “but there’s a bigger reason we came first.”

She wouldn’t tell me what she meant, claiming it was a secret, but I could come up with a few guesses. One possibility was that Sera had cast Angel’s Blessing on Class A before the exam had started. Her skill was powerful, increasing the power and duration of other buff effects. Using this, she could increase the movement speed of the rest of her class.

Another factor was likely the Holy Woman organization. The government formed it to protect the sole Holy Woman in Japan, employing shrine maidens who were specialists with skills on a par with the notable Assault Clans. They were likely dotted around the dungeon, ready to assist Sera’s class because she would inherit the organization’s title.

Such protection was like overeager parents interfering with their child’s sports day. Helping was one thing, but they were practically taking the exam for them, making a mockery of one of the few chances for us to compare our

abilities.

“The objective for the specified monster task is either twenty goblins or one goblin chief,” explained Tenma. “Nobody’s going to pull ahead of us with an objective this easy.”

As the name suggested, the teams had to slay specified monsters. Majima and his well-tested party were the team for Class E, and the class was expecting good results. Every class was slaying the goblins with no trouble.

Who’s leading Class D’s team? I wondered, checking my terminal. *Oh, that’s not good.*

The bulletin board listed Kariya as the leader of Class D’s specified monster team. Was that just a coincidence, or had they gotten wind of our strategy and planned to knock out our best students? Either way, things were about to get ugly.

“There’s still no update on the gem-collecting task,” said Tenma. “Our team will wait until they get to the tenth floor before they hunt any monsters.”

Class A’s gem-collecting team wasn’t interested in the magic gems of the weak monsters from the early floors, so they were heading straight to the tenth floor. Kaoru’s Class E team was likely raiding the third floor to warm up and gather enough magic gems to pay for their food. According to the bulletin board, there had been no incidents, meaning things were probably going all right for them.

I felt quite guilty about relaxing in a luxurious restaurant as my classmates fought as hard as possible against the higher classes, scrounging up enough magic gems to stay fed. I made a mental note to ensure none of my class saw me here when I exited the restaurant.

Soon, the servers brought out a dish with a large piece of well-done meat about the size of a piglet. Although it looked like chicken meat, it was surprisingly big.

“Ooh, it’s Mamu,” stated Tenma. “Not something you see every day!”

“Mamu?” I asked. “As in, those man-eating lizards?”

I recognized the name, which referred to giant man-eating lizards that inhabited the wetlands beyond the twenty-first floor. Tenma elaborated that Mamu meat was in high demand among the rich and powerful. A hundred grams of Mamu meat would cost tens of thousands of yen. There was something odd about people consuming man-eating lizards.

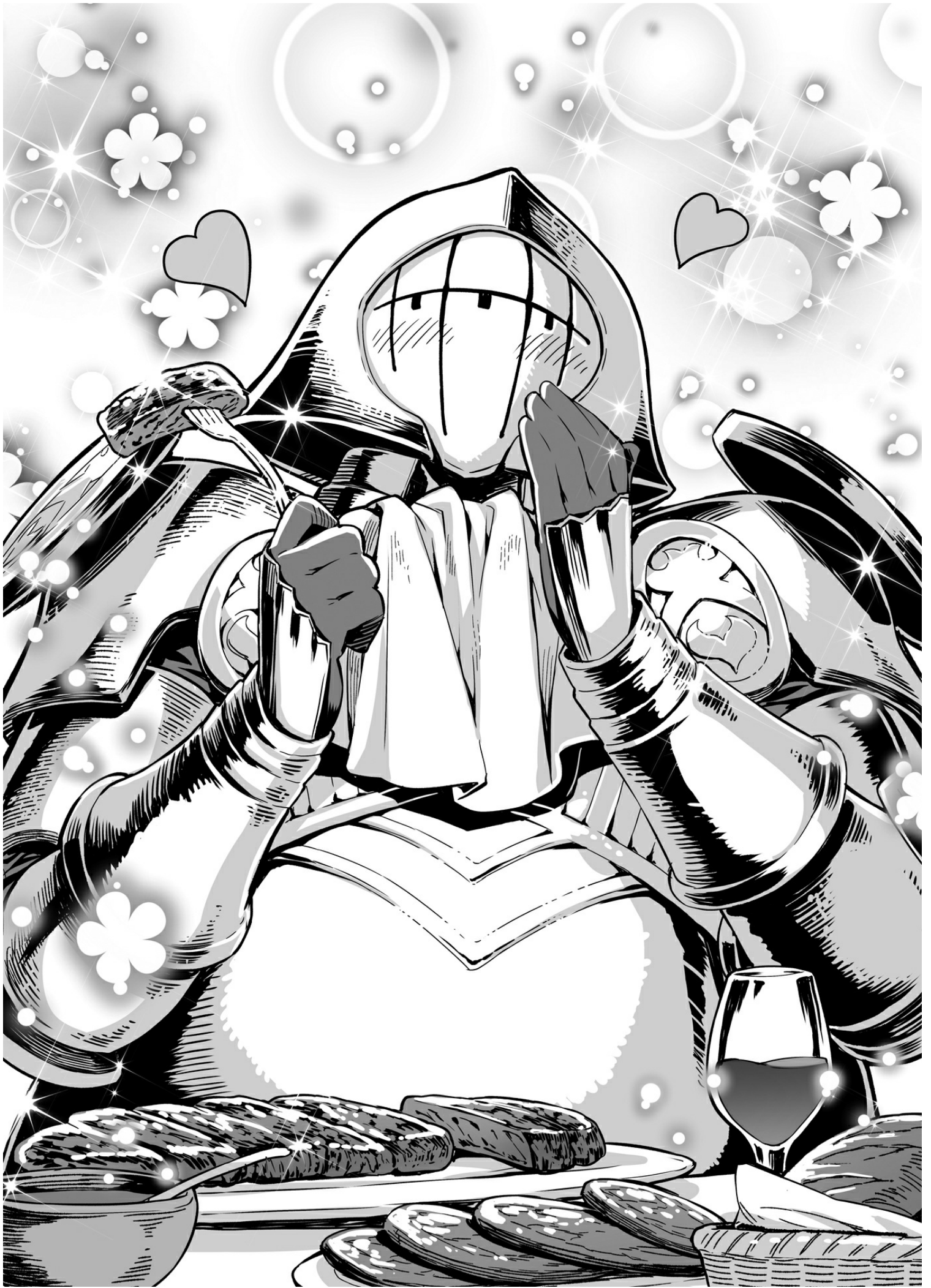
The servers sliced the Mamu meat and distributed it. I took a bite...and understood the appeal! The meat was tender, and the fat was just right, tasting quite like chicken.

“I hear it increases your strength and stamina stats,” continued Tenma. “The plan is to get to the tenth floor in one stretch by the end of today, so eat up, Narumi!”

“Actually, I’ll call it quits on the eighth floor.”

“What if I offer to carry you there?” asked Tenma as she wolfed down the lizard steak on her plate. “As thanks for talking about dieting with me.”

When she finished her plate, she asked for another serving and another after that. She certainly enjoyed herself, though I wasn’t sure this was in the spirit of dieting.



“How far are your class planning to go, anyway?” I asked.

“At the moment, the fifteenth floor, but it’ll depend on the other classes. We might go all the way to the twentieth, looking at how much help Class B has brought.”

Class A’s deepest-depth team appeared to be mostly between levels 15 and 18, so the twentieth floor could be risky. But the skilled retainers they’d brought along would enable them to reach that floor safely.

My problem was that if they reached the twentieth floor, I’d need to go even farther than the eighth floor. Otherwise, I wouldn’t get any points for my class. Heading to the tenth floor by myself would raise suspicions, leaving Tenma to escort me as the best option.

“We have a deal then!” said Tenma. She then peered down at the large menu, apparently not full. “Now then, what do I want for dessert?”

The big window behind us granted a view of the rest area, and I could spot several groups of students from our year. All of them would live frugally for the duration of the exam... It felt like we were in different worlds.

While I absentmindedly gazed out the window, for a brief second, I thought I had caught a girl sneaking around like an expert spy who’d infiltrated an enemy base.

Chapter 14: My Important Work

Once the deepest-depth teams had finished their lavish lunch at The Pig's Tail Inn, we all headed out to the next floor. We'd spend the night at the hotel on the tenth floor, where Sera had booked our rooms in advance. Since we couldn't reach the tenth floor within a day by walking, we planned to start running once we reached the seventh floor.

"Narumi, do you want one of these?" offered Tenma, holding up a takoyaki while running through the dimly lit forest map. "Say 'aah.'"

She was doing a good job of eating one, given the circumstances.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry yet..."

"You sure?"

The rest of the students had run ahead, so it was just me and her...and the black butlers who surrounded us.

You don't have to treat me like a threat, I thought, looking at the scowls from the black butlers. *I won't do anything to her!* The butlers let me see their latest model of DUX brand weapons, paid for by Tenma's family company. Doing so informed me they'd cut me down if I made one wrong move toward Tenma. I was pretty sure they'd nearly drawn their weapons when Tenma offered to feed me takoyaki.

Until now they'd kept their distance so they would not stand out. When I was alone with Tenma, they showed up out of nowhere. The butlers did do a good job of disposing of the bats and orcs in our path though, and I couldn't complain too much.

"I have to say, you've got great stamina for your level," Tenma marveled. "You must do a lot of training."

"I, uh, have always been a good runner." It wasn't the best excuse, but it'd have to do. Naturally, it was difficult to conceal my stamina while running for several hours straight and carrying heavy bags.

Tenma had kindly offered to carry me when we set out. Yet the murderous gaze from the black butlers convinced me that politely declining would be in my best interests. *It wouldn't hurt Tenma to be a bit less blind about her servants' fanaticism, would it?*

I had another problem too. At The Pig's Tail Inn, I'd noticed Kuga through a window following me. I hadn't been sure it was her until I read on Class E's bulletin board that she'd gone missing. The black butlers hadn't noticed her, so she was probably using a stealth skill. If she was following me out here, she was still suspicious of me after what had happened at the training session.

What to do, what to do. Should I try to lose her? I thought, then sighed. This wasn't the relaxing jog I'd hoped for.

We'd reached the tenth-floor entrance area. The misshapen bare rock cave walls from the ninth floor gave way to manufactured stone tiles on the tenth. Blue lights shone on the ceiling, making me feel refreshed as if I were outside. Despite the brightness, it was past 8 p.m. Adventurers had set up tents in the square, ready to camp. I wondered whether camping here would disrupt your sense of time.

Phew, I thought. I'm finally free!

The journey had worn me out mentally. Not only had I been surrounded by black butlers who would've killed me at the drop of a hat, but I also had Kuga following me. I'd made it to my destination safe and sound though, so at least I had that.

Our destination was The Ebony Inn, a Japanese-style hotel built from pure black wood. A look at the inn was enough to know that it was much fancier than the hotel on the fourth floor. Near the entrance, there was a terrace reserved for inn guests. The students from the other deepest-depth teams sat there, enjoying a late dinner.

Sera sat near the front in a yukata, then noticed our arrival and waved, smiling cheerfully. I'd never seen her wear that outfit in the game, and her beauty set my heart racing.

“Well done, Lady Tenma,” said one of her black butlers. “We’ve reserved a room for you, so please come this way.”

“Oh, uh, okay,” stammered Tenma. “I guess this is goodbye, Narumi. You should hire a guide for the return journey. They’re not cheap, but it’ll be safer for you.”

“Thanks for staying with me,” I said. “Best of luck in the rest of the exam.”

“Thanks! See you at school.” Tenma waved goodbye as she walked away.

Even though we’d only been together for a short time, I’d enjoyed being around someone so cheerful. I even had the chance to speak to Sera and see her in a yukata. Plus, our team wouldn’t face disqualification from the deepest-depth task. These results seemed like a victory! All I had to do now was drop off Class B’s bags to their owners, and the Battle of the Classes would be over for me.

Or so I thought.

“Hey, you’re not thinking of abandoning your duties, are you?” growled a Class B student at me with a menacing look in his eyes.

“Huh? My duties? I’m not sure I’d call it that...” *They do realize I’m level 3, right? I know I’m not, but they think that I am. And a level 3 would die from the tiniest scratch from the sorts of monsters you get around this floor.*

“You don’t have to worry about your safety,” one of the nobles said. “We’ll guarantee no harm comes to you on the road.” The noble then pointed at a spot on the ground. “Be here at 9 a.m. tomorrow morning.”

With that, he had no further use for me and returned to his classmates to resume his card game.

Even Class D couldn’t reach this floor, so who did they expect to carry their bags before?

Carrying their bags didn’t bother me. What worried me was how the other students in the class would perceive me, a level 3, coming to this dangerous floor. I’d need to come up with an explanation.

With that said, I can’t just say no to a noble.

Disputes with nobles could spiral out of hand, which might get my classmates caught up in the resulting trouble. My only option was to suck it up and carry their bags.

On the upside, this would provide an opportunity to see how Suou and Sera would fight their way forward. Both were important characters in the main story, so observing them could prove useful. At least that's what I tried to tell myself, but I wasn't convinced. Instead, I decided I'd sneak out of the dungeon and return home for the night. I wanted to sleep in my bed!

The school had configured the GPS in our wearable terminals to be on for the duration of the exam, so I'd be disqualified as soon as I set foot outside of the dungeon. However, this rule was surprisingly easy to work around. The school wouldn't know I'd left if I stored my terminal with my bag in one of the coin lockers. Besides that, I had another problem to solve before I could leave.

What should I do about Kuga?

Out of the corner of my eye, I focused on the direction where I assumed she was hiding. But I couldn't see her because of her stealth skill, which was incredibly annoying. Part of me wanted to just call out to her, although she'd probably try to interrogate me to learn how I'd discovered her if I made contact. She could also get violent too. No, losing her tail would be my best bet.

She was at a higher level than me, adept at tailing people, and an active spy trained in covert operations. In other words, it wouldn't be easy to shake her. But I had the perfect plan—go inside the men's bathroom! Whatever else she might be, Kuga was an innocent teenage girl. There was no way she'd follow me inside there!

I entered one of the stalls in the men's bathroom, humming to myself, and pulled two items from my magic bag to put them on. Those were the blank mask that would block appraisal skills and the Dark Hopper robes that would conceal my presence.

There was another exit on the other side of the bathroom, and I could sneak out there. Simple. I looked through a hand mirror to look back at the way I'd come in, and—

What?! She didn't think twice about coming into the men's bathroom?!

Kuga wore a baggy hoodie, which kept her face hidden in shadow. At first glance, it looked like a boy had walked in, though I knew it was her. Anyone could tell it was a woman beneath the hoodie at a closer look, so it wasn't a very good disguise. Even the middle-aged man who'd been humming as he walked in was gawking at her.

She looked around, unsure where I'd gone. Although she probably didn't have any detection skills, she'd find me soon enough because this place wasn't that big, even with my mask and robe. I needed to exit the bathroom and switch to plan B.

The nearest place that fits my needs is...

I began heading to the Fool's Garden, a DLC-exclusive room where trolls spawned. Risa and Satsuki had used this room while leveling up. It was close to the tenth-floor rest area, so it wouldn't take me long to run there.

After I turned a bend, I poked my head past a corridor to look back the way I'd come. I saw Kuga walking in the distance. Would she be able to get into the DLC area? Yes, it seemed she could despite being a bit lost.

So, she does have a detection skill... Probably Detect, I'd guess.

Detect was a skill that would give you a vague idea of where nearby people and monsters were. But it wouldn't lock onto particular targets and track them like other detection skills would. That was why she couldn't use it when more people had been around. If I headed into the DLC area, nobody else would be there, making it easier for her to follow me.

Guess I've got no choice but to use my last resort.

I retrieved a pendant from my jacket pocket and channeled my mana into its crystal. In the dungeon, I'd obtained this magical pendant from a quest. The item helped its user escape in emergencies, and when I activated it, it would send me to the location that I'd set it to in a gate room. I didn't use these pendants very much because they were hard to get, but using them would be better than getting caught by Kuga.

Although escaping now won't stop her trying to follow me tomorrow. I'll still

need to find a way to deal with her.

Light emerged from the pendant, enveloping my body, and I felt like I was floating—

I was now in the tenth-floor gate room.

When I teleported in, I found a man and a woman wearing light armor and helmets standing in front of me. They soon noticed me and lifted their metal visors, showing they were my parents.

“Souta?” my father asked. “Is your exam all finished?”

“What good timing!” said my mother. “We were just about to go shopping.”

They’d sometimes come here to stock up on goods for our family shop. Since they wore armor, I imagined their main objective was to raid. I could also see my sister outside of Granny’s Goods.

“Bro, guess what! Mom and dad are level 13 now!”

“You know, I’ve dropped two sizes since I hit level 10, and my skin is so much softer!” exclaimed my mother.

“You’re more beautiful than ever,” my father complimented her. “My shoulders feel a lot less stiff too. I guess you weren’t kidding about the rejuvenation side of things, eh?”

Both were making good progress on their leveling and were pleased to be experiencing the rejuvenating effects of physical enhancements. That had been a feature in the game too; leveling up would bring your body’s age closer to its physical peak. Because every playable character had been a high schooler, nobody had cared.

I wondered how much younger my parents would look after reaching level 50.

“Now that we’ve leveled up, we were planning to head down to the execution ground that Kano told us about. Wanna join us?” stated my father.

“It’d be a big help to have you around,” my mother said. “I’m not sure I feel safe swinging this by myself.”

My parents reached into their magic bags and pulled out Boost Hammers, items that I'd received from Furufuru in exchange for feeding her addiction. The red one my father carried had a flame magic enchantment, while my mother's purple one had a lightning enchantment.

This was their first time playing whack-a-mole, and they were understandably nervous since they'd never used these weapons. I'd taught Kano the strategy for whack-a-mole and how to use the Boost Hammers. But she hadn't mastered either yet, so it would be safer for me to tag along and demonstrate the proper form. It was only a short trip through the gate, anyway.

"Sure. I don't have anything else to do anyway," I replied.

"Yay!" cheered Kano. "If you're coming, we can kill that baron guy too!"

"I've heard he's a tough one," remarked my father. "I can't wait to see for myself!"

"I'll have to remember to snap some photos!" my mother added.

Glad to see my family's just as carefree as ever.

"It's so atmospheric here, don't you think?" my mother said. "I love it!"

We'd finished shopping at Granny's Goods on the tenth floor and teleported through the gate to the fifteenth floor. We walked along the bleary, barren plains toward the Gathering of the Fallen, the destination for today's raid.

