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As a Former Failure and Overweight Villain,

I'm Ready to Rank Up and Form a Party

with My Beautiful Classmates

FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER



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“Hmph.”

“Oof!!!”

Souta Narumi

The protagonist. He's usually overweight because of his Glutton debuff skill.

Piggy (Souta Narumi)

The obese version of Souta Narumi. He's currently working hard to be athletic despite his weight.

Satsuki Oomiya

The straitlaced leader of Class E, admired by everyone.

Risa Nitta

A gorgeous, intelligent woman with glasses. Somehow she knows Piggy's true identity...?!

Kaoru Hayase

Piggy's childhood friend. She's thrown into confusion upon seeing Piggy's change...

Kano Narumi

Piggy's cute little sister. A girl with boundless energy and an exceptional talent for combat.



“Tell me, Souta Narumi...
You’re Mav, aren’t you?”

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Chapter 1: To the Tenth Floor - Part 1

“So the last skill the skeleton fired off was an anti-air skill?” asked Kano.

“Yep,” I replied. “It’s an anti-air skill used for counters that has a high chance of inflicting critical damage when used against opponents in mid-air.”

I’d blacked out after the intense fight against Volgemurt and slept for two hours. When I woke up, my immense hunger almost made me pass out again. Kano was carrying me on her back through the dungeon because I still didn’t have the strength to walk.

Ever since possessing Piggy’s body, I’d been working on a diet and found the pants I had worn when I joined the school felt a little loose at the waist. This glimpse of success had made me hopeful that I could reach eighty kilograms within six months... But after the short fight with the skeleton, I awoke with a remarkably thinner body. Being obese made it hard to remember how my body should look until I checked my arms and my waist, finding that I barely had any body fat. My clothes and armor also were baggy over my body.

I had maintained my decency with a belt, yet munching on my sister’s snacks to quell my insatiable hunger made that unnecessary as my pants became tight once more. My belly swelled with every bite, like a scene from a manga, and I was rapidly returning to my old plump self. Even though I wanted to stop, the hunger was too powerful to resist. What the hell was going on with my body?

Kano had changed too. Following the fight, her physical enhancements had reached the point where she could effortlessly lift boulders that weighed dozens of kilograms one-handed. Clearly, she’d gone up by more than just one or two levels.

Leveling up had also made her hyperactive. She was darting around, zigzagging every which way with me on her back. I wished she’d calm down and walk properly. After all, I didn’t want anyone to witness the surreal, embarrassing sight of a high school boy getting a piggyback ride from a tiny girl.

I wouldn't have to worry if my legs were in working order, I thought.

I'd used Basic Appraisal on myself to see why I couldn't move my legs properly after waking up, and I saw that I had reductions in my movement speed and maximum HP. These conditions were likely caused by my leg muscles repairing themselves imperfectly following repeated use of healing and strengthening magic, which had caused strain to my body. A few spots had gone numb or had no sensation.

For treatment, one of my options was getting healed at the Adventurers' Guild to pay for expensive treatment. I could get the school's Priests to look me over, but they'd definitely appraise me. Those choices would reveal I'd leveled up so much, and I didn't want anyone to know that. With those options rejected, I'd decided on going to Granny's Goods, a hidden shop on the tenth floor.

A falchion I'd taken after the fight hung from my waist. The skeleton had dropped this weapon along with a magic gem when defeated. We'd also helped ourselves to a pendant with an aqua blue jewel and a silver chain from the treasure chest in the lord's room, which had opened by itself.

Both pieces of loot were likely magic items, so Basic Appraisal not displaying their properties meant they were probably mid-level items. However, loot guarded by undead monsters often included cursed items. That was why I kept the falchion in its sheath and the pendant in my rucksack. If any curses existed, they wouldn't activate unless we equipped the items.

I was trying to get a grip on our current situation. The problem was that Kano was desperately curious about my fight with Volgemurt and had been shooting questions at me the whole journey.

"What was that last skill you used?" she asked excitedly. "It looked super powerful..."

"Oh, Blade of Agares?"

Blade of Agares was a skill from the expert Sword Saint job that worked with one-handed swords, whether using a single weapon or dual wielding. It was an incredible weapon skill because it required only a simple motion for Manual Activation, displayed few signs that it was about to be activated, and didn't

leave its user vulnerable afterward. Its most notable quality was that you could activate it without wielding a weapon. Although this reduced its power, it had become a popular choice for players that wanted to fight other players with a mix of martial arts and weapons.

I had a cheat that let me utilize weapon skills I'd learned in the game, even if most of them were useless for inflicting damage because my strength stat was abysmal and my weapons were too weak. Blade of Agares, however, dealt a fixed amount of damage in addition to the one that scaled on your strength stat, making it the one skill that I could use to attack enemies at my low level.

Activating an expert job skill at my level came at a cost. My body couldn't handle the strain, and I'd entirely lost my right arm. I'd expected something like that might happen, though.

"Bro, you've gotta tell me," said Kano. "How the hell did you fire off all those skills? And what was with the way you activated the strengthening skill at the beginning of the fight? And before we get to that, what was that strengthening skill anyway?"

Kano naturally had a lot of questions. So, I took a moment to plan my explanation.

"It's a high-level technique to convert body fat into mana," I explained. "You're too inexperienced and have too little body fat to attempt it."

"What sort of weird technique is that...?" muttered Kano. "And stop trying to sound like my master!"

The teacher at the martial arts school Kano had attended for the last six months had demanded his students call him master and acted like an elderly expert despite being young, which she found annoying. She'd also complained about his lame beard and sleeveless vests. Apparently, he was a high-level adventurer.

"I can explain everything, but only after you're strong enough to protect yourself from other adventurers. Learning dungeon secrets can put you in danger," I said.

"Ugh... Okay," she relented.

She was being uncharacteristically compliant.

Some game knowledge was still too risky to tell her, though I might be better off teaching her how to use Manual Activation soon. She should have a means to protect herself in case anything unexpected happened or a dangerous game scenario got us in trouble outside the dungeon.

We continued chatting as we jogged down the seventh floor's main street and reached the eighth floor after an hour.

The dungeon's structures returned to a cave setting. But they were bigger than on previous maps, twenty to thirty meters wide and tall, not feeling too claustrophobic. The rest area at the floor's entrance held even fewer amenities than on the seventh floor, with just a handful of benches and vending machines. It was like a rest stop in an empty rural village.

Kano lowered me, pointed at the toilets, and said, "Sit tight for a second. I just need to use the bathroom."

I could walk around okay now, so she didn't need to treat me like I couldn't look after myself.

"I'll be waiting by that vending machine," I replied.

After she'd left, I slowly stood up, stretched my back, and carefully walked twenty meters to the vending machine to see how I fared. My legs didn't hurt, but they still felt numb in a few spots. I looked at my calves, noticing my veins and muscles bulging through my skin. Even though I could still fight in this condition, my speed and reaction time would be much worse than usual. It would be best to avoid combat.

"That's what I get for pushing myself too far," I scolded myself. "Not that I had a choice."

My right arm had regrown perfectly, even if the muscles and skin of my left arm had not done the same. Still, I was unnaturally hungry despite everything I'd eaten. I wasn't sure whether my Glutton skill or the side effect of prolonged use of healing magic caused my insatiable hunger. Perhaps it was both.

I looked up at the old-style vending machine to distract myself.

It sells udon, I thought. Ridiculously expensive udon.

The udon was the cheap kind, just noodles with deep-fried tempura batter. Yet the price was almost a thousand yen. That was more expensive than I would've thought, even knowing that prices increased the farther down the dungeon you were.

I wanted to resist, but the temptation grew and made my stomach growl.

Who am I kidding? Just one won't hurt, I mused. And before I knew it, I'd wolfed down several bowls.

When Kano returned from the bathroom, she looked at me with her head tilted to one side and remarked, "That's strange. You're almost back to your normal shape. What's going on with your body?"

"I've...had a bit too much to eat," I confessed. "Do you think you can still carry me?"

"I'll give it a go, so hop on," she responded.

I climbed onto her back.

"Oh, yeah, this is totally fine," she said, galloping around the rest area with me on her back.

I wished she could rein it in a little because it was embarrassing. Though the eighth floor was less busy than the previous floors, we still got odd looks from the adventurers there.

"But is it safe to carry you all the way to the tenth floor?" asked Kano. "What about all the monsters?"

"We should be okay," I said. "But maybe we should try fighting an eighth-floor monster to see how strong you are now."

We'd need to pass through a room with a miniboss inside to get to the hidden store on the tenth floor. In the worst case, we might have to battle our way through. So, we'd be better off knowing how strong we had become before getting to that point. I wanted to learn how much we'd leveled up after the Volgemurt fight.

The eighth floor had four types of monsters: orc generals, giant bats, orc archers, and orc soldiers. Orc generals had a monster level of 9 and often had several orc soldiers and orc archers accompanying them. You needed to count how many enemies you were fighting at once if you encountered one.

Giant bats were pesky too. Although their attacks weren't strong, they were exceptionally annoying to fight against if you had no long-range attacks because they could fly. You couldn't just ignore them and move on either because they'd follow you relentlessly, forcing you to defeat them. I wished we had a long-range party member to help with raiding this floor, but we did have other options.

"The standard way to defeat them is to hit them with a counter the exact moment they attack you," I explained.

"Cool... Ah! Up there! That's gotta be a giant bat, right?"

While Kano was carrying me down the main street leading to the ninth floor, she spotted a fifty-centimeter-long creature clinging to the ceiling. A bat that big would probably have a wingspan of one and a half meters.

"It hasn't seen us," I said. "Maybe it's sleeping?"

"In that case, I'll chuck a rock at it," said Kano.

We moved over to the spot right beneath the giant bat, where it was about twenty meters up. Kano got a pebble from the ground and flung it at the monster. The pebble whizzed through the air and struck a spot one meter away from the giant bat, exploding into pieces. From the force of the impact, I guessed Kano must've hurled the stone at about two hundred kilometers per hour.

The giant bat jumped to life at the sudden sound and buzzed as it scanned its surroundings. When it spotted us, it folded its wings in and plunged, aiming at my sister's unguarded neck.

"Come and get it!" yelled Kano.

She readied her dagger to strike back.

Hmm, I thought.

The giant bat's gliding speed was a hundred kilometers an hour, but I still saw its movements clearly. Kano could also do this because she skillfully grabbed it by its neck instead of slicing the beast when it attacked. The monster screeched and struggled in her grasp.

Kano leaned in to examine the bat more closely, likely expecting it to be cute. When faced with the sight of its ferocious face, she used her dagger to finish it without hesitation and turned it into a magic gem.

Yikes, Kano, I thought.

"It was really easy to follow what it was doing," stated Kano. "Do you think that's because I've leveled up?"

"Yep," I replied. "In addition to your strength and mana, leveling up also increases your reaction speed and dynamic visual acuity."

This fight proved that her dynamic visual acuity had a margin increase. She could probably take on multiple giant bats without breaking a sweat. But we'd need a bigger sample size to gauge how strong we had become.

In other words, we needed another fight.

Chapter 2: To the Tenth Floor - Part 2

A black mist formed two kilometers away from where we'd fought the giant bat, and an orc archer appeared.

"Have a go at taking it down fairly," I suggested to Kano.

"Roger."

Kano set me down and brought her dagger up. Hopefully this fight would be more informative than the fight against the giant bat.

As soon as the orc archer left its defenseless postspawn state, it spotted us and raised its bow. The orc fired an arrow at Kano's leg as she ran toward it, probably wanting to slow her down.

The monster's bow was simple, no more than a tree branch with a bowstring tied. Yet it was massive, over two meters long. The loud sound the bowstring made when released showed how much power one needed to use the weapon. And the arrows' boom made it seem like someone had used a ballista. Level 8 monsters were nothing to trifle with.

And yet...

Kano effortlessly struck away the arrowheads of the projectiles without slowing down, and she sliced the orc archer open from its neck to its collarbone when she closed in on it. The orc archer turned into a magic gem before even hitting the floor.

Her dagger had bent slightly out of shape due to the force exerted upon it.

"Oh no, my dagger!" yelled Kano. "It's gone wonky!"

"From the looks of things, you might have gone up to level 15," I said.

Although the dagger's slender design made bending it more likely, it was as durable as any other steel weapon. It had been tough enough to retain its shape when she'd handled it roughly at level 8. This display meant her grip strength and overall power had increased.

Also, that was a rental weapon and technically belongs to the school, not you... Now we're gonna have to find a way to pay for it.

I paused for a moment.

"We'll have to get some new weapons," I said. "I'm basically broke, so I hope we can find something nice at Granny's Goods."

"Can we trade our dungeon coins and magic gems there?" asked Kano.

In the game, you could buy items at Granny's Goods that other adventurers had sold. One could snatch up magic items and weapons made from rare materials at a cheap price as long as enough were in circulation. We probably wouldn't find anything like that because there weren't many other players in this world. The lack of players meant that certain items would be cheaper to buy.



“Looks like you can handle the fights, so it should be safe to head down to the tenth floor,” I said.

“Gotcha,” replied Kano. “Hang on tight because I’m gonna run.”

I climbed onto Kano’s back, and she sped down the scarcely populated road toward the next floor.

Kano’s running form was like she was jogging, probably so I wouldn’t have a bumpy ride. Somehow, she reached a speed of about forty kilometers per hour. Several adventurers did a double take when they saw us, startled by her speed and how she was carrying me.

Uhh, Kano, I thought. Couldn’t you slow down just a bit? We’re getting odd looks.

“Whoa, I’m going crazy fast!” she shouted, laughing. “This is so much fun!”

“Watch where you’re going!” I screamed.

Despite the main street not being as busy as the other floors, we encountered adventurers traveling down the path. I knew it would end badly if we collided with them.

After Kano ran for a few more kilometers, we reached the ninth floor. I thought about suggesting we take a rest to let Kano catch her breath after twenty minutes of running. But she’d barely broken a sweat, so we skipped it and set straight off for the tenth floor.

The official statistics claimed that only ten percent of adventurers could fight monsters on the tenth floor. When I looked at the ninth-floor rest area, I only saw a handful of adventurers. All of them had likely changed to basic jobs, recognizable because they all wore equipment suited to their roles of Fighter, Caster, Thief, or others. Fighters, who wore light armor and used single-handed swords, were the best represented among the gathered adventurers.

A person generally needed three things to be able to reach this point: enough capital to equip yourself with decent armor, time to hunt monsters and level up, and the right amount of friends to form a party. Few people had all three.

Those who had these things received support from sponsors or an adventuring clan, were graduates of Adventurers' High, or were wealthy. Of course, former players could get along just fine with just their game knowledge.

"So what'll we run into on the ninth floor?" asked Kano.

"Mostly orcs and bats, same as the eighth. Although you do get some trolls down here too."

Trolls were giant, three-meter-tall hairy monsters with a level of 9. They attacked with bare fists rather than weapons, but it was a good idea to dodge their blows because of their colossal strength. You would be in deep trouble if they caught you too. Fights against trolls often became prolonged due to the monster's regenerative skills. Longer fights increased the risk of other monsters joining the fray, so fleeing was usually the best option.

"Reeeally," she said. "I bet I could walk all over them with my current strength."

"Don't forget that I'm not in fighting form, and our weapons are too weak to handle our strength," I warned her. "We'll fight back if one attacks us, but don't go looking for trouble."

After a pause, Kano replied, "Sure."

I watched a party of adventurers battling in the distance as we strolled toward the tenth floor.

"Look over there!" called out Kano. "There's a weird lump in the ground."

"That'll be an active trap," I explained. "Avoid lumps like that if you spot them unless you want to break your back trying to climb back up."

So far, we'd only encountered traps that others had already sprung on the main streets of the dungeon. However, we'd begun to find a few active traps down here where fewer adventurers came. The traps on the first ten floors were relatively conspicuous and of no danger when careful. Around the twentieth floor, traps would become almost impossible to spot, requiring parties to have at least one member with a trap detection skill.

We kept running, overtaking several other parties, and even passed an orc

general. Since we were the only adventurers there, we ran past the monster and finally reached the tenth floor.

Reaching the tenth floor was one of my long-standing objectives, so being here moved me deeply... Or I would've felt that if I'd planned it and not been forced here by that damn skeleton and those bastards from Soleil. They'd get what was coming to them, especially after what they had done to Kano. I'd make sure of that.

Thinking about them pissed me off.

I glanced around at our surroundings in the resting area of the entrance to the tenth floor. The creators of this floor's map had designed it to look like a human-made labyrinth. All the walls were built from stone, as were the floors. Even the light blue ceiling looked like the sky, seeming brighter and less claustrophobic than on the other floors. The scenery reminded me of walking through the backstreets of a traditional Japanese castle town.

"There are the shops. Oh, look, there's a hotel too!" remarked Kano.

Several stores sold their items in a corner of the rest area alongside offices with employees of the Adventurers' Guild. On the other side was an old traditional Japanese inn. It looked like they served food inside, and several parties were relaxing and chatting outside its entrance.

Unlike the leisure facilities on the fourth floor, this one catered mainly to actual adventurers looking for a place to stay during their raids. Going through the dungeon without using a gate would take half a day, with the same being true of the return journey. As such, adventurers who raided deep inside the dungeon needed a place like this on the tenth floor to stay for a night. Most adventurers brought tents with them and camped in the open space of the resting area to save on costs. But high-level adventurers and the upper classes were too proud to pitch a tent, which kept the inn in business.

Doesn't make a difference to us, I thought. We can just use the gate.

Granny's Goods was opposite the main street that led to the eleventh floor. Few adventurers would have business in this direction, as the area teemed with

monsters. I decided that we should take a break to prepare for the coming conflict.

“Let’s rest up a bit,” I said. “I’m gonna go use the bathroom.”

“Me too,” Kano replied. “Oh! And I’ll pick up some food to take with us, just in case we get hungry.”

Then, I glanced at the food stalls and saw a terrifying sign reading “Yakisoba: 1080 yen.”

I knew I shouldn’t grumble. The delivery people had to fight through monsters to get the supplies down here, and the hiring pool for a job like that would be tiny. But still, over a thousand yen for some yakisoba? I wondered how much more expensive it was going to get.

As I continued brooding over the prices when I returned from the bathroom, I got a big surprise. My sister was about to order from that same yakisoba stand.

Better check my wallet, I thought.

“Hey, mister!” chirped Kano. “Can I get two yakisoba?”

“Comin’ right up!” replied the vendor. “Two yakisoba, with some extra for the pretty lady.”

“Thanks so much!”

I looked at the yakisoba he’d given her. The servings were larger than what he’d served to other customers. Yet the stingy vendor had barely put any filling inside.

We wrapped the yakisoba packs in napkins and put them in our rucksacks, took a final look at the resting area, and set off to the west toward the hidden store. As the name suggested, it stood in an area that was difficult to access.

“So we just have to slot a dungeon coin into the wall?” asked Kano.

“Yeah, a copper one,” I said. “There’s a miniboss on this floor that has a chance of dropping them when you defeat it, but we don’t need to do that. We’ve already got some from killing the orc lord.”

Kano groaned and said, “Can we at least come back to fight the boss when

you're all healed?"

I'd thought running for an entire hour with me on her back would wear her out, but Kano was itching for a fight. Her physical enhancements were having a greater effect on her than I had expected.

While I felt incredibly energetic after leveling up, I was pretty sure I was experiencing the burst of hyperactivity a person felt after powering through exhaustion.

At any rate, we were almost at our destination. I'd get my status effects healed at Granny's Goods first, then I could sleep well at our home. All I'd need to do was to keep my guard up for a while longer.

Chapter 3: The Smiling Fiend

We continued traveling along the stone-paved floor, heading to the hidden area. The straight corridors were perfect for seeing ahead, even if there were plenty of crossroads. Thus, we had to be vigilant against ambushes from the blind spots of the intersections.

I'd walked by myself as there were bound to be more encounters in these parts that other adventurers rarely ventured. Although, I had to keep an eye on how my legs were doing as I proceeded.

"What sort of monsters will we get on the tenth floor?" asked Kano, idly spinning her dagger in her hand.

"Mostly large humanoid monsters like trolls and orc lords," I explained. "The miniboss is a minotaur."

"Ooh, a minotaur?" noted Kano, humming. "I wonder if I'm strong enough to beat an orc lord in a fair fight now..."

The image of the orc lord as a fearsome foe was still fresh in my mind from our trains on the fifth floor, but we were probably more powerful than it now. That realization hadn't quite sunk in based on how quickly we'd leveled up.

Many humanoid monsters were on this floor, so I instructed Kano to put on her chest the Crest of the Orc Lord we'd found on the fifth floor since it would give her buffs against them. The badge with a cute picture of a pig would increase her attack damage by ten percent and reduce received damage by ten percent. Only the fifth floor's orc lord dropped this item, and perhaps I could get a few more if we could monopolize the bridge-dropping trick.

We heard pounding from the left corridor, and felt tremors as we approached an intersection. A troll was coming. I peeked around the corner and saw a troll lumbering in our direction.

At almost three meters tall, the troll was a giant. Thick fur covered its muscular body, it used tattered rags like clothes, and it had messy hair. Trolls

weren't perceptive, so they wouldn't attack unless we strolled blatantly up to them despite them being active monsters.

"What do we do?" whispered Kano. "Should we fight it?"

"No," I whispered back. "We'll wait for it to pass by."

Small-bladed weapons like daggers and shortswords often failed to penetrate past a troll's thick muscles or fat unless you managed to hit it in the right place. To take a troll down quickly, you needed a weapon with a longer blade or skills with high attack power and penetrative capabilities. We were better off avoiding the fight for now.

So, we backed up and waited for the troll to pass before continuing to the hidden area.

After another kilometer of walking, dodging traps, and sneaking past trolls, we reached a spot on the road blocked by an orc lord. There was no other way around, and the monster was there to stay.

Orcs were slow and horrible at pursuing their enemies, but I wasn't sure whether my numb legs would carry me fast enough to outrun one. I had the option of letting Kano bait it into chasing her and getting it lost. But she wasn't familiar with this map, meaning she could run into other monsters and find herself at the head of a train. Defeating the monster was our best option.

"We're taking him down," I whispered. "Be careful not to swing your dagger too hard, or it'll break."

"Gotcha," murmured Kano. "I'll take it on first, then you get it from behind."

"Sounds good."

This orc lord carried a giant club, like the one on the fifth floor. When it noticed Kano darting toward itself, the monster swung that club at her. That said, Kano sped up quicker than it could react to, and her blade gleamed as she cut it open from armpit to hip.

The monster stumbled and roared in pain.

Unfazed by its shrieks, Kano mercilessly cut into the orc again and again. The

orc fell to the ground and transformed into a magic gem, and the fight was over before I could get behind it.

“It wasn’t quick enough to react to your attacks,” I remarked. “It probably couldn’t even see them happening.”

“And that’s not even as fast as I can go, I think,” said Kano.

Despite the nasty impact the giant club could deliver, Kano was too quick for that to be a realistic concern. Part of that was because she could see everything the orc was doing, mainly because her physical enhancements had increased her movement and reaction speed by far more than I’d assumed. Seeing that the fight looked like a piece of cake for her, I thought she could probably trounce the minotaur.

We had a few more battles to assess our strength, then reached the domed room that housed the miniboss. We’d need to pass through this room to get the mechanism, letting us into the hidden area on the other side.

The room was about fifty square meters large. We peeked through the entrance and saw the two-meter-tall minotaur standing in the center alone. It looked small relative to the large size of the room, yet its bulging muscles and bull head gave it an intimidating appearance.

This minotaur had a monster level of 12. It wielded a labrys, a powerful axe with two symmetrical blades. You’d need a high strength stat and a sturdy weapon to deflect a blow from that axe. More importantly, this was the first monster in the dungeon that used weapon skills... Other than the unique boss we’d encountered on the seventh floor. The minotaur didn’t detect enemies well, so we would be able to sneak past it moving along the walls.

How were we going to proceed?

“I really want to fight it...” pleaded Kano quietly.

“Oh, go on then,” I said. “Just be careful with its weapon skills. You don’t wanna get hit by one of those.”

“Kay. It’ll be dead before it gets a chance anyway!”

Minotaurs used the two-handed axe weapon skill called Full Swing, which

increased attack power by an amount proportional to its user's strength stat. I'd taught Kano how to spot the movements that preceded Full Swing, but her current physical enhancements and reaction time would allow her to evade the attack even if she didn't spot it before it activated.

As soon as Kano entered the room, she leaned forward and charged at the minotaur. She went up to fifty kilometers an hour in the blink of an eye.

The noise alerted the minotaur, who noticed the intruder advancing and braced itself for an attack as it knew its disadvantage. That decision proved this wasn't a simple monster that relied solely on brute force.

I followed Kano but failed to reach the speed I had at level 8. Nonetheless, I was still running faster than an ordinary person could outside of a magic field.

No need for us to rush into an attack if the monster isn't on the offensive, I thought. Or does Kano have a plan to kill it?

Since Kano saw the minotaur was on the defensive, she zigzagged toward it while launching feints. That kept the monster guessing which direction the real attack would come from.

The minotaur seemed to hope it could use its strength to knock Kano's weapon away when she attacked and delivered a counter. It gave up on that plan and relinquished its defensive stance, probably realizing it wouldn't work. Hence, it crouched and began performing the motions to activate its weapon skill. A Full Swing would mow down everything in a wide range in front of the monster.

But the minotaur reacted too late. Kano sped up and reached the monster before it could activate Full Swing. She slipped past its right flank, stabbing its belly and circling behind it. Her hands moved independently of each other to repeatedly slash the monster, an elegant feat made possible by her Dual Wielding skill. The attacks dealt massive damage, their power bolstered by the Crest of the Orc Lord.

Regardless of the damage the minotaur took, it activated Full Swing. Fortunately, Kano had already left the attack's strike zone. The monster shrieked as Kano made mincemeat off its back, then it collapsed to the floor and turned into a magic gem.

In *DEC*, the only way to stop an offensive skill once you'd started performing the motions was to carry out a "skill cancel." No monsters would ever cancel their skills, at least none I remembered from the game. The minotaur probably didn't know how to cancel skills if the game was anything to go by.

Full Swing was difficult to evade after it had begun due to its attack radius. Luckily, you could get out of the way if you spotted the skill motions before activation.

There were four ways to dodge: advancing, crouching, jumping, and retreating. Of those, only the first two left you in position to counterattack. Kano had increased her speed and advanced, getting behind the monster and attacking it from there.

Her choice was justified by her high level relative to the minotaur's. The minotaur wouldn't have chosen Full Swing as its first attack if they'd been at the same level. In fact, its whole combat style would've been different, as it wouldn't have gone on the defensive.

"I know, I know. That only worked because I'm higher level than it," said Kano, sighing.

"Yep," I said. "Well, I wouldn't have given you the go-ahead to fight it otherwise."

Thankfully, Kano appeared to have a good understanding of her limitations. Overconfidence was an adventurer's greatest risk. If we could respawn like in the game, we could throw ourselves into situations without worrying about the consequences. But that wasn't how it worked here.

We picked up the magic gem and dungeon coin dropped by the minotaur, then walked toward the stone wall at the back of the room. Once there, I scanned the stone wall until I found a small hole. I slotted our dungeon coin inside, and then...

"Whoa!" Kano exclaimed. "The whole wall just opened up! Oh my God!"

The stone wall slid apart where the stones previously met, causing a loud rumbling as the heavy wall passed over the ground. I entered the newly created opening, marveling at the elaborate mechanism. It amazed me we made all this

happen by simply slotting a coin in a hole.

We were safe now; no monsters would spawn beyond this point.

As we walked through the open, tranquil space beyond the wall, memories of my first time playing *DEC* flooded in. This spot had been a secret when the devs first launched the servers until it became a popular place to use as a base of operations for players participating in public raids because of its large size. Whenever I came here, the place had many adventurers selling items from stalls and parties trying to attract new members. Now, we were the only ones here.

We passed through the open area and walked for a while until we came across a rectangular building composed of rough stones piled atop each other. I let out a deep sigh of relief. We'd finally arrived at our destination, Granny's Goods. I hadn't planned to visit this shop for at least another month, but events had conspired against me.

In front of the shop, a woman in thin and slovenly clothing sat on a simple chair puffing on a kiseru, a Japanese tobacco pipe.

When Kano and I approached, she calmly arose. The fiend, her large horns protruding from her forehead, smiled in greeting and welcomed us.

"Oh, hello there," she said. "Would you like to browse my items?"

Chapter 4: Granny's Goods

"Horns?!" blurted Kano. "Wait, she's not human?"

The woman with remarkably large breasts smiled and answered Kano's question, "I'm what you'd call a fiend."

Two large curved black horns sprouted from the sides of her forehead. Her name was Furufuru, which she'd reveal to players after they'd completed a quest in the depths of the dungeon and befriended her. All the gamers loved her. Despite her delicate, seductive appearance, she was over a thousand years old. She was essentially a wise old lady who would answer any questions about the dungeon. Players had nicknamed her Granny, but she would blast away those foolish enough to use that name within an earshot of her with a near fatal punch.

Fiends running shops weren't unusual in *DEC*, and members of other races had occasionally helped adventurers. I hadn't found any record of these nonhumans, but Furufuru was here, which reassured me. For that reason, I wanted our relationship to have a good start.



“Would you mind showing us what you have for sale?” I asked.

“Be my guest,” replied Furufuru. “Take a look around inside.”

This whole place was tranquil. No other adventurer was present in the shop, the square outside, or anywhere in the hidden area. And yet, the shelves contained rows of various items, from weapons and armor to accessories and medicines. This store stocked a better selection than most of the shops in the Adventurers’ Guild. Furufuru clearly wasn’t in it to make a profit, but I also knew she wouldn’t haggle on the prices.

Kano picked up a shortsword that gleamed with a dull silver light and showed it to me. “Oh my God, is this mithril? Awesome!”

“It’s a mithril alloy,” I corrected her.

Mithril, also known as magical silver, was a metal that was incredibly strong within a magic field. Outside one, it was as soft as regular silver. And so, its users had to consider that weapons made from it could turn into weak, heavy lumps of metal.

The alloy came from adding a tiny amount of mithril to regular silver to create something stronger than even steel. Adventurers within levels 10 to 30 frequently used mithril-alloy equipment.

My sister had picked a shortsword of such material, though the mithril content was no more than one percent, as the rest was silver. But silver wasn’t cheap since a small weapon like this would cost over a million yen at the Adventurers’ Guild.

You could also get equipment made from one hundred percent pure mithril. These were incredibly strong, light enough to float in water, and resistant to magic, so they were fantastic to use for magic swords and magic-resistant armor. The downside was that they were both difficult and expensive to acquire, with auction prices going through the roof.

While Kano stood mesmerized at the shortsword, I requested treatment for my status impairments. The store sold medicines that would get the job done, but getting Furufuru to use her healing magic on me was cheaper.

“I can get rid of your status impairments for, let’s see... How about three lir?” mused Furufuru.

“Deal,” I said. “Here you go.”

Lir was the unit of the dungeon currency. One copper dungeon coin equaled one lir. We currently had 138 lir from our thirty-eight copper coins and the gold coin the seventh floor skeleton lord had dropped.

Furufuru clapped in front of my eyes, then the swelling on my body subsided as I regained sensation in my legs. The woman narrowed her golden eyes and looked over my body to check the healing had worked, and she drew her head back. The first healing spell must not have worked, so she placed her index finger on my forehead and channeled magic into me. My vision gradually cleared up, even though I hadn’t been aware of that issue before.

“You’ve put yourself through quite the ordeal,” she remarked. “The second spell is on the house.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. “We had to fight an...*unusual* enemy.” I had to stop myself from going on a tirade about the mysterious skeleton we’d fought. What the hell was it doing there anyway?

I rotated my arm to test its motion, and it was back to normal. My body felt surprisingly light, yet it was nothing like that. All the food I’d eaten had puffed me back up, and I was almost as big as I’d been before the fight.

“I’d also like to change jobs, if that’s okay,” I said.

“Go ahead and use the crystal ball I’ve got in the back room,” responded Furufuru.

“Me too!” interrupted Kano, gliding over to us carrying the equipment she’d grabbed from the shelf. “I wanna change jobs too!”

Job changes allowed you to learn new skills, which expanded your tactical opportunities during combat. People from this world saw obtaining your first job as proof that you were a true adventurer, and Kano was excited to make that leap.

“So this is the job-change crystal ball? It doesn’t look particularly special,” said

Kano.

A transparent crystal ball about fifteen centimeters in diameter sat atop several layers of cloth. In the game, touching the ball summoned an interface, but I wondered how it would work here.

I gently pressed my hand against the ball and saw a mental interface appear in my mind. It was like when I did mental math, imagining the numbers in my head.

It is hard to keep up with, I thought.

Reading the interface was difficult because I couldn't compare the stats of different jobs. It would have been much easier if all the data were on a computer screen to examine the numbers and consider my options. I figured I'd better copy the numbers down on paper or my terminal to use that instead.

"My level is...19?!" I exclaimed. "It's gone up a lot. Wait, so that skeleton was around level 25?"

"What?!" said Kano, gasping. "So you've gone up eleven levels! What was a monster like that doing on the seventh floor?"

"Beats me."

I continued sifting through the interface and eventually found the job change menu.

There were three jobs I could change to: the basic jobs of Fighter, Caster, or Thief. The requirements to change into these were to have a job level of 5 in the Newbie job and to have high enough values for specific stats. Fighters needed at least 20 strength, Casters 20 intelligence, and Thieves 20 agility. Kano and I were level 19, so we had cleared the stats requirements for all three.

"Which one are you gonna pick, bro?" asked Kano.

"Let's see. I planned to go for a Thief job and get the Fake skill that lets you forge your stats... But we got here sooner than expected, which gives us some wiggle room. I might take the Caster job first and learn some magical attacks."

We'd soon have to face monsters that could reduce or nullify physical damage, making it essential to have means of inflicting nonphysical damage.

There were elemental weapons infused with magic in this world that could do that, though a select few adventurers treated the currently known ones as national treasures and hoarded them. We couldn't get our hands on one, even if we had the money.

"Kotarou uses an elemental weapon, right?" asked Kano.

"I think so," I replied. "The red effect it has is a flame enchantment."

Kotarou Tasato, the leader of the Colors Clan, wielded a sword infused with magic that classified it as one of the greatest treasures in Japan. Only a few ways to get an elemental weapon on the first thirty dungeon floors existed, so they were valuable.

"Monsters impervious to physical damage were why people stopped using firearms in the dungeon, right?" inquired Kano.

"Yep. Thanks to wraiths and slimes."

At the dawn of the adventuring age, when dungeons had first appeared in the early Showa era, the primary weapons for raiding had been bayoneted rifles. Like in my previous world, firearms were the most effective weapons in close-quarters combat, showing how a swordsman was no match against a machine gun. This world also had guns, and they'd been a safer option for hunting monsters. For example, picking off an orc from afar was safer than running up with a sword.

So why didn't adventurers use guns? After the tenth floor, some monsters could reduce or nullify projectile damage. You could try to plan your raid to avoid some of them, but you needed to deal with others such as floor bosses. A raid would stall if you only had physical attacks. In fact, the first raids hadn't pushed past the fifteenth floor.

The benefits of your physical enhancements from leveling up and changing jobs wouldn't be visible if you used guns since there weren't any skills related to them. However, monsters became stronger, quicker, and more resistant to various kinds of damage the farther you descended the dungeon, and they'd begin using powerful attacks against you. Kano and I could have sprayed Volgemurt with bullets, and he would've taken barely any damage. Although guns were fine to raid the early floors, it was best to train with a weapon and

get weapon skills or learn how to use magic. You might initially be weaker, but you would ensure greater strength in the long run.

Plus, the first ten floors pack many adventurers that you might hit if you fired a gun, I thought.

As such, it would be best if Kano, I, or the both of us, learned some magic.

Other than magical attacks, I wanted the essential skills of Fake and Detect Traps I from the Thief job. Also, I would have liked Backstep and Plus Three Skill Slots from the Fighter job.

“Can you change jobs as often as you want?” wondered Kano.

“You can,” I replied. “But your job level gets reset each time.”

Despite the ability to change jobs indefinitely, your job level returned to level 1, and you lost your status bonuses*. That wasn't a problem because you could raise your job level again. The most common reason for reverting to a previous job was to reacquire its skills and bonuses.

*TIPS: Status bonuses scale linearly with job level, with the player achieving the full bonus at level 10. For example, a Fighter with a job level of 10 will receive the full bonus of a ten percent increase in their HP and strength. But a player with that role at a job level of 1 will only receive a one percent increase to these stats.

I explained to Kano the skills and benefits* of each of the three jobs.

*TIPS: Data for the three basic jobs.

(Fighter)

Ten percent bonus to strength and HP.

Slash: Available at job level (JL) 2. Requires a single-handed or two-handed sword.

Max HP Increase I: Available at JL 4.

Full Swing: Available at JL 5. Requires a single-handed or two-handed axe.

Backstep: Available at JL 7.

Plus Three Skill Slots: Available at JL 9.

Sword Mastery I: Available at JL 10. Increases attack power and combo power when wielding a single-handed weapon.

(Thief)

Fifteen percent bonus to agility.

Fake: Available at JL 2. Falsifies stats when appraised by other players.

Stealth: Available at JL 3. Reduces the likelihood of detection by monsters.

Double Sting: Available at JL 5. Requires a shortsword. Initiates two attacks.

Power Shot: Available at JL 7. Requires a bow. Depletes stock of arrows.

Lockpicking I: Available at JL 9. Opens basic locks.

Detect Traps I: Available at JL 10. Detects basic traps.

(Caster)

Ten percent bonus to MP and intelligence.

Fire Arrow: Available at JL 2. A fire-affinity skill that conjures an arrow of flames several centimeters long.

Restoration: Available at JL 3.

Ice Lance: Available at JL 4. A water-affinity skill that conjures a lance made of ice.

Cure: Available at JL 6. Heals status impairments.

Wing Guard: A wind-affinity spell that increases defense against long-range attacks.

Meditation: Available at JL 10. MP regenerates while the skill is active.

“So, I’d like to try Caster first to shoot some spells. Can I still use Dual Wielding while casting magic?” said Kano.

“Yep, you can do both. Just be mindful of how you use your weapons so they don’t get in the way when you’re casting magic.”

Besides magical attacks, the Caster job also had the skill to heal simple status impairments, which was why every party should have at least one. It was a great skill if you had room in your skill slots.

“In that case,” I said, “I’ll go for either Fighter or Thief.”

The Fighter job came with various skills, mainly for close combat, with the most significant being Plus Three Skill Slots. I was determined to get this one. Seeing that Backstep was a skill that helped you dodge attacks by retreating seemed useful. Moreover, it allowed you to cancel other skills and attacks you were partway performing, a state that would otherwise leave you vulnerable to enemy attacks. Such skills were great during fights against other players and certain powerful monsters. Backstep was amazing until you were a high enough level to learn the Sway skill, which was an improved version.

Although the Fighter job would have given me the best benefits during combat, I chose to learn the Fake skill from the Thief job first to help conceal my stats. The other useful Thief skill was Detect Traps I, which eliminated the risks of falling victims to traps. But a party would only need one member with this ability.

“Guess I’ll become a Thief first,” I said.

I gently rested my hand on the crystal ball and closed my eyes. Number sequences formed and flooded my mind.

Chapter 5: Our First Change of Jobs

My mental projection of numbers and letters shifted whenever I focused on a particular section of the text, making it difficult to navigate. Yet I selected the Thief job, which caused a list showing my current stats to appear. I quickly jotted the numbers in my terminal.

Name: Souta Narumi
Level: From 1 to 19
Job & Job Level: Thief, Level 1
Adventurer Class: Rank 9
Status
Maximum HP: From 7 to 103
Maximum MP: From 9 to 53
Strength: From 3 to 35
Intelligence: From 9 to 51
Vitality: From 4 to 88
Agility: From 5 to 31
Mind: From 11 to 60
Skills From (1/2) to (2/6)
Glutton
Basic Appraisal
(Empty)
(Empty)
(Empty)

(Empty)

The numbers displayed my current stats and what they'd become after I changed jobs. I'd noted that the stats of an ordinary person outside the influence of a magic field would have values between three and eight. When I was level 1, my stats had appeared in that range. Now that I was level 19, however, my stats had increased massively. With these stats, I was a superhuman. I could outrun an Olympic athlete while carrying a hundred-kilogram weight, or I could spar against any martial artist with no risk of losing.

My stats were becoming lopsided as I noted my HP and vitality were high, but my strength and agility were low. That was due to my Glutton skill. Basic Appraisal indicated it gave me a bonus to increases in HP and vitality whenever I leveled up, an insatiable appetite, and a thirty percent reduction to my strength as well as fifty percent to my agility. There was also an effect that I couldn't view.

Ordinarily, going from level 1 to level 19 increased my stats forty to fifty points. With the bonus, my HP and vitality were double that, and it surprised me how big that seemed. I'd imagined it would give me an extra ten percent or something small.

Maybe I should keep the Glutton skill for a bit longer, I thought. But I hate being hungry all the time!

I debated whether to keep Glutton or get rid of the hunger for good, but Kano noticed that I had finished. So, she began shaking me by the shoulders.

"Move over. It's my turn!" she called out, eager to take my place.

Well, I guess there'll be enough time to evaluate my options, so I should just let Kano get on with it.

Kano sat by the crystal ball and looked up at me, seeking an explanation of what to do. I told her how to change jobs, and she nodded as she listened. When I was done, she successfully acquired the Caster job.

"And I'm done," reported Kano. "I don't feel any different, though."

"That's just how it is," I said. "Let me know what your stats look like now."

“Let’s see...” Kano told me her stats, and I recorded them in my terminal to not forget. When she finished, she said, “That’s everything.”

Name: Kano Narumi

Level: From 1 to 19

Job & Job Level: Caster, Level 1

Adventurer Class: Unregistered

Status

Maximum HP: 70

Maximum MP: 59

Strength: 61

Intelligence: 54

Vitality: 47

Agility: 73

Mind: 46

Skills (2/6)

Dual Wielding

Basic Appraisal

(Empty)

(Empty)

(Empty)

(Empty)

“Kano, you’re, uhh... Ridiculously strong...” I uttered.

Her stats were high even though she didn’t possess a skill that gave her bonuses like mine. If I didn’t have the Glutton skill, she would’ve beaten me hands down. I’d heard rumors during my *DEC* days that said that certain lucky

characters would increase their stats faster. Could that be why she scored so highly?

Thinking about this wouldn't change anything, so I moved on.

"Now we just need some equipment," I said. "I'll buy you a weapon if you find one you like, and you can spend up to fifty lir."

"Yay!" Kano cheered. She jumped to her feet and ecstatically charged over to the weapon section. "The daggers were easy to use, but it scared me that I'd bend them if I gripped them too hard."

I began searching for other items, with the first price tag I looked at being a magic bag. The digestive system of a monster called a giant worm was the material of these bags. You could store twenty times more stuff inside than the size would suggest. However, you'd need to be careful because the items placed inside still weighed the same. If the bag ripped, they'd all spill out onto the floor. We'd need a solution to store bulky items we might get on future raids, so it was worth checking out.

"Two hundred and fifty lir," I read. "So we can't afford it now."

In the game, the materials needed to craft the bag were commonly bought and sold thanks to the number of players around, allowing me to buy finished magic bags for as little as fifty lir. I'd known to expect a higher price in this world, but my hopes the bag would be affordable proved unrealistic. While we'd have chances to revisit this store, we would need to save more dungeon coins. I decided to rework my plan for future raids once we returned home to have more opportunities to loot coins.

I looked at a magic wand that would activate the Appraisal skill, which could reveal facts about items and skills that Basic Appraisal would not. It could also see through faked stats and made it invaluable. The downside was you could only use the wand limited times, so I'd need to find out how many.

"A wand with ten charges costs ten lir, like in the game," I said, then turned to Furufuru. "I'd like one of these, please."

"Thank you," she replied, taking the ten lir.

When we got home, I wanted to use the wand to appraise Glutton and the

items we'd looted from Volgemurt. I wished to run some more experiments too and expected to buy more wands later if I could spare the money.

Afterward, I bought two potions that healed status impairments for five lir each. I wanted Kano and me to have one each to protect ourselves, as getting hit with a status impairment at the wrong time could be fatal.

I then checked the price tag on the healing potions.

Two lir, I read internally. Surprisingly cheap.

These were excellent potions as potent as the Medium Restoration skill available to Priests. You'd immediately activate them by pouring the contents over your body to fix broken bones and missing fingers. High demand for the potions drove the price at the Adventurers' Guild up to hundreds of thousands of yen for a single bottle. And we could snag one here for a mere two lir.

During the game, they'd always be out of stock at Granny's Goods and sell for ten lir when supplies became available. The absence of other players had kept the price low, the opposite to the situation for magic bags.

Awesome! I thought. I can sell this and make a fortune!

Now for the final in-demand item.

"Do you sell unrefined mithril ore?" I asked.

"I do," responded Furufuru. "Over on that platform."

There was a raised platform about three square meters with various ores. Labels indicated one was iron ore, another was silver ore, and the one I was interested in was mithril ore. The sizes were all over the place, even for ores of the same metal. However, Furufuru explained that the metal content was roughly the same for each one. That made the problem of deciding which to buy simple since I chose the small ones, the easiest to carry around.

It was cheaper to refine mithril from ore than it was to purchase an ingot. This item had always been out of stock in the game because players interested in smithing had snapped them up as soon as they'd hit the shelves.

If I buy the ore here, I can refine and craft it into a weapon elsewhere, I thought. Then, we can get a full range of weapons with little expense.

The mithril content of the ore I'd bought was low, but the price for that much would be expensive at shops outside the dungeon. I could stand to make a huge profit if I could sell it. Step two in my resale business!

"Hey, bro!" said Kano, walking over with two swords. "So...I wanna get two one-handed swords. But they'll cost more than fifty lir together..."

Kano wasn't putting the swords down, obviously expecting she could get me to pay for both. She looked up pleadingly at me.

"How about this," I said. "We'll buy the ore, then we can get swords made at the factories at school."

"We can do that?! Yay!"

I decided we would stop by the factories and get a quote for the weapons.

"Are you leaving?" asked Furufuru.

"We are. And we'll probably return for more shopping, so we'll see you then," I said.

After paying for enough silver and mithril ore to craft our weapons, I spent the last of our lir on HP potions for us to sell. I planned to skip back and forth between Granny's Goods and the shop at the Adventurers' Guild. This left enough time in between so Furufuru wouldn't raise her prices.

"Oh, that's a shame," said Furufuru. "It's been so long since my last customer, and I'll be alone again... Or has it? Now that I think about it, another human came in not long ago."

"What?!" I remarked.

That was a stunning revelation.

Chapter 6: Humans All Look the Same

Another human had visited this store recently? Granny's Goods was in a difficult-to-access hidden area, and we had passed no other adventurers. I'd assumed nobody else had ever found it.

"What were they like?" I asked.

"Hmm," said Furufuru, tilting her head. "My apologies, but I can't remember. Humans all look the same."

That was a funny statement. Fiends looked like humans, other than their horns, so I didn't know how we could all look the same. Anyway...

I wonder whether the other customer was a player, I thought.

A bit over a month had passed since I arrived in this world. If I assumed the other players had also started in Class E, they would have faced challenges reaching Granny's Goods in that period. But it'd be possible if they'd invested more time and taken a riskier strategy than mine. I also couldn't exclude the possibility they knew techniques and methods I wasn't aware of.

Is it possible that the customer was an ordinary adventurer? I considered.

I couldn't find any reference to this store during my investigations in the library. Many decades had passed since the dungeon's discovery, so it wouldn't be outrageous that someone had slotted a dungeon coin into the hole in the wall and stumbled upon this area. It made sense they'd kept that a secret to hoard the benefits of the shop.

Whether the customer was a player or an ordinary adventurer, they would have cleared the shop of some items. That's what I would've done, but the shelves looked full... So, I asked Furufuru directly. A player would buy potions and ores like me, and an adventurer would likely buy magic items instead. The answer might help me narrow the options down.

"Oh, they didn't buy anything," replied Furufuru. "They just asked if anyone else had visited."

They didn't buy anything? I thought.

Everything the store offered was incredibly desirable compared to the goods on sale elsewhere. Perhaps they had brought no dungeon coins with them? If that were the case, wouldn't they save up and return after Furufuru had explained the currencies she accepted? And couldn't they use magic gems anyway?

Therefore, their true aim was in what they'd asked, wanting to know who else had come here. The nature and timing of the question made the customer seem more like a player.

Which of my classmates looks like they spend the most time in the dungeon? I wondered.

I didn't know how long any had spent here since I had little time getting to know them. Or rather, none of them wanted to know me after my reputation got tarnished for losing to a slime. I had joined no clubs and left when lessons ended to head straight for exercise or dungeon raids.

Plus, I've even thought of dropping out of school. Maybe I should start building relationships with my classmates to gather more information.

Getting to know my classmates would come at the cost of time, and the advantages were gathering information and rewarding game events. Most of DEC's events and key event characters revolved around students and faculty at the school. Some plots initiated by the events were dangerous. Still, I could figure out how far Akagi and the heroines had progressed through the events while getting friendly with my classmates.

"I see," I told Furufuru. "If they come back, please don't tell them we were here. It could cause trouble for us."

We'd made it here so soon due to the unforeseeable encounter with Volgemurt, and the other player had beaten me here because they were strong. I wanted to keep as much information about myself secret in case they were hostile. But I was sure I was at a higher level than them and intended to continue getting stronger.

"Of course," accepted Furufuru. "You needn't worry about that... I'll probably

forget you once you've gone anyway."

"Thank you very much," I said. "We'll see you when we come back."

Kano waved her hand. "See you later, miss!"

Furufuru waved back, smiling.

I wondered how she coped with running a dead shop in an area no one visited. It would surely mess with her perception of time, which was convenient for us.

Kano and I went out to the empty square and took a break. It was peaceful, making it easy to forget we were inside the dungeon. There were no chirping birds or rustling breezes, and the ceiling was high and emitted a bright blue light. These qualities made the space feel comfortably large. It felt nice knowing my sister and I had this spot for ourselves.

We got out the yakisoba we'd bought at the tenth floor's rest area and began to eat. As I'd dreaded, the extra money we had paid didn't translate into better taste. The flavor was so indistinct I couldn't even tell what meat they'd used.

"Let's head back home," I said.

"Yep!" chirped Kano.

There was a gate in the square we were sitting in that we could use to get home. I would register my magic at the gate so that we could visit Granny's Goods from outside the dungeon whenever we wanted.

Thanks to my high level, the four chunks of ore I carried, each weighing over ten kilograms, didn't slow me down. Their awkward size was more of a problem than their weight, which made me long for a magic bag. I'd have to save up more dungeon coins and return to get one.

I considered whether we'd hunt the minotaur in our next raid or venture deeper into the dungeon. Yet I chose to leave the question for now and think about it properly after we were home. I had a long day and felt tired, yawning nonstop.

When I found the symbols on the wall that marked the presence of a gate, I channeled my magic through the magic circle and opened it. We went through

and were instantly in the empty classroom of the school's basement. The humidity was lower here, and the air cooled my skin.

"You head on home," I said to Kano. "I'm gonna drop the ore off at the factory. Are you okay getting home by yourself?"

"I'll be fine!" responded Kano. "Thanks for dropping mine off too!"

She skipped as she left, clearly in a good mood. I almost yelled for her to be more careful because she'd be easy to spot as an outsider if someone caught her doing that. It would probably be safer if I gave her a fake uniform so she didn't stand out dressed in her armor.

People might notice I was at a high level if I carried the ore around, so I got a cart from the factory and loaded it. The cart clattered as I pushed it outside the building, where I could hear students training at the Arena. The noise made me nostalgic for my high school days. Although, I was living through them in a certain way.

While I headed to the factories, I wondered how Akagi was settling with his club activities. Had he joined the Class E exclusive club? He might have fallen into depression. If that were the case, an annoying event was on the horizon, and I'd need to avoid getting caught in the fallout.

I approached the white, rectangular factory building and marveled at the brand-new outer walls and spotless storage area. From inside, I could hear machinery and hammers striking metal. One of the school's clubs allowed students to learn blacksmithing by crafting metal carvings and other decorations private corporations ordered. Most activities took place in the factory area on school grounds. Metals mined from the dungeon, such as mithril, required a person to channel magic through them during the refining process. Adventurers' High students possessed large mana reserves because of their high levels. This advantage made them suitable to become engravers and blacksmiths, so many students pursued those career paths.

Hopefully a second-or third-year student is around, I thought, looking through the large open door leading to the factory. A stocky student spotted me and walked over.

"What do you want?" he asked, glaring at me with suspicion until he noticed

the ore in my cart. “Oh, you want an order made?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I’d like a quote for refining this ore and using it to make weapons if that’s all right.”

The student, probably a second-year, leaned forward and scanned me. Next he turned to my ore and looked surprised when he realized it was mithril.

“Oh, this is fortunate!” he said, suddenly more friendly. “Me and the guys are studying mithril alloy and can knock the price down for you.”

“Really?” I asked. “How much will it be?”

His change in attitude was a bit off-putting, but the allure of a bargain was too much to resist. I’d set my finances to drastically improve once I could sell my HP potion, even though my wallet was nearly empty.

“Refining the mithril and silver will cost you...this much,” he explained, showing me the calculation on his terminal. “The price for making a weapon will depend on how much mithril we extract, so you’re better off waiting until the process is over before making a choice.”

The price he showed me was lower than I’d expected. Visiting the Adventurers’ Guild and seeing their prices would be worth it. If they were cheaper, I could do the refining process here while I got my weapons crafted there.

“We have a deal,” I said. “I’m Narumi, a first-year Class E student.”

“First-year Class E student?” he repeated with doubt. “And you’re gonna use a mithril-alloy weapon...? Either way, come back for your metal later.”

“Aren’t you going to write me a receipt or anything?”

“Hang on a second,” he said, then disappeared into a back room and returned with a refinery request contract, which I signed. The refining process wouldn’t take long, and he told me to come back in a few days.

With that out of the way, I headed home.

“I’m back,” I said, and my mother ran out to greet me the moment I stepped through the door. “Oh, err, hi?”

“Souta!” she exclaimed. “Is Kano telling the truth? She said... Wait a second, have you lost weight?”

She seemed curious to know whether Kano had really become a Caster but got distracted by the change in my appearance. I couldn’t blame her; as it would baffle any mother to see their son lose so much weight in one day.

The weight that I’d lost in the Volgemurt fight had mostly rebounded after I devoured some snacks. Overall, I was lighter than I had been and guessed it was around ten kilograms less than usual.

Perhaps the shock of my weight loss and Kano’s story were too much for her mind to handle at once. She stood there opening and closing her mouth with no words, wildly swinging her arms around.

“Why don’t we talk over dinner?” I suggested. “I’m starving.”

After a pause, my mother agreed, “The dinner’s ready. I just need to set the table.”

I went to my room and exhaled, recognizing today had been exhausting. As I removed my tattered demon wolf armor, I noted I’d need to replace it even though I had just bought it. Then, I worried about how much I would need to spend on new armor suitable for a level 19 adventurer.