Corpses hung from the lifeless trees along the path. In the distance, undead monsters swarmed around gravestones that protruded from the ground at odd angles. The field here was like something out of a horror movie... Yet my mother seemed to enjoy it! I could hear the shutter click as she happily took photos using her terminal's camera.

My father explained that my mother was a big horror buff. In the past, she'd traveled around Japan to visit every haunted house in every amusement park. She loved the atmosphere here, which was far spookier than any of the earlier floors, and she was desperately excited to see what the execution site looked like.

Kano's expression made it clear that our mother's horror fascination utterly bewildered her, and I felt the same way. I'd killed enough undead monsters to have grown used to seeing them, but this dreary field still gave me the creeps.

It takes all sorts to make a world, I thought.

Ignoring my mother's excitement, I explained to my parents how to use the Boost Hammers.

"So all I need to do is channel my mana in here and swing it hard," said my father. "And the enchantment will activate by itself?"

"That's right," I answered. "It'll activate when it hits something. Flame enchantments deal extra damage to undead, so it's perfect for whack-a-mole."

Boost Hammers were magical weapons. If you swung them hard while channeling mana into them, an explosion at the rear of the hammer's head would propel the weapon forward at a higher speed. This feature helped people with a low strength stat to deal large amounts of bludgeoning damage.

In the game, Boost Hammers had been common weapons beyond the thirtieth floor. However, nobody in this world had made it that far into the dungeon, so the hammers hadn't made it into circulation.

"What about my purple one?" mused my mother. "I think you said it has a lightning enchantment."

"Weapons with lightning enchantments have a small probability of releasing an electric charge that will stun your opponents. They're most effective against other adventurers and powerful bosses."

"That's so cool!" exclaimed Kano, taking the Boost Hammer and checking it up and down. "I bet people would pay a lot of money to get their hands on these!"

I could see dollar signs in her eyes.

Weapons with debuff enchantments were most effective and most impactful against other humans. If you could stun someone for half a second, that would be long enough to break their stance or get one good attack in, winning you the fight. Debuff weapons could also disrupt the activation of powerful skills, an incredibly important ability to have in evenly matched, intense fights where

every moment mattered. Against monsters, however, enchantments that increased the amount of damage dealt were more effective than debuff weapons.

“Fighting other people...” trailed off my father. “Well, I suppose I’d better learn how to do that. The dungeon can be quite a lawless place.” He was probably thinking back to the adventurer who had attacked Kano.

Monsters weren’t the only danger lurking in the dungeon. One needed to be prepared to fight other adventurers.

“How can we get better at fighting other people?” inquired my mother.

“Leveling up,” I said. “That’s the surest way.”

Whether fighting monsters or people, the level would always be the most important factor when you fought inside the magic field. Against an enemy ten levels lower than yourself, their equipment and experience wouldn’t matter. Even a world-renowned martial artist wouldn’t be able to beat my parents.

“But if we’re fighting someone the same level,” Kano said, “then equipment and experience *will* come into play?”

“Yeah, of course,” I replied. “That’s why we’re getting better equipment and building up experience fighting monsters. However, the most important factor in fights against adventurers is speed.”

“Speed?” my father asked, puzzled. “Sure, it’s important, but more than anything else?”

In evenly matched fights against an opponent the same level as you, the key factor to survival would be speed: how quickly you could react, adapt, and respond.

Better equipment would increase your chances of surviving attacks and dealing massive damage. Having a lot of combat experience would also let you use your intuition to shape your combat style to your specific opponent. These two factors would influence the outcome of fights where your life was at stake. One should avoid such fights with uncertain outcomes at all costs.

“Speed is best,” I said. “And that’s because running away is one way to ‘win.’”

Should you be faster than your opponent, you can run away from them if you think they're stronger than you and can outmaneuver them if you can beat them. The most important thing is that you don't get defeated. As long as you're still alive, you can take a shot another day. That's why I wanted you to learn those speed-increasing skills."

Movement speed was best for running away, and reaction speed for winning fights. Having speed on your side made defeat unlikely. Speed had also been the main factor in *DEC's* PVP.

"Oh, you mean the Accelerator skill you were talking about before we came here?" probed my father.

"That skill's the reason you told us to become Rogues, wasn't it?" added my mother.

I'd had my parents change jobs to Rogue at Granny's Goods so that they could learn the Accelerator skill, which would increase movement speed by thirty percent. Kano had learned the skill already. Blue sparks emanated from her feet, and she zipped around the field.

"Trust me, this is so much fun!" she yelped. "Woo-hoo, watch me go!"

"Wow, look how fast she's going!" commented my father.

We were on a sandy, gravelly hill where it was easy to lose your footing. Regardless, Kano was racing around faster than the average automobile. Wherever she went, she kicked up a cloud of sand and gravel, spoiling my mother's photographs. After she'd run a lap of the field, she sped back and suddenly stopped in front of us.

"Speed is great, but we'll get more equipment from today's raid too, right? I'm dying to get some stuff made of pure mithril!" shouted Kano.

"Pure mithril?" my mother said, her attention caught. "Oh, it would be so nice for some pure mithril jewelry." She made sure that she spoke loudly enough for my father to hear.

"O-Oh, err...of course, dear," said my father.

Mithril was indistinguishable from silver outside of the magic field. Still, its

rarity made mithril jewelry a prized status symbol among married women.

Pure mithril was a hundred times more expensive per gram than gold. For small accessories like earrings, this wasn't too bad. But a pure mithril weapon could easily cost more than a hundred million yen. My family couldn't afford this astronomical price, although we could gather the mithril ourselves.

"Today, we'll level up, learn skills, and get loads of mithril by killing that baron guy a whole bunch. That's killing three birds with one stone!" expressed Kano.

"Wonderful!" my mother said. "I can't wait to get started! And we can come back tomorrow and the day after too!"



The allure of mithril had inspired my mother and Kano, as they wanted to come here every day for whack-a-mole. I wouldn't be able to join them, unfortunately.

"Are you gonna come with us tomorrow, Souta?" my father asked.

"No, I have to stay in the Battle of the Classes."

"What?!" jeered Kano. "But I wanted to kill the baron guy with you!"

Sorry, Kano. I've got some very important work to do, carrying other people's bags, I thought. It was a shame because I'd planned to finish my task in the Battle of the Classes on the first day and then spend the rest of the exam raiding with my family. *I'll do my best to show them how whack-a-mole works today so they can come here safely.*

"Oh, Satsuki just texted me," Kano said. "She says I should be good to join in from tomorrow. Yay!"

"Remember to disguise yourself," I reminded her.

Kano desperately wanted to take part in the Battle of the Classes. She'd been badgering Satsuki with messages since the start of the exam, and Satsuki had now finally given her the okay. She was excited to see how strong the students at our school were. Worrying that Kano might get too excited and cause trouble, I sent Satsuki a text telling her to keep an eye on my sister.

Soon after, we arrived at the DLC area that was even gloomier than the one we'd come from. Black, ominous clouds swirled in a large vortex in the sky. It was the perfect weather to play whack-a-mole!

It's time to take my mind off the exam and kill some zombies!

Chapter 15: The State of Class E - Part 1

Naoto Tachigi

It was the third day of the Battle of the Classes. I was responsible for managing Class E's strategy and was talking to Yuuma, who led the specified location team, over our terminals to gather information.

"Something's up, I'm sure of it," said Yuuma over his terminal. "I'm going to investigate what's going on."

"Actually..." I started but stopped myself. "Never mind. Let me know if you find anything out. Good luck out there."

"Will do," replied Yuuma. "You too, Naoto. Bye."

We ended the call and I heaved a sigh. The class was experiencing more difficulties than expected. Our initial plan had been to put all our efforts into the first half of the exam, when the tasks would take place on the early floors of the dungeon. In other words, we'd wanted to gain enough points by today to boost our ranking. For this plan to work, we would need to get more points than Class D. The second half of the exam would take place on the fifth floor and below, so the low-level students that made up Class E would be at a disadvantage.

However, Yuuma's report for the specified location task said that Class E had come in last place in all eight locations assigned as targets. We hadn't even been able to score higher than Class D, let alone the higher classes.

The specified location teams competed to arrive at randomly assigned locations before each other. Since you could start from wherever you wanted, the teams that happened to be closest to the target would have a major advantage. On paper, at least.

Even when the randomly generated locations were closer to Yuuma's team than Class D, they'd beat us. I couldn't understand how Class D could make it there so fast with all the monsters standing between them and the goal. Were

they not killing the monsters? But if they ran past the monsters without killing them, they would continue to chase after them to form a long train. Monster trains were dangerous. If someone caught Class D doing this, other classes or even ordinary adventurers would report them, and the school would disqualify them from the exam. Class D were still participating, so they had to use another method to avoid fighting monsters. But what?

My first thought was that they were using their outside help. Letting their outside help fight the monsters they encountered would greatly reduce their time spent in battle and compensate for their unfavorable start location. Yet the information I had on hand didn't corroborate this.

I decided to discuss it with the girl standing next to me, who'd been listening to our conversation. Speaking out loud would help me gather my thoughts.

"Nitta, what do you think of Yuuma's report?"

"Hmm," she hummed. "I thought Class D sent all their outside help to support the gem-collecting team, right?"

"Yeah," I replied. "That's what Oomiya told us."

Our class had gone crazy with despair when they'd found out the other classes were using outside help. Yuuma and Majima had talked some sense into them and calmed them down, but some of our classmates would surely lose heart if we let Class D's point lead grow even more prominent. One student's despair would set off the others like falling dominoes, destroying our morale. I needed to urgently discover how much outside help Class D had and how strong they were to devise a plan. Oomiya had volunteered to run the investigation.

Soon after that, Nitta had received a detailed report. I had no idea how Oomiya had investigated so thoroughly in a handful of hours. According to the report, six adventurers who wore sun badges and were likely level 8 were supporting Class D's gem-collecting team. Their other teams didn't appear to have any outside help.

It would be great if I could use Oomiya's information to reshape our strategy and stage a comeback. But Yuuma's report contradicted Oomiya's, implying that Class D might have outside help with its specified location team.

“Hmm... I think we can trust Satsuki’s information,” Nitta said. “They must be using some other trick for the specified location task. Let me think...”

She touched her cheek with her index finger. Usually, she wouldn’t participate very much, but she’d started voicing her opinions since last night. Nitta was knowledgeable, and I was counting on her.

“Maybe Class D’s gem-collecting team is helping out their specified location team?” she suggested.

“Hmm, that could explain it. But—”

“But it doesn’t make sense that they’d prioritize the specified location task when there are more points at stake in the total magic gems task, right?”

At the moment, the randomly generated target locations for the specified location task were on the fourth and fifth floors. We could gather magic gems while supporting the specified location team. But it would be much less than they could gather by working independently. Thanks to this, as well as Sakurako and Kaoru’s hard work, Class E performed better than Class D in the gem-collecting task.

Class D had already suffered a setback by losing their entire deepest-depth team. If they lost the gem-collecting task, then Class E would have a chance to catch up to and overtake their point totals. Getting overtaken by the class they’d mocked and ridiculed for so long would be humiliating, so they were sure to take action to prevent that.

“They must be planning an attack on us,” said Nitta. “Like, maybe they want to dangle hope in front of us and then snatch it away at the last second.”

“We should tell Sakurako and Kaoru to keep their teams close to each other to be safe.”

“They’ve got Satsuki, so they should be all right. Besides, I’ve called in some special outside help.”

“Special...outside help?” I repeated. “Who?”

Class E’s biggest disadvantage was that we were low-level, but the outside help the other classes had was certainly making matters much worse. If we

could get outside help, that would overturn one of our big disadvantages and potentially allow us to stage a comeback. How powerful was the helper Nitta had called? Them having enough strength might give me more options to play with when devising our strategy. I was desperate to find out!

Nitta giggled mischievously, put a finger to her lips, and said, "It's a secret."

Kaoru Hayase

"No monsters here either," I said. "This is getting weird."

"Others have cleared this area out already," replied Oomiya. "Maybe we should go farther in?"

We'd stuck to the fourth floor for the first two days. When we got used to the battles, my team had split up from Sakurako's and started raiding the fifth floor near the entrance. But we'd hardly been able to find any monsters. We ventured farther into the fifth floor, but it was the same story as well. There had to be some other group raiding here.

Standing around and waiting for monsters to respawn would take too much time, so Oomiya suggested exploring more of the fifth floor.

"I'm not sure," I said. "We haven't had many chances to fight on the fifth floor, so I think we should tread carefully. We're already a person down."

"But we're ahead of Class D at the moment, and we need to keep going to secure our lead."

Tsukijima had wandered off, saying he'd bring back a huge magic gem, so we were one person short of full strength. I couldn't believe he'd be so reckless... Didn't he think about how worried we'd be for him?

There'd been some positive news, though. It turned out that Oomiya was much more experienced in combat than I'd expected. She'd taken over from me as our main tank, and she was much better at it than I was. This had allowed us to go into more battles than we'd originally planned and given our party a sense of stability.

The news that Majima's and Yuuma's teams were suffering setbacks and that the other classes were bringing in outside help hit our classmates in the other

teams. But our gem-collecting team was in high spirits thanks to our good results, and that was all thanks to Oomiya.

If we could keep our momentum up and continue gathering gems, that could boost the other teams' morale for the more challenging second half of the exam. Together, Oomiya and I could handle ourselves if things got rough, so it was worth following her suggestion.

"Okay," I said. "We'll make one more trip farther in. Let's see... I know where we should go. It's somewhere with a safe space nearby we can escape to."

"Everyone, we're on the move again!" said Oomiya.

"Okay!" responded our classmates enthusiastically, proud of our team doing well.

I'd been worried about how the exam would go, but if we kept up the good work, we'd make it through the Battle of the Classes. We might not win this time, but we could be more confident about our future endeavors. We weren't going to give up!

Despite how far we'd progressed into the fifth floor, it was bizarre that we hadn't encountered any monsters yet. Very unusual.

We walked another two kilometers south, reaching our destination. There was a safe area nearby that we could go to when we needed a break. Surely we'd be able to find some monsters here.

"I'll go and bring some monsters back," said Oomiya, beginning to walk away, but then she noticed something. "Hang on...something's coming our way!"

"What's wrong, Oomiya?" I pricked up my ears. "Wait, what's that?" I could hear...vibrations. Even though the sound was faint, I didn't like the sensation of the ground trembling.

"Someone's leading a train of monsters!" exclaimed a classmate, peering through binoculars. "And it's massive!"

When the train got two hundred meters away, I could finally see its whole extent. In the train was the orc lord! It was running at top speed, roaring at regular intervals. The creature was more enraged than orcs normally were,

suggesting someone had been provoking it. Behind the orc lord followed at least fifty summoned orc soldiers. We'd suffer heavy casualties if we got hit by a train that big... So, we needed to get away.

"Look over there!" someone called out. "Sanjou's team is there!"

"Huh?" I blurted.

I looked where the orc lord was heading and found Sakurako's team scattering. Their terror had caused them to lose cohesion in every direction. This was bad! Even if they outran the orc lord, few could survive on this floor alone. Other than Sakurako, none of them were even level 5! *What should we do?*

"Everyone, calm down!" shouted Oomiya, drawing a knife from her belt. "I'll go and deal with the train. The rest of you, stay together and retreat down the way we came!"

I wanted to yell at her for being reckless, but somebody had to change the train's direction, or we'd all be dead. But...

"I'll be okay," stated Oomiya, looking into my eyes. "Hayase, keep everyone safe!"

She charged away at a frightening speed. The train was about to collide with Sakurako's team, and I had no time to think. I had to trust Oomiya!

"Everyone," I called out. "Follow me!"

Chapter 16: Behind Two Masks

I was on the thirteenth floor of the dungeon with the deepest-depth teams, spending the tranquil night on a hill where only dead plants grew. I'd made myself something simple to eat earlier and sat by the campfire.

"It's so cold..."

We were in a safe area called the Windy Hill. Adventurers often camped here because of the excellent view of its surroundings. Because of the higher elevation, the temperature was cold. I broke out in goose bumps whenever the cold wind blew.

As such, I put on my hood and warmed my hands by the fire. The only people camping outside in the cold were me and the students from Class C. In the meantime, the nobles of Classes A and B slept in simple prefabricated houses on the hill's peak that their retainers had built for them. The houses had magical items that functioned as air conditioning and lighting, so I was sure the nobles were comfortable. Structures like this hadn't existed in my old world, so I wondered about how they were made and what they'd look like inside.

A girl's voice echoed throughout the tranquil hill. "But, brother, I can keep going!"

It was Meiko Mononobe, the student leading Class C's deepest-depth team. She was talking to a man dressed in a ragged cloak and black armor covered in scratches. He wore a hannya, a face mask with a leering mouth and two black horns. His outfit made me feel so creeped out that I wouldn't want to bump into him on the road at night! Apparently, he was Meiko's older brother.

While his armor looked terrible, on closer inspection, I realized that everything he wore was enchanted. He was undoubtedly stronger than the average adventurer. The hannya mask particularly caught my eye since I noticed it was probably a unique item with several enchantments. Where could he have gotten his hands on it?

Takamura must be taking things seriously if he's calling in a monster like that to help Class C, I thought.

Meiko's monstrous brother softly admonished his sister, "And how are your teammates doing? As their leader, you should have been paying attention to their state."

Meiko grunted.

Class C's deepest-depth team was mostly between levels 12 and 13, which was high enough to raid the thirteenth floor. But their team was exhausted, and they went to bed early. They'd brought many magic users to combat wraiths impervious to physical damage. In a stroke of bad luck, they'd fought back-to-back battles and had run out of mana several times. Running out of mana would make you feel exhausted. Meiko's brother chastised her for failing to pick her battles and conserve her magic users' mana.

"But if you came with us, we could keep going even further!" argued Meiko.

"I won't help you," retorted her brother. "I'm only here to see how much progress you've made. You'll have to get stronger if you want to keep going."

If her brother helped, they could probably make it all the way to the twentieth floor. He had no intention of helping and bluntly turned down his sister's request, saying getting stronger mattered more than rising to Class A. Thus, he cautioned her not to mistake the latter as the ultimate goal. Meiko was in tears when he finished.

Her brother had a point, though. Getting to Class A was vital to progress to Adventurers' University. Strength mattered most should you instead want to become a top adventurer. If Meiko wasn't strong enough to raid any further, she should level up, gain more experience, and return another day to try again.

With that said, it was wild that he'd come all this way to monitor his sister with no intention of helping. Maybe he was a siskon.

While sipping my warm tea and listening to the siblings argue, I heard Meiko shout, "Fine, be like that!" Then, she stormed away. She acted courageously when her teammates were around, only to revert to being a cute little sister when she was alone with her brother. I found that quality adorable. Part of me

wanted to ask the masked man how he'd raised his sister to act like that, in case I could use the same trick on Kano.