Once I changed into some casual loungewear, I went to the living room. My father was there, sitting in a chair and sporting a wooden smile.

Good, we’re all here. “Okay,” I started, “where should I begin?”

My mother slid into the chair beside me and excitedly said, “With Kano becoming a Caster!”

Many from this world widely knew that successfully attaining a basic job proved you could make a career as an adventurer. My father had always clung to the dream of becoming one but never cleared level 4 of the dungeon. He was reading a newspaper and pretending not to pay attention, yet he was listening since he was eager to learn how we’d leveled up so much.

“You can’t let anyone else know what I’m about to tell you,” I warned.

“Could it put us in danger?” asked my mother.

“Some of it could.”

New information about the dungeon could be valuable, sometimes to the point you could go on with the rest of your life and not worry about money. If word got out that you knew something, shady characters might try to force the information out of you.

As such, my parents gulped when the severity dawned on them as they waited for me to continue.

“So anyway,” interrupted Kano. “I became a Caster, and bro became a Thief.”

“Yep. Also, we’re both level 19,” I added.

“N-N-Nineteen?!” my parents screamed in unison. While my father’s mouth gaped, my mother practically grappled me. Famous clans scouted adventurers level 19 and higher. They cheered, clapping hands with each other, and continued, “Our kids are geniuses!”

Genius was a bit much, still...

I considered how detailed I should be with my explanation, knowing I could trust them and turn them into the best party members. Thus, I decided to be as open and honest with my family as possible. I would need to warn them about the danger this could bring while telling them everything I knew about the dungeon.

However, I wouldn’t tell them their world originated from a game or anything about my previous world. They would think I’d gone insane, and the information wouldn’t benefit them.

And so, I explained to them everything that had happened over the last few days.

Chapter 7: The Narumi Family Conference

The four of us held a family conference in the living room, where we sat at the low table that we used as a kotatsu in the winter.

I would tell them about my knowledge of the game next, but I explained how we'd gotten here first. So, I started with us power leveling Kano and how we got to the tenth floor.

"So you really changed jobs..." said my mother.

"For the millionth time, yes!" shot back Kano with frustration, her cheeks puffing like a hamster with a mouth full of seeds.

My father placed his newspaper on the desk and looked up, surprised. He asked, "But how did you level up so fast?"

Since my mother temped at the Adventurers' Guild and dealt with their statistics and data, she knew that even the best adventurers took at least three years to reach level 19. That time frame sounded reasonable for those with no game knowledge or access to the gates who would have to share their experience points with a large party of others. They would even have to fight monsters with no chance of getting defeated. Adventurers needed enough money, time, and trustworthy comrades to achieve that. Knowledge of the game would enable them to make the same progress in months, but Kano had reached level 19 in days. That rate was next to impossible in the game, let alone the real world.

I explained this seemingly impossible feat to my parents, including everything else we'd done. Kano had gotten up to level 7 through power leveling, and we'd hoped to reach level 9 or 10 by hunting golems on the seventh floor. A group of thugs had assaulted Kano, only for us to fight against a powerful enemy. After a tough battle, we reached level 19, and I'd lost a lot of weight.

"How dare they lay their hands on Kano!" roared my father. "I'll make them pay for that!"

I hoped my father would calm down and not try to make good on his threat. The thugs that attacked Kano belonged to an Assault Clan, and he'd stand no chance against them as a level 4.

"So that's why you're thinner," remarked my mother.

Enduring a tough fight was a bizarre explanation for sudden weight loss, although I still had plenty to lose. Still, my parents couldn't doubt what I'd said because the proof was sitting in the living room with them. I felt my mother was just happy that I'd come back in one piece, however strange the reason. She even tried to fatten me again with a high-calorie meal, which I wished she'd stop doing.

"And they were from Soleil..." said my mother. "I've heard of them."

She'd learned at her job at the guild that Soleil was a new clan founded less than a year ago. Its leader was widely known as a troublemaker who did whatever he liked. The clan was constantly on the guild's radar for picking fights with other clans.

Many reasons existed for two clans to come into conflict: fighting over promising recruits; secrets put at risk when members switched clans; or the right to raid the juiciest spots with the best monsters. The last one was especially the case when acquiring or stealing rare items, out of ordinary competitiveness or simply pride to show they were the best clan. And the biggest reason of all was the huge sums of money at stake.

Years ago, conflict between clans would only manifest as brief skirmishes inside the dungeon. In recent days, clans had made use of artificial magic fields to take their feuds outside the dungeon, sometimes resulting in damage to life and property on a devastating scale.

Regular police officers could not intervene in battles between clans, so the Adventurers' Guild had taken on the role of conflict mediator. That was how my mother knew so much about various clans and why she knew the name of Soleil.

"My friends in the Adventurer Offenses Bureau are at their wit's end trying to deal with the rise in clan violence," she told us. "They don't have the staff to handle it."

It was difficult enough to intervene in feuds between ordinary clans, but mediating Assault Clans required a particular skill set that was scarce even for the Adventurers' Guild. Whenever big clans started fighting, the few people at the guild qualified to handle it would remain working day and night.

I want to get revenge on Soleil, I thought. But I'll need to know how far their backers will go to defend them.

The Golden Orchid Clan supported Soleil, and above them was Colors. I'd get my revenge on Soleil, but I had to be patient about it. To do that, I had to level up, grow stronger, and wait until I could take them out in a definite and safe way that did not risk me getting discovered. I didn't want Colors coming after me.

My revenge on the Class D students would come first anyway, and I'd need to get the Fake skill before taking action at school so that my true strength remained a secret. For the next few months, I'd focus on laying the groundwork and improving my equipment and skills. Leveling up was important, but I'd gone too far too fast.

"Taking revenge on Soleil will put you both in danger," I said to my parents, "so we'll put a pin on that for the time being until everyone in this family is at a high enough level."

My mother held a hand to her cheek with a worried look and sided with me. "We should stay well away from anything dangerous."

I fully agreed with her. The lives of the people in this family came first, and nothing else truly mattered as long as we were okay. Kano was fine; the potion I'd given her had healed the wound on her leg and left no scar. There was no sense in risking ourselves here.

"So anyway," said Kano, "I'm gonna power level you up, mom. Don't forget, bro says leveling has an anti-aging effect."

"Y-Yes... I suppose I'll take you up on that," responded my mother.

"C-Can I come too?" my father asked hesitantly.

Kano was eager to take our parents bridge-dropping, but they were nervous about fighting the orc lord. It was a monster so fearsome that the Adventurers'

Guild had published warnings about it. They had nothing to worry about, though. Kano was now strong enough to battle the orc lord and several orc soldiers head-on and walk away unscathed.

The most efficient way to level in the game was to power level on the deepest floor you could. Yet I'd discovered that leveling up in this world put more strain on your body than I expected. Since I didn't want to risk our parents' lives, the safest and surest way to level up would be the bridge-dropping trick I'd used with Kano.

I also told my parents about my plan to make money reselling HP potions and ores from the hidden store on the tenth floor. Of everything I'd told them, this was the thing I most wanted them to keep a secret, or else we couldn't profit from it.

"Sell a few of them to me for our shop," suggested my father. "Any other shop you sell it to will take a big cut."

"He's right. You'll make more money at your dad's shop," agreed my mother. "The stores at the guild will pay you less than half what they sell it for."

My father was self-employed at a little shop he'd opened called Narumi's General Goods, where he sold adventuring items and merchandise. Recently, he'd set up a website for the store and started shipping his products nationwide.

According to him, HP potions flew off the shelves if they came with a guild certificate guaranteeing their authenticity, even when sold at a nonguild affiliated store. He'd avoided HP potions so far because the guild charged too much per vial to make a profit, and few adventurers would risk buying uncertified potions.

Hence, my father's plan was perfect. I'd make more money, and so would my family. We'd be able to splurge a little, so I decided to sell all the HP potions through him.

Once I'd stuffed enough food in my stomach to quiet its incessant growling when the family conference finished, I headed to my room and collapsed on my bed. I slept like a log, weary from the day's troubles but satisfied.

“Here it comes!” yelled Kano. “Dad, get ready to cut the rope!”

“S-Sure thing... But... God, there’s a lot of them...”

Kano came into sight, along with the orc lord and a huge train of orc soldiers behind her. At least fifty of them followed her, charging at the rope bridge like a herd of buffalo, kicking dust clouds into the air.

We were on the fifth floor of the dungeon.

After discussing our options at length at our family conference the night before, we’d decided to prioritize the family’s safety.

Soleil knew what Kano and I looked like, so we could get in trouble if they discovered we were still alive. It would be even worse if they used Basic Appraisal on us and saw how mysteriously high we’d leveled up to since their parent clans might use violent means to find out how we did that.

Although Kano and I could defend ourselves from this threat, our parents were too low-level to fight them off. One drastic solution to this problem would be for me to make the first move and eradicate Soleil on a lone crusade. However, my level might not be high enough to keep me safe if their backer clans intervened.

We concluded our safest course of action was to learn the Fake skill and level up our family up as soon as possible. Perhaps I was worrying too much, but caution was common sense in this crazed, violent world.

Acquiring the Fake skill would let me disguise my level, job, and stats with fake information. This measure would greatly reduce the risk of anyone discovering that I possessed secret knowledge. We’d be in deep trouble if anyone used Basic Appraisal on us now, and my family would be in danger the longer this situation lasted. I needed to get the skill quickly.

I also wanted to level up everyone in my family as a matter of urgency. If I could get everyone to level 30, they could fend off most adventurers who might attack us for said knowledge. Then, we could fight fire with fire. Of course, the leveling plan I would devise would be safe because I would not let them take any risks.

For that reason, I'd skipped school today and told my father to close the shop for the morning so we could come to the dungeon to power level and learn the Fake skill. As Kano was a Caster, I had her change her job to Thief at Granny's Goods.

Since we'd registered our magic at the gates on the fifth floor and outside Granny's Goods, we could jump back and forth between the two as we liked. My parents were shocked when I told them about the gates, but they'd have to get used to reacting like that because there was plenty more where that came from.

The rumbling the orcs made as they stampeded interrupted my thinking.
Oops. Now's not the time to be distracted!

"Here are the orcs I promised!" shouted Kano at us.

"Mom, dad," I called out. "Even when Kano makes it over, don't cut the rope. Wait until the orc lord crosses the midpoint!"

"Okay!" replied my mother.

"Leave it to us!" added my father.

Kano skipped across the rope bridge like a mountain goat. Her leg strength had increased so much that the bridge swaying violently beneath her didn't seem to slow her down. In the game, your character's speed would increase along with your level, but your running style remained the same... This was another difference that showed up when the game became reality.

Soon, the orc lord reached the midpoint of the bridge. Its bloodthirsty eyes appeared angrier than usual... Had Kano annoyed it? I signaled my parents, and they cut the ropes on their side of the bridge. The orcs screamed their characteristic cry as they plummeted, then we received their experience points after ten seconds.



“Oh wow!” exclaimed my father. “I’ve leveled up! It feels amazing!”

“Oh... I felt tight chested for a second, but now I just feel...refreshed,” commented my mother. “So did it work? Do I look younger?”

Single-digit increases in level wouldn’t have much cosmetic effect, though my father rushed in to compliment her on how good she looked.

Now that we’d confirmed that our power-leveling plan was promising, we collected the loot and decided to hunt down monsters normally during our downtime before the orc lord respawned.

As an aside, Kano explained the reason for the orc lord’s rage. She’d tested whether she could dodge its attacks before she lured it into the train. Orcs loved asserting dominance and playing with their prey, so they hated looking like fools.

While we walked down the road, picking off any stray monsters we encountered, I told my parents many helpful tips about the dungeon. I talked about traps, the map, the traits and tricks of monsters, and how to defeat them. I also explained my ideas for future raids, like how I wanted us to learn magic to raid the eleventh floor and beyond. Plus, I mentioned that I wanted to acquire the Machinist job.

“Where did you...” my father began to ask. “Well, never mind. I should focus on getting to level 7.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And some proper combat experience would be good. Have a go at fighting the golem to get comfortable with your body.”

Increasing your level would let you use your body in new ways. For example, a higher strength stat would let you swing heavy swords one-handed, when it would have required both hands before. You could sometimes even perform feats that inertia should make impossible. The only way to overcome a lifetime of habits and become accustomed to your new limits was to experience actual combat.

I explained that once they’d reached level 8 and gotten used to their physical enhancements, their Newbie job level should have reached level 10, unlocking Plus Three Skill Slots. Then we could take a trip to Granny’s Goods, switch their

jobs to the Thief, and learn the Fake skill.

My father nodded gravely, but I wasn't sure he had understood what I'd told him. Well, Kano and I were here to help out so he wouldn't have to learn everything all at once.

Kano, who'd been running around slaying goblins, bounded to us with good news and said, "I've done it! I've learned Fake!"

I used Basic Appraisal on her to see what it would show.

Name: Kano Narumi

Job: Fighter

Strength: Pathetically Weak

Available skills: 0

"A pathetically weak Fighter, okay..." I remarked. "You'll look odd having zero skills as a Fighter."

"Okay, I'll make it say three instead."

Fake was a passive skill used for deception that spoofed your stats when an adventurer cast Basic Appraisal on you. You could set what you wanted your parameters, such as job and strength, to show up as. But an adventurer could uncover you were hiding your real stats if your choices appeared unrealistic. It was a cheap trick to fool the appraiser and nothing more.

The other drawback was that it wouldn't work against higher-level appraisal skills, even if few students at the school were strong enough to possess them. Those who did wouldn't need to use them unless we got into a fight, so we wouldn't have to worry.

Players had considered the Fake skill useless in the game because there wasn't any good reason to hide your strength. Most people in this world seemed to hold the same opinion. Only spies and covert agents would fill a valuable skill slot with Fake.

"I'll hunt some monsters alone to get the skill once we've done another

bridge-drop,” I said.

“Sounds good!” stated Kano. “Speaking of which, it’s about time for the orc lord to respawn, so I’ll fetch it.”

“Be careful, Kano,” said my mother.

We slew the orc lord several more times that day. My father reached level 6 by the end, my mother level 5, and I picked up Fake. I set my parameters to show my job as Newbie and my level as 5.

Though I’d planned to go to school the next day, I wanted to research more about Soleil and the world. I needed a new school uniform to fit my thinner body, so I’d take another couple days off. All this had made me quite a busy man.

Chapter 8: Naoto Tachigi

Naoto Tachigi

I remembered the debacle in the fourth room of the Arena.

The Priest had healed Akagi back to health before the day was over, fixing the ribs he had broken from his brutal beating at Kariya's hands. Now, he walked around like he hadn't lain in the infirmary for nearly a full day—the very picture of health.

Physically, at least. Emotionally, Akagi and all of Class E still reeled from the day's events, overcome with a gloom we couldn't wrest free from, try as we might.

Our pride had already suffered at the club fair a few days prior, but most of my classmates had rallied after that experience. We hoped they would recognize our efforts through hard work. The duel had set that idea in its grave.

Yuuma was the strongest in our class, the most talented, the most charismatic...and he'd lost. If anyone in the class had thought to pick up his torch, the hateful jeers from the other classes had dissuaded them, crushing any remaining hope.

Those of us who'd helped Yuuma were no exception. Sakurako, Kaoru, even me... We were all depressed.

I didn't resent Yuuma for losing, though. The Class D students had picked a fight with Yuuma after he stood up for Sakurako when they approached her with lust. They'd been the unfair ones to challenge him to a duel, knowing he'd never set foot inside the dungeon. Their underhanded methods made me sick.

The entire class had sung Akagi's praises when he'd bravely accepted the challenge, but the cold light of day made it clear that the whole thing was a setup. An inspection of the list of reservations for the Arena had revealed the First Magic Club were the primary users of the fourth Arena room based on the anti-magic shield in place. The Second and Third Magic Clubs occupied all the

remaining slots. Why had they relinquished a slot for some silly Class E duel?

Kariya didn't make sense either. What was he still doing in Class D when he was stronger than his classmates? When I watched him fight against Akagi, I could tell he had a highly developed prowess and technique from years of training. Adventurers' High sorted students into classes based on their grades. Kariya could have risen to Class C or even B instead of leading Class D with his skills and high level. Why would he remain in Class D, the lowliest class of those who transferred from Adventurers' Middle School? Had they relegated him to Class D for missing an exam? Or perhaps...

There was something off about the faculty as well. The idiots in Class D had bullied us, and our homeroom teacher had turned a blind eye, which had encouraged them to escalate their abuse.

Our class wasn't the only Class E victim of the higher classes. They frequently subjected the second-and third-year students to the same mistreatment. Some students even quit school to escape their tormentors.

It feels like the entire school is complicit, I thought.

The situation made it feel like the school had reinstated the Four Occupations, the old class system from the Edo period in Japan. That would place Class E at the lowest rank on the social ladder and encourage everyone to discriminate against us.

If I was right, then Class D wasn't the main problem. They wouldn't be able to act like they had without support of some kind. But who was supporting them?

Their supporter would have to be someone who could spur Kariya and Class D into action, rearrange bookings for the fourth room in the Arena, and keep our homeroom teacher from objecting. Class A? The student council? No, it had to be bigger than that.

What if the Eight Dragons are backing them? How could I possibly take them on?

Adventurers' High was home to several factions, with eight substantially larger than the rest. These were the Eight Dragons. They were powerful factions composed of many students with ties to private businesses, adventurer clans,

graduates of Adventurers' University, and public officials. All these people exerted their influence at every school level—over teachers and the upper management.

Only five of the Eight Dragons had clear identities: the student council, the First Swordcraft Club, the First Magic Club, the First Archery Club, and the Class A Alliance. The other three were unknown.

What hopes would a mere high schooler have of taking them on? To oppose the Eight Dragons was to become an enemy of the school.

Despair made my vision blur and grow dark. I felt like my hopes of a bright future, of everything my family had wished for me, were falling apart and slipping from my grasp.

My head hung low; I couldn't muster the energy to keep it raised.

I began listening to the conversation of some Class D students who stuck around in Class E's classroom. I didn't need my Super Hearing skill since the students made such a ruckus that I could hear every word.

"Oh, did I tell you my brother got an invite from one of Colors's subsidiary clans?" one of them said.

"From Colors?! No way!"

"Your brother's in Soleil, right, Manaka?"

"That's so cool!"

Colors, eh?

They were heroes celebrated in Japan for their tremendous victory against the mighty undead lich king. Everyone in the country stayed glued to their TV screens and watched the raid, regardless of whether they were training to be adventurers. I was no exception. I'd stayed up all night for the broadcast, and I must have rewatched my recording of the raid a hundred times. That fight showed the best that adventurers offered.

Ever since the raid, you couldn't turn on the TV without seeing Colors. One story run by news broadcasters a few days ago reported that tens of thousands of people were sending applications to join the clan, a monumental increase

over the norm.

Colors was a massive organization, supporting five subsidiary clans directly. Each one supported its own subsidiaries, of which Soleil was one.

I aimed to attend Adventurers' University, but watching the broadcast made me dream about becoming a top adventurer. And what a hopeless dream it was... I would never be a top adventurer, much less enter Adventurers' University or Class A. Hell, even getting into Class B or Class C seemed impossible with how things were.

I thought about my parents on the day I'd left to come to Adventurers' High.

I was the heir to a family of semi-nobles that served the noble Viscount Isshiki. But I had been a sickly child and had spent most days confined indoors to avoid falling ill. One day, I heard that the viscount's heiress, Otoha Isshiki, got accepted into Adventurers' High, where only the best could attend. The news shocked me so much that it kept me up all night. She was shorter and thinner than the other girls her age, as frail as me. How could she get into a school that summoned monstrously talented children from all over the country? Would she even be able to keep up once there?

Surely she wouldn't, I thought. Surely she'd come back home soon.

I was wrong. After just a year at the school, she'd made such a name for herself that magic magazines devoted special editions to the thirteen-year-old wonder child. The picture in the magazine of her slaying an orc with magic sent chills down my spine. It showed me how much people could change, from a timid little girl to a powerful mage.

Later, I quietly applied to Adventurers' Middle School without my parents' knowledge. They rejected me, of course. I told myself that would be too much for me—I wasn't talented. I was just a frail little kid, so scrawny that my ribs showed on my chest. That excuse made the rejection easier to swallow.

One day, I told my parents. They responded by revealing Lady Otoha's secret: she'd worked tirelessly to get where she had, all of it out of sight. She'd changed her diet, started a training regimen, and studied every night. My

parents told me that hoping for change to happen would get me nowhere. If I wanted to change, I'd have to put in the effort to change myself.

Did I really want to attend Adventurers' School? My frailty had prevented me from joining Adventurers' Middle School, but had I tried to overcome the problem?

I looked back at the picture of her in the magazine, where she crossed her arms and held her head high, smiling while her gorgeous red hair fluttered in the wind. The sight made me wonder how strong her desire to change must have been, and I felt like it showed me the path I needed to take.

From that day on, I trained like my life depended on it and did everything to strengthen my body. I asked for my mother's help preparing meals to make me tough, ran every day, and studied problem sets from elite schools. I even asked my father for help when I couldn't work out the answers. My parents helped me every step of the way, and I would not let them down! Nothing would stop me from getting into the school Lady Otoha had joined.

And where am I now?! What am I doing?! I screamed in my mind. These ideas weren't me moaning about the pessimistic outlook for Class E. No, I directed that rage at myself, anger at my own weakness for almost throwing in the towel after such a minor setback.

I'd spent years working hard to get in, and I was almost ready to give up before I had a chance to *try* to make something of myself after a mere month... How pathetic. I was sure Lady Otoha would have a good laugh at my expense if she could see me now.

Remember how you got here, I told myself. *And remember why.*

And I remembered the tears of joy in my mother's eyes when I'd received the acceptance letter from Adventurers' High, the pat my father had given me on the back. I'd come here to make them both proud and to follow Lady Otoha, and I wasn't going to give up!

It's not over yet, Naoto Tachigi! I thought. *Maybe it won't work out but don't settle for that until you've tried! Class D, the Eight Dragons, whoever the enemy*

might be—don't give up without a fight! Gather whatever information you can, however insignificant, create a strategy to beat them, and raise your chance of success one percent at a time!

At some point, I'd closed my eyes and had them firmly shut. When I opened them, it seemed less dark than before. The classroom hadn't changed, but having told myself not to give up made everything look a bit brighter.

The Class D students were still chatting in our classroom. Meanwhile, the E students paid attention; talk of Colors and its subsidiary clans was popular here. They listened because they shared the same dreams and aspirations as me. But their hopes would crumble if nothing changed, and we'd all find ourselves at the mercy of the upper classes and the major factions. To stop that, I needed to show them that there was still hope and open their eyes to the fact we could still fight and catch up to the other classes.

Our academic performance wasn't going to hold us back. Any student who had passed this school's exam had good grades, so the other classes wouldn't develop an academic lead on us as long as we studied every day and helped each other.

The big problem was our inexperience in the dungeon, which had only opened to us after we'd joined the school a little over a month ago. It was natural that the other classes would be better than us inside the dungeon, and we shouldn't beat ourselves over it. So, the enemy must have chosen that moment to crush our spirits. Why hadn't I suspected they had carefully planned the timing to deal the greatest damage? Why had it taken me so long to realize somebody was behind it all?

With the right plan, Class E could overcome its inexperience and improve its performance in the dungeon over the next year or two. I desperately wanted to prove to our enemies we could make it to Class A, to shove it in their faces.

The higher classes and upper-year students would likely ramp up their interference. They'd use every trick in the book to corner us into subservience. Although it wouldn't be easy to persevere through their abuse, I could not reach Class A by myself.

I'd need help from friends brave enough to face whatever the other classes might throw at us and carry on... Yet I could tell that Kaoru and Sakurako were on the verge of giving up. Their bright, optimistic attitudes and the glimmer in their eyes had disappeared. Still, they were talented and had stoically striven to become stronger. Overcoming our current challenge would take them to new heights, if it didn't break them. They were the ones whose help I should seek first.

Of course, I'd need Yuuma too. His defeat was still fresh in his mind, which put him in low spirits. But I needed his charisma to rally the rest of the class. Unfortunately, most of the other classes would channel their abuse at him. That meant I'd have to be supportive to cheer him up instead of him being there for me.

The school would hold the Battle of the Classes in June, where each class had to accomplish certain objectives inside the dungeon over a week. Each class received a single grade at the end of the event, measuring the class's ability to cooperate. Those of us at the top of the class still had to try our best, but the most important thing was to help any student who might hold us back.

My preferred course of action would be to hold a study session for all the classmates struggling to level up. Everyone would have an easier time increasing their level if we shared tips and tricks about the dungeon.

I had in mind several students who appeared most likely to be lagging, and the foremost was the overweight kid who'd joined the school with the lowest grades. For him, the best choice would be to train him one-on-one all day if only I had the time. Another option was to invite him to our party and give him a taste of raiding the dungeon. I'd have to speak to Kaoru to decide the best approach to help the other Class E students.

Kaoru and Yuuma could teach them swordcraft while Sakurako and I taught them magic. We could invite interested students to a study session.

First things first, I had to instill hope in Sakurako and Kaoru. Once that ended, we could think long and hard about how best to ensure the success of Class E.

Nothing was going to stop me. Not until I caught up to *her*.

Chapter 9: Kaoru Hayase - Part 1

Kaoru Hayase

Fear gripped me when I saw how much more skilled Kariya was than Yuuma, and the ridicule from Class D stung my heart. I had to close my eyes when Kariya's longsword struck Yuuma's side.

With every passing second, another fragment of my faith chipped away, and no matter how I tried to mend the damage, it continued to fragment and crumble away to nothing. The class had cheered him on when he'd gone out to fight, sure of his victory, but now he'd lost in the most demeaning way possible.

Maybe they were right to call us Class E students losers. Maybe that was why even the long hours of grueling training hadn't made a difference and let Yuuma win. Maybe all our dreams about this school had been unattainable nonsense from the very beginning.

I struggled to pay attention in class the days after the duel. Nights were impossible to sleep through, and I'd stopped my daily routine of morning runs and evening dungeon raids.

Once class ended, I heaved a deep sigh. As I tidied up my desk to leave for the day, Naoto whispered over to me.

"We need to talk," he said, with more urgency than his calm demeanor usually allowed. It had to be important.

He led me out into the hallway so the Class D students in our classroom wouldn't overhear. The sky outside was a sullen gray, ready to weep—just like me.

"Kaoru, we can't give up," said Naoto.

"Give up on what?" I almost said, instinctively trying to avoid what I knew was coming. But his compelling, kind look directed at my eyes cut off my escape.

“We have to keep going,” he urged. “For the rest of the class and ourselves, most of all.”

For myself, I thought. How could we overcome the other classes that had three years of experience? I recalled the skilled way Kariya had fought. Yuuma might reach that level of expertise, but how long would it take me? I wasn’t sure I could any longer.

“That’s what they want you to think,” spat Naoto.

I knew how much they despised us; they had made it clear at the club fair. None of their clubs attempted recruiting Class E students, and those who signed up anyway weren’t welcomed.

“Ask yourself this. Why did they single out Yuuma for a duel on our very first day here?” inquired Naoto.

From his perspective, Class D’s intrusion on our first day had been a meticulous plan.

Yuuma had joined the school as the external student with the best grades, and had become the face of Class E. He was the charismatic figure everyone else followed. Kariya and his Class D bullies had come along and picked a fight with him for no good reason.

Class D hadn’t been twiddling their thumbs for three years of middle school. No, they’d been just as desperate as everyone else to level up and become powerful nation assets. And they’d singled out Yuuma, a student with no dungeon experience, to challenge to a fight.

When I thought about it, Class D’s instigation seemed planned.

“We’re up against a bigger enemy than we thought,” stated Naoto. “That doesn’t mean we should roll over and let them have their way. We must keep going, or we’ll never improve.”

Naoto animatedly made his case. Our enemies were likely much more powerful than we’d imagined, both the ones who’d planned this and those who backed them. As such, he wouldn’t give up on his dreams without a fight.

I’d worked so hard to get where I was. Years before I joined the school, I’d

swung my wooden sword, jogged, and studied late into the night; after joining, I'd added a daily dungeon raid to the list. And now I'd stopped, even only for the last few days. I couldn't summon the energy to try—or rather, I didn't want to face reality.

“Kaoru. What was your dream? What did you strive for?” he asked.

My dream... I mused. I'd always longed to be like the adventurers in the stories my mother had told me as a child. Brave heroes who could achieve the impossible with their swords, who had mastered the profound magical arts, fought against hordes of terrifying monsters, and ventured into new, unexplored dungeon floors. Every night, I begged my mother to tell me those stories.

Thinking of it now, I could remember talking about these heroes with Souta. One day, he had promised to take me with him to find an undiscovered world. I'd believed him, and his words had caused my heart to skip a beat.

But now I knew that heroes like that only existed in fairy tales. No adventurer had mastered both swordcraft and magic, and nobody could raid an entire floor alone.

Still, Assault Clans existed and fought on the front lines to fulfill their dreams as adventurers who would risk their lives challenging mighty floor bosses to gain access to the unexplored floors beyond. I'd practiced kendo, hoping I might fight alongside them one day. That was the dream that I'd held when I'd joined Adventurers' High.

“It's only been a month since we started here,” added Naoto. “Are you going to let their irrational malice break you and give up on your dream? I don't want that. I will not give up.”

I don't want that either, I thought. *But...*

“So... Will you help me?” asked Naoto, bowing his head low. “So that we can both achieve our dreams.”

I wasn't able to help Yuuma. At that moment, I was a coward who'd run away and let her friend get beaten and bullied. I had no right to stand by his side. Even so...

“I’m...” I began. “I’m weak... Will I really be able to help you...?”

Rain began to fall from the bleak silver sky.

“For the Battle of the Classes, I see,” I said.

“We don’t have much time,” said Naoto. “Everything depends on how far we can get in the next month.”

The Battle of the Classes would happen in June. Every first-year class would participate in the exam, and it was the first in a series of exams that would grade us as a class and serve as a measure of our progress.

“I’ve looked up what happened in last year’s Battle.” Naoto handed me a printout.

I had to admire his organization. He’d already carried out some research and summarized his findings.

“Hmm,” I intoned, reading the document he’d given me. “Seems like we’ll have to decide how to split our class into groups.”

Moreover, the Battle of the Classes would occur inside the dungeon for a week. Last year’s first-year students received grades based on five criteria: the specified point they had reached, slaying a certain monster, the deepest floor they’d made it into, a specified quest’s completion, and the number of magic gems they’d gathered. These were likely part of the same criteria judges would assess this year.

My initial impression was that most of the criteria favored higher-level students. For example, students with stealth skills could complete more tasks by avoiding needless fights with monsters. Class E would have a tough time since we all had low levels, and most hadn’t changed jobs yet.

How would we split ourselves into groups to accomplish the five tasks? Would it be better to keep the most advanced students like Naoto and me in one group or spread us out among the others?

“Whatever we decide on for the groups, the first thing we should do is raise the fighting skill of the stragglers in the class,” said Naoto.

Naoto was inspecting the school's database on his terminal. He explained that a straggler would slow down their entire group, but at the same time, even low-level students could see the quickest results from leveling up and training. Plus, he thought our most productive use of time would be to focus on training the worst-performing students.

I looked at my terminal to check on the current levels of our classmates and saw most of them had reached level 3 over the last month. About ten were level 4, and only five students were level 5 or higher—Naoto, Yuuma, Sakurako, Majima, and me. In other words, only five of us had changed jobs so far.

At level 5, a Newbie would have a job level of 7. You could then learn Basic Appraisal, and nothing would stop you from changing jobs. So, I could tell whether someone had changed jobs by checking if they'd reached level 5.

I hope that a few more of us can change jobs before the exam. "The student with the lowest level is..." I murmured, scanning the list of data showing the registered levels of everyone in the class. "Kuga, level 2."

She was the only level 2, so I clicked on her name to expand the details. Her record indicated that she was Kotone Kuga, who wielded a shortsword and a bow, wanting to become an Archer.

I tried to remember what I knew about this girl, who had a short bob and sat in the back of the classroom. She was always alone and I rarely saw her talking to anybody. Quiet and forgettable. Maybe she was still level 2 because she had found no one to raid the dungeon with her?

Then, I searched for Souta's entry to check. He'd reached level 3, meaning he was taking raiding somewhat seriously... Or maybe Oomiya was doing the work for him.

Kuga and Souta. They're the two we need to focus on, I thought. Both were the most likely to hold the rest of the class back. *What should we do about them?*

"We could gather the weakest students and power level them," noted Naoto. "But that's a crutch, and we're in for trouble if they begin to rely on it. In my opinion, we should hold a training session to strengthen their abilities."

Power leveling was an easy way to level up, but it would have long-term effects if you depended on it. The best way forward was to help them out just enough that they could battle through raids and level up on their own. We'd share what we knew about the dungeon and teach each other swordcraft, magic, tactics, and anything that would make raids simpler for everyone.

Unfortunately, the best way to learn swordcraft and magic was at a club. They had better equipment and knew more about their disciplines than Naoto or me. However, the fight with Class D forbade us from participating in clubs. Did Naoto have a solution to this?

"What about clubs?" I asked.

"That's a difficult one," replied Naoto, rubbing his forehead as he tried to solve the endless stream of problems we'd need to overcome. "Unless we can sort things out, we'd best join the club the higher-year Class E students set up."

"But then Class D will come down on us even harder..."

Following the duel, Kariya pressured us into staying out of the Class E club. If we were to join anyway, there would be reprisals from Class D.

"They will," said Naoto. "Oomiya has asked for a meeting with the student council about clubs. She might get nowhere, but we can hear her opinion on what to do after she's heard back."

Oomiya was a cheerful petite girl that always bounced around. She took action, yet I doubted the student council would do anything to help. They hadn't lifted a finger to help us so far. We didn't have many avenues open, so it was worth waiting for her, regardless of the small chances of success.

"What else should we do before the Battle of the Classes?" I asked.

"Coming up with defenses against attacks from other classes, for one..." he said. "Like what to do if they threaten us to hand over our magic gems."

Based on the Battle of the Classes's rules, students could trade in magic gems for food, sanitary products, and essentials. So they'd literally be our lifeline in the dungeon. I didn't know what rate we would trade items at, but this would force us to withdraw from the Battle if the other classes took our magic gems.

The rules technically prohibited students from physically stealing from others. Still, the school wouldn't be able to monitor every single student inside the dungeon. We'd need to come up with a countermeasure, like dividing the gems between ourselves or hiding them somewhere safe.

"Good point," remarked Naoto after I suggested this. "But I'd like to wait until we've had more time to digest last year's Battle before coming up with specific countermeasures. Anyway, I'll draw up a list of people I'd like to attend our study session."

"Have you already told Sakurako and Yuuma?" I asked.

The duel had sapped their enthusiasm. I hoped they were still the trustworthy companions I'd come to know.

"No, not yet," replied Naoto. "Will you help me tell them?"

"Yes, of course!"

Thus, I was going to think carefully about what I... No, about what we could do to get ourselves to a better place. And I'd have to help save them like Naoto saved me today. Before, I'd felt like I was sinking into an ice-cold swamp with a broken spirit.

I noticed the rain had stopped, and sunlight pierced through the dense clouds. The world was telling me that no rain lasted forever. For the first time in several days, I smiled.

Chapter 10: The Rank-Up Exam - Part 1

“Only adventurers with an adventurer class of 7 or above can view that document,” said the librarian.

I didn't think that would matter, I thought.

At the moment, I was in the library's reference room on the eighteenth floor of the Adventurers' Guild.

It wasn't much of a reference room since it had no books or bookcases, though. Only cubicles with computers were present, separated by dividers like in an internet café. I could access the Adventurers' Guild database on the computers, but I'd need to log in with my terminal.

I was trying to discover what the Adventurers' Guild had logged about clans, particularly the Colors subsidiary known as the Golden Orchid Clan and its subsidiaries. While I knew Golden Orchid backed Soleil, I didn't know how many members and other subsidiaries it had. I had hoped the database would help me, even if I couldn't access the information. According to the librarian that worked in the reference room, my adventurer class wasn't high enough. I couldn't even get their clan name to come up on-screen.

The Adventurers' Guild assigned risk and criticality scores to documents and restricted viewing privileges based on adventurer class. My adventurer class was 9, the starting point for all Adventurers' High students. I hadn't signed up for rank-up exams since I had registered as an adventurer because I felt there would be no benefits. This opportunity would be best for me to raise my class, allowing me to gather information from the guild and help with future quests. I'd aim for a class of 7 because, from what the computer told me, that would grant me access to most of the information I wanted.

Then, I looked up the dates of the rank-up exams and found that class 8 rank-up exams took place at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. every Wednesday. It was currently 8 a.m. on a Wednesday. I ran to the reception desk and spoke to the receptionist, who told me I was on time to take the 9 a.m. exam. So I paid the nine-

thousand-eight-hundred-yen fee and went to the exam location.

None of these are the sort of people I'd like to invite over for dinner, I mused after seeing the other adventurers who'd come to take the exam.

About a hundred young, muscular adventurers with bad attitudes and fierce glares proceeded. Some had shaped their hair into long, sharp spikes. Others resembled third-rate villains from old turn-of-the-century manga series. Everyone here looked awful.

Guys, there's no need to go so crazy with your hairstyles.

For a second, I wondered if I'd wandered into a cosplay convention by mistake and checked the sign by the entrance. It definitely read "Class 8 Rank-Up Exam," so I was at the right place.

Was it just a coincidence that the examinees looked like this? Would I have found the same scene if I'd come for the afternoon exam instead? I remembered that thugs often picked on Akagi in the game, though these adventurers were rougher than I would've thought. Maybe it was fashionable to dress so threateningly? A few of the examinees looked normal, but they hid on the edges of the group and tried to stay out of sight.

I stopped marveling at the adventurers and headed to an empty seat, but one of them chuckled and tried to trip me. Another lifted his expensive weapon to show off how strong he was. Others boasted about how high their level was or how deep they'd raided, and a person stared at me because they wanted to start a fight.

Sadly, I couldn't sense that anyone had cast Basic Appraisal on me. Although I had shed some weight and was now just a plump boy rather than obese, I probably still looked like nothing to them. Even so, I doubted the sanity of any adventurer who picked fights with someone just because they *looked* weak.

Appearances weren't a reliable indicator of strength for adventurers, and I wasn't sure if this area was within a magic field. My sister looked like a little girl but could easily juggle hundreds of kilograms with her enormous strength, and the rugged students at my school weren't always muscular like Kariya. For

instance, a delicate girl led one of the strongest factions. Judging strength by appearances was a good way to get yourself killed.

It wasn't my problem if any of these adventurers got themselves killed, so I didn't correct their misunderstanding. I ignored the tough guys' glares and waited about ten minutes for the proctor. He arrived dressed in a smart suit and seemed more sensible than the examinees.

"The exam will start shortly," he said, checking his watch. "So I'll brief you all on the exam."

He handed out sheets of paper with the information and instructions for the exam from a large envelope.

"The instructions are simple, as you can see," explained the proctor. "Each of you will go to your assigned spot in the dungeon and bring back what they put there."

The exam instructions were as follows:

The assigned spot is somewhere on the third floor.

The time limit is twelve hours from when you enter the dungeon.

You do not need to defeat any monsters. But you will likely experience fights against them based on the location.

You can work together with an unlimited number of fellow candidates. As each candidate is assigned a unique location, candidates in teams will need to collect each candidate's item.

You must hand in your item to the quest officer at the Adventurers' Guild along with your exam slip.

The structure of the exam was nothing unusual. Many quests required gathering specified items or loot from designated locations. I'd need to monitor

how much of my twelve hours remained; traveling to and from the third floor would take a lot of time.

A glance at my fellow candidates showed that most had come alone or in small parties of two or three. Few had come in larger groups, which was reasonable because retrieving every party member's item would take too long. None of this mattered since I'd set out to take the exam alone.

"You will see a timer activate on your terminal once you enter the dungeon," added the proctor. "So you may begin as soon as you're ready."

I opened the accepted quest menu on my terminal, noticing that my assigned location was pretty far within the third floor, and I'd need to find a particular document.

Hence, I gathered my things and left just as somebody called out to me.

"Hey you! How about you carry our bags for us?"

"Not so fast!"

I quickly left them behind and dashed toward the dungeon entrance, as I had already spotted that a few candidates were planning to pick a fight with me. Thus, I didn't stick around because they wouldn't attack me in front of the portal where plenty of onlookers might wander.

It annoyed me that I had to line up at the portal like everyone else since I could usually breeze through the gate in the school's basement. I wanted to make good time, but the main streets were as busy as ever, and it took me two hours to reach the third floor.

After I left the third-floor rest area, I veered off the main street and ran toward my destination. At level 19, I could hit a pace of nineteen kilometers an hour without breaking a sweat. But I slowed my pace whenever I entered smaller areas or ones with poorer visibility to avoid colliding with the few parties hunting monsters I had encountered.

"I've run into quite a few monsters so far," I remarked.

While I ran past the monsters without slaying them, adventurers of the right level for the third floor wouldn't have that option. They could not keep running

away from monsters and had to kill them, which ate away at their time. A few of the candidates would probably breach the time limit and have to figure out which of the many winding, branching paths to follow. Perhaps the exam was actually harder than I'd given it credit for.

I kept running for another ten minutes, periodically checking my location on my terminal until I reached my destination. When I got there, I anticipated a fight because it was a monster room with several stationary monsters, similar to the slime room or orc room. However, all I could see was a bespectacled man of medium height and build wearing a uniform with the guild emblem on its breast. Was he a proctor?

Before, I assumed the purpose of the exam was to deal with a group of monsters in my assigned location in order to retrieve the item. Did something go wrong?

"Oh, you're here already," said the man. "I've been waiting for you, Souta Narumi of Adventurers' High School's first-year Class E."

Did I know him? I rummaged through Piggy's memories, and nothing turned up. My mother worked at the guild, so maybe he knew me through her, or knew who I was because he was a proctor for the exam.

"Hi," I greeted back. "Have we met?"

"No, we haven't. It's a pleasure to meet you."

From the look in his eyes, it didn't seem like much of a pleasure. He stared at me like he held a grudge against me and wanted to take action.

I don't like this one bit. "So, I just need to take that document there, right?" I asked as my instincts told me to get far away.

"There's been a change to the exam." He picked up the document I was supposed to retrieve from the center of the room and tore it into tiny pieces. "We'll fight each other, and I will allow you to pass if you can defeat me."

Before I could protest, he cast Basic Appraisal on me. With my Fake skill, I showed up as a level 5 Newbie with one skill. I would've liked to cast Basic Appraisal on him too, but doing so at this point would arouse suspicion.

“You were level 5 when you signed up for the exam,” he said.

The proctor inspected me from head to toe. Unfortunately for him, I only had a tracksuit and a baseball hat. Nothing would give away my true strength.

“And yet, you made it here in record time,” he continued. “They train you well at Adventurers’ High, don’t they?”

From the sounds of things, he’d bought my fake stats. What was he after, though? I took a good look at him.

I could tell that he’d chosen good equipment. He wore light mithril-alloy armor with what looked like felbull leather boots and gloves. His weapon was a mithril-alloy rapier that seemingly had no enchantments. The man’s appearance suggested that his level was between 10 and 15.

Hang on, and he still wants to fight me after seeing I’m level 5? “Who gave you the right to change the exam out of the blue?” I asked.

“The right?” he repeated. “I couldn’t care less about rights. All this is happening because you’re an Adventurers’ High student.”

What did that mean? Did students from Adventurers’ High get separate exams?

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Let me explain all the wrongs you’ll answer for,” he spat, then rattled off a long list with a look of disdain. “First, your school doesn’t know talent when they see it! Second, they failed to recognize my obvious superiority and rejected me at my entrance exam! Third, I *hate* how everyone in the adventuring world fawns over your students when you aren’t even that strong! Fourth, you all look down on ordinary adventurers! Fifth, you...” His speech carried on. When he finished, he stretched out his arms and smiled. “And that’s why I’ve decided to crush your evil eggs before they hatch.”

To summarize his long-winded ramblings, he was furious about flunking the Adventurers’ High entrance exam. As a result, he used his position as proctor for rank-up exams to ambush any students from the school taking their exams.

“I’m not exactly prepared for the occasion,” I protested. “Look at me. I only

have a baseball bat as a weapon, and I'm in a tracksuit."

"A full suit of armor wouldn't make a difference," he sneered.

The rental weapons and demon wolf leather armor I'd been using hadn't survived the fight against Volgemurt, so I was back to the starting equipment, tracksuit, and metal bat I had on my first dungeon raids. At level 19, the third floor wouldn't present a problem for me with this equipment.

This proctor appeared to enjoy himself as he had a large sadistic smile. I knew the entrance exam was difficult, and fewer than one percent of applicants passed. Still, I never would've thought flunking the exam could warp someone's personality this much. I supposed that applicants tended to be proud, and adventuring appealed to certain people's superiority complexes.

"And now," the proctor said, "I get to savor taking my time tormenting you."

He stepped toward me and unleashed the full strength of his Aura, confirming my suspicion that he was between levels 10 and 15. I was at a higher level, so I could probably outrun him. But I had a stressful morning and wanted to vent, and I checked nobody else was around.

All good, no witnesses, I thought. He's gonna get it!

"What's the matter, boy?" scorned the proctor, hatred twisting his visage. "Has my powerful Aura frightened you so much you can't move? You can try to run if you want. You won't get anywhere, though. And nobody's coming to save you."

He had become warped beyond the point of no return.

My opponent was a level 15, meaning he'd probably already mastered all the basic jobs. Additionally, my baseball bat likely wouldn't inflict as much damage as I wanted, making me consider using my bare fists to fight him. Then, I could drag him to the guild to answer for his actions. Maybe they'd let me pass the exam if I did that.

I twisted my neck and cracked my knuckles, deciding how to punish the corrupt proctor. Just then, I sensed someone approaching us at incredible speed. They were even faster than me, which meant they had to be level 20 or higher! The individual arrived on the scene before I could hide or run.

“Now, now. You’ve gotta play nice!” announced the newcomer.

Upon turning around, I noticed a seductive female ninja displaying a dynamite physique while crossing her arms.

Chapter 11: The Rank-Up Exam - Part 2

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!” screamed the proctor.

The woman dressed as a ninja simply stood there smiling, her hands on her hips.

She wore a side slit miniskirt with tight fishnet stockings beneath. Her red kimono parted in the middle, accentuating her large breasts, and she had a floral-patterned half-width obi tied around her slender, sexy waist. Although I couldn't see her face hidden beneath a mask, her voice, mannerisms, and the look in her eyes told me she was a stunning beauty.



I noticed she wasn't out of breath, which was odd considering the speed at which she'd come running toward us. Perhaps her level was even higher than level 20.

The proctor didn't share the new arrival's calmness. Far from it, he was clearly agitated because his reaction suggested the two weren't accomplices. If they had been, I might have had no choice but to pull out my secret weapon.

"For the last several years," the woman told the proctor, "you've committed theft, assault, rape, and many other violations of the guild officials' code against students of Adventurers' High, haven't you? The thing is, the guild has put out a quest to investigate these crimes."

Apparently, she'd discovered that the perpetrator had targeted only Class E students. As the perpetrator only attacked during rank-up exams, she kept an eye on the list of registered candidates. She believed she would catch him in the act if she waited long enough.

Wait, he's raping people?! I thought, disgusted. I'm not in any danger, right? I mean, I'm a guy...

"Aren't you glad I turned up, kid?" the woman addressed me. "This one likes his men big, and that cute face of yours would have given you quite the ordeal."

He's a monster. Lock him up and throw away the key!

"Hmph, did it make you feel big, a Fighter like you going after weak little Newbies?" the woman taunted.

"Ha!" the man snorted. "And you're nothing more than a Newbie. For a second there, I thought you might be serious."

It seemed both had cast Basic Appraisal on each other. The woman's well-toned body clearly didn't belong to a Newbie, so she must've been disguising her stats with Fake, like me. I'd thought most adventurers dropped skills like Basic Appraisal and Fake when they broke past level 20 to free up valuable skill slots for important skills... Maybe her character build focused on fighting other adventurers like mine, or perhaps she kept the Fake skill for covert activities, true to her ninja appearance.

“Adventurers’ High is the root of all evil,” declared the proctor. “And I will purge the world of every rotten person associated with it with my own hands. If you’re going to stand in my way... I won’t hold back.”

“So, that’s why you rape people? You’re nothing but a pervert.” The woman began laughing at the proctor.

The proctor screwed his face up in contempt for her. He unleashed his Aura, seeming convinced of his victory. Regardless, the ninja kept smiling as if his Aura were only a light breeze. She was at least ten levels higher than him, so his Aura had no effect. At this point, the proctor would’ve had to consider whether she was persevering through the Aura by sheer will or if she was truly stronger than him. Naturally, the former was what he appeared to believe.

They stood facing each other, both smiling. The fight would begin any second... But there was something I wanted to clarify.

If the ninja defeated and arrested him, I would fail my rank-up exam and get nothing for the exam fees I’d paid. I wanted to see whether we could come to an arrangement first.

“Sorry to butt in, but what about my exam...?” I trailed off.

I explained to the ninja that the rotten proctor had torn up the document they had assigned me to retrieve and changed the exam to a one-on-one fight. Since I didn’t want to duel another person in single combat, I asked the ninja if she’d let me take him to the guild after she defeated him.

“No way,” she replied. “I don’t have time for that. You found him before me, so I’ll let you take him on if you want.”

“Huh? You want me to defeat him?” I asked.

“If you’re not strong enough to take him down, then sit down and watch the professional at work like a good little boy.”

I exhaled as this was becoming a huge pain. She was a stranger, so I would’ve preferred not to let her see me fight... But it might be better for me to take down the proctor.

“Okay,” I said, relenting. “I’ll deal with him. No need for you to stick around.”

I hoped that she'd take the hint and leave, but...

"Ooh?" purred the ninja, her eyes glowing with intrigue. "Have you got a trick up your sleeve? I can't wait to see it!"

Oh, for God's sake, I thought.

"Ha! You think you can defeat me? I'll take you both on!" exclaimed the proctor.

The proctor continued showering us with his Aura, which had no effect except to piss me off all the more. I was ready to explode because I came here for one reason: to take an exam. Why did everyone need to make things so difficult?!

Would I be able to get by without using Manual Activation? The ninja surpassed my level, so there'd be no problems as long as I could keep her quiet.

"That's settled, then," I said.

"Just you, kid?" asked the proctor. "That's a shame. I wanted to save you for the main course. Ah, I know! I'll only beat you *half* to death, then I can enjoy you later."

The vile proctor licked his lips and began to slowly approach me, stopping to face me when he was five meters away.

Everything's his fault, I thought, so there's no reason to hold back on him.

First, I checked him out with Basic Appraisal. He had the Fighter job and strength listed as "pathetically weak," which meant he was at least five levels lower than me, level 14 or lower. He only knew three skills, one of which was Basic Appraisal, meaning I had nothing to worry about.

However, the information I'd gleaned might not be accurate. He could be using the Fake skill, like the ninja and I were, to disguise his data, making discerning his true strength almost impossible. Manipulating your data was standard practice for those who primarily fought against other adventurers because false stats made opponents underestimate you. In that sense, Basic Appraisal wasn't an accurate measure of strength.

For this reason, I kept an appraisal wand in my rucksack that could see through disguised stats. But the proctor didn't seem like the subtle type, so I

was confident he wasn't faking his stats.

"Tell you what," offered the proctor. "I'll give you a handicap. I won't attack you for the first ten seconds. You're too low level to understand right now, but I'll demonstrate how much stronger I am."

Why was he so utterly convinced by what he'd seen from Basic Appraisal? Fake was the very first skill every Thief learned, and Thief was a run-of-the-mill job. It was like the idea that I'd faked my stats hadn't even occurred to him, which was bizarre.

He strolled over to a spot two meters away from me, not drawing his weapon and lying down on the floor. Clearly, he thought he could dodge anything I threw at him. I wanted to wipe that arrogant smirk from his face.

"Are you gonna be okay?" asked the ninja with concern, placing a hand on her cheek. "I wonder... Are you faking your stats?"

If I were level 5, I probably wouldn't land a single punch on him. But I was at level 19. He'd have a tough time dodging my attack and a rougher one if he kept his guard down.

I leaped forward. Even though the proctor wore light armor of mithril alloy, a thin leather piece held together the torso component, and said area would be vulnerable to a strong attack concentrated there. I instantly crossed the two meters between us and drove my fist into him, striking his solar plexus. The sensation in my fist told me that I'd hit my mark.

"Oof!!!"

A direct hit from my full-strength punch, with all the weight of my physical enhancements, dealt the proctor a severe amount of damage.

I made him fly backward several meters, where he sat clutching at his stomach with a look of incomprehension. He appeared to have trouble breathing, but I would not show mercy to this prolific criminal. I struck him again.

While he sat there in agony, swaying, I kicked his head and forced him to the ground. I stomped on his right ankle, breaking the bone. There was no way he could get away now. Next, I broke his right shoulder to make sure he couldn't

activate any skills, just to be safe, and I grabbed him by the collar.

“Pay attention to what I tell you,” I warned. “If you put up a fight, I’ll break more of your bones.”

The proctor yelped.

I explained I would call guild officials here, then ordered him to confess to tearing up my assigned document when they arrived, including all his other crimes.

He didn’t reply to my order, only whimpering and wailing.

“What do you say?” I pressed, my tone threatening more violence.

“Y-Yes! I’ll... I’ll do it!” he said as he cried, suddenly more receptive. “Please don’t hit me again!”



He continued with his annoying screams and cries after that, so I hit him once more and knocked him out.

I looked down at him and tutted. “Good armor like this is wasted on a rapist.”

“Why don’t you take it for yourself?” suggested the ninja. “For your troubles. He’s in no position to complain.”

His armor was the type adventurers around the level 15 mark frequently wore, and it would cost several million yen to purchase new. Leaving the armor with a rapist would only make it easier for him to commit crimes, and I helped myself to his armor to put it to good use. I could get the felbull gloves and boots dry-cleaned, and the rapier was a fitting weapon to keep.

“You don’t go in for half measures, do you?” said the ninja with a chuckle as she watched me eagerly strip the man and equip my looted armor. “What I cannot get my head around is how you know the Fake skill...”

Because she used the Fake skill too, I couldn’t figure out why that would surprise her.

“You can have him and do what you like after I’ve reported to the guild officials,” I told her.

“But you’re the one that defeated him...” she started. “How about this? I’ll give you half of the quest reward.”

She explained that if I gave her my terminal’s contact details, she’d share her reward once she had turned in the quest. The reward was over a million yen, so I happily accepted. And all that money for knocking out a level 14 nobody! I’d found another reason to want to increase my adventurer class.

We sat down and chatted to kill time before the guild officials arrived. The ninja revealed she belonged to a state-affiliated clan that assisted in guild-related investigations that weren’t public. She also wasn’t allowed to tell me the name of her clan.

I’d assumed organizations like that would exist, but I hadn’t thought this sexy ninja would be a member of one. I got her to disclose that her adventurer class was of 4 and that she belonged to a clan composed entirely of Thieves.

So she's class 4?