I was about to go to bed because the man in the hannya mask had volunteered to keep watch. But he called out to me before I could do so.

"Sorry you had to hear that."

"Oh, no, it's fine," I replied. It was so creepy that he kept his mask on despite the darkness.

"Narumi, was it? What's someone as powerful as you doing carrying other people's bags."

"Well, the nobles asked me to... Hang on. What do you mean, 'as powerful as you'?"

I hadn't shown my true strength in front of him, and as far as I could tell, he hadn't broken through my Fake skill and seen my real stats. The only armor I wore was the old leather one that had been gathering dust in my family's shop. Had he somehow seen my star potential?

"When we ran into undead monsters on this floor, I couldn't sense the slightest trace of fear in your eyes. My gut is telling me you're no average adventurer."

"Oh..."

He told me that monsters naturally emitted a small amount of Aura, so adventurers would usually flinch when they saw monsters stronger than them. When I thought about it, I remembered feeling scared the first time I encountered the orc lord. Perhaps I needed to start pretending to be scared whenever we ran into monsters.

The masked man chuckled and said, "Every now and then, a bona fide genius shows up in Adventurers' High's Class E."

There was a trend of powerful adventurers very occasionally finding their start in Class E, like Tasato from the Colors Clan. I was no genius; I just had the unfair advantage of retaining my knowledge from the game. Although, I just found out that Tasato had started in Class E.

“The nobles will probably give you trouble,” the masked man said. “From the looks of it, you can handle yourself. Anyway...wanna join me?”

“Join you?”

“My clan. I bet our leader will take you in. You don’t have to answer now, but think about it.”

What was he saying? Joining a clan like The Red Ninjettes would be exciting, but I wouldn’t say I liked the idea of joining the sort that housed creepy guys like him. Their clan leader was probably even worse if this weirdo was anything to go by.

At any rate, I saw it was late and decided to brush my teeth, crawl into my sleeping bag, and go to sleep.

“Hey, wake up.”

Somebody smacked my head. When I opened my eyes, I saw a group of people in black suits looking down at me.

What do they want? I thought.

I turned my sleepy eyes to my terminal and checked the clock. It was still just 1 a.m.

“The boss wants to see you,” said one of them. “Come with us. Now.”

Your boss? Who’s that?

The people wore black suits and a badge on their chests bearing the Japanese symbol for heaven, indicating they were the Tenma family butlers. Therefore, they probably meant their majordomo.

Being rudely awakened at this unsocial hour by this glaring group told me that I shouldn’t expect my meeting with the majordomo to be positive. I wasn’t in a position to refuse, so I reluctantly followed them.

And so, I walked behind the butlers for a few minutes through the biting wind. They led me to a ring of chairs, upon which about ten butlers dressed in black sat. In the center of the ring with her legs crossed was a girl wearing a

black one-piece and a white apron with large frills. She wore an Alice band in her black hair, adding to how the girl was the very picture of a maid.

I'd noticed her before, which would not have been hard since she was the only person working for Tenma who wore a maid outfit. Everyone else wore black suits. She was the boss the others were speaking about, the Tenma family's majordomo.

"Brave of you to show your face here, brat," she hissed, glaring at me like I was her worst enemy.

"Huh? But I..." *Am I sure she's the same person I remember?*

If you progressed Tenma's route and became romantically involved with her, you'd also become friends with her personal maid. She'd been a thoughtful girl who'd always smile and take care of the protagonist, being almost as popular as the heroines. Players had begged the developers to add a new route for her.

I'd never seen *this* from her—attitude, this way of speaking, this crazed look on her face. Maybe this was a different girl, her twin sister? She looked exactly the same, but surely it couldn't be the same person.

"What are you after?" she asked. "And I want an honest answer."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean! You weaseled your way into my lady's good graces by telling her what she wants to hear!"

The black butlers around us glared at me with the same fierce look. *Weaseled my way in... Is she talking about how we spoke about dieting?*

Akira Tenma was the darling daughter of the magnate who ran the family business empire, and the butlers trusted her unquestioningly. Hence, it was natural they'd be suspicious if a boy they'd never heard of suddenly acted friendly with her.

"I don't have any ulterior motives," I explained. "I was just talking to her as her friend."

"H-Her... Her friend, are you? You son of a bitch!" The maid's face twisted into a look of pure rage.

The nearby butlers reacted at once to this dangerous change in the maid's attitude and restrained her, grabbing her arms. *Maybe I should stop acting like I'm best buds with Tenma around this maid...*

"This should be clear already, but let me say it out loud for your sake. If you lay so much as a finger on her... Your head will roll."

"I understand that."

"If you make her cry, there'll be hell to pay, got it?!"

"I'll do my utmost not to let that happen."

As a player, I knew how much this maid and the butlers loved Tenma. They were former adventurers chased out of their positions due to the conflicts between the nobles and clans. Tenma had bestowed upon them a new home by giving them their black suits and employing them as the Tenma family's bodyguards. By rescuing them from their dire situation and taking them in, Tenma had earned their undying loyalty for herself and her family. Even so, weren't they being a little too overprotective?

"Also..." continued the maid. Her animosity had subsided, and her expression turned serious. "What were you speaking about with him?" She pointed to the man in the hannya mask sitting alone by the campfire.

To be honest, I don't know much about him either. Just who is he? "Just small talk, nothing important," I replied. "Who is he, anyway?"

"He rarely speaks to others." The maid pursed her lips in contemplation for a second, then changed her look and waved me away like she had no further use for me. "Whatever. If he didn't tell you anything, forget I mentioned it."

Huh, they let me go easier than I thought they would. I hope they're gentler the next time they want to wake me up. Brrrrr, I'm freezing. Time to wrap myself back up in my sleeping bag.

"I can't believe they called in such an amazing ringer to help and then dropped out early!" said Tenma, chuckling beside me. It was the next morning, and we were walking along the main street toward the fourteenth floor. "Some

people in my class were getting worried we wouldn't be able to compete with them."

Class C had declared they would go no farther than the thirteenth floor. Meiko hadn't seemed happy about it, but her peers in the same class still looked exhausted even after a night's rest. They could not keep going without Meiko's help. I was looking forward to watching how she would use this unsatisfying defeat as a chance for personal growth.

Inspired by their early exit, I went to the nobles and said I wanted to drop out too. As expected, the nobles ordered me to continue carrying their bags. Classes A and B had agreed to head to the twentieth floor and get joint first place. The nobles told me that if I carried their things, they'd take me up there for free, acting like they were doing me a favor.

Both classes had brought along powerful helpers in their bid to win first place. A side effect was that it had guaranteed the contest would take them to at least the wetlands of the twenty-first floor if they didn't reach an agreement, which would be incredibly dangerous. Taking the contest that far would risk the lives of their retainers, the reason they'd agreed to stop at the twentieth floor.

What concerned me was that the suggestion had come from Suou. Everything I knew about him from the game indicated he wouldn't settle for joint first place with his rival Sera and Class E inferiors unless he had something else to gain. He was probably plotting something. But Class A had assembled their best fighters here and many powerful retainers, so I couldn't see how anything Suou plotted could work.

Tenma had voiced her agreement with Suou's plan to keep her butlers away from danger.

I wanted to avoid sticking around and listening to Class B babble on about their superiority, but joint first place was appealing. Contributing and making up for Class E's losses in the other tasks would give me a suitable excuse to stay and continue the task.

Besides, I don't want to leave Tenma.

Tenma skipped alongside me in her full suit of armor, humming. She didn't fit in well with the rest of her class but would speak about anything and everything

to me, making it fun talking to her. She had invited me to go with her, which was enough for me to want to stay.

However, I'd need to make sure not to stand too close to her. The glares from the butlers and the maid behind us were a constant reminder of that.

"By the way, Narumi. I saw you talking with Blacktooth," said Tenma. "I didn't realize you knew him!"

"Blacktooth?"

"Yeah, that's his title. His nickname, you could call it."

Evidently, the weird guy in the hannya mask was a big-shot general of the Ten Devils, Japan's largest Assault Clan. I'd suspected he might be a member of the clan because his younger sister, Meiko, served Takamura. But I would've never guessed he'd be a general!

The Ten Devils was an exceptionally violent clan that was frequently in conflict with other clans and the nobility. "Blacktooth" had made a name for himself during those conflicts by taking down the top brass of enemy clans one after another. That led to him receiving the title of general at the young age of twenty, showing he was a dangerous character.

When I spoke to him, I felt I was talking to a PK, knowing he'd probably killed no small amount of people. The Ten Devils had been mentioned in the game, though there hadn't been any scenes featuring them fighting or showing their generals. Because of this, I didn't have much information about them.

"That clan has no shortage of loose cannons, but Blacktooth is the most dangerous of the bunch. I heard once that he broke into a noble's mansion and took on all one hundred of the noble's guards by himself. Even my butlers were on edge around him!"

Tenma told me that the number of people lying in pools of their blood was beyond counting. Nobles quaked in fear at the mere sight of his hannya mask. The retainers who'd come to help Classes A and B had panicked when they'd seen him at the camp. That was probably why Tenma's maid wanted to know what I'd spoken about with him.

I'd rather not piss off any nobles, so I'd better keep my distance from him if I

can.

His habit of using violence against anyone he felt like had turned everyone around him into his enemy. There'd been a big battle recently as well. I wasn't sure what ideals the Ten Devils fought for, but it didn't matter to me. They were trouble, and I didn't want to be a part of it.

We probably won't meet again, so there shouldn't be anything for me to worry about.

The deepest-depth teams continued their journey, strolling up and down the gentle slopes of the main street. I wouldn't exactly call it a peaceful journey—we ran into a few too many undead blocking our path for that—but being in the middle of a large group of people meant I could spend my time chatting and never have to fight. In that sense, it was easy.

There was only one problem; Kuga had also found her way inside the group.

Chapter 17: One Decisive Move

The deepest-depth teams left the neglected hills of the previous area, then entered a dark forest where the undead wandered. All the spooky trees around us obscured the advance of any approaching monsters, so we were constantly on watch for a surprise attack. Going straight ahead on this road would take us directly to the nineteenth floor, but getting lost was surprisingly common.

“Draw! Fire!”

A unit of archers—the retainers of one of the students—unleashed a barrage of fire-enchanted arrows. Their target was a large, living tree monster known as a treant blocking our path about thirty meters ahead. The monster was almost ten meters tall, making it troublesome because it would reach out and snatch up anyone who got too close with its long, branch arms and wring them like a rag. Taking a detour into the dark and dangerous forest was the only way to proceed without engaging this monster that blocked the road. That was why so many adventurers would get lost on this floor.

But treants moved incredibly slowly, and that made fighting them easier if you had adventurers with long-range attacking capabilities in your party.

The barrage of arrows tore holes in the treant’s one-meter-wide trunk and remarkably snapped its body in two with a loud crack. Shooting a tree like this usually left the arrows sticking out of it. Still, these archers were actually gouging away at the trunk. The force the arrows imparted upon impact told me the archers were higher than level 20.

“Those Archers belong to the Suou family,” explained Tenma. “Even Assault Clans won’t usually be able to keep that many Archers on their payroll. It takes a lot to train them up!”

She explained that vast sums of money were necessary to train an Archer. Their arrows weren’t the sort you could buy over the counter; they were crafted from mithril alloy to endure large stresses. Making a profit on a raid when you fired off volley after volley of extremely expensive arrows was next to

impossible. As such, Archers would often face financial ruin unless they secured the patronage of a noble family or a clan.

Conversely, a fully trained Archer was one of the most powerful types of adventurers, which made them valuable assets to larger groups that wanted to boost their combat effectiveness. Tenma bitterly added that she hoped to have a unit of archers of her own one day.

“Oh, looks like all the noise has attracted some other monsters,” remarked Tenma.

“They’re smaller than demon wolves,” I commented, “but damn, they’re fast!”

“Yes. And because they’re spectral, they can pass straight through the trees.”

A pack of ghost hounds called barghests had arrived, alerted to our presence by the sound of the arrows. They looked like black dogs, but their spectral forms gave them immunity to physical damage. Unlike wraiths, barghests’ quick movements made them hard to hit with magic.

I stood watching to see how the other adventurers would respond. Women in shrine maiden outfits broke away from the wider group and stepped forward. They were from Sera’s Holy Woman organization, who began chanting magic with their melodic voices.

“O merciful light, ease their burden. Medium Restoration!”

Healing magic would damage spectral and undead monsters, meaning healers took on combat roles in undead zones like this. The greatest benefit to restorative spells was that you could hit your targets quickly, even without precise aiming. Hence, the healers had no trouble hitting the fast-moving barghests. The downside was that healing magic was inefficient from a mana consumption perspective, and you couldn’t keep up a continuous barrage because of the long cooldown time necessary after each cast. To make up for this, another line of shrine maidens emerged from behind the first and began chanting their own incantations.

“I wonder what sort of place the Holy Woman organization is,” commented Tenma. “To amass so many healers...”

“Can’t you ask Sera?” I asked.

“We don’t really talk that much. But you’re right. I’ll ask her next time I have the chance.”

The Medium Restoration spell the shrine maidens were using was potent enough to perfectly restore a lost tooth or finger if the injury was recent. The medical field highly sought this, and healers would exchange large sums of money for it. Figures in the criminal underworld and corrupt politicians had been quick to exploit this. The abduction and unlawful imprisonment of healers for use as human healing potions had been a hot topic in the news at one point.

The Holy Woman organization’s purpose was to protect their namesake’s figure. But it was also a refuge for low-status healers at risk of abduction and allowed them to practice their craft safely. The only information about the Holy Woman organization in *DEC* had come from Kikyou Sera’s route, and the game only mentioned a few names and ranks. Players wouldn’t even learn much about what the original Holy Woman was like. Tenma could probably find the answer by asking Sera directly, but they didn’t speak to each other much. Maybe Tenma felt uncomfortable around her.

After the treant fight, our group continued walking through the dark forest and eventually reached the nineteenth floor. We were almost at our destination. Monsters wouldn’t spawn within two hundred meters of the stairs connecting the floors, so we decided to rest here for the night.

When you got as deep as the nineteenth floor, you would no longer find stores and stalls in the rest area. The only things here were coin lockers and a few portable toilets. Moreover, the fast-moving spectral barghests and the high-firepower skeleton mages that spawned on this floor made it a poor place to raid. So, adventurers would either pass straight to the next floor or stop early at the floor before. Thanks to this, our deepest-depth teams had the rest area to ourselves.

We arrived late in the day, so everyone got to work preparing their dinner. I parted with Tenma so that she could go off and eat her meal.

Nobles insisted that people should eat their meals at tables, even inside the

dungeon. And so some of the retainers busily assembled tables while the other retainers prepared the food. It was also customary for nobles to eat by themselves instead of enjoying their meal in the company of others with conversation. There was plenty about noble culture that I didn't understand, although I got they put a lot of emphasis on saving face.

Guess I should make myself something to eat too.

I retrieved a portable stove and a kidney-shaped mess kit from my magic bag, poured rice and water into the kit, and turned the stove's dial up. Once the rice seemed cooked, I would splash on some instant curry sauce I warmed up, and dinner would be ready. Being a commoner was lovely; I didn't have to worry about saving face one bit!

To pass the time while the rice was cooking, I watched what everyone else was doing. The retainers who'd been the most active in combat had removed their armor and were giving their weapons maintenance. A surprising number of them were women, perhaps because their masters were female too. Some retainers were cooking rice or stirring large pots. Our group had some chefs, yet they only made food for the nobles and not the retainers. Maybe they were the nobles' exclusive culinary staff? I could also see shrine maidens making the rounds casting Purification on everyone.

Purification's primary use was to dispel debuffs, though it could also clean dirt from your body and clothes. It was a beneficial spell when there was nowhere to take a bath! The other groups of retainers did have their own healers. Still, they couldn't use this magic because Purification was a spell only taught in the Holy Woman organization, and they kept the method of learning it a secret. It wasn't a dangerous spell, so why didn't they make it public? They could have wanted to keep the privilege associated with being the only ones possessing it, or they might have thought it would help boost the shrine maidens' value.

The shrine maidens cast Purification on everyone from Class A to Class B's retainers. Upon completion, they returned to their group instead of approaching me. Was there some criteria I failed to meet?

Not that it matters. I already know Purification!

I stealthily cast Purification on myself to clean myself up. Granny's Goods sold

scrolls of the spell, so anybody who could reach that store could learn it without effort. Purification also helped keep skin healthy, so the ladies in the Narumi house incorporated it into their daily skincare routine. They cast it several times each day, even though they could bathe whenever they wanted.

One other thing caught my eye.

I'm not looking forward to this, but I'll try talking to her.

I heaved a sigh and rose to my feet. While I had initially intended to pretend I didn't know Kuga was here, it was disturbing knowing that someone was following me and keeping tabs on me. I wanted to sort this out.

A girl was sitting alone away from everyone else, slurping on cup noodles. Her brown skin camouflaged her in the darkness of this map... Or it would have if she hadn't been wearing shorts and a black-and-yellow cat-eared hoodie. This outfit looked glaringly out of place inside the dungeon.

Is that her idea of a disguise? I thought.

"Hey, that's you, Kuga, isn't it?" I said, walking up to her. "So, you've been tailing me all this way?"

Kuga slowly raised her head and frowned when she saw who was speaking to her. She didn't stop slurping her noodles, though. And she wasn't about to let me ruin her dinner!

"When did you notice me?" she asked.

"Quite a while back."

I had thought the others would have noticed her by now because of her conspicuous outfit, which counteracted her stealth skills. But nobody had questioned why there was an extra person among the retainers. Perhaps her disguise was better than I gave her credit for, or the retainers didn't know who the other nobles had called in for help.

"I'll commend you for not slipping up so far," she said. "But the fact that you're on this floor and not panicking is plenty suspicious."

Says the person who's happily chowing down on noodles! "I could say the same to you."

Despite investigating, Kuga asked me why she couldn't find any information on my backers. Although my family was reaching a high enough level that people would start to notice them soon, I didn't have an organization supporting me. I was just an ordinary individual.

Her question did let me know that Kuga wasn't a player. If she had been, her first suspicion would've been that I was also a player, and that would be what she investigated instead. Her behavior and way of thinking were identical to the game's Kuga, so I was sure. She slept through half of the school classes and generally seemed unenthusiastic, but she had a great work ethic.

And that would be fine if she didn't direct that passion for work at me!

She had judged that I was an agent for an intelligence agency of some country. In a way, her inability to find an obvious organization backing me made me look much more suspicious to her. Kuga turned to me, staring up and down at me from under her hood.