Classes 1 and 2 were essentially bestowed as titles, so the highest class was effectively class 3. Therefore, class 4 was the second-highest and carried influence at the Adventurers' Guild. She appeared to be around level 25 as well, and a person so strong wouldn't belong to any ordinary clan.

And so, we continued talking about nothing in particular until the guild officials I'd contacted arrived. I filled them in on what had happened as they took the proctor away, and the ninja confirmed my version of events, making everything go smoothly.

When it was time for her to leave, she winked at me and said one final thing that caught my attention, "Before I forget... One of our trainees is a student at Adventurers' High. Say hi to her if you see her."

The trainee was apparently a cute girl, though I doubted I'd get a chance to meet her. No one knew Class E for being members of powerful clans.

I'd recorded the proctor confessing to tearing up the document I was supposed to retrieve for the exam and headed to the Adventurers' Guild to hand that in. The extra hassle bothered me, but I didn't want to lose my shot at ranking up.

Unfortunately, they told me my exam results would depend on the verdict at the proctor's trial, which was at least a year away. There was no way I could wait that long, so I gave up on arguing, mourning my loss of nine thousand eight hundred yen.

On the upside, I'd gotten some new armor and couldn't grumble too much. I could always return to take another exam when I had the time.

Cheered up, I decided to return to school in the morning for the first time in quite a while.

Chapter 12: Love Letter

“Souta, Kaoru’s come to get you!”

I was going to attend school after a break of a few days. Since I’d let Kaoru know, she’d diligently turned up to walk to school together. I put on the school uniform that I’d bought to fit my slightly slimmer body and went down the creaking staircase. Kaoru was waiting for me by the door, but she didn’t seem her usual self.

“S-Souta, is that really you?” asked Kaoru.

“Yep,” I replied. “My diet has started working... Are you all right?”

She clutched at her chest like she was in pain. Had she caught a cold? I asked her, and she was apparently all right. Maybe she was lovestruck with my new handsome appearance? Oh, the trouble with being popular!

While I entertained myself with delusions, I walked a few paces behind Kaoru as we walked to school, as always. I had lost weight but was still quite plump, so I’d need to wait a little longer until I could be considered handsome. Just a little longer...

The clear summer sky had brought the temperature to a warm twenty degrees Celsius despite the early hour, cooled by the occasional refreshing morning breeze. I’d sweated heavily during my first day of school on my morning walk despite the freezing weather, and the weight of all my fat had slowed me down. Now, the walk gave me far less trouble.

I was 170 centimeters tall at the moment and weighed 80 kilograms on the scale yesterday. While I regretted gaining some weight back after the Volgemurt fight, I couldn’t resist my hunger. However, I’d shed plenty of weight while increasing my muscle mass to improve my body’s balance. The Glutton skill still gave me an insatiable hunger, and my mother tried to fatten me up at every opportunity. I would need an iron will to stick to my diet without giving in to temptation.

Appraising the Glutton skill was one of my three major concerns, including my hunger and getting money. Still, I had no rush and could decide what to do with the skill later.

I followed Kano as we navigated the disorderly mess of school buildings toward the classroom for first-year Class E. When I sat down at my desk, I noticed the rest of the class was staring at me like I was a unicorn.

“Is it just me, or has Piggy lost weight?” one of them said.

“Yeah, he’s more piglet than pig now.”

“Ha ha, you’re saying he’s returned to being a baby, then!”

“I, uh, caught a cold,” I said.

My classmates usually ignored me, so it felt awkward to find myself suddenly at the center of their conversation.

Listen, guys, I’m a coward and can’t handle you staring at me like that! Yeah, I know how weird it is to lose twenty kilograms in a few days, but still! I thought.

I shrunk in my seat, pretending to read a book, until two sweet angels descended from the heavens and appeared by my desk.

“Hey, Narumi!” greeted Oomiya cheerfully, who had her hair in two braids on either side of her shoulders.

“Are you feeling better?” asked Nitta, the girl with glasses, who was as relaxed as ever. “You’re, like, so much thinner. Must have been a really bad cold, huh.”

The two friends were as beautiful as ever. I was grateful for their concern over my health, but it was a “really bad battle” rather than a “really bad cold” that had caused my weight loss. I couldn’t admit that and told them I was feeling better instead.

After I’d greeted them back, I asked them why they’d wanted to talk to me. It seemed we had a sword fighting class in the Arena in the afternoon.

“The thing is, we need to form pairs,” explained Oomiya. “But you were sick,

so you don't have a partner, right?"

Being told to form pairs was every loner's nightmare. Would we start sparring already? I couldn't think of another reason we'd need to pair in sword fighting class. Physical education at the school, like club activities, was meant to help with dungeon raids. Various classes also instructed students in weapons usage and martial arts. I recognized the benefits the combat-focused classes could have for me for dungeon raids.

"Her partner is absent today," said Oomiya, glancing at Kuga. Yet Kuga was sitting alone in a shadowy corner as if trying to stay out of sight. She was usually a quiet student but did speak to her roommate, who was supposed to be her partner. "So I told her I'd be her partner."

"If I pair up with you, Narumi, we'll all be sorted," said Nitta. "How about it?"

The simplest solution would've been for Kuga to pair with me. But Kuga was a secret agent with an appraisal skill, so I didn't want to get too close to her. Oomiya and Nitta's suggestion to split up and form pairs with each of us was a stroke of luck for me.

However, I felt it would be awkward for a guy like me to budge into a girl's group, so I—

"Yes, please!!!"

—I bowed so low my head nearly hit the ground. The two girls had likely, or definitely, only invited Kuga and me out of pity so we wouldn't be left out. Though, I would not let this golden chance slip out of my fingers!

I hadn't fostered relationships with my classmates because I'd spent all my time raiding the dungeon. Plus, I had made a name for myself by being the loser that had lost to a slime. No one wanted anything to do with me either. Even though I'd become a loner, Oomiya and Nitta had gone out of their way to include me, and I wanted to get to know them better. Platonically, of course.

"They'll hand out weapons in the class, so you don't have to bring any," added Oomiya. "You should try to find protective gear that fits you... And I have to say, you seem really different."

"Yeah, it's not just that you've lost weight," agreed Nitta. "And you seem a lot

stronger.”

“Y-You think so?” I responded.

I’d been obese and hardly been able to move when I joined the school, and now I’d slimmed down to just a plump boy. My exercise regime and dungeon raiding had built up muscle in my body. Although, the biggest reason for my weight loss was my fight against Volgemurt... At any rate, I definitely looked different.

“I’ll see you later, Narumi!” said Oomiya.

“Go easy on me when we spar,” remarked Nitta.

Both left to join another group of girls, waving at me as they went.

Class E’s treatment at the club fair had dampened Oomiya’s spirits for a time, but it seemed she was regaining some of her usual cheer. Nitta was as beaming as ever, clearly enjoying school life, and her presence always lightened the hearts of those around her. I was glad I’d gotten to speak to them on my first day back, as it put me in a good mood.

Right, today’s going to be a good day!

Most of my classmates went to the cafeteria at lunchtime, while only ten students stayed behind in the classroom. I also remained, eating a jam bun with milk I’d bought for a change of pace to the school lunches I usually ate. As I did that, I skimmed through Oomiya’s notes for math class she’d lent me so that I could catch back up after my absence.

We were only in the first term of school, even if the problems set as homework were already as difficult as university entrance exams. I needed to work more than I had at my old high school, or I’d fall behind. Even though I’d studied at a STEM university that wasn’t the best in my original world, I didn’t plan on letting myself lose ground to first-year high schoolers in STEM! While I copied the problems over and munched on my bun, I heard a stir from the other side of the classroom since someone was saying my name.

“You there,” a girl called out to a student. “Is there anyone named Souta

Narumi here?”

She was a petite girl with long wavy blue hair and good posture. Her eyes and small nose gave her a dignified, strong-willed appearance. Her voice was clear and distinct, even from behind the black feather fan she held in front of her mouth. She was the very image of a noble girl.

The blue scarf on her uniform showed she was a second-year student. She hadn't customized her uniform, but everything about the way she looked was elegant. This demeanor made it clear she was from the upper class or something akin to it.

If I remember correctly... I thought.

As an answer to the girl's question, my classmates all pointed their fingers at me in silence like they were pointing out a criminal, then they held their breaths. I didn't particularly want to get involved, though the tense atmosphere in the classroom left me no choice but to speak up.

“I'm Narumi,” I said. “Do you need me for something?”

“You?” the girl asked skeptically. She glared at me, looking me up and down. “Hmm.”

I felt incredibly uncomfortable under her gaze.

“I want to speak with you in private,” she said. “Come with me.” She set off, walking without waiting to hear my answer. I didn't feel I could ask her to wait until I'd finished eating, so I shuffled behind her.

We walked out into the hallway, took several turns, climbed a flight of stairs, and ended up inside an empty classroom. At that point, the girl handed me a postcard-sized envelope.

Wait, if she's taken me somewhere to be alone together and given me this... Could it be a love letter?

The envelope itself didn't seem special, but a wax seal stamped with the mark of a plant enclosed it. On the front of the envelope was written “To Souta Narumi.” But it had nothing written on the other side to identify the sender.

Given that the young lady was glaring at me as if I were a rodent, I could probably rule out it being a love letter. Love definitely wasn't the feeling I was getting from her; if anything, she seemed to dislike me. I wondered whether her annoyance had anything to do with the sender of the letter. When I went to open the letter, she interrupted me.

"I want you to answer my questions before you open the letter," she ordered. Her voice had grown stricter like she was presenting me with a warning.

Because I had no idea what was happening, I thought it would be best to do as she said.

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

"I believe you encountered another member of my clan the other day," she said.

A member of her clan? Which clan would that be? Hopefully, not Soleil.

"Did that person tell you her name or the name of our clan?"

The girl's question made me realize she was talking about the ninja I'd met. I hadn't gotten her to tell me her or her clan's name because she often performed secret missions. Although I remembered that when we'd parted, she had mentioned a trainee they had at Adventurers' High. That was most likely the person I was with now. How nice, or worrying, it was that she'd come to meet me so soon!

"No, I couldn't get either name out of her," I replied.

"Okay," the girl said. She cast Basic Appraisal on me, then asked, "Next question, what is your level?"

I'd tampered with my data to show my level as 3, the same as in the school database. Yet the girl appeared convinced this was untrue. The ninja might've told her about my victory against the corrupt proctor.

All the same, I didn't want to muddy the waters with the girl but would never tell her my level. I tried to phrase my refusal as amicably as possible. "I'm trying to keep my level a secret," I replied. "It's necessary for my current plans. I hope that doesn't offend you."

After a second, she said, “All right. Onto my last question, just who are you?”

That was quite an open-ended question. Was my use of the Fake skill really sufficient to warrant so much distrust? Even though first-year Class E students weren’t as experienced as the rest of the school, Akagi, Kaoru, and the others had already changed jobs. So what was so hard to believe about me becoming a Thief? Maybe people didn’t commonly use the Fake skill? That would explain the proctor’s blind confidence in Basic Appraisal and the ninja’s surprised reaction to my use of Fake.

I couldn’t be sure how common it was and tried to evade the question by saying, “Nobody special. Just Narumi, a first-year from Class E.”

The girl responded to my answer by momentarily releasing her Aura with a burst of hostility, but she quickly withdrew it. Perhaps the person who’d sent the letter prevented her from being openly aggressive toward me. I’d parted with the ninja on good terms, so I couldn’t think why her clan would be out to get me.

By the way, the girl was Kirara Kusunoki, a subheroine in the game who was quite popular among fans. Most of her friends called her by her first name, and those closest to her called her Kii. She was the heiress to a viscount and was an influential figure at the school.

Kirara only turned up rarely outside of Pinky’s BL mode, meaning I knew little about her since I’d played through the game as Akagi or a custom character. All I could remember was that she was a powerful student, acted as Pinky’s rival and protector, hated men, and had several powerful entities backing her.

She kept an entourage of many other students, which gave her a high profile within the school. More than a few annoying events would activate if I was around her, so I would’ve preferred not to get too involved with her. I worried that the letter she’d handed me would make my life difficult.

“Okay, you may read the letter now.”

“All right,” I answered with no enthusiasm. I opened the envelope, finding an invitation to attend a clan celebration. Pretty patterns decorated the card’s borders, and the sender had written the invitation with a fine brush. I was in for a surprise when I saw the sender’s name...

“From Haruka Mikami, leader of The Red Ninjettes?!”

“That’s right,” said Kirara, bringing out her feather fan and covering her mouth again. “The person you met the other day was our second-in-command.”

I knew The Red Ninjettes was an all-female clan composed entirely of Thieves. Their leader, Mikami, was a celebrity known for her glamour and beauty, making regular media appearances. Just then, I realized the ninja I’d met the other day and Kirara were also members of The Red Ninjettes.

But why would the ninja want to invite me to a party? We’d only met briefly. I would’ve asked Kirara, but I doubted they had informed her based on the questions she’d asked me.

“Celebration sounds grandiose, but it’s just a tea party for clan members. As Lady Mikami herself has invited you, I would implore you not to insult her by refusing to attend.”

Kirara’s hostility toward me made sense now. She didn’t like that a stranger, a guy no less, would attend a tea party reserved for the girls in the clan. But she couldn’t do anything about it because her clan leader had invited me personally.

“That’s all,” said Kirara. “I’ll see you again at the party.” With that, Kirara speedily exited the classroom, her footsteps making no sound.

I had to attend the party. While I would’ve liked to refuse the invitation, I was too worried about the potential consequences.

The date’s set just after the Battle of the Classes is over, I noted.

I heaved a sigh as I wondered what to do, then the school bell rang to announce that the afternoon classes would begin in five minutes.

Ah! I haven’t finished my lunch yet. I’d better run.

Chapter 13: How We Know Each Other

I stuffed the remainder of my bun into my mouth, washed it down with milk, and changed into my gym clothes. Then, I walked toward the third Arena room, where the sword fighting class would occur.

Kirara had annoyed me. My unplanned conversation with her had drained the energy I needed to get through the physical activities of the next class. Since this was our first sparring lesson, perhaps it wouldn't be too physically taxing. Nitta was as relaxed as they came, so I couldn't see myself breaking a sweat sparring against her.

If anything, I'd spend the lesson flirting and having fun. I can't wait!

Thus, my annoyance quickly changed to excitement, I walked the rest of the way with a bounce, having to stop myself from skipping.

I reached the third room of the Arena, which had a thick outer wall surrounding it. The intense lighting on the inside was almost blinding. We were in the third biggest of the four rooms in the Arena, but it was still as large as the gym at the high school I'd attended in my old world and had a staggeringly high ceiling. The magic field contained the entire room. Even the walls and floor could withstand powerful impacts, making the room suitable for training with physical enhancements.

"Has anybody not found a partner?" asked Murai as he walked into the room, checking the class register. Any leftover student would have to pair up with him, which seemed like punishment.

It might seem odd that a homeroom teacher was running a gym class. Still, Murai was an alumnus of Adventurers' University and a graduate of Adventurers' High in Class A. He was at a higher level with more experience when compared to the average adventurer, so he was more than capable of instructing us. I would've loved to glimpse his strength with Basic Appraisal, but

I resisted the urge.

Behind Murai were several other instructors and the handsome school Priest. We could rest assured that we'd be okay if any accidents occurred because the Priest could provide first aid and regenerative magic, all free of charge.

The instructors distributed black full-body combat suits along with hard plastic swords. We listened to Murai's instructions while putting on the suits. In today's lesson, we'd be striking at our partner with the training swords.

The sword fighting we would practice wasn't the same as kendo; instead, we would learn how to fight against monsters rather than other people. Monsters varied in size and shape as well as attack patterns and weaknesses, which required very different combat styles from fights against adventurers.

There was no standard weapon for sword fighting class either; shortswords, longswords, katanas, and daggers were all viable. The recommended style was to attack and retreat continuously rather than maintain a fixed distance from your opponent because the ideal distance depended on your opponent and your sword's length.

However, we wouldn't use the attack-and-retreat method since we would all use the same light plastic swords. We'd stand still, face our opponent, and strike each other with our swords, similar to kendo practice. The instructors would walk through the groups as we swung at each other and suggest how to improve.

Generally, you'd pick a partner close to your own level. Due to Class E having less than two months of experience in the dungeon, it wouldn't make a difference who we partnered up with... Or so Murai thought.

Nitta, my partner for the day, hoped to become an Archer, and used a bow as her main weapon. She probably hadn't practiced much with close-range weapons, and I'd need to go easy on her without making it obvious.

When I looked at her, she waved a little and whispered, "Good luck."

Good luck to you too! I thought, excited.

Oomiya, a petite girl who wanted to be a Wizard, had paired up with Kuga, who was slender. Plus, Oomiya would learn a lot from a fight against a student

aspiring to a different job with a different physique, especially at a much higher level than her. Unfortunately, Kuga was rubbing her eyes and didn't seem interested in taking the lesson seriously, which was a shame.

"Begin!" Murai instructed.

My classmates began tentatively swinging their swords at each other, getting a feel for combat. Most wanted to become adventurers one day, so they took the training seriously. A few of the students, like Kaoru, had perfect stances due to prior experience with kendo.

As for me... I hadn't actually checked what Nitta's level was, but it was likely much lower than mine. Ignoring that, I didn't want to go too hard on a girl and would let her get the first few hits.

Nitta put a hand on her hip and puffed out her chest. "Just so you know, I'm not too bad with a sword."

Had she practiced kendo before? It wouldn't matter, though. Inside a magic field, she wouldn't be able to beat me because level superiority mattered more than technique.

She's confident in her ability, I thought, so I need to be careful not to ruin her confidence.

Later, Nitta combed her hair back with her fingers and slowly pulled her sword from the sheath on her waist. The sight of her was delightful, and I let my guard down. But when I looked more closely...

She'd lowered her center of gravity, holding her sword in her right hand in front of her, and kept her left hand back as if ready to cast a spell. Magic Swordsmen favored this stance and was not the kind a Class E student with little raiding experience should know.

But wait, that's not the main problem.

Warning bells were ringing in my mind for a different reason.

The tip of her sword was swaying ever so slightly in time with her breathing. This sword style obscured the first attack behind a series of small feints...and I recognized it.

A sudden wave of déjà vu washed over me, and the memory of *her* came crashing back into my mind—the woman who’d hunted across the world for me in the game.

“Tell me, Souta Narumi—”

Nitta was staring deep into my eyes, watching for my reaction. Her gentle smile was unchanged, yet it looked infinitely more monstrous than it had.

“—you’re Mav, aren’t you?”

H-Holy shit...

The world around her shimmered, and I felt like a gale was blowing me away. Nervousness caused my heart to pound in my chest, and I gulped.

“You are! Your face has given it away! I knew it.” Nitta began bouncing up and down, forgetting that we were in the middle of a lesson. Her way of celebrating was quite adorable.

On the other hand, I felt dejected and about to lose my mind. I’d expected to find some other players here, but why did it have to be *her* of all people?!

“When was the last time we fought?” asked Nitta. “Devil’s Keep? You took out so many of my clan members in that one.”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right,” I responded. “You got me in the end, though.”

Before arriving in this world, Nitta and I had been rivals who’d fought and competed against each other. More accurately, in our role-play, I’d been a PK*, and Nitta had been a PKK*.

*TIPS: PK is short for player killer. This term refers to players who intentionally attack ordinary players to steal their money or items. People view them with fear and hatred as malign entities.

*TIPS: PKK is short for player killer killer. The term refers to players or organizations specializing in defeating PKs. Although they kill other players, others revere them for slaying the hated PKs.

DEC employed a PK combat system, allowing you to attack and kill other players. When I joined the game, I'd become a PK to seek thrills in fights against plenty of players. Sometimes I killed them; sometimes they'd kill me.

The great benefit of PKing was the ability to loot items and equipment from other players. But the downside was that you'd become a wanted player and get banned temporarily from player hangouts like Granny's Goods on the tenth floor. If you continued to kill players while in a wanted state, you'd receive the label of "permanent PK" and the Adventurers' Guild would set a huge reward for your defeat. There was no way to remove this label once they arranged it. No matter how many good deeds you might pile up, PKs would endlessly hunt you down for the bounty, turning your game life into one of constant fighting. Another disadvantage of PKing was that if you died or got killed while labeled as a PK, they would slash down your level, you'd lose all your equipment and items, and your player name would include an insulting tag. My tag was "The Most Atrocious Villain," or Mav.

The risks and restrictions far outweighed the potential benefits, so nobody became a PK for their own profit. Only eccentrics and thrill-seekers like me would choose to make PKing part of their daily gameplay.

Nitta had formed a clan of PKKers to hunt down PKs like me, so it was natural that we'd know each other. She'd hunted me, and I'd hunted her. We had stolen, attacked, and killed each other over and over again. That had been more or less where we'd left it before we had come to this world.

I inspected the girl beside me and could only see a cute older-sister type wearing sports glasses. This image was a far cry from the Dark Knight who'd hunted me down with all the tenacity of a wild beast. She used her sword fighting knowledge from the real world to wield her magic sword, shrouded in her jet-black plate armor and massive Aura.

"So, uh, did you pick a custom character?" I asked.

"Yep, this is the real me," stated Nitta. "Looks like you didn't."

I had chosen a random character, which led to me becoming Piggy, a character from the game. Even though I regretted my choice for a long time, I

didn't mind now because my diet was coming along nicely, and I got on well with my family.

Nitta had picked the custom character option but been sent to this world as herself instead of interacting with a character creation screen. It was strange because I'd always pictured the person behind her character as a giant female pro-wrestler with a hideous face. Nonetheless, it turned out she was actually a really cute girl.

"So, how did you know it was me?" I inquired.

I'd only started to use Fake to disguise my stats, so maybe she'd cast Basic Appraisal on me at some point without me realizing. I wasn't sure how that could be possible.

"Just a feeling," she said. "The giveaway was your reaction after seeing my 'pendulum.'"

Pendulum was the sword technique she used where she'd cause the tip of her sword to twitch to confuse her opponent about the timing and vector of her attack. Nitta's PKK clan had instructed members on real-world sword fighting techniques, and they'd upheld military standards of conduct in training and in battle. They'd been an adept team of swordsmen specifically trained in PVP. Rumor had it that Nitta had trained her recruits personally to raise the clan's overall fighting ability, even if I didn't know how true that was.

The Nitta standing in front of me didn't possess the same huge Aura or suite of sword skills as her game character. My countless deaths at her hands made it impossible not to be wary of her.

She smiled faintly as she gazed at my face with a strange twinkle in her eye. I recognized that look from her Dark Knight character.

Uh, she's not gonna try to kill me, is she...?

Chapter 14: The Third Player

Nitta and I pointed our swords at each other, standing two meters apart. If we'd been playing *DEC*, that would've been more than close enough to exchange countless slashes and weapon skills within a fraction of a second. Despite that, Nitta was perfectly calm, wholly comfortable to throw a horrible question my way in her dreamy voice. "I hope you're not planning to keep up your PKing in this world, are you?"

"God, no! Do you really think I'd kill people in the real world?"

"Maybe I'll become this world's Mav, then..."

Had she gone crazy? I stopped using my sword for a moment as her statement stunned me until I recalled we were in class. As such, I carried out half-hearted thrusts with my sword to disguise our whispered conversation so the instructors didn't think we were messing around. I tensed up every time Nitta attacked with her sword, even though I knew she wouldn't hurt me.

"I was joking, god!" she snorted. "I know this world and *DEC* are different, like in how its people think, how their lives actually matter, you know. So, maybe we could share our thoughts."

Life at high school here made me forget that I'd come to a new world. Unlike my old world, some clans had no qualms spilling each other's blood in their pursuit for power. And nobles tended to abuse commoners without fear of reproach from the law. The dungeon was the worst place of all, showing how you'd be safer in the worst gang-ridden slum of my world.

But just because we lived here now didn't mean we had abandoned the morals of our previous world. It was inevitable to want to rid this new world of its discrimination and punish those who abused human rights and caused mayhem. We'd need to research and adapt to this world if we wanted to carve out peaceful lives, remembering the different laws and standards of order as well as the value of human lives.

Nitta wanted us to share our thoughts about these matters, but...

“But I barely know you,” I said. “We hardly ever spoke in the game and spent more time killing each other. We’ll have to learn to trust each other before we can share our thoughts, don’t you think?”

“Oh my God, are you hitting on me?” Nitta clapped her hands to her cheeks, pretending to be embarrassed.

Her reaction felt out of place given our history, as my strongest memory of her was that she’d always swoop in to kill me as soon as our eyes met. Embarrassing as it was to admit, Nitta was beautiful enough to turn heads wherever she went that I would’ve fallen head over heels for her gentle smile if I had never found out who she was. That was a moot point now. I *had* found out, and I wouldn’t catch feelings for her. Not positive ones, anyway.

With that said, I wanted to check a few things with her since it wouldn’t be fair for me to judge her. I’d been a force for evil in the game, murdering and pillaging wherever I’d gone, and she’d been a force for justice. Nitta had all the right to judge me.

“So, Nitta, are we the only players you know about?” I asked.

“Don’t be so cold. Call me by my first name! Risa. Ri! Sa!”

I could see her body writhing for some reason, which I found strange. And I wasn’t sure why she was acting so friendly either.

“I’m gonna cast Basic Appraisal on you, if you don’t mind?” I asked.

“I’d rather you didn’t ignore me,” insisted Nitta. “But okay, go ahead.”

Name: Risa Nitta

Job: Newbie

Strength: Pathetically Weak

Available skills: 2



Those were the results of Basic Appraisal, but I could not tell whether she'd used Fake to alter her information. Basic Appraisal was less reliable when used on players and spies who would more likely manipulate their stats than the average adventurer.

"Are you using Fake?" I asked.

"No," she answered. "I've been trying to sneak into the dungeon, but I'm still just level 5."

"Level 5?" I repeated.

In that case, she probably hadn't visited Granny's Goods yet. You could technically reach the shop at level 5, but the journey would be too dangerous to be worth the trouble. To be extra safe, I asked if she'd been to the tenth floor, to which she responded with no. I believed her because it wouldn't make sense for her to cover this up when she'd voluntarily revealed herself as a player.

She was taking her sweet time to level up if she was only at level 5, though. What was taking her so long? She had game knowledge to help her level up and knew other players were probably here... Maybe she had her own reasons for taking it slow? Perhaps she was stuck with a debuff starter skill like me.

While I was thinking, Nitta suddenly switched from her stance, known in kendo as chudan no kamae, to unleash an attack while mixing in several feints. Instead of the Japanese style of sword fighting intended for use with katanas, she used the Western style meant for longswords. This indicated she had a long reach with her weapon and would mix in punches if our swords clashed. I retreated a few paces to avoid getting dragged into a fistfight.

"How about a little warning next time?!" I said, annoyed.

"Ha ha! Looks like I'll need to try harder to land a hit. We need the instructors to think we're taking this seriously, or they'll start lecturing us."

I glanced around and saw the instructors shouting at pairs that were slacking off, so she was right. We'd need to pretend to attack each other again.

Our swords clashed together a few times, then I let Nitta in on some of what I'd learned. I told her that while nobody seemed to know about Granny's

Goods, Furufuru had shared with me that someone had visited the store recently.

“Furufuru said that?” asked Nitta. “That wasn’t me.”

If the person who’d visited the tenth floor wasn’t Nitta, it had to be another player. And that player would also be part of Class E somewhere in this sword fighting lesson.

I sneakily scanned across my sparring classmates, searching for signs distinguishing one of them as a player. However, the third player would probably hide their true strength during the lesson.

While exchanging attacks with Nitta, I continued looking at my classmates for anyone I might recognize. I noticed *DEC*’s protagonist, toward the edge of the group, knock the sword out of his opponent’s hands. That confirmed my suspicions about Akagi: he had fallen to the dark side. His eyes were glazed over.

Akagi tried to join the First Swordcraft Club in the game, but the Class A students who made up the club just laughed in his face. He’d pleaded with them to let him join until they punched him away, which had led to a change in his heart. The next step in the game was for the subheroine Cuddles, aka Yuna Matsuzaka, to offer him a place in the Fourth Swordcraft Club she’d founded. This world’s Akagi appeared to follow that same path.

The boy that Akagi had struck trembled at the intimidating glare he received from his opponent. *Trying to talk to Akagi would only make things worse*, I thought. *Sorry, kid, whatever your name is.*

Kaoru and Pinky were sparring together, also near the edge of the group. Their speed suggested they were around level 5, though I felt they could go harder. Sanjou possessed a latent capacity for power in her position as the protagonist of *DEC*’s BL mode, and she had a fantastic but turbulent future ahead of her if the game was anything to go by. Her story featured a multitude of ridiculous game scenarios.

I could only wish that Akagi or another player had a handle on events to prevent the worst scenarios from occurring. Otherwise, nation-states and organizations might start wars to get their hands on Pinky, tangling us all. If

nothing else worked, Nitta or I would slam the brakes on it.

The other student on my mind at the moment was Kuga, the spy who'd infiltrated the school on behalf of an American intelligence agency. Kuga was already over level 20 and possessed various skills to spy and gather intelligence. She was harmless as long as her cover wasn't blown, and I wanted to stay away from her because her appraisal skills could see through my faked stats.

Oomiya, Kuga's partner, was diligently swinging her sword. The sight of her braids bouncing with each thrust was adorable. Kuga's original partner was a long-haired, shy girl that I knew nothing about.

"Kuga was supposed to be partners with her roommate," remarked Nitta when she saw where I was looking. "A level 3 girl, I think. I did some digging, but she doesn't smell like another player to me."

Apparently, Nitta had watched the roommate during combat and hadn't believed it was how a hardened *DEC* player would fight. Her theory was that long hours spent wielding clubs or swords as a player with an enormous strength stat led to signs emerging in how you attacked. I couldn't discern anything that deep in other people's attacks, but I didn't doubt her. Most of our classmates looked like they were around level 3 or 4, just as their figures in the school database stated. Nitta was better suited to sniff out players from the class than I was.

I wondered how many other players could have survived the game event that was the catalyst for us coming here. The game world got carpet-bombed, and all those caught in the huge radius of the attacks had died. Even if you'd escaped, innumerable traps would kill you instantly. I couldn't see many people surviving those cruelly unfair odds. A handful could've made it through based on the difficulty.

At the moment, I knew of three players: the person who'd visited Granny's Goods, Nitta, and me. I was a little shocked that three of us had completed the event, as I thought it'd been just me.

"I'm amazed you managed to complete that rotten game event," I commented. "I only survived because I got lucky."

The instadeath attacks just happened to miss me. The path I had chosen had

been clear of instadeath traps, or the people ahead of me had already sprung them. My survival was due to a string of coincidences rather than any skill...

Although that wasn't quite right, and skill did play a part. The instincts I'd built up through many long hours playing *DEC* had saved me at several spots, including dodging attacks. From that perspective, luck alone wouldn't have saved you if you lacked skill.

"My darling clan members helped me out," said Nitta, clutching at her chest as she stared into the distance as if eulogizing them. "I'll miss them dearly..."

Her clan members had walked into the path of the instadeath attacks and traps to keep Nitta safe at the cost of their lives. I hadn't thought of that tactic, but it seemed like it would work. Maybe there'd been other players that had used group tactics to complete the challenge.

"Yeah, I think some big Assault Clans took part," continued Nitta. "They didn't look like they were working together, though."

Nitta was the centerpiece of her clan, and its members had become utterly devoted to her. It made sense they'd sacrifice themselves to get her through. The big clans that made their names raiding the front lines and hunting bosses had some of the best players in the game, but those players were all in it for themselves and eager for glory. It was unlikely that any would forsake their chance to win to help a competitor survive the event. In that sense, using Nitta as an example of what the average player might do was a bad idea.

"We've got a lot to talk about," I said, "and I can't say much out in the open in the middle of class."

"Let's talk later," uttered Nitta.

We agreed to take it easy for the rest of the lesson and spar in a way that made us look like level 3s.

Even so, Nitta still mixed in the occasional feint.

I wish she'd stop that.

Chapter 15: The Student Council

Once I'd finished sparring with Nitta and the school day was over, I returned to our classroom.

Inside it, Oomiya was screaming furiously at a message on her terminal's screen. "Why won't they authorize my request?!"

Oomiya had applied to the student council for permission to form a new club for our classmates. This approach was her solution to the ban on entering the second-year Class E club imposed on us by Class D after Akagi's unsuccessful duel.

But the message on Oomiya's screen was a single word: denied.

The requirements for forming a new club were to have at least ten students wishing to join and one teacher to take responsibility for the club. Oomiya had cleared both of these conditions: over ten of our classmates had registered, and Murai had assured her that he was happy to be the club's affiliated teacher.

All she needed now was for the student council to stamp their approval, then Oomiya could create the club and begin managing it. However, that final yet simple step was not to be because the student council had curtly refused to authorize the club. Oomiya was furious, all the more so since they hadn't provided a reason for their action.

"I'm going to give them a piece of my mind!" Oomiya began to storm out of the room.

Nitta grabbed Oomiya by the arm and tried to calm her down. "Satsuki, hold on!"

Oomiya got worked up, and I agreed with Nitta that she should wait a while to let cooler heads prevail. It was a sensible idea to stop a Class E student from charging into the snake pit that was the student council without adequate preparation. We belonged to a school where power meant everything.

Some students were notable in their own right, but the factions called all the

shots. If you wanted them to hear your opinion and improve your position in school, you had to join one of the powerful factions. The school had several of those such factions, mainly composed of students from the third-year Class A. Most factions based themselves around the various school clubs, headed by the club presidents of the swordcraft clubs and the magic clubs. But the largest and most influential faction was the student council.

Sitting on the council were the two top students for each year group, and many belonged to the nobility. They controlled the massive budgets that would make an ordinary school principal's eyes water, and they could influence every event or club activity inside the school and even the factory and school alumni. The student council was the school's central nervous system, a glorious institution with members picked from the top of the elite cohort of students distinguished in studies and dungeon raiding. Naturally, a constant stream of unscrupulous students tried to use their noble privileges or bribes to worm their way into the council.

Just because they were elite didn't mean the members of the student council were...reasonable. Nearly all were bigheaded bundles of pride. I couldn't see them taking a student from Class E seriously. In the game, they'd butted heads with the protagonists Akagi and Pinky, leading to several duel events.

"I won't stop until they tell me why they're refusing to authorize it!" fumed Oomiya.

"I don't want you going to the student council room all by yourself, though," said Nitta. "I'll go with you, okay?"

Bolting in with an emotional outburst would only cause us more problems, so it was wise for the more collected Nitta to tag along.

While I was thinking about that, Nitta smiled and winked at me. "I'd feel a lot better if you came too, Narumi."

I'd been planning to join in anyway, feeling I owed both for saving me from a loner's life. This was my chance to show how big of a man I was!

"Oh, wow, you're coming too..." remarked Oomiya. "If it gets dangerous, hide behind me, okay?"

“Huh? Uhh... Sure...” I responded.

Oomiya still thought of me as the weakest student in the school. I got that for letting everyone know that a slime had beaten me. My lips almost began to quiver... But I wouldn't let that break me!

I shuffled along behind the two girls as we walked in silence down the sparkly clean corridors toward the student council room on the sixth floor. The wooden French doors leading into the room were large and heavy, decorated with engravings of birds and animals. The doors were likely worth several months of the average person's salary.

Standing before the doors, Oomiya took one deep breath to calm her nerves and knocked on it.

A few seconds later, a voice answered from the other side. “You may enter.”

The doors slid apart far smoother than their bulk would suggest, opening into a room decorated classically. All the tables and shelves inside were exquisite pieces of valuable furniture. A dark red carpet lay atop the pristine floor of sparkling marble. A large landscape painting hung on a wall, illuminated splendidly by an antique chandelier.

There was also a leather armchair, as valuable as the rest of the furniture, upon which sat a male student with glasses. Being nothing more than a commoner, I felt an irrational anger seeing a high schooler like me on expensive furniture in such a classy room. A golden badge gleamed on the boy's chest, showing how he was the son of a count of the imperial court. I would've guessed that the boy was noble, even without the badge, just from his demeanor. Perhaps dignity came naturally to those of high social rank.

The boy knitted his brows as he looked at us as though he were judging our pedigree. “What are you after?” he asked. A certain amount of suspicion was inevitable, given that we'd shown up without an appointment.

“My name is Oomiya,” she said. “I've come to discuss forming a new club.”

“You're first-years...” expressed the boy. “From...Class E.”

Students' uniforms featured different colors to visibly distinguish year groups: the color of the badges on boys' chests and the color of scarves for girls. The

red badge and scarves we wore demonstrated we were first-year students, while the green badge the student council member wore marked him as a third-year. Even the blue scarf Kirara had worn indicated that she was a second-year student.

He'd known our class because we weren't wearing badges showing our adventurer class. Years of raiding the dungeon would give you plenty of opportunities to complete quests set by the Adventurers' Guild and take rank-up exams. From class 7 up, one received badges of corresponding colors. Most of Class E was still class 9 because we'd only started raiding the dungeon. Since Class D students and above were almost all class 7 or higher, they could wear the adventurer class badges on their uniforms. While the school rules didn't stipulate that students had to wear the badge, most chose to do it because it was an indicator of your status within the school's social hierarchy. As such, the only students who didn't wear badges were first-year Class E students who hadn't had the time to get one, which made us easy to spot.

I had in fact taken a rank-up exam but hadn't passed, so I was still in class 9. That rotten proctor had a lot to answer for...

"Go away," the boy hissed, glaring at us like we were filth.

"No!" Oomiya shot back defiantly. "I want you to tell me why you won't authorize our club!"

"Why is it that every year we get nobodies showing up thinking they're better than they are?" he uttered.

I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, although that would be reckless. He was a noble, so who knew what could happen to us if we weren't careful.

"Do you know where you are?"

Based on the huge sign that read "Student Council" by the entrance, I imagined the question was rhetorical. Still, his condescension made me bristle.

"I'm busy," he said. "Go, and don't come back."

Oomiya seemed like she was about to argue, yet the boy turned away from us and refocused on the document he was reading for work. Even if we got his attention back, we wouldn't have a proper conversation with him. So, we left

the room and discussed what to do next.

“I can’t believe he won’t even hear us out!” fretted Oomiya. “That’s the whole point of the student council!”

“Maybe we should come back another day?” suggested Nitta.

“It wouldn’t matter,” I said. “He’s not going to listen to us...”

Someone with influence would need to introduce us to the student council if we wanted them to hear us out. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of any students with connections to the organization who were charitable enough to make introductions for some Class E losers. Our chances of success looked slim.

We barely spoke to each other as we dragged our feet back to our classroom. I could hear the shouts of students participating in club activities from outside the window. Only internal students from Class D and above engaged in training. A few Class E students might’ve been there to carry equipment and perform other menial tasks.

The students in the club the upper-year Class E students had formed were likely training somewhere, but they wouldn’t be at any of the prime locations inside the magic field. Those who had arrived at school with dreams of progressing to Adventurers’ University were getting a tough lesson in reality.

After we returned to the first-year Class E classroom, I began to pack away my things, feeling peckish, and the two girls started talking about raiding the dungeon.

“Nitta and I were planning on raiding the dungeon tomorrow,” said Oomiya. She was probably looking for a way to vent her frustration and smiled as if to prove she wouldn’t let a setback dampen her spirits. “Would you like to come with us?”

“Of course he is!” exclaimed Nitta, giggling. “You wouldn’t turn down an invitation from a girl, would you?” She smiled at me, urging me to go.

I’d intended to pick up some items at Granny’s Goods to sell for a profit tomorrow, though I was interested in getting closer to the two girls. But I could help Oomiya out with raiding, and I wanted to discuss some things with Nitta.

When I accepted their offer, they invited me to go with them to check out rental weapons at the school's factories. That reminded me of the ore I'd dropped off there. Oomiya seemed interested when I brought this up and asked whether she could tag along. I would've preferred that they didn't see the mithril ore I'd left... Although I could probably hatch a plausible excuse about where I found it, I didn't see a reason to refuse.

I glanced at the smiles on the girls' faces, Oomiya with her bouncing braids and the giggly Nitta. So, I gathered up my things and followed them out of the classroom.

Chapter 16: New Weapon

The three of us walked through a path in the school grounds lined by cherry trees. The cherry blossoms had all fallen, and green leaves sprouted on the branches. Even though it was past 4 p.m., the sun was still high in the sky, shining brightly through the trees. This part of the school included the factory complex. Delivery personnel and corporate workers streamed in and out, and I could hear conversations and the sounds of metalworking, especially at the busiest time of day.

We walked another hundred meters and reached the factory where I'd requested my mithril ore's refinement. I stood at the entrance and called to let them know I was there, but nobody responded. When I looked inside, I couldn't see anyone. I started looking around outside, hoping to find someone.

Oomiya told me she'd heard people talking and pointed me toward a storage area by the side of the factory that had raw material and other items stacked up. I went over and found the large student I'd met the other day talking with a few others with a huge grin.

"Check out my new weapon!" the student said, swinging the weapon to show off in front of his younger friends.

"Awesome!" one of his friends marveled.

"How much did you have to pay for it?" another asked.

I noticed the weapon was comprised of mithril alloy. *Don't tell me...* "Excuse me," I butted in. "I ordered the refinement of some mithril alloy the other day, and I wanted to check on its progress."

With that, he finally noticed me. The student grumbled, looking annoyed that I'd interrupted his boasting.

He gets no points for customer service, I thought. *And he should remember that I'm paying him.* I retrieved the refinery request contract from my bag and handed it over.

The student flicked the contract with his middle finger, snorted at me, and said, “This is a counterfeit. I have half a mind to bring you in front of the student council.”

I had a bad feeling when I saw him boasting about his new weapon, and his reaction confirmed it; he’d used my ore for himself. And so I decided to point this out to him so he could grovel at my feet and apologize for his thoughtless action. Then, and only then, might I consider letting him off the hook.

“Um, no, actually,” I said. “You wrote it out for me yesterday. If you look closely, you should recognize the handwriting, seeing it’s yours.”

“It’s not stamped, so it’s not valid,” he argued and continued to do so to prevent me from piping up, trying to intimidate me. “Besides, you’re from the first-year Class E. How’d a loser like you get their hands on mithril ore? I’ll tell you: you stole it.”

The thief’s threatening attitude had stunned the two first-year students behind him as well as Oomiya and Nitta.

Mithril ore was expensive, but not prohibitively so. Moreover, mithril ore and alloy were common in the factories since many orders for weapons went through. Pointing all this out to him would be a waste of time. He’d just ignore me and continue to call me a thief.

“Wh-What’s happening?” Oomiya whispered to me, sounding concerned. “Did he take your ore for himself?”

I felt guilty for dragging her into this and wouldn’t have brought her if I’d known that my contract required a stamp. But I had been exhausted on that day and hadn’t been thinking clearly, forgetting that scum like him was commonplace in this world.

Now, what was I going to do about it? I could freak out and beat the pulp out of him. That would definitely be the easiest option.

He said he’d bring me in front of the student council, didn’t he? I thought. What does he think they’re going to do about it? They don’t know anything about what happened. Unless he thinks they’ll decide against me because I’m in Class E.

I had to do something, or he'd keep my mithril. The best option would probably be to go along to get the student council. They were more likely to hear reason, and I could return to the "freak out" plan if that didn't work.

"Okay then," I said. "Let's see what the student council thinks."

"Who do you think you are? You're just a Class E loser," he warned, slashing the mithril-alloy curved sword that I wanted as a katana for Kano. Hadn't his parents ever taught him not to point blades at people? This world's Japan likely hadn't passed the Firearms and Swords Control Law. Regardless, his behavior was out of order.

He'd forced my hand since he wouldn't settle this without a fight, so I cast Basic Appraisal on the thief.

Name: Yuzuru Kumasawa

Job: Fighter

Strength: Pathetically Weak

Available Skills: 3

He probably wasn't using the Fake skill, so I could defeat him barehanded, even though there would be too many witnesses. The two first-year students, whom I didn't know because they weren't in Class E, glared at me behind Kumasawa.

"Did you just appraise me, you little shit?!" barked Kumasawa.

"Stop!" protested Oomiya, jumping between us. "P-Please, no fighting! If you'd take another look at the document, I'm sure—"

"Shut it!!!"

Kumasawa raised his fist to strike Oomiya's face, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him. *Maybe I should squeeze until it breaks*, I thought.

"What's going on?" someone called out. "Why are you arguing?" It was the third-year student council member we'd met in their office. "Oh, it's you three again." He had apparently heard the commotion while locking up and had come

to investigate.

Kumasawa switched from open aggression to deferential meekness now that there was an authority figure to suck up to. Listening to him prattle off his false justifications made me want to kick his ass.

Wanting to plead my side, I held up the contract and asserted, “He’s taken my ore for his own use.”

“The ore was stolen property,” rebutted Kumasawa, changing his excuse.

“So you’re suggesting that he may have stolen the ore?” the student council member asked Kumasawa while eyeing me.

“That’s right!” Kumasawa confirmed. “So, you see, I was about to rough him up a bit...”

“I see. So, where did you buy, or mine, the mithril?” he asked me. “Show me your proof.”

He wasn’t likely to believe that I’d bought it from Granny’s Goods on the tenth floor. Not that I would have told him anyway since I wanted to keep the shop a secret.

“Come on, out with it,” pressed the student council member. “Don’t tell me you did steal it?” He activated his Aura threateningly. “I’ll get the answer out of you one way or another.”

Why did everyone in this world think threats were the simplest solution to all problems? I sighed as I thought nobles were supposed to be smart, so why didn’t he understand that doing this to people he didn’t know could have consequences? I felt it might turn out like this, so I pulled Oomiya behind me and stepped forward to keep her out of harm’s way.

He’s probably around level 20, I thought. On the high side for a student here.

I hadn’t cast Basic Appraisal yet, but the volume of his Aura suggested he was a similar level to me. A short staff with an embedded dark-purple jewel hung from his waist, even though he hadn’t moved to draw it yet. He wasn’t facing me directly and hadn’t leaned into any stance, which led me to believe that he was a straight-up magician rather than a staff-wielding magical warrior. I

expected that he was a Caster... Or, no, Wizard was more likely, given his level.

Appearances could be deceptive, so it was time for Basic Appraisal.

Name: Akizane Sagara

Job: Wizard

Strength: Slightly Stronger

Available Skills: 4

So he was a level 21 adventurer with the intermediate Wizard job and four skills, none of which was likely Fake. The few skills suggested that he was purely trained in magic and had none of the skills from the warrior-or thief-style jobs.

His appearance made it obvious that he had little experience fighting other people. Yet he showed complete confidence in his prowess despite not being able to judge his opponent's strength, disregarding he was wildly underestimating me. He probably wouldn't take any notice if I changed my stance ever so slightly and continued staring me down.

Magicians needed to have expert footwork and fire off quick volleys of spells if they wanted to survive PVP*. Sagara didn't appear to have much PVP experience since he had probably faced opponents weaker than himself. Had he faced any strong opponents, his strategy had likely been to shield himself behind a wall while he cast powerful long-range spells.

*TIPS: PVP is short for player versus player and refers to situations when two or more players fight against each other, unlike combat against monsters. PVP usually conveys situations all players involved have agreed to combat to differentiate from PK, where a player attacks another without their permission.

I would've loved to show him what happened when a magician tried to stare down a close-combat type within reach... But he was a noble. I could get away

with self-defense, but throwing the first punch would get me in trouble.

Still, I sensed Sagara casting Basic Appraisal on me. Although I felt awful that someone like a bird of prey examined me, my Fake skill meant that he wouldn't see my true stats. I'd appear as a pathetically weak Newbie to him.

"How odd," said Sagara.

"So, are you going to get the answer out of me by force?" I asked.

Sagara ramped up his Aura to its full extent to apply further pressure. Aura's original purpose was its use against low-level monsters in the dungeon to avoid combat, and it had little effect against an opponent of similar strength.

Not everyone here was the same level as Sagara. While I shielded the two girls from receiving the full force of the Aura, some of it still made it past me. Oomiya was clutching herself, cowering. On the other hand, Nitta put on a brave face despite being only level 5, which was a little amusing. If I didn't end this situation, their bodies would suffer the consequences of being exposed to a powerful Aura for too long. Just as I was about to act, Sagara suddenly retracted his Aura.

"Hmm, so that's how it is," he said. "Souta Narumi... I'll remember that name."

I wasn't sure what had changed his mind, but I was glad that the Aura was gone. It sucked that he'd learned my name through Basic Appraisal, and I would have to pray it wouldn't get me in any trouble.

"You," Sagara addressed Kumasawa. "He is more than capable of acquiring mithril through his own means. You are to return what you've taken or otherwise compensate him. That's an order."

"B-But I've already used the mithril," Kumasawa tried to protest.

Sagara then directed his Aura at Kumasawa, who shrunk back with fear. While I hadn't liked how proud and arrogant Sagara acted during our earlier meeting, I was thankful he was here to resolve our problem.

Chapter 17: Kaoru Hayase - Part 2

Kaoru Hayase

“Here it comes!”

“Ready to heal whenever you need me! I’m good to go!”

I took up the front while Naoto and Sakurako brandished their staffs behind me.

We were on the sixth floor of the dungeon at a camping site for hunting a particular demon wolf called a warg. A demon wolf followed Yuuma as he ran toward us. The monster was faster than we’d expected, and we needed to lure* it by firing arrows from a distance to stop it from catching up to Yuuma.

*TIPS: Luring monsters is when adventurers use long-distance attacks or skills to aggro enemies and induce them toward them. Parties prefer to fight in safe locations where other monsters won’t disturb them, so they lure their prey to their chosen spot.

When luring demon wolves, one needed to ensure no other demon wolves were nearby, or the prey’s Howling skill would attract them. Taking on two wolves at once was too risky at our current level.

But it was Yuuma doing the luring, so we had nothing to worry about. He carried a bow on his back, a shield in one hand, and a one-handed sword in the other. Plus, he took on various roles within our party, from luring prey to dealing damage and functioning as a tank. His ability to succeed in all three roles proved his natural talent.

The demon wolf chased after Yuuma, growling with its fangs bared. But the scariest thing about the beast was that it was silent when it ran despite the hundred-kilogram bulk of its two-meter-tall body.

Once Yuuma had reached the safety of the camping spot, he turned around and blocked the demon wolf with his shield to buy us time. It couldn't be easy bearing the brunt of this creature's force, considering it had come charging at us at fifty kilometers an hour. But Yuuma's strength and technique made it possible. I circled behind the wolf while Yuuma held it at bay and Naoto prepared to launch a magic attack slightly farther away; our formation would let us strike from all directions. We'd put Sakurako at a safe distance just in case. She fulfilled the most vital role in the party, healing us when necessary, so she didn't need to get involved directly in the combat.

The single-minded frenzy of the wolf dissipated when it realized we'd lured it here to surround the creature. It growled as it observed us, switching to the defensive. Naoto broke the stalemate by casting Fire Arrow at the beast.

"Distract it!" I shouted. "I'll use my skill."

Switching to the basic job of Fighter had greatly improved my fundamental stats and enabled me to use weapon skills.

Yuuma kept the wolf's aggro directed at himself by jabbing it with his weapon while defending with his shield so that it wouldn't target the rest of us. I waited until the exact moment that the wolf took its eyes off me to activate Slash.

It was like a switch connected to my muscles suddenly flicked on. My body began performing the skill motions automatically. Then, I performed a powerful attack, far stronger than an ordinary person could achieve and comparable to a master swordsman. And my sword would slice through the wolf's thick pelt like butter.

The warg somehow twisted away from my surprise attack from behind at the last second, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow. It was a reminder that the monsters on the sixth floor were no easy prey. My attack cut a gash in the wolf's side up to its hind leg. The wounded wolf tried to limp away, but Yuuma closed in from the front with his sword and Naoto from behind with a dagger. Both plunged their weapons into the beast, which let out one final high-pitched whine before turning into a magic gem.



“And that makes ten,” I said. “We’ve got a good pace, but we should probably take a short break.”

It was a Saturday, so the four of us had come down to the dungeon early in the morning, and we’d already hunted ten demon wolves.

“I can keep going,” argued Yuuma, a fierce look in his eyes.

“No, we need a break,” said Naoto. “Now that we’re on the sixth floor, we can’t take even the smallest risk.”

The fight hadn’t lasted longer than a minute, but risking your life in a fight to the death was mentally draining. Plus, we’d be better positioned for further fights if we waited a while to regain mana and let my cooldown timer reset so that I could use my weapon skill again.

“I know it’s a little early,” said Sakurako, “but does anyone want lunch? I’ve made sandwiches with plenty of vegetables and yummy meat for today.”

“I am hungry,” I said. “Your sandwiches are always so delicious, Sakurako. I’d love some lunch.”

“Yuuma and I will get the tableware ready,” volunteered Naoto. “Yuuma, could you get the plates out?”

“I’ve brought some soup in this magical flask as well,” remarked Sakurako. “Could you pour some out for everyone?”

We sat for lunch and enjoyed our meal since monsters wouldn’t spawn near the campsite unless somebody led them to us. Sometimes other adventurers would pass by and leave when they saw that we’d arrived first because the space was only large enough for one party to hunt at a time. In other words, we had the campsite all to ourselves.

The large basket Sakurako had brought was filled with all sorts of sandwiches with colorful ingredients. Another bag had an enchanted flask with a spell to retain heat. The soup had been kept near boiling temperatures, so the vegetables’ flavors would have mixed in nicely and left a lovely smell.

Naoto let out a sigh of contentment and said, “It’s a nice, calming flavor.”

“There’s plenty to go around, so eat as much as you want,” said Sakurako.

The ingredients weren't exotic, but the varied assortment of vegetables created a wonderful flavor. Additionally, the taste of the sandwiches was a perfect remedy for fatigue. It was so good that I almost forgot my table manners and wolfed them down. Fortunately, I retained my dignity as a young lady.

Embarrassed that I'd almost lost control of myself, I looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and saw Yuuma troubled. He'd kept up appearances after his loss to Kariya, pretending to be cheerful. I could see that his spirits had sunk too low to continue this facade. Yuuma's visit to the First Swordcraft Club the other day must have been the final straw. I recalled that he'd scared the life out of his partner in yesterday's sword fighting class, ruining his opportunity to practice.

Naoto had noticed the look on Yuuma's face, stating, "We're friends, and that means that any challenges we face are together. So, Yuuma, you don't need to keep it in."

Yuuma said nothing.

"What happened?" Naoto continued softly. "If you're worried about something, let's talk about it. You're not the only one that wants to solve Class E's problem. Kaoru, Sakurako, and I all want that too. You don't have to do everything alone."

Naoto was right. I also wanted to help, and Sakurako gave a big nod to show she did as well.

Yuuma exhaled and relented. Without raising his eyes to meet ours, and with frequent pauses and stutters, he opened up about how his loss to Kariya had affected him. That included what had happened at the First Swordcraft Club.

It turned out that he hadn't been too upset about not beating Kariya. Yuuma had understood that he was inexperienced and that there were stronger students than him. Even though he'd lost so spectacularly, the loss hadn't affected him too badly. What had hurt, however, was the thought that he was responsible for Class E's current mistreatment.