Look all you want, you're not going to find anything out like that!

"In that case... I'm gonna stop beating around the bush and get my answers the old-fashioned way: by beating them out of you." She put down the empty cup of noodles, pulled a dagger from its sheath on her belt, and slowly got to her feet.

She's not gonna start a fight right here, is she? "You don't want to blow your cover by fighting in the open, do you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't if you were strong enough to fight back, but this will be over in a second," she said, then turned to look at me. "The interrogation might last a little longer, though."

I want to see what kind of interrogation she has in mind. Hopefully she'll be nice and gentle... Okay, maybe not. Then I asked, "Are you so sure that I'm not stronger than you?"

"Not a chance. I can smack you down easily if I don't hold back."

If I remember correctly, she's a level 24 Rogue.

The many stealth and disguise skills available to Rogues could have

devastating effects on society in the wrong hands. Consequently, governments worldwide kept the method of attaining the job a secret, sharing only with those who had sworn their loyalty and agents with special assignments. In this world, governments were vigilant about restricting access to information that could harm society.

Naturally, Kuga was no ordinary high school girl being a Rogue. She was an elite expert in her field, having undergone special combat training inside the dungeon from when she could walk. Even Sera and Tenma would be no match for her at the moment. No member of the higher classes—not counting players—could defeat her. She was indeed that bad ass.

“If you can move faster than me,” said Kuga, smiling, “then I’ll be impressed. Accelerator.”

Wisps of wind twirled around her feet, increasing her movement speed. Resorting to this skill before the fight had even started proved that she wasn’t underestimating me.

Both of us entered combat stances and cautiously approached each other. Once Kuga was close enough, she darted to the side at high speed, leaving her hood to fall back over her head. She aimed to finish the fight in one strike by attacking from my blind spot. I decided to settle things with one decisive move if that was her plan.

I lowered my center of gravity and pushed my arms forward. *This is it. This will end it!*

The move I’d gone for was...kneeling on the ground before her in submission.

“Please stop!!!” I yelled.

Whatever else she was, Kuga was still a teenage girl. Seeing a man throwing away his dignity and prostrating himself at her feet would likely cause her to hesitate. The very strangeness of it might even terrify her. Should that happen, I’d have to live with it. I was going to win the psychological battle!

Okay, Kuga, time for you to fall for my ploy— “Ow!” I yelped. “You’re hurting me!”

Kuga had trodden my defenseless head into the ground with no hesitation

whatsoever. Moreover, she started grinding her shoe against my head! There were spikes on the bottom of her shoes that really hurt. *I'm starting to think she might be a dom.*

“What are you playing at?” she asked.

I begged her breathlessly over and over to stop, saying that I just wanted to talk, but she continued grinding her shoe against me. Ten minutes later, she finally removed her foot from my head.

She remarked, “I’m getting bored.”



Chapter 18: Oil and Water

A sword sliced a barghest into three pieces in midair. The creature dissolved into mist, and a magic gem clattered. Cheers and applause erupted from the people watching.

“Splendid work!”

“Brilliant as ever, Lord Suou!”

“That was excellent swordsmanship!”

Early in the morning, Suou wanted to test his sword skills. He woke up his confused retainers and brought them along to flatter him. *Tough break, guys.*

Tenma, Kuga, and I observed Suou and his followers while drinking the tea Tenma’s maid had poured for us.

“You can almost forgive his arrogance after seeing that masterful swordplay,” commented Tenma, wearing her shiny suit of armor.

Kuga, dressed in a black suit, replied to Tenma’s barbed compliment by mentioning that something felt odd about his style. “He’s nothing special,” she rebutted. “But there’s something strange about his stance.”

I had to agree that Suou was very skilled with his sword. He masterfully predicted where his opponent would attack from and sliced through the barghest with his sword before immediately slicing again in the opposite direction. This sword technique wasn’t something you could master in a day.

Suou’s swordplay style worked on the assumption that the user had physical enhancements. He would handle his sword with his right hand and use his left hand to fend off his enemy’s attacks. This style allowed one to use magic and weapons simultaneously, so it was common among *DEC* players. Because Suou was a Wizard who also used a sword, it made perfect sense for him to utilize this style.

However, everyone else thought that he was simply a swordsman. He hadn’t

used magic during the fight, employing only the sword in his right hand while doing nothing with his left. That was the reason his stance had seemed strange to Kuga. This combat style would look amateurish if you didn't know about the *DEC* technique.

"His sword is remarkable as well," added Tenma. "It must be a national treasure class weapon!"

"It's wasted on him," Kuga butted in.

A thin, white mist hung around the sword's blade, which glowed dimly. Said effect was probably due to a sacred enchantment, which would explain how it could damage the spectral form of the barghest.

Enchanted weapons were quite common beyond the thirtieth floor. Yet the thirty-second floor was the furthest anyone had explored in Japan's dungeon, and only a handful of adventurers could make it that far. That was why so few enchanted weapons were in circulation, and their rarity gave them an extraordinary market value.

Besides being high-ranking nobles, Suou's parents were wealthy tycoons with a vast business empire. Even so, what sort of parent would give their teenage son a gift that cost the same as a castle? Maybe I was feeling jealous about his privilege.

"I could still beat him though," Tenma said. "He has plenty of openings I could use to win."

"I could beat him too," Kuga joined in.

"Uhh, I think he might be too strong for someone in Class E to fight, actually," countered Tenma.

"I'd make short work of him," replied Kuga. "I could beat you too, while we're at it."

Tenma turned to Kuga and stared at her through her visor.

Come on, Kuga, don't insult the person who's helping you hide by letting you dress up as one of her personal butlers. Look, the maid behind us wants to strangle you now!

How did we get to this situation? To explain this, we had to revisit the night before after Kuga had finished stomping on my head.

“Form an alliance... Why?” asked Kuga.

“You’re investigating me because you think there’s some organization giving me orders, right?” I said.

I wasn’t up to anything nefarious. But I couldn’t be fully honest and say that this world was a game and I was a former player. She’d think I’d lost my mind. Even if she believed me, sharing that information without already having established a relationship of trust put us both at risk.

On the flip side, I couldn’t just say that I had no answers to her questions. That wouldn’t get me anywhere. Instead, I let her know that I did have a secret.

“But I already know you have a secret,” said Kuga. “It’s what I’ve been trying to beat out of you.”

“On that topic, could you take your foot off my head?” I requested. “It’s making it hard to keep up a conversation...”

Kuga had steadfastly stepped on my head when I knelt on the ground to plead with her. Having her knead her foot into my head gave me a sense of guilty pleasure that I wasn’t sure how to deal with.

After ten minutes of pleading, she eventually removed her foot, enabling me to raise my head. I was worried that I’d get a bald spot on the back of my head if she’d kept up any longer.

Right, so what should I talk about first?

This oddly dressed girl glaring at me was an American intelligence agent who’d falsified her identity to enter Adventurers’ High and gather intel on Japan’s adventuring program. In other words, she was a spy.

America was spying on Japan partially because the two countries were hostile to each other in this world, but it was typical for every one of this world’s countries to spy on each other. Japan had probably dispatched spies across the world to do the same thing. In the modern day, the biggest threats to law and

order came from the adventuring world.

For example, consider what would happen if an elite adventuring clan like Colors went on a rampage in the middle of a city using an artificial magic field. These people could lift half a ton with a single hand, sprint a hundred meters in seconds, and slice buildings in half with their skills. They were impervious to gunfire too. The only way to stop them would be to send in another team of equally powerful adventurers or bomb them into oblivion with a barrage of tank shells and missiles. Inside a crowded city, the collateral damage would be staggering no matter which course was chosen. The worst part was that this wasn't hypothetical—it happened in some parts of the world.

Because of this, countries were desperate to gather as much adventuring intelligence as possible to discover how many elite adventurers other countries and organizations had at their disposal. They also wanted to know their powers and ideologies. Kuga would make detailed reports about all this to her home country.

Of course, she likely had other objectives as well. Japan had highly classified secrets about the Japan-exclusive Samurai job and the Holy Woman, a job that only a few people had attained, which Kuga would likely investigate. Her handlers probably also wanted her to find out about the standing of Japan's Assault Clans, including the educational structure of Adventurers' High, its students' personal information, and a host of other things. Sometimes, Kuga would be grouchy in the morning because she'd spent all night reporting back to her handlers in America without any sleeping time.

Forming an alliance with Kuga wouldn't work the same way as teaming up with Risa and Satsuki. I was instead proposing to be co-conspirators, supporting each other with matters that would be difficult to achieve undetected at school by ourselves.

"I can't accept unless you can prove that I can trust you and that you can be useful to me," said Kuga.

"But look... Take today. You sneaked away from your Battle of the Classes team, right? I bet Kaoru and the others are gonna be furious. But things will go a lot easier if we tell them we gathered magic gems together, don't you think?"

“They would,” replied Kuga. “But what are you after?”

What am I after? I thought. *The answer is that I want to prevent the game event called Kuga’s Revolt from occurring.*

If a player befriended Kuga and progressed with the game’s main story, she would betray the organization she worked for and ally with the protagonist instead. In this storyline, America would send several fearsome agents to Japan to eliminate Kuga. The fight against these agents would turn Adventurers’ High and the entire city into a devastated war zone. They weren’t the sort of people you could reason with, so it was impossible to avoid this destructive outcome if you pursued her route.

On the other hand, a player who did not develop a friendship with Kuga would make her a dangerous enemy who engaged in assassinations, sabotage, and spying. Here, there was no other option except to defeat her. But her wealth of stealth skills made tracking her down a complicated and lengthy process, where she’d continue her covert activities. So, this route also came with plenty of casualties.

The fastest way to ensure neither of those two eventualities occurred would be to kill Kuga here and now. That would be risky for me on a practical level, and most importantly, I did not want to resort to such extreme measures.

Kuga was a tragic heroine. Her handlers had plucked her from the orphanage she’d been born in and thrown her into the dungeon, where they’d forced her to learn how to fight. Her upbringing had turned her into a murder machine who’d never known what it was like to be happy. She mechanically followed orders to survive the violent days of her youth.

In the game, the smallest of coincidences led her to find companionship in the protagonist. She’d discovered love, overcome the horrors of her past and the trials of her present, and become a strong person capable of inspiring hope in the hearts of countless people. The climax of her storyline was a heartbreaking, tear-jerking triumph that ranked among the best scenes *DEC* offered.

How could I think about killing someone like that? I couldn’t. As a gamer who loved *DEC*, I only had one choice: save Kuga. Yes, I wanted to save her.

And so the answer I told Kuga was—

“What I’m after...is to see you smile.”

“Creep!”

My smile was enough to cause Kuga to cringe backward, which was an amazing feat considering that not much could disturb her.

With that, it was time to change the subject.

“Anyway,” I said. “I think we’ll benefit from working together, for a short time at least.”

“I feel like you’ve given me the runaround... But fine. I can tell that you honestly don’t want to fight me. However, I’m gonna continue looking into you.”

Kuga assured me that she would remain by my side, closely monitoring me throughout the exam to ensure she completed her investigation. But we couldn’t tell the rest of the deepest-depth teams that another student from Class E had joined the expedition down on the nineteenth floor. After thinking for the rest of the night about how to explain her presence, the answer we decided upon was—

The following day, about an hour before we watched Suou slay the barghest, I found Tenma surrounded by her black butlers. I asked her whether she could let Kuga act as one of her butler bodyguards. The majordomo maid had shot me a look of contempt and protested, but she gave in when her master, Tenma, said it was all right.

Everything was going according to plan, with no stitches or hiccups... Well, that wasn’t true.

“That attitude isn’t really appropriate for someone who’s supposed to be one of my butlers at the moment,” said Tenma.

“I’m just being honest,” answered Kuga. “I’m stronger than you.”

Kuga’s insulting, matter-of-fact manner caused Tenma to bristle. She looked ready to throw punches. The butlers watching from afar were also in an uproar.

Kuga, it’d help if you could choose your words better so you don’t piss people

off.

“That’s absurd, but I’ll treat it as a hilarious joke and let you off the hook.”

Tenma displayed enormous magnanimity here. The nobles of Classes A and B showed intense disrespect for commoners. Inversely, Tenma treated everyone equally regardless of their birth and didn’t hold grudges for insults to her honor.

Unfortunately...

“I wasn’t joking,” persisted Kuga, failing to appreciate how others would receive her comment.

The atmosphere grew tense once more. They were like oil and water, and I shivered thinking about the rest of our journey.

Chapter 19: The State of Class E - Part 2

Naoto Tachigi

It was the fourth day of the exam.

The school released data grading the various classes' performance early in the morning. I downloaded the data onto my terminal, glanced through Class E's results compared to the other classes, and summarized my findings from the first half of the exam. Simply put, we were dead last.

Worse, Class D is increasing its lead over us, I thought.

As the days passed, the Battle of the Classes would occur in deeper parts of the dungeon. Our team's specified quest required us to be on the fifth floor, and constant skirmishes with advanced variants of orcs and goblins slowed our progress. At our low level, things were only going to get more difficult.

That was exactly why I'd wanted our class to have more points than Class D going into day four... Unfortunately, we'd reached day four, and the data showed that we'd failed in that objective, spectacularly so in some of the tasks.

"Majima said in his report that they were slaying plenty of monsters and racking up points, so how come we aren't catching up to the other classes...?" I said out loud.

Nitta, acting as my advisor, flicked through screens on her terminal with rapid taps of her fingers. She smiled and, in her usual tone, she said, "It's Kariya leading class D's specified monster team, right? It's crazy that they're doing better than Class C."

I was immensely grateful to Nitta for her rational and levelheaded support as the situation worsened.

We had assumed that Class D would send Kariya and their other top students to the deepest-depth task. But they gave them the specified monster task, the same one as Majima. Kariya's strength was unquestionable, something we'd all found out during his duel against Akagi, so it didn't surprise me that he could

fight evenly against Class C. Still, it was a big setback to be losing so badly on the task we'd put our best students on. How could we minimize the damage?

"Majima's specified monster team will have to hunt monsters on the seventh floor starting tomorrow," I remarked.

"They don't have much hope of catching up to Class D's team, so maybe we should send them to support the gem-collecting team instead?"

Majima's team was hunting monsters on the sixth floor at a steady pace, meaning they could probably handle the monsters on the seventh floor without too much trouble. But the seventh floor was a forest map with low visibility, and it was easy for demon wolves to work together. Adventurers with no experience of this floor would see their risks skyrocket. There was a tremendous step up in difficulty between the sixth and the seventh floors.

They had little chance to catch up to Kariya's Class D team, even if we asked them to brave the risks of the seventh floor. Therefore, it would probably be best to follow Nitta's suggestion: give up on the specified monster task and divert that team to help with the other tasks. Majima and his team wouldn't be happy about it, but they'd have to suck it up for the sake of the class.

"I'll let Majima know," I said, sighing. "Next up is Yuuma's specified location team, and they're also doing poorly. They've even suffered a few injuries. Even worse, we've confirmed that Class D's helpers are supporting on this task."

"Are they clearing out the monsters, like we guessed?"

Said tasks challenged the classes to be the first to arrive at a randomly designated point in the dungeon. Class D had been raising their ranking by hitting the specified locations at such a high speed that could only be possible if they weren't fighting any monsters. Yuuma had investigated to see what trick they were using, and he'd spotted several people who appeared to belong to the same clan. He'd sent pictures of the helpers to me, so I forwarded them on to Nitta's terminal.

"The sun badge on their chests is definitely Soleil's emblem," said Nitta.

"Soleil... Hmm. Look at this photo Kaoru sent over. This man here, see him?"

The day before, Sakurako's team suffered attacks by a train of orcs, including

the orc lord. Kaoru had sent pictures of the man she believed to have created the train. Comparing the two photos, the man had the same facial structure and hairstyle as one of the men in Yuuma's photo, although they wore different clothes. Kaoru had snapped the photo while running, so the blurriness of the image made it difficult to be certain, though I was sure they were the same man.

"I guess this means they intentionally ran the train into us yesterday?" suggested Nitta.

"Yes, that's the most plausible explanation."

Trains weren't rare occurrences. Running away from monsters and accidentally pulling more into chasing you was something that happened every day in the dungeon. But Sakurako's team was over two kilometers away from the place the orc lord spawned. An adventurer running away from a bad encounter would surely outrun the orc lord before reaching that distance.

Even if we ignored that, what other reason was there for a member of Soleil to be running away from the orc lord so far away from the Class D team he was supposed to be supporting? It wouldn't make sense to think that he had strayed from his team, happened upon the orc lord's room, and accidentally created a train. The only way to explain all the facts was that he had intentionally led the train to our team.

Intentionally creating a train was a serious offense that amounted to attempted murder, and it carried a lengthy prison sentence. Every adventurer learned this when they got their license, so a member of an Assault Clan certainly couldn't feign ignorance of the law. The train had unleashed dozens of orcs on Sakurako's team, and it was a miracle that nobody had died. Regardless, the action was unforgivable.

"I can't believe they're coming at us so hard already," said Nitta. "Like, maybe something happened that worried them."

"Do you think we should report this photo?"

"Hmm. Nobody got hurt, so I think it'll be hard to pin anything on them."

Nobody had gotten hurt, but that was only because our class's helper had

arrived in the nick of time. While I wanted the culprit to be punished, it would be difficult to prosecute him without any injured victims to point to as proof. It would be a waste of time.

I also needed to figure out what to do with the helper who'd saved my classmates. She was apparently a petite woman dressed in a tattered leather cloak and a wooden mask, and the speed at which she took down orcs suggested she was at least level 10. Kaoru estimated that she could even be as high as level 15.

But I'd also received strange reports. You would forget where the helper was when you took your eyes off of her. Even if you were standing next to her, it was like she wasn't there, and this was most likely the effect of some skill or magic item. Did she belong to one of the major Assault Clans, or perhaps a military unit? Either way, it was clear that she was no ordinary adventurer.

"Has Oomiya told you anything about the helper?" I asked. "I'm told they know each other."

"She agreed to help on the condition that we don't probe into her identity. That's! A! Secret!"

Nitta always seemed so easygoing, but she could be tight-lipped when she wanted. She wouldn't let me in on what she knew, which was such a shame. If we could get this powerful helper to assist with the rest of the exam, it would give us many more options. Her presence as a bodyguard was already making the gem-collecting team safer, but think how much more she could be doing!

"Besides," said Nitta. "If we need outside help just to beat Class D, then we'll never be on even footing with Class A."

Oof... Was she reading my mind?