Next he told us about his visit to the First Swordcraft Club... Which was an appalling story to hear. They'd told him that he'd need to win in a one-on-one

fight to get into the club. His opponent had then thrashed him in front of a large audience, ridiculed him, and kicked him out. To make matters worse, his opponent had humiliated Yuuma by winning with a handicap; he'd gone through the whole fight without moving from where he stood and only using his right arm. Every club member had hurled abuse at him and ridiculed Class E. He'd felt like they had trampled on his proud ambition to become the strongest adventurer, and ever since then, he'd been feeling desperate.

There was a tear in Yuuma's eyes as he spoke.

Some members of the Fourth Swordcraft Club had run into him as he was sullenly returning from the First, and they'd offered him a place in their club. He hadn't replied to their offer yet because he felt that to accept would be to admit defeat, and he didn't know what to do.

The rest of us sat quietly after hearing Yuuma's sad tale, unsure what to say.

Part of me wanted to pity him, though I knew that the same thing could've easily happened to me instead, and it would be wrong to pity someone in the same situation as yourself. In fact, it would be wrong in any situation; the right thing to do was to face the challenge together.

"The Fourth Swordcraft Club..." I said. "I remember them from the club fair. The one on the stage wearing the hakama was their club president, right?"

"Yeah," replied Yuuma. "It was her and the vice-president that spoke to me."

The club fair was a bitter memory for Class E. However, the girl in the hakama who'd taken to the stage was another student fighting against the upper classes, and she'd spoken with conviction and zeal.

"I think we should go and see the people in the Fourth Swordcraft Club," I suggested, wanting to know their activities and how they trained.

"It'd be good to hear what they have to say!" added Sakurako.

"I agree," Naoto said. "We could stand to learn something from them, even if we don't decide to join." Naoto believed we could take inspiration from their methods to help us decide how to improve our class. They'd gone through the same ordeals as us, or maybe worse, so there might be helpful tips that we could learn from. "It's unlikely that we'll be able to progress to a higher class

this year. But we should still try everything we can to improve. I will work as hard as possible in every way I can to grow stronger.”

“Right!” agreed Sakurako. “So we’ve got to prepare for the Battle of the Classes.”

“You mean the exam we have next month?” asked Yuuma.

The Battle of the Classes would be the first exam where our class would compete against the others. Of course, we didn’t stand a chance of actually competing against the higher classes in any meaningful way since we’d just joined the school.

I wouldn’t have known this before my last raid, but each monster on the sixth floor and below was a problem that required a unique solution. In every fight you were one mistake away from death. Progress would take longer; you’d receive more wounds, which slowed you down, and you’d need more experience points than before to level up.

And yet, the higher classes—even Class D—regularly raided floors farther down than the sixth. Those in Class E needed many hours of raiding experience before we were as powerful as them. Would one year be enough for us to catch up to Class C or even Class D? Although I didn’t find it likely, we had to try.

“An idea I had for strengthening Class E was to set up a new club,” said Naoto. “Though, we should wait to see what Oomiya hears back from the student council. Even if she gets them to approve the club, it’ll be another month until all the administration gets sorted out.”

Oomiya was attempting to negotiate with the student council to form a club. While most council members were nobles, I wouldn’t hope they’d listen to what anyone from Class E had to say.

And even if they allowed us to form a club, it would take a month to sort out the budget, the assigned teacher’s schedule, and other matters. The Battle of the Classes was only two weeks away, so we had little time to wait for a club to get set up.

“Which is why,” Naoto continued, “I think we should invite the people in the class who’re having the most trouble leveling up by themselves to a study

session. There, we can help them practice sword fighting and magic.”

Naoto had already sent an email last night to the students who were having difficulty advancing past level 3, inviting them to practice after school and on weekends. He explained that he planned to open the sessions up to more attendees if other students wanted to join. Then, he asked us whether we’d be willing to help with the sessions.

His thoughtfulness and desire to help our classmates warmed my heart. Yuuma, Sakurako, and I wasted no time in volunteering.

“I practice kendo and can teach everyone some sword fighting,” I said. “I can’t help out with the magic, though. Maybe I could learn a thing or two.”

“I’ve been practicing with a bow and arrow,” Yuuma volunteered. “I’m not really good enough to teach others, but I can give it a shot.”

“I think, um, maybe I can help teach about healing magic,” added Sakurako.

The privilege to ascend to higher classes usually came through as a reward for individuals. But some of the school’s exams, like the Battle of the Classes, assigned a single grade to an entire class. It made sense that we should all work together for exams like that in order to get back at the higher classes, and I wanted to do all I could to improve the strength of the stragglers in our class.

“I hear that Majima has been trying to help the stragglers too,” said Sakurako. “He’s been taking some of our classmates into the dungeon and giving them lessons.”

“Hiroto Majima?” asked Naoto. “He’s pretty skilled with a sword. Maybe he practices kendo like you, Kaoru.”

I remembered him from his self-introduction, where he’d proclaimed that he was the son of a noble family and that he’d become a Samurai. Majima had invited Sakurako to raid with him, even though she had to decline the offer because we’d already planned to raid today. He hadn’t taken Class E’s treatment at the club fair well, but it sounded like he had picked himself back up and was striving for better once again, which I found admirable.

“Oh, also...” murmured Sakurako. “Have you heard the rumor going around?”

“What rumor?” I asked.

“You know Narumi?” she continued. “The second-year student Kusunoki seemingly came calling for him.”

“Kusunoki...?” I repeated. “You don’t mean Kirara Kusunoki, from the Eight Dragons?”

The Eight Dragons were the eight large factions that practically ran the school. The First Swordcraft Club and the student council we’d spoken about earlier were each one of the eight. Kusunoki was the girl that everyone was sure would be the next president of the Thief Development Club, another one of the Eight Dragons. She was a major figure in school politics.

Apparently, she’d come to our classroom, not accompanied by her large entourage, and called Souta away.

“Do Narumi and Kirara Kusunoki know each other from when they were younger?” Naoto asked me.

“Not that I’m aware,” I replied. “Souta and I are just commoners, and she’s a noble, right? I can’t see how they could’ve met anywhere but the school.”

Commoners and nobles might as well have lived on entirely different planets. The only places the two classes could have contact were exceptionally irregular places like Adventurers’ High.

“It’s interesting that she was asking after him herself,” remarked Naoto. “She could’ve just sent one of her entourage. Maybe there’s something here we could use to our benefit. Do you think you could ask Narumi what it’s all about?”

“I’ll ask him, but don’t hold your breath,” I replied.

Naoto clearly hoped that we could ask Kusunoki through Souta for help dealing with the student council and setting up a club. I couldn’t see Souta having any clout or connection with her. She’d probably stopped by the class on a whim and needed nothing too significant from him.

Now that I was thinking about Souta, I remembered how shocked I’d been when I saw him in the morning. Gone was the overweight boy that snacked at

every possible opportunity. He'd lost so much weight that he almost looked like his old self. Repressed memories of the younger Souta, the first boy I'd ever fallen in love with, had come flooding back, and I'd felt tightness in my chest.

But I didn't love him anymore... Or, at least, I thought that. My surprise about him had likely caused the tightness I'd felt.

Anyhow, losing so much weight wasn't normal. I'd sneaked glances while we walked into school, and I could tell that he hadn't just lost weight; he'd also gained muscle. The bits not covered by his uniform, like his neck and forearms, had been positively bulging. Perhaps he had hit upon a unique training method.

No longer did he leer at me or hound after me everywhere. Souta had changed so much in such a short period. There was no mistake about that. And yet, when I checked in the database on my terminal, he was still just level 3.

I would find a way to bring this and his relation to Kirara Kusunoki in our conversation on the way to school.

Chapter 18: Narumi's General Goods

Today, I'd arranged to raid the dungeon with Oomiya and Nitta. We planned to roam around the third floor, slaying orcs, and possibly explore the area around the fourth-floor entrance if we had time. According to Basic Appraisal, the monsters on these floors would all be "pathetically weak." I would not get any experience points from them, but the girls had been good to me, and I wanted to do something for them in return.

That wasn't my only objective, of course. The problem with being a bit of a social outcast was that I was often the last person to hear class gossip. Oomiya and Nitta were central figures in the class, so I bet that hanging out with them would help clue me in.

I also had to admit that the idea of spending time with two cute girls was a powerful motivator for any healthy teenage boy, especially when they smiled at me and made me feel welcome. Oomiya was drop-dead gorgeous. So was Nitta if I let myself forget who she was.

Naturally, I burst with excitement from the moment I woke up in the morning. I was so excited that I needed to take some time while performing stretches on the front porch to calm myself down.

I had thirty minutes before we'd arranged to meet, so I distracted myself by looking over the goods on sale at Narumi's General Goods, my family's livelihood.

Narumi's General Goods was a small store catering to low-to mid-level adventurers. Most of the shop's goods came from a distributor, while some were items my father had received from friends or found in the dungeon with his raiding buddies. The quicker the shelves emptied, the better our family ate.

The first items I looked at was a set of secondhand leather armor made from ordinary leather, like a cow or a pig, rather than demon wolf leather. Said armor came with bags and various accessories. My father would buy old, unwanted goods and patch them up to sell them. These items weren't in demand, but the

margins were good enough for him to continue stocking them.

On the topic of armor, I was wearing the light mithril-alloy armor that I'd confiscated from the corrupt proctor because my old demon wolf leather armor hadn't survived the Volgemurt fight. I couldn't afford to replace it, so this would do for now. But I would need to pick up better armor soon; mithril alloy wasn't quite durable enough for a level 19 adventurer. That bastard the proctor definitely wasn't eating delicious steak at the moment. I hoped he enjoyed prison food.

Next to the secondhand section was a shelf labeled "Narumi's Top Picks!" upon which were stacked potions in eerie red and green colors. These were watered-down healing potions, less potent than the instant-acting ones I'd bought on the tenth floor. However, they were strong enough to heal scrapes and bruises and relieve slight fatigue, meaning they sold well among the adventurers that raided up to that point. Stocking these potions came with little overhead because they didn't need certificates of authenticity from the guild. The downside was that their profit margins were tight, so the idea was to sell a lot to make money.

The three healing potions I'd bought from Granny's Goods to put up for resale had already sold out. These potions were potent enough to heal missing fingers instantly, showing why adventurers and medical professionals were willing to purchase them at high prices. For this reason, counterfeits had flooded the market, and you needed a certificate from the guild to prove that the potions you were selling were authentic. The appraisal fee was a whopping hundred thousand yen per potion. Our stocked potions had each sold for seven hundred thousand yen, though, indicating the high demand. Thanks to that, our family's hot pot had name-brand beef last night!

I'd usually lobbed most of my healing potions at undead monsters in the game because this would inflict major damage on them. But I wouldn't chuck hundreds of thousands of yen worth of potions at monsters here. And so, I purchased six high-quality healing potions from the shop while my father was out at the guild to get them appraised for certification. I would keep reselling potions from Granny's Goods until I'd amassed every name-brand beef in the world! Wait, no... The plan was to use the profits to buy better equipment.

At any rate, our finances were coming along nicely.

Near the register was long-shelf-life ready-to-eat food and camping equipment. We didn't stock much because we couldn't compete with the supermarkets, even though our customers occasionally purchased some of these in bargain deals with our other items.

I wanted to sell any items that I brought back from the dungeon at this shop. Once I'd come to grips with the art of selling, I could then open up a stall inside the Adventurers' Guild, where there was better security.

Everything hinges on you, dad, I thought.

Now that I had finished wandering the shop, I decided to get ready to leave.

I arrived at our meeting spot in the square outside the Adventurers' Guild a little early and was the first one here. As I wondered what I should do to pass the time, I received a phone call from Kano.

"Bro, please, please, please. Can I have another one of your swords? It's just not the same if I'm not dual wielding!" she cried.

Kano was heading into the dungeon to power level our mother. I'd told her to try using a single sword. From the sounds of things, she'd gotten cold feet right before the raid and wanted to borrow another sword if I had one in hand.

"I'm at the square outside the guild," I said. "Where are you?"

"Oh, hang on, we'll be right there!"

I'd brought with me two mithril-alloy curved swords that I got free of charge after Sagara from the student council resolved my mithril ore dispute. I would give one to Kano. Although I would've liked katanas instead, I couldn't grumble because I didn't have to pay for them. Plus, the teary look on Kumasawa's face as his hands trembled while handing the swords over to me had been satisfying.

I hung up the phone, leaned against a streetlight, and observed the comings and goings of the square. It was a Saturday, so the square was busier than usual.

Most people there were professional adventurers or hobbyists like my father,

and a few wore equipment sporting the emblems of schools.

Several schools near the dungeon offered adventuring classes or clubs. Some had even given rise to famous adventurers and received many applications from all over the country, even if they weren't quite as popular as Adventurers' High. The students I saw all appeared to be having a great time, which was a delight.

The students from our school drew attention for all the wrong reasons. Such a group, probably a joint party from the First Swordcraft Club and the First Magic Club, were decked out in expensive mithril-alloy armor with embedded magic crystals and yelled at each other. These clubs had been full of troublemakers in *DEC*, and it sucked that the club members were so faithful to the game!

I watched the party from a distance with growing distaste as it appeared they were in a heated debate over their raiding strategy. The swordsmen and magic swordsmen were at odds, and their argument had soured the mood in the square. Their raised voices made it easy to hear everything they were saying. Those from the swordcraft club wanted to command the raid and have the final say over the battle formations and the timing of magical attacks launched because they were worried about friendly fire*. The magic users scoffed and told them that a swordsman's job was to act as a shield while they cast their magic. They thought they should decide when to launch magic strikes because they knew magic better and could ensure the greatest use of their abilities. As such, they also wanted command during every stage of the battle.

*TIPS: Friendly fire refers to casualties inflicted by one's comrades, whether intentional or accidental.

How about you agree on someone to lead you before joining up, guys? I thought, exasperated. *This decision is the sort of thing you should work out from the get-go.*

Their argument was almost at the level of a screaming match, and several students unleashed their Aura. A fight was about to break out.

Are they all just idiots itching for a fight? I thought. *They're annoying everyone here!*

Just when I thought things were about to go south, a female student wearing a fancy floral-patterned robe swooped in out of nowhere and began giving orders to the assembled students. The party immediately stopped arguing and grew silent. Students from the swordcraft and the magic clubs seemed to respect her and were obedient.

The hood of her robe obscured her face, but I could see her long red hair. She was petite and slender, making her look kind of funny carrying her huge staff.

I remember that the leader of the magic club faction is a red-haired girl, I thought. Maybe that's her?

She'd shown up in the game a few times, though my only playthrough of the main story was a quick one after release. So, I remembered little about characters that weren't important to the story or didn't show up past the game's opening stages.

Soon, their baggage carriers arrived with three carts stacked high with items and provisions. The carts were each pulled by a machine that had a driver's seat and a magic gem engine. Their supplies would be enough to keep the party raiding in comfort for ten days at least.

Adventurers' High allowed students to miss lessons to carry out long dungeon raids, giving students assignments to complete in the dungeon during their absence for extra credit.

Bonuses were also available, and a student's grades would reflect their assignment's difficulty and the depth of their raid. Students needed to find skilled partners to form powerful parties to defeat stronger monsters to achieve the best grade. That was why the First Swordcraft Club and First Magic Club had teamed up despite their dislike for each other; strength mattered more than personal opinion. The magicians seemed to be the ones leading this expedition, though.

I continued watching the group, fighting the urge to use Basic Appraisal to see how strong they were until I heard Kano's voice.

"There he is!" Kano shouted to our mother. "Mom, over here!"

I was pleased that she'd equipped the two items I'd given her: the Sword of

Volgemurt, a falchion we'd looted from Volgemurt, and the Blessed Pendant that we'd found in a treasure chest. When I'd used one of the wands to appraise the items at home, I had found that the Sword of Volgemurt was even more powerful than I'd expected. It gave a buff to single-handed attacks, a large buff to stamina, the ability to drain and absorb HP from enemies, and reduced its bearer's weight. Enemies would use bombs from the eleventh floor onward, so it would be good to have a weapon we could use to steal HP from undead monsters. The sword's sheath had gaudy decoration, so we'd covered it with cloth so nobody would notice it.

The Blessed Pendant was probably a unique item only found in the DLC area on the seventh floor. The pendant was also powerful since it gave you mana regeneration, increased your maximum mana, and added twenty to your intelligence stat. I wasn't sure how much it replenished your mana, but it would be immensely useful in prolonged fights. The blue jewel was also rather conspicuous, though nobody was likely to spot it because Kano wore it beneath her clothes.

Both were ridiculously powerful items to find in the early floors, but then, so was the enemy we'd taken them from, so it made sense.

"Here's the mithril-alloy curved sword," I said, handing the sword to Kano. "Be careful with how you use it. Its center of mass is different from the Sword of Volgemurt, and it has no stat buffs."

I hoped she took my advice to heart. If she broke the mithril-alloy sword, she'd have to use an ordinary rental steel sword again. She'd be better off with a weapon stronger than mithril at her level. It would be far too expensive to buy one, and we'd need to gather the materials from the dungeon to make it ourselves.

As I explained this to Kano, Oomiya and Nitta turned up right on time.

"Here we are!" said Oomiya, then spotting Kano and my mother. "Oh... Hello?"

The two girls had dressed up differently for the dungeon raid, and it was lovely seeing how cute they were in a new style. Oomiya wore her long hair in a ponytail instead of her usual pigtails so it wouldn't get in her way during the

raid. Nitta wasn't wearing her glasses, making me wonder if she'd put contacts in. Both wore demon wolf leather armor, which higher-level adventurers usually employed. Still, it was a sensible cost-saving choice to buy better equipment that you could grow into.

"I take it you're Narumi's mother and...sister?" asked Oomiya.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I needed to hand something over, then we started talking." Kano was still a middle schooler, so I couldn't tell them she was going on a dungeon raid.

"My, my, aren't you both very pretty?" my mother said. "My boy's got game!"

"Hi!" chirped Kano. "I'm the little sister! Thanks for looking after bro!"

Kano and our mother seemed excited. Embarrassed, I told them to leave, yet they stuck around trying to chat with Oomiya and Nitta. In the end, I had to physically push them away.

"S-Sorry about them," I said. "They can be a bit like that..."

"Didn't you want to finish your conversation with them?" inquired Oomiya.

I was grateful for her thoughtfulness, but there was no telling what my family might have said if I hadn't shooed them away.

With my family gone, I rallied my spirits and prepared to enjoy my dungeon raid with these two beautiful girls!

Chapter 19: A Tragic Heroine

Because it was Saturday, the line for the turnstiles leading to the dungeon portal was longer than usual, as busy as the queues for attractions at Japan's premier theme park. On any other day, I would've grumbled at such a long wait, but today was different.

The wait would've been long and dull on my solitary days, except I had two cute girls to keep me company today. First, we discussed what strategy to use to hunt orcs on the third floor and turned to things we'd remark on at school, like our classmates and lessons. The conversation made the time fly by, and we were heading through the dungeon portal before I knew it.

Adventurers came and went, and they were tightly packed on the main street leading to the lower floors. It was too cramped for the three of us to walk together. Oomiya walked slightly ahead of us, leading the way as Nitta and I followed, trying hard not to get separated.

Nitta leaned over and whispered into my ear, "So, Narumi. How high is your level?"

She'd told me her level before, but I realized I'd never informed her of mine. I wanted to continue working with her, and keeping secrets wouldn't help, so I told her.

"What?!" she stammered, clasping her hand to her mouth to show surprise elegantly. "You're already level 19?!"

I had difficulty identifying the girl walking beside me with the Black Executioner—her nickname in the game due to her trademark black plate armor—that every PK had feared.

"There's a funny story behind that," I whispered back.

Reaching level 19 in such a short period was a tough feat even in *DEC*. Nitta would know from her raids that this world was far more daunting than the game, justifying her surprise.

If I had followed my original schedule, I would've been level 8 or 9, preparing for my first trip to Granny's Goods. The schedule had gone out the window when I'd fought a unique boss since that had shot up my level.

That fight had left me with a question: what was Volgemurt doing there? I'd never heard of such a monster in the game. Judging from the number of experience points I had received after defeating him, he must have been around level 25. It made no sense that a strong monster would appear so early in the dungeon.

One would expect to find floor bosses significantly stronger than the other monsters on their floor, like the orc lord, but only by about five levels. A party of ten to twenty adventurers at the floor's recommended level could defeat the floor bosses if they used the right strategies. With Volgemurt, you could amass a large party of adventurers at the right level for the seventh floor with no hope of victory. Their attacks wouldn't land, and they wouldn't survive a single hit from Volgemurt. In games, you sometimes found monsters that would catch adventurers unaware and kill them. The strategy was to flee and kill them later, yet it was impossible to run away from Volgemurt. His presence ruined the game balance... But this world wasn't a game, and complaining about balance wouldn't get you anywhere.

I told all of this to Nitta.

"Was there a monster like that in the seventh-floor expansion area...?" mused Nitta. "I don't remember ever seeing one."

She'd apparently visited the expansion area once in *DEC* and was sure she would remember encountering a powerful monster in a location as distinctive as the lord's chamber. I trusted her because she would have visited the fortress and the lord's room.

It seemed Volgemurt was exclusive to this world. I hadn't encountered any other discrepancies from the game besides in that expansion area. Should other ridiculously overpowered enemies lurk in the rest of the dungeon, I might have my days numbered.

"I'm surprised you beat an enemy strong enough to shoot your level up to 19, though," said Nitta.

“It almost killed me,” I replied.

My arms, legs, and nerves had all suffered because I had repeatedly used skills more powerful than my physical enhancements could handle. The fight had given me many experience points and a few unique items. The return wasn't worth the risk, and I didn't plan on doing that again anytime soon.

Nitta asked me whether I'd used my game character's skills, and I remarked I had done so. She, too, had picked up on the fact that we could use our game character's skills.

Her game character had been a Dark Knight, a job whose skills were mainly weapon skills that inflicted various debuffs on enemies after successful attacks. Unlike my character's Weaponmaster job, which needed a high strength stat to use its skills, Nitta's Dark Knight had several debuff skills that didn't depend on stats. She could inflict devastating damage on enemies with high defense stats, even at her low level. I prayed she would never find a reason to use them on me...

We paused our conversation when we arrived at the rest area on the second floor to take a short break and use the bathroom. Unfortunately, we wouldn't stay long since we had to return later.

While I waited in the long line for the bathroom, I grumbled at how long it had taken us to reach the second floor. It would've gone quicker if it weren't Saturday.

Perhaps we should leave a little earlier to beat the rush next time, I thought.

When I returned from the bathroom, I regrouped with the two girls and set off for the third floor. The crowd wasn't quite as densely packed here, so we could walk side by side.

After a few minutes of idle conversation, Oomiya turned to us like she'd summoned her courage and said, “There's something I want to ask you. If, um... If I can't get an official club up and running...I want to create a student circle.”

She'd been unable to get what had happened in the student council room out of her mind.

It took me a second to think about the prospects of a circle. For an official

club, we'd need approval from the student council. Since we didn't have high-level students in our class or well-connected contacts, we weren't likely to get approval based on Sagara's attitude the other day. It would take a long time to reach higher levels and buddy up with contacts, and if we twiddled our thumbs in the meantime, the other students of Class E wouldn't improve themselves.

Oomiya planned to establish a student circle, which we could probably get approval for instantly and use to create an environment where Class E could get stronger without delay. You only needed three students to form a circle, and the student council approved them more easily. Oomiya's main objective was to strengthen Class E, and forming a club wasn't the only way to achieve that.

She was happy for our classmates to make use of the circle when they saw fit. They might eventually leave to join a proper club but have a dedicated place where they could train, letting them grow stronger, and they could decide what to do afterward. All she wanted was to help our classmates, even a little, in their struggle to better themselves.

The downsides were that circles received next to nothing in their budgets and generally had no access to facilities like the Arena because the clubs got priority. Also, circles couldn't participate in tournaments and events like the Battle of the Clubs that gave students extra credit. In short, there'd be a lot of hurdles to overcome.

She's really thought this through, I thought. But...

Everything so far had followed the game's storyline, which meant there was trouble to come. I remembered that in *DEC*, Oomiya had created a circle and worked hard at running it until older students and other classes didn't like what they'd seen and targeted her. She'd then suffered ongoing verbal and sometimes physical abuse, pranks, and other forms of bullying. She stoically resisted the attempts to demoralize her...for a time. But the abuse had whittled away at her, and she eventually transferred out of the school.

"So I was thinking," continued Oomiya, holding her hands out to me while flashing an innocent smile. "Wouldn't it be nice if the three of us formed one?"

She seemed to direct this spiel at me. Nitta was her roommate and had probably heard all of this already, and she was grinning at me too.

To *DEC* players, Oomiya was a tragic heroine. If I didn't do something to stop it, she'd probably suffer the same fate as in the game. In fact, there was no "probably" about it. Everything I'd seen from this world's adventurers and the school made me sure it would happen.

If I were to help Oomiya, I'd need to develop solutions for the various game events that would trigger once she began setting up the circle. Annoyingly, it wasn't lone students that we'd contend with; entire factions would try to stop her, and I could get dragged into the ensuing violence if I wasn't careful. Plus, I would put all of us in danger if they discovered any of my game knowledge. If I wanted to remain safe, my best option was to refuse her offer.

However, Oomiya was a kindhearted soul whose sole purpose was to help others, whoever they might be. I couldn't just stand by and let a sweet girl like that be traumatized by the game's events. I was still grateful to her for making a space for me in her group during orientation when nobody else wanted anything to do with me. I owed her, and I would repay my debt with interest.

"I'm joining," Nitta said, displaying a cheerful smile. "Satsuki and I are, like, best friends after all. You'll join too, won't you, Narumi? *Won't. You.*"

I didn't know whether Nitta had plans to deal with the game events, but she was planning to join. I felt comforted knowing I'd have my strongest enemy and rival from the game as an ally.

"Yeah, obviously. I'll join too," I said. I tilted my head to one side and gave a thumbs-up...but it didn't generate the reaction I'd hoped for, and we all stood there in awkward silence.

Chapter 20: Magical Contracts

“I know a great place to hunt,” said Nitta.

We had reached our initial destination, the third floor, and were discussing where to hunt monsters. Nitta’s suggested spot, however, was on the fifth floor. I wondered whether she referred to the bridge that we could use to kill the orc lord.

The problem was that if we headed to the fifth floor, factoring in the return journey, we’d barely have any time to hunt monsters...unless we used the gates. Did she plan on telling Oomiya about the gates? I decided that I should check with her to see whether we were on the same page about the risks of sharing game information.

I beckoned over to Nitta. “C’mere a second,” I whispered. “So, uh, Nitta... How much are you going to tell her?”

“Quite a lot,” she whispered back. “We can trust her.” She then poked my cheek and added, “Also, the deal was that you call me Risa from now on.”

Once we’d decided to form a circle, the girls had said we should call each other by our first names to deepen our relationship. It was one thing to call Kaoru by her first name since we had grown up together. Something was embarrassing about calling girls in my class by their first names... Although that wasn’t what I wanted to discuss with her.

If there were other players out there, they could track down the source of game information should it get out and find us, and we’d be in trouble if a player we did not know wanted to do us harm. But as long as news of our game knowledge didn’t spread any farther than the school, we could probably handle things. At least players came from a world where people weren’t psychopaths, so there was always the possibility we could come to an understanding. If not, Nitta and I could team up to take them down.

We’d get in deep trouble should anyone outside the school catch wind of it.

Many countries and companies would kill to have their hands on dungeon secrets. If they even suspected we knew something they didn't, they'd come after us in ways that even I couldn't predict.