Nitta was probably right, though. The duel against Kariya and Class D had proved how much weaker we were than them. They didn't need help from Soleil to beat us in this exam. Using outside help rather than our own power to defeat Class D would yield us a victory in name only.

That didn't mean we should give up on this exam. We might not defeat them, but dealing them a blow would give us hope for the next trial. After all the

mockery we'd endured, hope was what we needed most.

Nitta chuckled. "We're gonna keep fighting, right?"

"Absolutely," I replied. "Yuuma and Majima might be out of luck, but we still have the other tasks."

I had to accept that Yuuma's and Majima's teams, the center points of our strategy, had failed to achieve their goals. No change to our strategy could reverse their fortunes. However, we'd also had some unexpected good fortune: the orc train had given us many level 6 magic gems, equivalent to an entire day's work for the gem-collecting teams. Those teams had experienced a near disaster, but we needed to exploit the unexpected advantage it had given us. Fortunately, all of them were fit, healthy, and ready to continue collecting gems. That would make it worthwhile to divert Majima's team to assist them.

Our specified quest team was also putting up an excellent fight against Class D, all thanks to Nitta. She could predict the next quest and direct our team to the right place. I didn't know what pattern there was to the school's determination of quests. Nitta wasn't telling me how she made her predictions. Anyhow, we could beat Class D in this task if we followed her instructions and stacked up points.

"I feel like I'm forgetting one of the tasks, but never mind. We'll begin preparing for the next stage once we've finished our breakfast."

"Sure," said Nitta. "Although, I wonder just how much further Souta plans to go..."

There were three days left. We needed to focus on defeating Class D in at least one of the tasks, even if just that one.

Chapter 20: The State of Class E - Part 3

Kaoru Hayase

“Sakurako, how is your team holding up?” I asked.

“They’ve calmed down a bit now,” Sakurako replied over my terminal. “But we’ve gone back to the fourth floor. It scares them too much to be on the same floor as the orc lord.”

“I see...”

The giant orc lord train had run directly into Sakurako’s team. Fortunately, no one sustained any injuries, yet the narrow escape terrified them. They’d experienced what it was like to face a monster more powerful than themselves that was intent on their deaths, and it wouldn’t be fair to expect them to continue raiding as if nothing had happened. When faced with a life-or-death situation, some people gained new strength, while others succumbed to fear. The train situation had created this reaction that became disastrous for Sakurako’s team.

Her team wouldn’t be able to gather as many magic gems on the fourth floor, but we had to accept that. I hoped they could restore their confidence bit by bit and be able to return to the fifth floor before the end of the exam.

“We’ll continue raiding the fifth floor for now,” I told Sakurako. “The helper is here, so we’ll be safe.”

“Okay,” responded Sakurako. “About that person... Actually, never mind. Let me know right away if anything happens. Best of luck to both of us!”

“You too.”

That was all for our daily morning check-in, and I hung up. Building a team back up after their morale had shattered was no easy task, but Sakurako was as kind as she was clever. She could come up with the right encouragement to restore their confidence.

Aside from that, my biggest concern was...

Who in the world is that person?

There was a petite adventurer extremely close to Oomiya. Her drab clothing and small figure made her look unremarkable, but she was actually an incredibly powerful fighter. Although Oomiya had called her to help, how did they know each other?

I remembered everything about the train yesterday, from its start to its end.

We'd ended up in a specific part of the dungeon. It was almost as though we'd been led here. Then, we ran into a massive train of dozens of monsters led by the orc lord. I saw Sakurako's team in the distance break up and flee in all directions.

"Hayase, keep everyone safe!"

Oomiya drew a dagger from her belt and charged toward the train. She acted immediately in response to the emergency, while I was so shocked that I couldn't move. Her quick reaction told me she was a much better leader than I was. But now wasn't the time to think about that!

"Everyone, follow me!"

As soon as I finished getting our classmates to safety, I planned to join Oomiya. She was only level 5, so the best she could do would be to distract a handful of the orcs and lead them away from us. I would need to draw the orc lord away, whatever the risk of my life might be. There was no other way to stop this disaster.

I gathered my team and ordered them to run toward the rest area in one large group. Later, I instructed them to alert the school and the Adventurers' Guild about what happened here to prevent further casualties.

While I ran, I used my terminal's camera to take a picture to send to the help center as evidence. The orc lord furiously chased after the man who was probably responsible for creating the train. Someone would need to be held accountable, and I wasn't going to let him get away with this.

I saw Oomiya charge into the orcs at incredible speed while I took photos. Most of the monsters in the train were the advanced variety of orc that the orc lord summoned. These orcs carried weapons and armor, possessing strength comparable to the demon wolves on the sixth floor. Despite that, Oomiya cut them down one after the other without fear or hesitation.

A-Amazing!

Oomiya leaned backward to dodge an orc's sword, which passed a hair's breadth above her face. Then she twisted her body around and sliced into her assailant with her dagger. The other orcs now noticed that Oomiya was attacking the rear of their group, so they roared and swung their weapons to deliver a storm of swords headed toward Oomiya. Even though there were over a dozen of them, Oomiya gracefully weaved her way through the maze of blades while maintaining a safe distance, calmly countering the blows one at a time. It was staggering how purposeful every movement she made was.

When fighting monsters in the dungeon, many considered it essential to fight one monster at a time with the help of your adventurer allies. Oomiya wouldn't have experience fighting against an enemy that outnumbered her so massively. No ordinary adventurer would. And yet, she took down one orc after another in this consequential situation. I could never do something like that.

Once I'd taken the necessary photos, I drew my own sword and ran toward the rear of the group of orcs to try to do what little I could to get rid of them. But I saw one of my classmates cowering on the floor in fear. She'd failed to get away in time... And the orc lord was about to reach her!

The orc lord, the king of orcs, grinned maliciously as his murderous Aura oozed from his body. Only the best adventurers could fight against a monster this fearsome. Everyone else would have trouble even standing in front of him. How many adventurers had had their spirits crushed, their lives ended, by this foe?

I was at least thirty meters away from the orc lord, but I was still trembling. Would I be able to face him? I would have to. If I didn't, that girl would die. I forced my trembling legs to steady, gritted my teeth, and ran.

Oomiya was trying to break through the center of the orc train and leave the

multiple foes she'd been fighting behind. She must have noticed the girl too.

But the orc lord was now right before the girl, then raised his giant club.

I'm not going to make it!

But then I heard a crash!

Huh?! What was that? What just happened?

Suddenly, a force propelled the orc lord off to the side. His gigantic body spiraled through the air until it crashed into a cave wall about ten meters away, turning into a magic gem.

Without delay, the other nearby orcs were sent flying or sliced in two. Looking more closely, I noticed a shadowy figure darting between the orcs at high speed. The orcs seemed stunned, unable to comprehend what was happening around them.

The shadowy figure continued slaying the orcs without mercy. Every orc from the train had been eliminated in less than a minute. The only figure still standing was a petite adventurer wearing a tattered cloak and a wooden mask.

I stayed paralyzed after I witnessed her awesome power with my own eyes, but she wasn't an enemy...probably.

Why did I think that? Because...

"You're here! Thanks so much for coming!"

Oomiya ran straight to the masked person and hugged her. The adventurer was hugging her back, so it appeared they knew each other.

Dozens of magic gems lay sparkling on the ground. It was like the nightmare from just a few moments ago hadn't even happened.



That was how yesterday's incident had gone. We'd come close to disaster, but everyone had made it out unscathed, thanks to Oomiya and the helper.

Thinking about it now, it seemed likely that the fifth floor had been cleared of monsters to lure us into a trap there. The man who'd led the train had gotten away, but I'd sent the pictures I'd taken of him to Naoto so he could decide what to do with them.

What should I tell Naoto about the helper?

The masked person who'd rescued us sat beside Oomiya in a corner of the rest area while they ate snacks together.

I assumed she was a woman, although I based that only on her stature because her mask and the old robe that covered her entire body obscured her features. Beneath her robe, she wore black leather armor and gloves, probably demon wolf leather. Based on appearances, that armor, and that she looked like a middle schooler, you wouldn't expect her to be powerful.

However, she'd blown the giant orc lord away and had cut several advanced orc variants to pieces with a single slash of her sword, eradicating a large train of over a dozen monsters in the blink of an eye. That wasn't a dream; it had really happened. You'd think someone that strong would command a strong presence, but it was the opposite—almost like she was hardly here at all. Everything about her seemed so contradictory, and I couldn't get a proper read. Maybe her armor was powerful and had just been designed to *look* like demon wolf leather.

Oomiya had introduced her to me as someone she'd invited, so I nervously tried to strike up a conversation to greet her. Still, the helper turned her face away and ignored me. She was more bashful than I'd expected!

The helper wasn't the only mysterious one. Oomiya was also hiding something. She wasn't as strong as the masked person, yet her movements in the fight had been too perfect for a level 5. She might even be stronger than Yuuma, who everyone believed to be the strongest in our class. Why was she hiding her true strength?

Despite not speaking to each other in class, I knew that Oomiya was an upstanding, honest, and kindhearted student. She even got along with Souta! If she vouched for the masked person, I would also put my faith in her.

Not everything made sense, but I was happy to wait until the exam was over before asking questions. The Battle of the Classes needed to be my top priority right now.

But... That masked person keeps staring at me when she thinks I'm not looking. What's up with that?

Chapter 21: The Devil and the Holy Woman

“And then, just when everything seemed hopeless, Kano came to our rescue!” said Satsuki.

“I’m here today as well!” added Kano.

I was on a group call with Satsuki and Kano, who was still wearing her mask. They sounded excited, but what they were telling me was troubling.

They launched a train on them.

Apparently, a train had attacked Pinky’s gem-collecting team. The person responsible would surely have known the horrific consequences of throwing the orc lord at many low-level adventurers.

I’d initially assumed that the worst that could result from a bunch of adults taking part in a high school exam would be some minor sabotage. That was how it turned out in the game. In reality, they’d resorted to MPKing to commit attempted murder. What pathetic adult would try to kill teenagers who were working hard for their future?

Risa had sent me a photo of the man who’d led the train, and I recognized him. He was the one who’d sliced into Kano’s leg on the seventh floor, meaning Soleil was behind this. I never would’ve thought they’d try to harm my classmates!

Did Soleil really think that their involvement wouldn’t become known and their parent clan wouldn’t be implicated? Did they also believe they could do whatever they liked if they didn’t leave behind any evidence? Whatever Soleil thought, they’d crossed the line, and there would be consequences. Their clan was immoral and a threat to our safety, so I would make it my mission to bring them down.

Soleil was already on my hit list to take down one day, but this attack told me that I couldn’t leave them to their own devices any longer. There was no telling what else they might try before the exam was over. Perhaps the gem-collecting

teams needed more protection... I could turn around and race to join them as soon as I reached the twentieth floor.

“Kano, whenever you have the time, I want you to be with Satsuki’s team and keep them safe,” I said.

“Gotcha,” replied Kano. “But how come everyone’s having such a tough time on such an early floor? Aren’t the students of Adventurers’ High supposed to be awesome?”

You see, Kano, unlike me, they don’t have knowledge from the game, I thought, knowing I couldn’t tell her that. I told them, “Let me know if anything happens.”

“Okay,” responded Satsuki. “You be safe too, Souta.”

“Kano, make sure Kaoru doesn’t figure out who you are.”

“Kay,” said Kano. “I think I’ll be fine, though. She’s not all that smart.”

I sighed as I hung up from the call, unsure what to make of this. The exam hadn’t gone this badly in any of the game’s routes. Why were things different? I was working that out as I returned to our campsite.

“You’re late, you scumbag!” yelled Tenma’s maid, the head of her black butlers, as I approached. She lifted her clenched fist and gave me a threatening glare. “If you’d held up my lady’s departure, I would’ve knocked your teeth out!” Although she acted like a prim and proper lady when Tenma was around, her attitude turned aggressive when she was alone. Honestly, it got me kind of excited!

Tenma had finished her lunch and was waiting for her black butlers to finish polishing her suit of armor, ready for their departure. The butlers were doing an impeccable job, scrubbing away every little stain and mark. Hence, the armor gleamed blindingly when the light hit it. Kuga, dressed in a butler’s suit, was sitting a short distance away and munching on an onigiri, shooting me an annoyed look.

“Where were you?” asked Kuga. “I thought you’d run away.”

“Do you honestly think I’d run away by myself on this floor?”

We were on the nineteenth floor of the dungeon. The map for this floor showed an abandoned city, full of old brickwork buildings. Monsters lurked in the alleys, where they were difficult to see; these were often skeleton mages, skeleton archers, or other monsters that could fire projectiles, showing this floor was incredibly dangerous. If you wandered around with no means to defend yourself from long-range attacks, you'd end up riddled with holes.

"Shall we get going?" suggested Tenma. "Kurosaki, set up the barrier."

"As you wish, my lady," said the maid, humbly bowing. She grabbed a magic item that looked like a pot and flicked a switch that had the Japanese character for heaven on it. This marking appeared on the products for Tenma's family business. A few seconds later, a semitransparent dome appeared around us. This magic item, enchanted with the Antimissile spell, would deflect a fixed amount of long-distance attacks.

The magic item also greatly reduced the difficulty of traveling through the otherwise dangerous nineteenth floor. An individual adventurer could get around on this floor using stealth skills, but that trick wouldn't work for a group as large as ours. Such an item was essential for any party wanting to raid the nineteenth floor.

The barrier produced by the magic item wasn't large enough to fit everyone from the deepest-depth teams and the squads of retainers inside at once. And so, we split up into Class A and Class B.

"In we come, Tenma," said Sera, throwing her shining silver hair over her shoulder as she entered the dome with her retainers and noble classmates. Despite this being the fourth day in the dungeon, she showed no signs of fatigue, and her smile was as bright as the day we'd entered. She was still wearing just her school uniform, with no armor. Her armor was a national treasure, so maybe she needed special permission to wear it. Of course, it wasn't like she'd need to be fighting any monsters here—there were plenty of retainers to handle that for her.

Sera was a natural chatterbox, and she struck up conversations with everyone as we traveled. Everyone except me, that is. In fact, it was like she didn't even acknowledge my existence. Was she avoiding me because of what she'd seen of

my disastrous future with her Clairvoyance skill? I'd spent so many years idolizing her, but now that I'd met her, she didn't want anything to do with me... It made me feel so dejected.

It was strange, though. Since joining Adventurers' High, I hadn't pulled any pervy pranks. So why had her vision shown me getting expelled? I was desperate to find out. Maybe her Clairvoyance skill would only show her events from the game's main story, regardless of what we did in this world.

"So anyway," Tenma said to me. "Kurosaki keeps telling me that you're a brute and a pervert. Is it true?"

"I'm not sure what you expect me to say to that..." I trailed off.

"He's definitely a brute," commented Kuga. "I can't rule out that he's a pervert either."

While I'd been looking forward to spending time with Tenma and Kuga, they were ganging up on me. I glanced at the maid and saw that she had a smug smile.

I understand you're trying to get Tenma to stay away from me, but please don't make me out to be a pervert!

I looked at our surroundings as we walked to take my mind off of Tenma and Kuga's remarks.

This floor was smaller than the rest, having a circular map with a diameter of one kilometer. That didn't mean there wasn't much to see. Every available space had abandoned brickwork buildings crammed, packed tightly together. If this weren't a ghost town, about fifty thousand to a hundred thousand people could live in these houses. But only the undead wandered the streets. I looked at the center of the town and noticed a gothic castle standing about a hundred meters tall with dozens of pointed towers piercing into the sky. Inside it was the twentieth floor, our destination.

The castle's entire interior was a safe zone. It had been a popular tourist spot in *DEC*, where players had visited to admire its intricately sculpted statues and colorful stained glass windows.

“I haven’t visited the Devil’s Castle in quite some time,” remarked Tenma. “I imagine this will be your first time coming here?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

“It will be. But why’s it called the Devil’s Castle?” asked Kuga.

Even though I’d told Tenma I hadn’t visited the castle before, I hadn’t visited *in this body*. Technically, I wasn’t lying. I’d forgotten its name, which was the Devil’s Castle... Why did they call it that?

“You see. There’s a legend about the Holy Woman coming here long, long ago, so it’s a special place,” said Tenma.

“The Holy Woman...? Tell me more.”

The dungeon first appeared in Japan at the beginning of the Taisho era, around the early 1910s. Few people would venture inside the dungeon in those early days. According to official records, a single party of four adventurers had conducted most of the raids. One of them was the Holy Woman.

Her party’s raids were nothing like those we carried out today. We had it easy because we knew how to efficiently hunt the monsters we found. Everywhere the Holy Woman’s party went was unexplored territory, and they had needed to conquer new and powerful bosses on every floor they’d raided without any information going into the fight. For example, the orc lord was currently a hidden boss but had once been the floor boss for the fifth floor. That should clarify how brutal a fight against him would be without knowing his strength or powers and the strategy to defeat him. They couldn’t level up higher than the orc lord in preparation for the fight either because they couldn’t reach the next floor until they beat the monster.

Every time they’d conquered a new floor and reached the next one, they’d needed to survive a fight to the death. The situation was like what the modern Assault Clans were doing on the frontier, but only four were there. It was a miracle they’d survived at all.

Years had passed, and World War II had come and gone. There had been no land invasion during the war, so Postwar Japan hadn’t been in ruins. The country had thrived thanks to the energy industry, which had benefited from

wartime procurements of magic gem energy. During this economic boom, the Japanese government ordered the conquering of the twentieth floor to secure even more magic gems and other resources... But the results had been disastrous. The Assault Clans the government had trained got decimated, losing many promising young adventurers in the process. As a last resort, the government had called the Holy Woman's party out of retirement and sent them back to the frontiers.

"And that castle is where it all happened," explained Tenma. "Inside is the famed giant devil."

"They sent a party of four to accomplish something that all the Assault Clans working together couldn't do?" said Kuga. "That's ridiculous. Sounds like the story is half propaganda."

Kuga had a point. If the fight was so tough, wouldn't they have sent other powerful adventurers to join the Holy Woman instead of just her four-person party? Although, I could think of several explanations. Namely, every bit of information about the Holy Woman was top secret; perhaps they hadn't wanted to risk anyone learning those secrets. Or maybe they had called in other help but had left that part of the story out to elevate the legends of the Holy Woman's prowess. Or maybe her party had been so overwhelmingly powerful that anyone else they sent would get in their way.

Whatever the case, the Holy Woman's party had defeated the giant devil, giving birth to a legend. Apparently, this was why so many people still revered their party.

"I wish I could see the giant devil for myself," said Tenma. "But he'll never return."

"What do you mean?" asked Kuga.

"Floor bosses don't come back once you've defeated them. Except for unique cases like the orc lord."

The present-day twentieth floor was simply one big road and a town square. No monsters would spawn here anymore, and neither would the floor boss. At the end of the road was a large door through which the tropical map of the twenty-first floor lay.

While we walked, we chatted about which parts of the Devil's Castle we wanted to visit and what snacks we'd eat there. But a sudden commotion at the front of the group interrupted our conversation. A skeleton rider had attacked Class B's team.

"Wow," Tenma said. "He blocked the skeleton's lance instead of dodging. That's amazing."

The skeleton rider was a variant that charged toward you at seventy kilometers per hour with its lance atop a steed. Although skeletons lacked the additional mass of flesh and muscle, the kinetic energy of its lance would be intense at that speed. Blocking that attack proved just how strong Class B's retainers were.

Once the tank had brought the skeleton to a standstill, Class B's heavy cavalry immediately surrounded the monster and attacked it from all sides. Staying mounted reduced the skeleton archer's maneuverability, which gave the monster a height advantage and let it thrust down with its lance from a steep angle. You would have to be careful even if the skeleton wasn't facing you directly. The skeletal horse was also hostile and would bite and kick nearby targets.

Class B's retainers seemed practiced at this kind of fight, though. The tank did a perfect job of holding the monster's aggro, and the damage dealers were using one weapon skill after another. The fight was over soon. Just as the skeleton rider fell to the ground, it turned into a magic gem.

Skeleton mages and archers repeatedly attacked us. However, the squad of archers and the group of shrine maidens fought back from inside the safety barrier with arrows and healing magic, making short work of the monsters. Our group's impeccable strategy had turned killing the fearsome monsters of the dangerous nineteenth floor into a simple matter.

We continued fending off the undead as we walked toward the center of the abandoned city. Because the map was so small, we arrived at our destination after an hour.

The towers seemed to continue endlessly into the sky, and it was possible to see their complex architecture now. Carved into the walls were cuneiform-like

inscriptions and images of people. From up close, it looked more like a temple than a castle. At the front of the castle was a large iron door leading to the twentieth floor.

Suou arrived at the door first and said, "I will be the tour guide for this sacred place." He walked forward with an uncharacteristic smile. The only times he ever looked this pleased with himself were when he was up to no good... I wondered what he was plotting.

Chapter 22: It Plays

We had arrived at the Devil's Castle and debated who would enter first. From my point of view, I couldn't see what was so wrong with us all going in together or entering the castle in the order we'd arrived. But nobles were proud and cared a lot about little details like these. They argued for some time, each contending that the honor should be theirs, until Suou stepped forward and suggested that the first to enter should be the representatives of each class.

"How about Sera, Tenma, and I go in first?" suggested Suou. "I'm sure we'll see something spectacular inside." He'd included Tenma because she was the second-best student academically and would represent our entire year group. This showed that Suou recognized how powerful Tenma was.

"If we're going with representatives, then Narumi should come too," said Tenma.

You could've just kept quiet! I thought. In a way, I was representing Class E. They only chose me since nobody else wanted the job. I'd feel awkward if I brought that up in front of everyone, so I hurriedly considered another excuse that would let me reject the offer. Unfortunately, Kuga sealed my fate before I could do so.

"If he's going, so am I," said Kuga.

"Oh? Fine," responded Suou. I would've thought he'd put up a fight about letting two outsiders join in. He was definitely up to something, but he probably thought Kuga and I were too weak to impact his plan.

Kurosaki furiously begged to be allowed to come along too so that her master wouldn't be alone with a brute like me, but Tenma refused. The maid glared at me with tears in her eyes.

Don't look at me. This wasn't my idea!

Sera's nobles and shrine maidens rushed and begged her to change her mind.

"Please reconsider, Lady Sera!"

“Have you forgotten what happened in middle school? He’s up to no good. I’m sure of it!”

“Suou will be by himself, and I’ll have Tenma with me,” replied Sera. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Sera paid no attention to their warnings. She was a free spirit who didn’t like to be tied down, which must have driven her guards crazy. But that was what made her so amazing.

I agreed with her retainers, though. Suou wouldn’t volunteer to guide us unless he had an ulterior motive. But what could he accomplish by himself? Perhaps he’d hidden an assassin inside the castle? Or he’d laid a deadly trap somewhere? Or maybe he was planning to revive the legendary giant devil? Maybe I was worrying too much. Sera might be his rival, but she was also the daughter of a marquis and the person next in line to be Japan’s Holy Woman. As such, Suou couldn’t harm her without facing the consequences.

“Right, Suou, lead the way,” Sera said.

“As you wish,” replied Suou.

“Let’s get going!” Tenma said cheerfully. “Come on, Narumi!”

I felt Tenma’s metal glove grip my hand, and she led me away.

Nobody will listen if I say I don’t want to go, so I might as well play along.

Suou and Sera went in first, followed by Tenma, Kuga, and me. As we passed through the extravagantly decorated entryway, we arrived at a large, chandelier-lit entrance hall that had two big doors on either side. The door to the left would take us to the tropical savanna fields of the twenty-first floor, but Suou instead opened the door on the right and beckoned us to follow.

Beyond the door was a large open room that accounted for most of the space inside the castle. The ceiling was very high, with tall stained glass windows on either side. Moreover, the warm light they let through made the room feel more sacred. There was a massive pipe organ at the back of the room. Once again, it felt like I was in a cathedral or some other religious temple rather than a castle.

After all, we stood where the Holy Woman had fought the giant devil.

Sera took in the sight of everything in the room, looking deeply moved. “I always used to beg my grandmother to tell me stories about her fight here.”

The woman she called “grandmother” was her great-grandmother, the Holy Woman, Japan’s first adventurer. The battles that took place here against the giant devil were legendary. Both the battles the Holy Woman won and the ones that decimated the Assault Clans fascinated Sera as a child.

“Oh, about that,” said Tenma. “On the way here, we were talking about why there were only four people in the fight against such a powerful enemy.”

“I don’t know the true answer...” responded Sera. “But whenever my grandmother fought, she was always with the same three people, so maybe it was just easier that way for her.”

Sera’s great-grandmother knew she could trust those companions with her life. Apparently, she’d frequently said that improvised parties did more harm than good. In games, greater numbers were always better. When you were risking your life, you had to trust your companions.

Sounds like the company line to me, I thought.

For my part, I still thought the real reason was to keep confidential information about her skills and job a secret. The Holy Woman job was top secret but involved powerful magic that could heal over huge areas and revive the dead. If this information became public, it could raise difficult moral questions. The Japanese government would surely take great care in managing these secrets.

Suou began telling us what he knew about the giant devil as if it were a story. The giant devil was an incredibly strong devil-type monster over five meters tall that swiped at its opponents with its six unbelievably powerful arms. Blue flames engulfed its body once it had taken enough damage, massively increasing its offensive and defensive power. When it got to this stage, only the best warriors could hope to stand against it.

Only a few people had fought the giant devil and lived, yet the psychological trauma of the battle would rob most of them of their wits. For this reason, it

was challenging to gather accurate information about the giant devil. However...

It's a male lesser demon that has four arms and uses the Magical Warfare skill.

Lesser demons were the weakest variant of devils. Defeating them was no easy task because all of DEC's devils were strong monsters that used physical attacks, magical spells, and skills. They were a bad choice of monster to farm for experience points.

But the devil in question was a floor boss, which was why it had unique traits. The difficulty of this boss fight was far greater than with the other floor bosses, so I could understand why the old Assault Clans could not defeat it. That made it all the more surprising that the Holy Woman had accepted the government's request to fight the creature. If anyone asked me to fight a monster nobody else had ever beaten, I'd turn around and run away.

Kuga wasn't paying much attention to the conversation about the giant devil. Instead, she was staring at the pipe organ in the back of the room with a look of great interest. She pressed several of the keys on the multiple manual keyboards, but no sound came out. While the massive pipes above the keyboards appeared in good condition, I couldn't tell what was wrong with them. Tenma also seemed interested in the manual keyboards and the pedalboard.

"How do we get this organ to play music, I wonder?" mused Tenma.

"Maybe the blower behind it is broken..." suggested Kuga.

Suou chuckled and inserted himself into the conversation. "No, it isn't broken." It seemed he knew something about the organ. "This instrument only plays when you're fighting the giant devil."

From the look of things, the organ provided the appropriate background music for a boss fight.

"With the giant devil?" repeated Tenma. "So we'll never be able to hear it again, then." She cast her head down, disappointed.

"How does it work...?" asked Kuga, seemingly fascinated. She pulled on bits of

the organ, pushing other parts and touching it all over. Breaking an organ of this size would usually cost a lot of money to repair. Fortunately, our being in the dungeon guaranteed that such damaged items automatically repaired themselves after a given time.

“Not at all,” Suou told Tenma. “We can hear it play if you’d like.”

“What?” blurted Tenma. “But you said it’ll only play when the giant devil is here.”

“So all we have to do is bring the giant devil back!”

We all looked at Suou with confusion.

He pulled a thick book from his backpack. Bulging veins throbbed on the book’s cover, emitting a foul aura, like black tar. This item was beyond creepy. It was positively grotesque, and everyone was suddenly on edge.

Aha, so this is what you were planning, I thought.

Kuga crouched and entered a combat pose. “What...are you going to do?”

“This can’t be happening!” cried Sera. She lurched backward in shock, apparently having seen this book before.

Tenma was looking around at everyone here, confused.

Suou roared with laughter at everyone’s reactions. “Wouldn’t it be such a shame if we came all the way here and didn’t see the giant devil?”

The book was undoubtedly a devil-summoning grimoire that could summon the lesser demon floor boss from this room. Seeing as the book was a DLC addition to the game, you needed to follow a bunch of annoying steps and eventually complete a particular quest from a DLC-exclusive area to get it. It would be impossible for anyone to find without knowledge of the game. Perhaps Tsukijima had told him about it.

Surely, he was bluffing. Beginning the summoning ritual would lock the doors to this room, forcing everyone inside to fight the giant devil. If that happened, Suou would be stuck with the rest of us... But he went ahead anyway! Suou began channeling his mana into the grimoire. *Has he lost his mind?*

He raised the book aloft, its veins throbbing harder. The book flew open, and

something black fired from the pages, landing on the stone floor. A hexagram of two overlapping triangles appeared on the floor around the black substance. Then, the symbol glowed dark red as the magic circle for the summoning ritual was active.

Sera and Kuga raced toward the door when they realized the summoning ritual had begun, but they didn't make it in time. Once Suou had channeled mana into the book, he sealed every exit. This was why there'd been so few survivors from the Assault Clans.

At the same time, the pipe organ began playing a climactic melody at a thunderous volume. The tune was somehow somber and psychotic. Though it suited the atmosphere for a boss fight, that was no comfort to the people in the room.

"What a wonderful sound!" shrieked Suou. He moved his hands like a conductor, and his eyes wide from excitement as he continued the ritual. "It surpasses everything I've heard about it! It's time now. The giant devil will arrive soon, and it will be my first time seeing it."

The ground shook as a ram's head slowly emerged from the center of the magic circle. Next came the devil's dark red, muscular torso and four incredibly thick arms. Finally, the characteristic pointy tail that all devils had appeared.

I raised my head to look up at the monster, which stood four meters tall. It stared back down at us with its insectoid compound eyes. Noting those eyes was enough to tell me that this *thing* was incompatible with the human race. I sensed one emotion from it and only one: a vicious desire to devour and destroy as many lives as possible.

Okay, what should I do?

This monster was level 25. As a floor boss and a devil, it would have plenty of unique skills to make it more powerful than other monsters of the same level... In other words, I'd need to join in this fight if we wanted to win.

But I can't show off my true strength in front of everyone here!

"D-Do you have any idea what you've done?!" screamed Sera.

"Why the hell would you summon something like this?!" cried Tenma.

The two were usually so calm, but Suou's reckless actions had driven them into a rage. Of course, I was furious as well.

How did you plan to eliminate this beast after you summoned it? I thought. You've got a plan to get rid of it, right? You'd better!!!

"Oh, look, it only has four arms! But... Actually, never mind. It definitely is still strong! I've seen what I came to see, so I'll be taking my leave now. If the four of you defeat it, your legend will be as grand as that of the Holy Woman. Good luck!" Suou pulled a small translucent stone from his breast pocket and channeled his mana into it. "Although two out of four of you are worthless trash from a class of rejects." With those parting words, Suou vanished in a beam of light.

Chapter 23: My First Friend

Upon looking at the legendary giant devil that the Holy Woman had once defeated, Suou pulled out a small stone and vanished in a beam of light.

That bastard summoned this freak monster and then ran away without doing anything!

“Eh?!” yelled Sera, covering her mouth as she panicked.

“H-He ran away!” shouted Tenma, stomping on the ground in anger. “That scumbag!”

It's lovely to see a new side to these two girls... Okay, now's not the time!

Suou had used a return stone, a magic item enchanted with the Eject spell that would let its user warp to the outside of the dungeon. It was an invaluable tool for escaping deadly situations. But adventurers would never use them unless absolutely necessary because each stone cost as much as a house.

Kuga quickly retrieved a chest protector from her bag, put it on, and pulled out her dagger. Now that a fearsome monster had appeared, she was probably looking to do everything she could to increase her chance of survival.

She said, “Souta Narumi, how well can you fight?”

“I...”

The problem was that I knew showing my true strength would complicate things.

Soon, the lesser demon had fully emerged from the magic circle. It licked its lips as it inspected each of us, deciding which of us to devour first. Its sickening Aura defiled the holy atmosphere that had shrouded this room until moments ago, making it look like hell rather than anywhere sacred. There was no time left to think.

“Tenma and I won't be able to fight that monster by ourselves,” said Sera. “You'll have to forgive me...”

That stone... So she does have one too.

Sera pulled a translucent stone out of a necklace she wore. She was the heir to a major noble family, a remarkable, once-in-a-generation girl with good looks and talent selected to be Japan's next Holy Woman. Her family would be more than happy to pay for a return stone to keep her safe.

"Tenma, I know it's hard, but you should use your stone too," Sera said. "I wish we didn't have to leave the two of them behind, but we're nobles. We have to put our families first. Goodbye."

Sera gripped her stone tight and channeled her mana. Then she vanished in a beam of light, just like Suou.

It would be stupid for her to stay behind and fight this hopeless battle just for the sake of two other kids she didn't know well in her year. Plus, I could understand that noble heirs needed to prioritize their families.

If everybody would hurry up and leave without me, I'd find this monster much easier to deal with!

"Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse..." remarked Kuga. "Here it comes!"

Two people had left, and there were now just three of us. The lesser demon charged forward to prevent the rest of us from escaping, causing tremors with every step. It swung a colossal fist at us.

Tenma jumped into the path of the demon's fist and blocked it with her two-headed axe. Bracing her legs, she just about managed to keep the absurd mass of the monster's fist at bay. The faint glow of red Aura emanating from Tenma told me she was using her unique Super Strength skill.

Spirits had granted Tenma the Super Strength skill because of their love for her. It was both a blessing and a curse. The skill would significantly increase her physical strength, but it had the tragic side effect of aging her body and turning her ugly. Even though I was grateful she protected us with this skill, why wasn't she using her escape item?

"I can hold the monster off for a little while!" shouted Tenma. "Use that time to find a way out of this room!"

The lesser demon used its four huge arms to unleash a rapid flurry of punches. Tenma tried to fend off the blows with her Super Strength, but the speed and power of the attacks proved too much for her, sending her flying. Her body bounced off the floor several times, her momentum not slowing until she finally struck a wall.

“Don’t be an idiot, Tenma!” I shouted. “Forget about us and use your escape item!”

“I won’t!” Tenma shouted back. “You’re... You’re the first friend I’ve ever made... I won’t leave you here to die!”

Each time the monster knocked her down, Tenma would get back to her feet with a roar and charge back at it. Dents and bloodstains now covered her cherished armor, but that didn’t stop her.

She was always so cheerful around me, so I’d almost forgotten that she’d been treated like an outcast throughout middle school, always by herself. That was why she’d started wearing that armor.

Really though... It makes me feel so good to hear her say that.

Tenma had called me, the biggest loser in the school, her friend. She was risking her life against a legendary monster to protect me. From the desperate way she rose to her feet repeatedly, I could tell she genuinely meant what she’d said.

I could feel my body heating up, thinking, *You know what, let’s show this devil.*

Kuga sliced the lesser demon’s legs with her school rental dagger, although it didn’t have much effect. The monster had thick skin, and its regenerative abilities meant it effectively took no damage. She could deal damage with a better weapon or if she could land a severe blow. But the lesser demon’s aggro wasn’t focused on any one of us, so she couldn’t get close enough for that.

With Kuga also fighting, I might get away with not using my full strength. From what I could tell, the girls needed a good tank the most.

“Okay, here’s the plan!” I yelled. “I’ll be the tank. You two focus on dealing damage!”

“Narumi, that’s too dangerous!”

And what you’re doing isn’t? You could use your escape item to get away. I was confident that the head of the Tenma family would have given his beloved daughter a return stone. If Tenma was going to risk her life to save mine, the least I could do was unleash some of my true power.

I retrieved black, pure mithril gloves from my magic bag and quickly put them on. Then, I pulled out my pure mithril longsword. I had not plated this one yet as I hadn’t planned to use it. My first task was redirecting the monster’s aggro away from Tenma to me.

“Hey, big guy! Over here! Irritate Howl!”



A thunderous howl burst from my lips, along with a shock wave. This was a taunting skill used to pull a monster's aggro, which had been part of every tank's basic toolkit in *DEC*. The lesser demon stopped attacking Tenma, spun around, and charged toward me like a magnet had pulled it. The monster looked confused, clearly not understanding why it was so focused on me now.

"That skill..." muttered Kuga. "It's from the Empire... I was right about you..."

"What?" Tenma called out. "What did you just do?!"

The Knight job was apparently kept secret by a particular country. But I wouldn't get myself in too much trouble by showing them this skill...I hoped. As long as I groveled at Kuga's feet later, I knew I could smooth this over.

I still didn't have enough power to land an attack on this monster, though. And so I'd need one more skill!

"Let's turn the heat up! Flame Arms!!!"

I extended both of my arms as I activated the skill, and red snakes made of Aura wrapped themselves around my arms. This Warrior buff skill increased my strength stat by thirty percent. That wouldn't raise my stats high enough to fight on even footing with this beast, but it would let me fend off its attacks.

"Both of you, hit it with all the firepower you've got," I instructed. "I'll make sure it doesn't take its eyes off of me!"

Under the effects of my taunt skill, the lesser demon brought its fist crashing down toward me. I didn't want to get hit by that, so I dodged its fist by circling the monster's flank. When I saw my chance to strike, I pierced it with my mithril blade. I'd need to repeat this same maneuver, recasting my taunt spell whenever the cooldown timer elapsed so that I would be its only target.

"I don't really get what's happening, but you look like you can handle yourself!" said Tenma. "In that case, I won't hold back either!"

Kuga sniffed.

As Tenma judged that I could fulfill the tank role and hold the monster's aggro, she swirled her massive axe around and thrust it hard into the lesser demon. Her Super Strength made her attacks incredibly powerful, and her

weapon inflicted multiple deep gouges in the monster's thick skin, taking its HP down considerably. I could see why everyone said she was the strongest attacker first-year student.

Kuga also successfully dealt damage despite not using any attack skills. Her dagger was glowing, leading me to believe she had used a spell to enchant it and enhance its slicing damage.

The lesser demon roared and thrashed at me with its arms. It looked enraged as its attacks were missing me, and the girls' attacks slowly hurt it more, putting the monster in a foul mood. The monster puffed out its chest and started performing skill motions to get the upper hand. A blinding blue Aura oozed out from its four arms, then it howled and swung its fist down once more.

"Narumi, watch out!" called out Tenma.

"I'll be fine," I said. "But you might wanna stand back a bit."

Just then, the lesser demon was about to throw rapid punches with all four of its long arms. It was usually difficult to evade all the attacks, but I knew a technique from my time as a gamer. I had to stay very close to my opponent's body while circling it, and this would mean that almost none of its attacks could reach me. This was the basic strategy for tanks that weren't wearing heavy armor or didn't have a high strength stat. However, the lesser demon's attack skill would hit everything from short to medium range, meaning that there was no safe place to stand to avoid getting hit.

I couldn't use the circling technique, and I couldn't block the attack without sustaining damage. Somebody seeing this for the first time would have a hell of a time fighting it.

Lucky for me, I've seen it before!

In *DEC*, you could accept certain special quests that allowed you to fight specific floor bosses as often as you wanted. Your level would reduce to the same number as the boss's floor for the duration of the fight, but I'd taken on this one countless times to get the fantastic loot it dropped. Incidentally, I held the record for the fastest victory against the lesser demon.

I knew exactly how much damage was needed to change its attack patterns

and exactly how those patterns would change. So, I could use the small changes in the monster's stance when it activated a skill to know which skill it was about to use. All of this made it easy for me to react in time. The monster's skill would begin with a downward swing of its upper arms, which meant all I had to do was get out of its attack path and calmly prepare to counterattack.

When I saw the monster bringing down its two upper arms while howling, just like in the game, I lowered my center of gravity and effortlessly dodged. I slipped past its next two thrusts and sliced into its body. The next attack would be a swipe from the left, so I slid to the right and got behind the monster. I struck it three times with my sword skill, Vorpall Thrust.

Although the lesser demon released a deep scream, monsters couldn't interrupt their weapon skills once they'd started.

Since its next attack would be an uppercut, I used Backstep to cancel my Vorpall Thrust early. I activated Slash to sever the arm that had attacked me at the elbow.

The final stage of its attack would comprise a jump upward and a punch as it landed, so I predicted where it would land and got out of the way.

"A-Amazing!" said Tenma. "I didn't know he could move like that!"

"He's able to follow the monster's movements..." remarked Kuga. "No, that's not right. It's like he knows exactly what the monster will do next."

Clever you, I thought. Perhaps Kuga had noticed how I'd been adapting my center of gravity. While she was correct, it wasn't as easy as I made it look. I'd initially wanted everyone else to run away because I thought I could defeat the lesser demon by myself, but I was wrong about that. It was a good thing they were both still here to help.

Even though I knew I could dodge its attacks, hearing the thunderous rush of air as its fists passed within a hair's breadth of my face was psychologically taxing. If I'd been fighting alone and the fight lasted a long time, my growing stress levels would have drastically increased the probability of making a mistake. Because I knew I had the two of them to deal damage to the monster, I could focus my mind entirely on dodging the monster's attacks. I'd need to thank them later.

The force of the lesser demon's landing kicked up a cloud of dust into the air, and it let out an ear-piercing screech. At last, the four-meter-tall monster writhed and twisted on the ground. Blood was spurting from the stump where its arm had been, though its regenerative abilities would regrow the lost arm in less than a minute.

At that moment, the monster was defenseless while it squirmed on the ground. It was our golden opportunity to deal as much damage as possible.

"Now's our chance!" I shouted. "Hit it with all you've got!"

"Ha ha, take this!!!" yelled Tenma.

"No holding back..." said Kuga. "Double Sting!"

Tenma swung down with her two-headed axe over and over again. Each strike stirred up a whirlwind and dealt tremendous damage. The strength of her attacks honestly surprised me.

Kuga rapidly scratched the monster with her dagger, using a weapon skill. She darted around and found the most vulnerable places on the monster's body, which was a little scary but encouraging.

Floor bosses had a colossal amount of HP, showing even this damage had only reduced it to half its maximum. When the lesser demon's HP got low enough, it would enter berserk mode. Once that happened, there would be no more margin for error. But—

"This is payback for earlier!" shouted Tenma. "Meat! Give me your meat!"

"Your horn..." said Kuga. "I'll be taking it."

—with these two girls by my side, I felt we could make short work of the monster.



Chapter 24: A Disciple of Aurora

Kotone Kuga

Suou had summoned the floor boss called the giant devil, and we weren't ready to fight it. Even if it might've been no more than a prank for him, it was much worse for me. I didn't have an escape item, so I couldn't even run away.

He would've known that, though. Only nobles were rich enough to buy escape items, and he didn't care one bit whether commoners died. That was the problem with this country's anachronistic aristocratic society. Moaning about it wouldn't improve my situation. There was no way out, and I needed to prepare for the worst.

My agency had shown me recordings of fights against this floor boss. It was a variant of devil known as a lesser demon, and the recommended party strength for the battle was eighteen people of level 20 with high combat experience. Even then, the fight could go either way.

Unfortunately, only four of us were here: me, Souta Narumi, the woman in armor, and the holy girl. The other three were probably around level 20, which was the correct number. But they were spoiled kids. They'd probably power leveled to get this high. Even if I was being generous, I couldn't imagine that they'd be as strong as the agents from my home country who'd undergone grueling life-or-death training.

To make matters worse, the holy girl, who I'd hoped might be helpful because she was the best student in our year group, quickly used an escape item and abandoned us. It would only be a matter of time before the other noble in armor would use her escape item. That would just leave Souta Narumi and me. Could I count on him...?

I can take it down to berserk mode if I'm lucky, I thought. But that's as far as I can go.

Some floor bosses would enter berserk mode when their HP dropped to a

certain percentage. In berserk mode, these bosses would gain access to new, powerful skills. When this devil was at a quarter of its max HP, blue Aura would engulf its body and greatly increase its defense stats. At that point, it would use devastatingly destructive attack skills. Once it got to that stage, there would be nothing I could do. Souta Narumi wasn't as weak as he looked, but I doubted he could hold his own in the high-level fight that was coming up.

We're doomed. That was the thought that crossed my mind... But just then, the situation changed.

The woman in armor insanely decided not to use her escape item. Instead, she attacked the giant devil, spurring Narumi to volunteer as our tank. I had found it strange that he hadn't looked scared when Suou had summoned the giant devil, and I was about to find out why.

"Hey, big guy! Over here! Irritate Howl!"

That skill... What's a disciple of Aurora doing here?

Narumi's howl was loud enough to shake the ground throughout the room. The skill he'd used was the most recognizable skill available from the Knight job, a top secret job that only existed in the Holy Empire.

The Holy Empire was an eastern European country run by the Holy Woman Aurora. She would handpick the best of the best from her country's elites to become Knights, who would exert significant influence over the Empire's governance. From what I heard, they usually joined the imperial guards or became one of her disciples. They rarely revealed themselves to outsiders, and the Empire took great care to keep information about them a secret. So why...

Why is one of the Empire's secret agents here with us?!

Frankly, I'd underestimated Aurora and her disciples. I didn't expect much from a fledgling country formed through terrorism by a gang of criminal adventurers. And why should I care about a group of adventurers just because some girl in fancy robes had chosen them as her disciples? But the Knight I was watching now proved me wrong and was living proof of how exceptional they were.

Flames enveloped Narumi's arms, and he evaded the nonstop, rapid attacks

from the monster's four giant arms. He calmly approached the monster and got in a few strikes when its guard was down! From his speed, I could tell that he was at a lower level than me but displayed stunning combat experience and battle sense. I'd need to revise my opinion of Aurora and the Empire if they found raw talent and trained them to this degree.

Everything about this was bizarre, especially since Narumi's movements weren't particularly fast. He wasn't anywhere near as fast or as powerful as the devil, or even me, for that matter. But he was incredibly efficient. He was moving his body just enough to avoid the next attack, and these were ones that even I would have trouble dodging! Also, how he moved made it seem like he knew where exactly the next attack would come from. Because of this, the devil could not land a hit on him.

How is he moving like that...?

Narumi didn't wait until the monster had thrown a punch to dodge. He had instead shifted his center of gravity and begun to evade from the moment the monster lifted its fist. Was he predicting where the attacks would come from? No, it didn't look like it.

Even if you could predict the enemy's attacks, you couldn't move like that. You'd be dead if there was the slightest error in your prediction of the lesser demon's punch trajectory. As such, Narumi would move even farther out of the way when he dodged to guarantee extra distance and a larger margin of error if he were predicting the monster's attack.

Regardless, he showed absolute confidence when dodging. How he did so by a hair's breadth and quickly switched position to counterattack was too well-practiced.

He knows the lesser demon inside and out.

Narumi was fighting against the lesser demon in a way that was impossible unless he had an extremely thorough knowledge of the monster. At least that was what I felt when watching him, and I became certain of it when the lesser demon unleashed a combo skill using all four of its arms. Before the devil had finished the skill motion for its attack, Narumi had shifted his center of gravity and run over to a safe spot. He'd then started performing the motions for a

sword skill even though the monster hadn't launched the attack yet, meaning there were no vulnerable spots for Narumi to hit. More impressively, Narumi dodged the incoming punches without looking at them and unleashed his sword skill. He slashed into the place where one of the monster's arms was about to be. His combat technique was so perfect that it gave me the creeps.

To achieve a technique this perfect, Narumi would need to know every attack the monster was capable of and understand which attacks would come. That included the order, where the attacks would leave the monster vulnerable, and what circumstances would lead to the monster choosing one attack over another. Just watching videos wasn't enough to get skills like this. Narumi would have needed to stack up tens or even hundreds of real fights against the lesser demon. Was that even possible?

How many devil-summoning grimoires would you need to make that possible?

To summon a lesser demon, you'd need to get your hands on a devil-summoning grimoire. Once acquired, you'd need to conquer an even stronger monster and follow a convoluted series of steps. Gathering the grimoires in any quantity would take a mind-boggling number of people and an unbelievable amount of time. Was the Empire systematically farming grimoires from the dungeon inside their borders? Until now, I'd assumed that only America had known the secret method to obtain devil-summoning grimoires. If Suou could get his hands on one, it stood to reason that the Empire could too. But what was the Empire hoping to gain by amassing that many grimoires? I'd be very interested to know.

The Empire released little information to the rest of the world, so various countries had sent spies to gather intel on it. Some agents I'd gone through training with were currently spying inside it. To date, nobody had infiltrated past the lowest rungs of its state apparatus. From that perspective, getting close to a disciple of Aurora like Souta Narumi would be as valuable as a ton of mithril.

Was there any way I could coax him into spilling some of his secret information? Anything I could learn from him would be extremely substantial. Maybe I should start acting a bit nicer toward him to win his trust.

“Kuga!” yelled Narumi. “When the devil’s HP drops to twenty-five percent, I want you to use Appraisal to give me real-time updates!”

“Why do you know I have that skill?” I asked.

“We can talk about that later,” he replied. “Just listen to me. He’ll go into berserk mode when his HP drops to twenty percent. On my signal, both of you need to get to a safe distance.”

“We will, Narumi!” said the woman in armor.

Appraisal was supposed to be the ace up my sleeve... I’ll have to pin him down later until he tells me how he knew.

Narumi could be our tank until the monster entered berserk mode. After that, it would use unimaginably powerful skills rivaling the bosses on the deepest floors. He wouldn’t be able to fight the monster in that state, especially since he had no special equipment to deal with it.

Did he have some kind of strategy for it? I couldn’t think of any, but maybe he could. Or perhaps I was about to witness him show off another one of the Empire’s secrets. I was dying to know, and I thought it would be simplest to ask him directly. It couldn’t hurt.

“Souta Narumi... What are you gonna do?”

“I’m gonna dodge his berserk mode skill,” responded Narumi. “When that’s over, I want you both to get back on the offensive with your weapon skills. Normal attacks won’t faze the monster when it’s in berserk mode.”

Dodge? How?! If you’ve seen this monster go into berserk mode before, then you know that’s impossible!

The way Souta Narumi had fought so far made me feel like maybe, just maybe, he could do it. He really was an enigma.

“Twenty-six percent HP,” I said.

“Berserk mode?” asked the woman in armor. “Is the skill as bad as the one the lich uses in berserk mode?”

“Yep,” answered Narumi. “It shoots off a thousand rounds of magic bullets at you.”

“A thousand?! A-A-Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Twenty-three percent,” I said.

As the devil got closer and closer to berserk mode, the look of exhaustion from this tough fight began to fade from its face, and it regained its cruel smile. It was like it was enjoying the thought of crushing us to a pulp.

“Twenty-one percent.”

“Here it comes! Get back!”

“I believe in you, Narumi!” shouted the woman in armor.

“Leave it to me!” he shouted back.

The woman in armor and I rushed to a safe corner of the room. Seeing that the lesser demon’s berserk mode skill would rain destruction over a huge area, we needed to get as far away as possible.

A blinding blue light filled my vision when the monster’s HP hit twenty percent. The devil let out a low, rumbling roar while scorching blue flames covered its dark red body. Its thick, stifling Aura filled the atmosphere.

Regular attacks, even with my magic weapon, wouldn’t deal any damage to the devil in berserk mode. If I wanted to hurt it, I’d need to use a skill to boost my attack power. While that wasn’t a problem, we had to deal with the incoming skill.

The devil lifted its four arms into the air, and a magic circle three meters in diameter appeared above its head. Intricate patterns weaved across the magic circle, from which the letters oozed viscous black mana. Even at this distance, the strength of the magic caused me to break out in goose bumps.

Moreover, the lesser demon’s berserk mode skill would fire magic bullets from within that magic circle. A single bullet was powerful enough to reduce buildings to rubble, and they’d turn a human body to mincemeat upon a direct hit, no matter what armor they were wearing.

There were two strategies to deal with this skill. The first was to use several antimissile magic items at once to create a multilayered barrier, while layering several pure mithril shields to endure the attack. That was the safest course of

action my country knew, although the magic items for the barrier were extremely expensive. Either way, the magic bullets would reduce the mithril shields to scrap and render them unusable. Employing this strategy even once would cost a fortune, with returns for winning the fight not enough to justify the expenditure.

The other strategy was to run blindly around and accept a certain number of casualties. You didn't need any special equipment for this one, but the unpredictable number of casualties was this strategy's fatal flaw. If the monster weren't aiming at one specific target, the magic bullets would cover every possible spot on the ground, even in a large room, leaving nowhere safe. The attacks could wipe out the entire raiding party in such a situation. Some nongovernment affiliated Assault Clans had seemingly used this strategy, but to put it bluntly, it was a gamble.

Both strategies have flaws... Does that mean he's not gonna use either of them?

Then, the giant devil locked its magic circle onto Narumi and was about to fire a massive burst of magic bullets. Despite that, he showed no signs of running away or pulling out any magic items. He just stood there, smirking. I had to see what would happen next.

The magic circle flashed brilliantly for a second, and dozens of blue spheres fired simultaneously, striking everywhere around Narumi. When the spheres landed, they tore up and pulverized the stone slabs with a thunderous explosion, kicking up a huge cloud of dust. Less than a second later, the next barrage of magical bullets fired again and again. This skill was like carpet-bombing; it was pure overkill.

Explosions soon struck a larger area, and the magic bullets increased with each barrage, causing a hail of destruction. The spot where Narumi stood became rubble, and nothing remained. While this had been a tranquil church when we'd entered, it now looked like a war zone, with craters everywhere.

I had only seen the lesser demon's berserk mode skill in videos, which hadn't prepared me for the terror of witnessing it with my own eyes. The destruction was horrifying. Even the woman in armor beside me stepped back in fear but

stopped from retreating any farther. She waved her axe and shouted words of encouragement at Narumi. I had to admire her positivity, but there was no way he could have survived those barrages. It didn't matter how good his reactions were. There were too many bullets, and he wasn't even wearing good armor.

But... That's the worst of the monster's attacks out of the way.

The rest of the fight would be challenging because the monster's Aura increased its defense stat. At least we had a shot at defeating it. I tried to reframe the situation in my mind, noting that only one of us died and that it could have been much worse. And so I needed that positive point of view because now I'd need to rely on the woman in armor to deal as much damage as she could.

"You in the armor," I said. "We need to look on the bright side—"

"Narumi!" interrupted the woman in armor.

"Okay, girls—"

When the dust settled, the boy stood among the rubble like nothing had happened. He brushed the dust off of his clothes. Had he really dodged every magic bullet in that indiscriminate barrage? That was impossible!

"—it's our turn to go on the attack."

Chapter 25: Secret Room

Yikes, this is terrifying!

The lesser demon rotated the magic circle in the air, locking its target on me. It grinned like it thought it had already won. A single magic bullet was several times more powerful than ordinary monsters' magic attacks, and this devil was about to fire hundreds of them at me. I wished they'd nerfed this boss in an update!

It would be possible to survive the barrage by using a mix of special items and skills, but unfortunately, I had neither. The only half-decent equipment I had were my mithril gloves, and I'd left my usual armor at home. Instead, I was wearing the light leather armor that had been gathering dust in my bedroom. I hadn't enchanted any of my armor, so it would do nothing to reduce damage.

Plus, the two girls are watching me.

I wanted to keep as many of my skills a secret as possible, which added an extra complication to an already difficult situation. However, I had a plan. Stone slabs paved the floor of this room. In the game, you could lift a slab to reveal a secret shaft leading to a gate room. The first thing I'd done when we entered this room was confirm that the shaft was still there. Once the boss fight started, you could not leave this area to get to the outside or the gate room. But you could use the shaft to enter the small room below. I planned to do that when the monster started the barrage and just wait it out.

I had to ensure the lesser demon didn't notice me entering the shaft. If the devil discovered me, it would pulverize the shaft or switch targets to Tenma and Kuga. Therefore, I'd wait until the first barrage hit and use the smoke and dust it kicked up to conceal my movements as I slid down the shaft.

Although the first attack wouldn't be aimed directly at me, the monster would fire bullets in a spiral pattern around me. The intent was to frighten me by cutting off my escape. In that case, I only needed to exploit that pattern to dodge the bullets while being careful not to get caught up in the blast. This

wasn't guaranteed to work, like in the game, and I would be a dead man if I were wrong about this.

When I tried to ask myself rationally how I'd ended up in this situation, I couldn't help but laugh. I glanced up at the lesser demon's ram's head to gauge whether it would let me go if I begged for my life. The answer seemed to be no, so I started moving closer to the shaft to jump in at any moment.

I hope this works. Here it comes!

The giant magic circle flashed, and dozens of blue magic bullets appeared, packed densely together. For a few seconds, they hung in the air until they fired toward me at lightning speed. The blue spheres filled my vision. Even at level 20, my eyesight wasn't good enough to follow the movements of these fast projectiles.

But that didn't matter. I'd confirmed that the bullets fired in a spiral pattern, just like in the game. I quickly began moving that way, and I could hear explosions all around me as paved slabs shattered and debris flew everywhere.

The explosion didn't kick up as much dust as expected, so I threw a smoke bomb on the ground. Thankfully, I'd kept some on me to help escape monsters. I pulled up the slab leading to the shaft and jumped inside.

"Did...it work?" I asked, panting. "God, I thought I was gonna die!"

Hearing the explosions on the floor above hadn't stopped meant my plan had been successful. The monster happily sprayed the area I'd been in with magic bullets, utterly unaware that I wasn't there.

Typical low-ranking devil, I thought. It's all muscle and no brain.

The more advanced variants of devils tended to be more intelligent so the same trick likely wouldn't have worked on one of them.

While I got my breathing back under control, I swung my miniature lantern around to light my way as I climbed down the ladder. After descending ten meters, I found myself in a stone-walled space smaller than my bedroom. In the center was a shiny, dark gray box that was a silver treasure chest. It was guaranteed to contain a magic item. *I was hoping to find this here.*

This chest was so close to the gate room that other players would always get to it first in *DEC*, and it would always be empty whenever I checked. However, the perception interference at work in this world meant that nobody knew to come here and open it. I used the silver treasure chest key that I'd brought from Granny's Goods and opened the chest.

The treasure chest was so large that I could have climbed inside, but it only contained a small ring with a red jewel. Size wasn't everything, and this was still probably valuable and didn't disappoint me. I picked the ring up and inspected it, then what looked like little sparkling spirits danced around the jewel.

"Does this...have spirits residing in it?"

Certain very rare magic items would have spirits residing in them. These items typically evolved with use. Even if their magical effects appeared unimpressive initially, they would become compelling if you guided their evolution. That made them fetch absurdly high prices when players auctioned them.

The spirits residing in the red gemstone were probably carbuncles, spirits that could increase vitality, so the effect of the ring was perhaps to regenerate HP.

"It probably won't do much more than heal little scratches at the moment, but it's worth keeping hold of," I said. "Wait... What's up with this?"

When I started twirling the ring around, trying to decide which finger to wear it on, I sensed a small outburst of mana that felt somehow annoyed. Did the ring have a mind of its own?

Ignoring this, I put the ring on, and immediately felt minor scrapes and scratches on my body begin to heal. The ring would probably only heal about one HP per minute, but that was enough for everyday use.

The explosions from above grew louder, and the tremors were more violent. Dust and stone fragments fell from the ceiling, showing the devil's attack was nearly over. It was time for the final stage of the fight.

The monster, wreathed in a thick blue Aura, reached out with its arms to crush me. This attack was slow, so I only had to twist my body backward slightly to dodge it. Now that I was back, I recast my taunting skill.

“Let’s go!” roared Tenma. “Severing Chop!!!”

With a running start, Tenma leaped forward and swung her two-headed axe down blade-first with all her might, slicing off an arm. A shock wave rippled outward as her blade sliced through the devil’s Aura and thick skin, dealing critical damage.

“I’ll be taking your other arm... Double Sting.”

The pain of Tenma’s attack had caused the lesser demon to fall to one knee and support its body by pressing one hand against the ground. She’d immobilized it. Seeing the monster was vulnerable, Kuga rushed in and sliced off another of its arms with a well-timed skill. The monster now only had one arm left. Its regenerative skill wasn’t working fast enough to heal its wounds, and blood was spurting from all three of its bloody stumps. The devil had taken massive amounts of damage, slowing it down. All it needed was one final attack to finish it off.

I’m honestly surprised. I didn’t realize the two of them would be so powerful if they focused entirely on attacks.

In less than ten minutes, they’d wiped out the HP of a lesser demon that had a defense buff from its mana shield. If I hadn’t used my taunting skill, the monster would’ve switched targets to them long ago.

“How are we gonna split up the loot?” asked Kuga. “I hear devil’s horns are good raw materials for crafting.”

“I wonder what the legendary giant devil tastes like,” said Tenma. “I can’t wait to find out!”

The monster wasn’t even dead yet, and they were already dividing the spoils. Tenma was mumbling something merciless about looting the tenderloin while she slashed away at the monster’s thighs with her axe. Kuga was darting around, slicing into the monster with her dagger, and occasionally stopped to try to rip out one of its horns.

Yet the lesser demon’s howls were much more pleading than after the summoning, as it seemed to understand what we were saying. I did feel somewhat guilty at attacking the monster while it was this feeble, but this was

payback for unleashing that crazy skill on me. No matter what I might say, the girls were intent on getting their raw materials anyway.

When the monster had only a couple of percentage points of HP left, and its defeat was inevitable, it let out a high-pitched scream. This was an SOS skill exclusive to devils to call other monsters and sympathetic devils. Their gist was, “I’ll let you be my master, so come save me!” Devils would wait until the last moment to send this call out because it was humiliating. But no other monsters were on this floor, and devils wouldn’t spawn on any nearby floor. Basically, the skill was absolutely useless.

“Cool,” I said. “Now that it’s done begging for its life, let’s put an end to th—”

“Huh?! What’s happening?!” blurted Tenma.

Just as I was about to drive my sword into the lesser demon as it tried to crawl away, a figure of pure purple light appeared before my eyes. Somebody was using the Gate skill to get here.

All three of us jumped backward and waited to see what would happen next. The light coalesced into a humanoid form.

“Is this the right place? Yep, it’s here all right... Wow, there are barely any mana particles in the air here. Oh, who’s there?”

The figure from within the light had a face that, on a human, would look about as young as a middle schooler. He had long, wavy blond hair and fiery red eyes. Above his white scale-patterned armor, he wore a black cloak with a red trim. Large curled horns sprouted from his head. This individual was a fiend in combat mode.

And I knew this fiend, but the one I remembered was more shy and nervous. He seemed very different from how he used to be.

“Oh, what do we have here!” he said. “Akira, Kotone, and... Wait, is that Piggy? How in the world did you three get put together?” The fiend threw his hands in the air in an exaggerated display of surprise.

Why does he know who we are? I wondered. There’s only one explanation I can think of...

“Who the hell are you?” asked Kuga. “Those horns... Are you a devil?”

“A devil?” repeated Tenma. “But why does he know our names?”

Tenma and Kuga weren't acting particularly cautiously. After all, the fiend looked like nothing more than a young teenage boy. But it would be wise for them to tread carefully. Appearances rarely correlated with strength in this world. That especially applied to this fiend because he was at a far higher level than the lesser demon we'd just defeated.

The giant devil let out a whimper.

“Hmm? Ah, that's right! You're the one that called me here. The problem is, I'm a pretty busy guy, y'know? For interrupting me, you can have a taste of my Blade of Agares.”

The fiend activated the Blade of Agares skill with a flick of its wrist. A blinding light obscured everything momentarily as an explosive blast rippled throughout the room. The shock wave blew the three of us who'd been watching backward.

Inside the crater that the explosion created, the torn halves of the monster were all that remained of the lesser demon. These soon evaporated, leaving behind the monster's horns and a magic gem.

“So, guys, here's the deal. I want to get to the outside world. Any ideas on how I can do that?”

As I forced my body to crawl forward, I tilted my head and saw his eyes. They were burning just as brightly, just as crazed, as when he'd first appeared.

Afterword

Long time no see. Or perhaps, hello for the first time! I'm Akito Narusawa. Thank you for reading *Finding Avalon* Volume 3.

The plot of the third volume centers on the Battle of the Classes. Our protagonist Souta heads into the dungeon with the encouragement(?) of his peers, but there he'll encounter quirky heroines, rivals, and hostile groups. Will he be able to make it through unscathed? Of course not. You can tell that much by reading the volume's subtitle!

I'm hoping that the fourth volume will be released in the fall or winter of 2023. The next volume will feature more of the world besides Adventurers' High. The plot might deviate from the web novel, but I'll do my best to get it released on schedule.

Additionally, the serialization of the manga adaptation has begun. You can read the first three chapters of the manga adaptation for free at *Tonari no Young Jump*. I hope you'll give it a look; Zero Satou has breathed new life into *Finding Avalon*. I'm always excited to see his detailed, badass illustrations. Thank you very much!

Finally, I'd like to use this space to express my gratitude. I want to thank my editor for listening to everything I wanted to say (thanks for the awesome time a few days ago!), as well as KeG for his amazing and genuine artwork. I'd like to thank the proofreaders for smoothing out the text, the graphic designers, and the printers. Thank you all so much!

But my biggest thanks go to you, the reader who has supported this series and enabled it to reach volume 3.

Until we meet again in the next volume.

April 2023, Akito Narusawa

Bonus Short Story

A Shopping Trip Before the Battle of the Classes

Adventurers crowded the large square outside the Adventurers' Guild. It was never quiet here since adventurers from all over the world would gather at this location, which added to my enjoyment of watching the crowd. Some wore suits of armor that rattled as they walked, while the magic practitioners had colorful robes that reminded me of parrots.

I stood on the edge of the square, dressed more fashionably than usual. As I waited, I was a little nervous.

"Found you!" a cheerful voice called out. "Sorry for keeping you waiting, Souta."

I turned toward the voice and saw Satsuki waving her hand as she approached me. She was wearing a white oversized blouse and an A-line skirt. While she was a petite girl and always looked cute, her clothes took her cuteness to a new level. And right behind her was...

"We arrived right on time, so there's no problem," said Risa, smiling. She was wearing a beige summer sweater and white wide leg pants. Her outfit was quite relaxed, but that fit her personality perfectly.

Both would be attractive no matter what they wore, although these outfits complimented their features wonderfully. I felt too embarrassed to say that to them, though.

"All good," I said. "I only just got there."

Risa chuckled. "Let's start browsing then!"

"Yeah!" Satsuki said. "I've been saving up. Now I just need to find something to buy."

The three of us had arranged to go shopping for equipment. Even though Risa and Satsuki's raids were going well, the problem with leveling up so quickly was

that they'd outgrown their equipment in no time. Fortunately, they'd made a fair amount of money from selling the magic gems of all the monsters they'd slain around the tenth floor. As such, both had decided to spend it on new equipment. They had arranged to go shopping by themselves but had mentioned that they'd love to have me around for my expert opinion on armor and weapons. I'd jumped at the chance! I wouldn't turn down an opportunity to help the two girls out, and I made sure to wear my best outfit for the day.

We entered the colossal Adventurers' Guild building. In addition to the administrative offices overseeing the adventuring world, the building contained public facilities like a library and a hospital. There were also customer service businesses like restaurants, fashion outlets, and armor and weapons stores. This mix made the guild a popular destination for ordinary people as well as adventurers.

I could see all sorts of people walking—adventurers, families, couples, you name it. We stayed close as we slowly walked through the crowd to avoid losing each other. A store with cute dresses in their display window caught Satsuki's attention, only for her to put on a guilty smile when she noticed me watching her. I would've been more than happy to let her look inside that store, but we continued toward the equipment stores instead.

After going up several escalators, we arrived at the floor where most adventuring equipment stores stood. Multiple display lights illuminated a gleaming full suit of plate armor, capturing my attention. The bottom half had a skirt, and the top half was shaped to accentuate the female wearer's curves. Still, the armor's design prioritized aesthetic appeal over practicality.

Satsuki's eyes lit up, and she remarked, "That armor's so pretty... I wonder if I'll ever be able to wear something like that."

"You have more of a middle guard role, so you're better off wearing something lighter," replied Risa.

Wearing large amounts of metal armor would restrict mana flow and impede your ability to use magic. As Risa had said, light armor was a better choice for adventurers who needed to be mobile or use magic in their fights.

"I can't believe how big this store is," I said.

“Let’s start here,” said Risa. “They’ve got a lot for us to look through.”

“Sounds good,” added Satsuki.

From the entrance, this appeared to be a large store. They offered a variety of equipment, from swords and blunt weapons for close-combat fighters to magic staffs and other goods for long-distance adventurers. I began browsing their collection of hand axes and two-headed axes.

Most of their wares were cheap steel weapons, with prices ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of yen. Over ninety percent of adventurers were lower than level 10, so it made sense that they’d cater primarily to this target market with steel weapons. I did spot a few customers pretentiously purchasing equipment made from mithril alloy and other dungeon materials, but not many.

A little farther away from where I stood, showcases displayed mithril alloy equipment. The cheapest cost hundreds of thousands of yen, and the prices skyrocketed as the mithril content of the equipment increased. It was the sort of equipment we’d come to look for, yet it seemed like a bad idea to purchase such expensive equipment without testing it out first.

“This sign says there’s a room in the back where you can try out the equipment,” said Risa.

“Oh, look, it says they’ve got lots of weapons there for you to try out!” Satsuki said. “Let’s go take a look!”

The rear end of the store was close enough to the dungeon to be inside the magic field, so the store’s owners set up a room for customers to test the weapons. I really liked this service; weapons felt very different from usual if you didn’t have the physical enhancements from being inside a magic field.

We entered the designated testing room. The interior wasn’t massive, but it was large enough for a few people to swing big weapons around without hitting each other.

Many of the store’s best-selling weapons were laid out inside for testing. Apparently, we could ask a staff member to bring in any other weapons from the main store. I chose to start with the weapons already here.

I picked up a simple hand axe weighing around two kilograms and swung it. With my physical enhancements, weapons like this felt light as a feather. I was used to wielding the ten-times heavier Boost Hammer, so this hand axe felt somewhat inadequate.

“They’ve got so many weapons in here,” remarked Risa.

“How does this shortsword look?” asked Satsuki.

The two girls were holding thirty-centimeter-long shortswords, which were useful regardless of an adventurer’s job. Such uses included fights against monsters and self-defense as well as for uses while camping. Meanwhile, the girls stood a safe distance away from each other and began spinning around and swinging the shortswords. Satsuki spun so quickly that I could *almost* see what was beneath her skirt... I really liked that oblivious side of her.

Feeling guilty about staring, I looked around for excellent weapons. That was when one of the other customers looking through the pile swung a sword in a wide arc. What was he up to?

“Yeah, see,” he said, “when you get as strong as me, swords like this are nothing. Watch... Hoorah!” He was an adventurer with a small mustache. The mithril alloy sword would weigh seven or eight kilograms, and he was swinging it around, probably trying to impress us.

“That’s awesome!” his friend said, intentionally speaking loudly enough for us to hear. “Mithril alloy is so heavy. You must be a top adventurer just to pick a weapon like that up!”

The sword would undoubtedly be too heavy for adventurers at the very beginning of their careers, but you’d only need to reach level 5 or so to wield it properly. In other words, they exaggerated when they said that only top adventurers could use it to impress us. I could see them shooting glances in our direction. In fact...

Ah, I see. They’re showing off for the girls, I thought.

I looked back at Satsuki and Risa, who were still swinging the light shortswords around. Adventurers’ High was home to all manner of attractive people, and the two girls were stunning even by those high standards. Their

pretty outfits only made them look even more appealing. While I understood why the men would feel the urge to try to win their interest, the girls hadn't even noticed them.

"I thiiiiink I'll try this one next," drawled Risa. "Ooh, it's mithril alloy."

There was a longsword with a meter-long blade that must've weighed more than twenty kilograms. Risa picked the weapon up with one hand, took a stance, and stepped forward while slashing twice in the shape of a cross.

Satsuki clapped. "Wow! You look so cool, Risa!"

I had to agree with her praise. Her intense and lethal technique reminded me of her status as one of the best sword masters in *DEC*. People often needed to practice with a new weapon to get used to its balance, but Risa handled it perfectly on her first try. Although I considered myself well-versed in weapons, I doubted I could pick up a longsword and demonstrate a technique as expertly as Risa. I'd need to get her to give me a lesson someday.

"I-I..." stuttered the boaster, suddenly pale. "Uh, I've just remembered there's somewhere I need to be. Better get going."

"R-Right, yeah. I-I don't wanna make you late, so let's bounce."

The men left in a hurry. I could understand why they'd feel put off. Both had just witnessed a girl they wanted to impress pick up an incredibly heavy mithril alloy longsword and wield it in a way that even amateurs could see was masterful. Hopefully, this would teach them not to judge based on appearance.

"Now that we've got the place to ourselves, let's try out more of these weapons," said Risa.

"Good idea," responded Satsuki. "How about this one?"

They carried on happily, trying weapons like nothing had happened. *Wait, so did they do that on purpose?*

We tried out a few more weapons, then looked around some other stores. In the end, the girls opted for some shortswords they could use when camping during the Battle of the Classes that would start soon. They were made of mithril alloy, meaning the blades would stay sharp for a long time, even with

use.

“Thanks for everything today,” said Satsuki. “I’ll be sure to get lots of practice with my new shortsword.”

“Yeah, let’s practice tomorrow,” agreed Risa. “See you later, Souta.”

The two girls smiled and waved me farewell as they carefully carried the boxes with their shortswords. This shopping trip had been worth it just to see those smiles.

I left the busy Adventurers’ Guild area and started walking home.

“The Battle of the Classes, huh... Guess it’ll be starting soon.”

Satsuki and Risa planned to assist our class in various ways during the Battle of the Classes, but I’d have it easy. All I needed to do was get to the seventh floor of the dungeon. What could go wrong?

Come to think of it, Kano said she wanted some new weapons. I’ll finish the Battle of the Classes, then get right back to planning how best to gather materials from the dungeon.



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Finding Avalon: The Quest of a Chaosbringer Volume 3

by Akito Narusawa

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