For example, people used some of the most dangerous magical skills from advanced and expert level jobs for mind control, brainwashing, and mind erasing. Although, I hadn't tested them myself in this world. There were probably magical items in existence that could also perform mind control. Technically, ways to protect yourself from these effects existed, but I'd be a sitting duck if someone used one on me.

The worst-case scenario was that somebody used mind control, threats, or torture to extract game secrets from a player, leading to those secrets becoming common knowledge in the world. That could result in a total breakdown of law and order, opening Pandora's box to hell on Earth. This world was an accurate recreation of *DEC*, so it already pushed law and order to its limits.

"Even so," whispered Nitta, "we'll have to share our secrets with Satsuki to level up faster, or we'll be in trouble later. Don't forget we've got to survive the cataclysms of the game's main story."

The cataclysms that Nitta—uh, *Risa*—was talking about were game events that could reduce the area around the dungeon to ashes and kill thousands of people. Worryingly, the developers had added several events like this to spice up the story. If the events resulted from following a specific character's plotline or during a particular quest, the solution was simple: don't advance those storylines. But the main story would progress no matter your choices in the game or which character you played. This choice meant that if the world followed *DEC*'s story, then tragedy could strike no matter what the protagonist did.

Of course, I would do what I could to stop the cataclysms, even if it wouldn't be easy to level up enough to counteract the main story without letting my secrets leak, especially in the time limit of the game's story. That was why Risa proposed we invite people we could trust to form a party.

I'd arrived at the same conclusion, partly why I had chosen to raid the

dungeon with my family, whom I could trust without reservation. This option had the benefit of ensuring they'd be strong enough to keep safe. Risa had no family in this world, so she'd decided to raid with Oomiya—uh, *Satsuki*.

The best solution was for the players with game knowledge to team up; it made the most sense for raiding and keeping information a secret. That wasn't exactly practical either, though. Players would likely be cautious of each other and wait to see how things unfolded. Others would likely keep quiet, even if a person revealed themselves as players. I knew I would.

"Don't you trust us, Souta?" Risa whispered.

"It's not that I don't trust you," I responded. "I just think we need to be extra careful when deciding what to share and what to hold back."

I believed we should only tell Satsuki the bare minimum. My family knew basically everything, but that was only because I trusted them well enough to put my life in their hands. We might be good friends with Satsuki, but it would be too risky to trust top-grade secrets to someone we'd only known for two months.

"I agree. Like, we should keep quiet about the game's story and events. But we should be safe to tell her about the gates, information about monsters, and bridge-dropping."

"When telling her secrets, we should make sure that she understands exactly how much danger we'd be in if they got out."

"Definitely. And taking her word for it won't be enough... Which is where this comes in!" Risa suddenly took out a piece of paper with plenty of fine print from her rucksack. When I looked at the document, I realized it was a magical contract.

Magical contracts had shown up occasionally in the game's main story. They would restrict the actions and speech of the person they bound.

Two jobs in *DEC*, Summoner and Elementalist, allowed players to form contracts with fairies and other summonable entities, creatures as powerful as they were quirky. Frankly, these creatures were difficult to control because of their selfish natures, which could endanger players who'd summoned them.

Because of that, I'd planned to stay away from those jobs in the game.

Contract magic stipulated the instructions the summoned creatures would have to follow. It was a curse where the creature that had broken the contract would be scorched to death by dark magical flames.

Risa had prepared a magical contract that bore the same symbols as contract magic, but the effects were weaker. A person could sign the contract by reciting the purpose and stipulations out loud while channeling magic through the contract. If they broke it, the document would burn to a crisp.

Broken magical contracts weren't as binding because they wouldn't incinerate faithless parties like contract magic; instead, they verified whether a party had broken their contract. Some countries experimented with using actual contract magic on human beings, but humanitarian complaints led to the results never becoming public.

Magical contracts wouldn't work if their terms were too vague. The conditions needed to be explicit and precise, and the person signing the contract had to understand them. Otherwise, there'd be no effect. If I drafted a contract stating, "Don't tell anyone what I've told you relating to the dungeon," it wouldn't be evident to the person signing the contract. That even applied whether that included commonplace information like battle tactics, dungeon geography, and raiding strategies.

On the other hand, a more specific contract saying, "Don't tell anyone about what Risa and I told you while we were in such-and-such place at such-and-such time," then the person signing the contract would have a clear idea about the terms they'd broken. Risa had probably prepared several contracts with similar, precise wording.

Magical contracts had shown up in droves in the game's main story when the contents of the contracts were important. I found it very interesting that such magical items originating from the dungeon had a place in this world.

On a bit of a tangent, the nuptial grimoire that Kaoru and I had signed was something young Piggy had written as an imitation of the magical contracts he'd heard about. That meant it was just a scrap of paper with no significance. Nothing would happen if one broke the grimoire's terms.

Risa and I finished our discussion to join Satsuki and led her to a secluded area to bring up the contracts.

“What were you two talking about?” asked Satsuki. “You both seem very close... Could it be what I think it is?”

Satsuki appeared to have come to a grave misunderstanding, which I hoped would be short-lived. There was no way I’d try anything romantic with Risa. She’d slice me in two if I did!

“We were talking about a special hunting spot,” said Risa. “It’s a secret, but if you promise not to tell anyone, we’ll let you in on the details.”

“You know about a place like that?” Satsuki said at once. Her tone suggested she was suspicious whether such a place existed, yet her curiosity won the day. “Oh, tell me, please!”

“But first,” Risa blurted. She pulled out the magical contract and explained that Satsuki had to sign and agree to its terms.

Satsuki gulped, and her eyes widened as she remarked, “O-Oh wow, this is the real thing, an actual magical contract. Is it really such a serious secret?”

The reason for Satsuki’s surprise was that magical contracts were expensive to purchase. Risa had said that it had taken her a long time to get her hands on it but hadn’t told me how exactly she’d done that.

“I’m not done,” said Risa. “If you break the terms of this contract... You’ll pay for it with your life.”

Satsuki gasped.

“Well, I’m half joking,” declared Risa, then she looked deep into Satsuki’s eyes. “But I’m half serious.”

Thanks to this, Satsuki understood that she couldn’t share our dungeon knowledge under any circumstances.

Risa continued, “Because if what we’re about to tell you gets out, there are people that might try to eliminate us and the people around us.”

“But if it’s such a big secret, how come you two know about it?”

It was a natural question to ask. The answer was that we were former players, though that wouldn't make any sense to her, so Risa said we couldn't answer that.

What mattered was whether Satsuki's desire to grow stronger was important enough for her to accept the risks of learning our secrets, secrets so important that we'd use a magical contract to keep them safe. It was okay for her to refuse the offer. In that case, Risa and I would level up using our game techniques and carve out time to level up Satsuki separately.

Satsuki contemplated it, hesitating until she made up her mind. "I-If it really will help me get stronger... Then I'll sign it!"

She clenched her fists and told us about her family. Satsuki's family was an offshoot branch of a prestigious family that served nobles. Apparently, she had to fight her parents to be allowed to enroll at Adventurers' High; they'd wanted her to attend a local high school where she could serve her family's main branch. She explained her success at Adventurers' High would prove to her family that she'd made the right decision. Other classes' treatment of Class E had hit her so hard because it'd taught her the truth about the school and sown doubt in her mind about living up to her family's expectations.

When she'd experienced that reality check, she noticed that many of our classmates were going through the same thing. In her melancholy, she'd wanted somebody to save her, but she desired to save her classmates and change the school when she saw them struggle. This wish had grown further each day that passed.

The game's Satsuki had run herself ragged to improve Class E's lot, even as the events took their toll on her mental health. So Risa and I, as former players, knew that she was telling the truth.

"Let's get it signed, then!" said Risa cheerily.

"Yep!" exclaimed Satsuki.

Risa's contract only pertained to information about the gates, so bridge-dropping wasn't in scope. No major societal consequences would occur even if the bridge-dropping technique got out and somebody wanted to use it for malicious purposes. A person could only perform the technique once an hour,

so there might be a fight over who got to drop the bridge, and only a few could reap the benefits. Additionally, it would no longer matter whether we could bridge-drop once we'd finished using it to level up high enough.

Knowledge about the gates was a much more sensitive matter, which could have significant societal repercussions, so Risa had put this in the contract.

Risa placed the magical contract on the ground, and the two girls laid their hands atop it, facing each other.

"Okay, channel your magic through now," instructed Risa.

Although this was Risa's first time using a magical contract, the internet had told her what to do, and everything worked perfectly. Satsuki recited the terms of the contract, that she wouldn't tell anyone about the gates, the gate rooms, or anything about the gates. The two girls then both channeled their magic into the magical symbol on the document.

Satsuki still had no idea what exactly a gate was, but the black symbol glowed with a faint green light, so the contract magic had activated as intended.

Now that the contract was out of the way, we told Satsuki about the gates. Risa gasped a little when I explained that the gates led to a room in the first basement level of the school; it must've been surprising to her.

"Are you messing with me?" asked Satsuki, suspicious. "I mean, I'd love it to be the truth! It'd be so convenient! We could really cut down on travel time."

"Seeing is believing," I said. "For now, though, let's head down to the fifth floor."

With the option of using the gate on the fifth floor, we could use the bridge-dropping trick for today's raid. My mother and sister were supposed to do that today but would only be raiding in the morning and be gone by the time we arrived. If they were still raiding, we could all bridge-drop together.

"But the orc lord's dangerous, isn't it?" inquired Satsuki. "Everyone knows about the warnings the guild puts up..."

"I'm sure Souta will keep us safe," said Risa.

"Absolutely," I confirmed.

No monster on the fifth floor was strong enough to survive one of my punches at my level, and the orc lord was no exception.

Satsuki didn't look convinced, looking at me with suspicion. In her eyes, I was someone she needed to protect, not someone she could rely on for protection.

She'd figure out how strong I was as we continued raiding and built up trust in me, so there was no need to tell her my level.

The three of us headed to the fifth floor silently, as each had plenty to think about.

Chapter 21: Kano's Crocodile Tears

We reached the fifth floor a little after five in the afternoon.

Bright lights illuminated the entrance to the rest area. Adventurers filled the room and ate their lunch on mats they'd rolled out atop every spare spot on the floor. It was common practice for adventurers raiding the fifth floor to return to the monster-free rest area to eat lunch because there were relatively few safe areas on the remainder of the floor. The sharp turns and blind corners elsewhere made it difficult to spot approaching monsters.

The peddlers capitalized on the occasion, walking around the crowd selling lunch boxes and drinks. Stall owners shouted above the noise to attract customers. The luscious smell of food drew adventurers to the stalls, and many walked around carrying food and chatting to their neighbors.

I was ready for a meal too, but we would have plenty of time to rest after we'd reached the bridge-dropping spot. So, we planned to head there first, then we could relax and eat the food we'd brought from outside.

However, I noticed the two girls looked exhausted despite being all right in the morning.

"Are you hanging in there, Satsuki?" asked Risa.

"Just about," replied Satsuki. "I think I might collapse when we get there, though..."

"It's not much farther now," said Risa encouragingly.

Both of them were below level 5. Although their physical enhancements would help somewhat, trekking through thick crowds for over five hours had naturally worn them out.

I was perfectly okay, as I could handle long journeys like this at level 19 without breaking a sweat. I wasn't yet sure how far my extraordinary stamina could take me.

“But it’s already past twelve,” remarked Satsuki. “And we’ve got the return journey to consider too. If it takes this long, we won’t be able to raid the fifth floor on school days.”

“Others can’t,” said Risa. “But we can use the gates.”

Satsuki was momentarily silent, then said, “Right...”

The problem our classmates had was that it took too long to reach their raiding spots because they had to enter the dungeon through the portal. It was horrible for students in Class D and above since they wouldn’t get to raid on school days. The First Swordcraft Club and First Magic Club we’d seen in the morning would likely take several days to reach their destination.

So, how did they train on school days? The answer was that in *DEC*, they’d train at their clubs and gain tiny amounts of experience points by sparring in a magic field against an opponent of similar strength. Such a method likely held true in this world. This system was why the upper classes invested much in their clubs and why Class E’s inability to join clubs was so debilitating.

“If we want to form a circle, we’ll have to get stronger ourselves first,” said Satsuki.

“That’s right,” agreed Risa. “Otherwise, our classmates won’t see the point in joining. Right. We’ve had our break, so let’s get going.”

We all performed some stretches and set off once more.

“I’ll lead the way, so stay close,” I said.

“Thanks,” said Satsuki. “And thanks for carrying our bags too. It’s a big help.”

“Ha ha, I knew we brought you along for a reason, Souta,” quipped Risa, giggling.

It was the least I could do. I cast Basic Restoration on the girls to help with their weariness at least a little.

We traveled through the floor, up and down hills, keeping an eye out for orcs as we went. Eventually, we crossed a large rope bridge over a deep valley, and the room where the orc lord spawned came into view.

“This is...the place the guild warns everyone to stay away from,” commented Satsuki. “We’re here, aren’t we?” She was nervously clutching her chest with both hands, shivering. Encountering the orc lord at level 4 meant almost certain death to most adventurers, and our assurances weren’t enough to ease her fear. I could remember being absolutely terrified the first time I’d seen the orc lord, to be fair. The sight of the orc lord now didn’t have the same effect, which made me think that the fear was a reaction to his Aura.

I tiptoed up to the room and peeked inside to check whether the orc lord was there... But the room was empty. Someone must have lured him away already.

“It’s not there,” I said, returning to the girls. “My sister’s bridge-dropping right now, which is probably why.”

“Wow... Your sister is really something,” marveled Satsuki.

Luring the orc lord wasn’t difficult if you had enough stamina; as long as you knew the way, all you had to do was keep running while taking care not to spring any traps. It was much scarier if you weren’t the best runner, like when I had first lured the orc lord.

“We’re almost there now,” said Risa.

“Yeah,” I replied. “The bridge will be gone, so we’ll need to go the long way around to get to the other side.”

If the bridge were intact, we could follow a straight path to reach our destination in no time, but we’d need to take a more indirect path without the bridge. Even so, we didn’t have long to go. Risa put on a brave face and encouraged Satsuki to keep going.

After we walked for another kilometer, the valley we were trying to reach finally came into sight. I looked around for a spot to rest until I spotted my mother and sister sitting on a rolled-out mat, munching on snacks a little below us.

“Look, there’s bro!” called out Kano. “And...the girls from earlier?”

“Come on down,” said my mother, patting an empty spot on the mat.

“There’s room for you all to sit down.” She offered us tea as well.

I was glad to see that she looked all right.

“Look how strong I’ve become!” added my mother, swinging the sword I’d given her. Her leveling appeared to be going well. She had been an adventurer for a time before she’d met our father, making it down to the fourth floor. So, she knew how to handle weapons.

To pass the time between bridge-drops, Kano brought a game console while my mother had a book to read. That seemed like an awfully cavalier approach to the dungeon. But there was nothing else to do before the orc lord respawned, so it made a bit of sense.

Risa and Satsuki thanked my mother, slumped onto the vacant spots on the mat, and began drinking the tea. They were visibly exhausted from the long journey here and so tired that they didn’t even have enough energy to hide it. We hadn’t stopped to rest often, and they’d done it all on an empty stomach. Plus, the last stretch from the orc lord’s room had been along paths with steep slopes.

“When will the bridge be ready again?” I asked.

“About twenty minutes, I think,” replied Kano. “Me and mom are going home when we’ve finished eating.”

The aim of their raid today was to power level our mother to level 7, and they’d accomplished that, meaning they were just finishing the snacks they’d brought before leaving.

“Cool, we’ll take over once we’ve filled our bellies,” I said.

“No fair!” whined Kano. “If you’re sticking around, I want to take part too!”

“You need to get our mom home safely,” I scolded her. “This is a dangerous area, even for a level 7.”

A level 7 would have no trouble defeating any goblin soldiers or orc assaulters they might encounter. But there was still the risk of running into a train of monsters another adventurer created. I didn’t want to endanger my mother by making her return alone on a route she didn’t even know.

When I explained this to Kano, she threw herself at Satsuki's feet and tearily said, "Bro doesn't want me around!"

I tried to pull Kano away from Satsuki to stop her from embarrassing me in front of the girls, but her grip on Satsuki's legs was iron tight.

"I think it'd be wonderful for your sister to raid with us!" argued Satsuki.

"Yeah, Souta, stop being such a meanie!" added Risa.

Kano's crocodile tears had won her the support of both girls and simultaneously made me look like the bad guy.

Well, Kano won't do any harm by joining in, I thought. And the girls don't mind... So I guess it's fine. As a compromise, I told Kano that she'd have to drop our mother off first and return if she wanted to raid with us.

And so, Kano waved her hands happily as she left and said, "Okay, I'll come back when mom's through the gate!"

My mother looked at Satsuki and Risa, then winked at me and whispered, "Good luck, Souta."

Once they were both gone, I turned back to Satsuki and Risa, who were eating their lunch on the mat, and explained the strategy for bridge-dropping. To receive the experience points for bridge-dropping, they had to cut the ropes on either side at the same time.

"I'm still a bit scared of taking on a level 10 monster," confessed Satsuki, having turned pale as the time to get started drew near.

"How many experience points do you think we'll get?" asked Risa. She seemed way more excited, eager to test the game's bridge-dropping trick in real life. Bridge-dropping worked the same as in the game, though. The only difference was the screaming of the orcs as they fell.

"Don't worry. If the trick doesn't work, I'll mop up the surviving monsters," I assured them.

"I wish that could reassure me, but I still don't know how strong you really are..." said Satsuki.

Even though I'd planned to demonstrate my strength by taking down some

orcs on the way here, we had encountered none. My sister had apparently paraded around the area, slaying all the monsters to kill time.

“I’ll signal you to cut the ropes,” I explained. “So don’t let yourself get spooked into dropping the bridge before they’re far enough over.”

“I just have to cut the rope here, right?” asked Satsuki. Her mood improved after I’d explained what she’d have to do. She was eager to get going, no longer nervous because she knew her task was simple. All she had to do was cut a rope, so it didn’t matter that she was still tired since it didn’t require much strength.

“This brings me back,” noted Risa.

Just then, the bridge rose and began to repair itself with a tremendous noise. It was like time was running backward, and I heard Satsuki gasp with surprise behind me.

The powerful restorative features of the dungeon would repair buildings, walls, and other structures a set amount of time after they had been damaged or destroyed. It amazed me the first time I saw it with my eyes. I’d never thought deeply about it in the game, even if it was something else entirely to witness such a deviation from the laws of physics.

The fact that the bridge had repaired itself meant the orc lord would have respawned as well.

“I’ll fetch the orc lord,” I said. “Don’t freak out when you see how many monsters I bring back.”

“Okay, um... Be careful...” said Satsuki.

“Good luck!” exclaimed Risa.

The two girls smiled and waved as I left. Their smiles were all I needed to push me onward. *Let’s do this!*

Chapter 22: Satsuki Oomiya - Part 1

Satsuki Oomiya

Souta turned around and dashed away. He'd traveled just as far as the rest of us through the dungeon while carrying my and Risa's bags, and he hadn't broken a sweat.

He headed off to confront the orc lord, a monster infamous for its high adventurer casualty count, yet he was as calm as could be. Just who was he? I thought back to the first time I'd met Souta Narumi.

In the breaks between lessons, Class E students sought out their roommates, their middle school classmates, and acquaintances to talk with them to get to know them better. These interactions weren't just an exercise in making friends. Everyone knew the party they formed would determine their grades, so they wanted to use their connections to find the best possible party members.

Once homeroom ended, everyone worked to trade gossip about other students and the school. They'd talk about which students were strong, who had joined whose party, who had what skills, how exams and events had gone, or how best to prepare for them. Like this, they would scrupulously gather information and use what they'd learned to ensure their position was sound.

A natural consequence of this behavior was that most students would try associating themselves with groups containing strong students like Akagi or Majima. I was no exception. Risa and I tried approaching Akagi's group and found out they'd already formed a party, so we had no way to weasel in. Majima had spoken to me once, but nothing had come of it yet.

While all the other students were driving themselves crazy, trying to claw their way into a good party, the overweight boy in the seat farthest to the back of the classroom did nothing but stare out the window. That was Souta. He was quiet, and I rarely saw him speaking to anyone, which wasn't to say he was

forgettable. Quite the opposite, in fact. Everyone knew who he was...for all the wrong reasons.

Even though he had the lowest entrance exam results of the entire year group, he didn't try to find a group and would leave school as soon as the evening bell rang. When he finally entered the dungeon, a slime had defeated him... Even a grade schooler wouldn't lose to such a weak monster! In the eyes of Class E and the rest of the school, this earned him the title of the worst student in the history of the school.

Our other classmates turned their gossiping toward him, giving him a nasty nickname and making their disgust as clear as day. From that point, his isolation within the class worsened. Nobody wanted to invite him to their party, saying that he couldn't possibly perform well on a raid, given his obesity and lack of any notable skills. Life at Adventurers' High revolved around networking, so isolation was as good as fatal.

Without a party, he'd have to raid the dungeon alone, which would only work up to the third floor. My classmates whispered among themselves that his academic career was dead in the water, that they should stay away from him unless they wanted to get dragged down too.

But none of them were looking at the big picture. Soon enough, we'd have to face the upper classes in the Battle of the Classes and the Arena Tournament, where the fight would be brutal. We couldn't afford to give up on any of our classmates. Why did none of them seem to consider that? What good was there to write him off so soon after we'd joined anyway? He'd have plenty of chances to get stronger throughout the year. Plus, he took our lessons seriously and did well in tests, so I wasn't sure he deserved the reputation they'd given him.

To find out, I summoned courage and invited him to join a party during orientation. All my classmates quickly praised me for being so kindhearted and pitying him, but they'd misunderstood my intentions. My roommate, Risa, didn't argue when I brought up inviting him. She actually supported me, which was surprising. She often came across as carefree, though I knew that she had an insightful, logical side and probably had reasons to let him in.

After speaking with him, I discovered he was quite intelligent and prudent. It

wasn't a lack of social skills preventing him from communicating with our classmates, but a lack of interest in them and what they thought of him. His confidence in his abilities was so secure that it didn't matter what anybody else did.

That didn't change how there was a limit to how far he could raid the dungeon by himself, and he'd reach that limit soon. And so, I had hoped that my invitation would be the impetus he needed to start associating with the rest of the class. I believed he might venture to our desks to talk to his new friends the day after orientation. Alas, my hopes were dashed when I saw him leaving school the moment the bell rang, as he'd always done.

Was he really good enough to make it by himself? I checked his level on my terminal, which hadn't moved from level 3. This stat suggested he was struggling to get farther than the third floor. Maybe he didn't think I was good enough to raid with? Maybe he had someone better in mind? Either way, I had more important things to worry about than Souta Narumi... And that was when we all learned how much the rest of the school despised our class.

The club fair was our first taste of this. Every upper-class student had subjected us to ridicule, and for the first time, we realized how little they thought of us. We'd all been dying to join a club, then found out that applying for membership would be nothing more than signing up to carry out menial tasks for them. It was a depressing discovery for all of us, and the classroom became gloomy.

Our situation deteriorated further after the duel with Class D, where our classmate Akagi got beaten to a pulp, and they forbade us from joining the club the older Class E students had founded. This opened the floodgates for the rest of the school to treat us like dirt openly; other students would march into our classroom to mock and deride us.

How could they be so cruel to their fellow students? Strength was certainly important at a place like Adventurers' High, but what good could come of depriving us of the chance to become strong before we'd even started? The teachers didn't do anything to address the bullying either. We'd all signed a waiver when we'd joined, acknowledging that attending the school carried a risk of bodily harm and death, so I'd known to expect things to be a little

rough... This treatment was too much. I spent every day feeling like darkness had swallowed me, unable to see a way forward. Sometimes, I even felt like throwing in the towel. But I wouldn't let my parents down. All my efforts, the hopes of my classmates, the dream of a bright future... I didn't want any of that to be in vain.

One of my friends felt the same way. We spoke about the situation all night, crying at times, shouting, and arguing with others before falling back to crying again. In the end, we established that we'd need to form our own club. I wasted no time in getting the application sent off and should have known the student council wouldn't approve it. Discrimination against Class E ran deep.

I found myself with *him* again while trying to solve the student council problem. He looked more dependable than before, probably because he'd lost a lot of weight compared to just after the entrance ceremony. His aloof attitude remained unchanged, though. It seemed like he was unaffected by all the worries and frets that plagued the rest of us. Risa could be like that also, but Souta's quiet optimism was on another level.

Later, I suggested that we go on a dungeon raid. I wanted to blow off some steam, and this was when things started to get strange. We talked about good places to raid, a magical contract got somehow involved, and I was suddenly learning about these crazy things called "gates." I suspected they were playing a joke at my expense, but they sounded serious.

Now, the orc lord charged toward us with what looked like a hundred orcs following through the dust clouds kicked up in its wake. At the very head of the pack was a boy moving at incredible speed despite his light jogging motions—Souta. I expected the bridge to sway violently based on how fast he moved, yet it barely did so as he slid over to join us. Maybe Souta was using some kind of magic.

"Wait for my signal!" he shouted.

The orcs piled onto the fifty-meter-long bridge in a roaring frenzy, pushing each other out of the way in an attempt to be the first one to reach us. The bridge wobbled and moved from side to side, sending a few of them tumbling

over the edge, but about fifty were still on the bridge. The closest was the orc lord, whose crazed eyes seemed intent on attacking Souta. It was easy to see why all but the best adventurers stayed away from this monster... And it was getting closer! Close enough now that I could hear its breathing and—

“Now!” shouted Souta. “Cut the rope!”

I was so scared that I wanted to curl up into a ball, but I sliced with my weapon. The rope grew slack. Yet the bridge and all the orcs fell and screamed. Ten seconds later, I could feel myself leveling up, the sensation stronger than ever before. My heart was on fire, and I struggled to breathe.

“D-Did I just level up...?” I mused.

“I did too!” said Risa.

The excruciating pain from the sudden surge of experience points caused me to hunch over. I looked at Risa, who pumped the air with her fist.

“Looks like you’re level 5 now,” remarked Souta. I’d felt an odd sensation like someone was rummaging through my soul. He’d probably used Basic Appraisal on me. It appeared I’d acquired the Basic Appraisal skill, proving I was at least level 5.

It amazed me how easy it could be to level up. All I’d done was cut a rope! Killing so many orcs at once would obviously be enough to level up, but who in their right mind had crafted the idea to drop a bridge after using the orc lord’s behavioral patterns to lure monsters?

Souta made sure Risa and I had both received experience points, then he performed some stretches and said, “I’m gonna go shut the rest of them up quickly.” He dashed away. Dozens of orcs remained on the other side of the ravine—the ones that hadn’t made it onto the bridge in time. Their menacing roars echoed in the dungeon.

I wondered if he had another trick up his sleeve to deal with that many orcs, and to my surprise, Souta circled to the other side of the ravine and charged straight into the pack of monsters! That was the first glimpse I had of Souta’s true power. Honestly, I wasn’t quite sure what was happening. Souta dodged attacks from all directions more quickly than my eyes could follow, and his

attacks were so fast that all I could see were blurs where his arms should have been.



This movement definitely wasn't the basic technique we'd learned in sword fighting class. The instructors had drilled into us that the most important rules in fighting against multiple enemies were to keep your blind spots covered and stay on the move to avoid getting surrounded. And yet, Souta stood dead still in the center of the group of orcs while being attacked from all sides. Despite this, none of the orcs' attacks struck him, and each succumbed to his swift sword. Was he guiding their movements where he wanted them to go? Had he developed his own unique sword fighting style? At any rate, his charging into the group of orcs so confidently could only mean that he was at a much higher level than them. As further proof, he was slicing through the giant orcs' bodies like they were butter, which would be impossible without an extremely high strength stat. The sword must have been heavy, but he swung it around like it weighed nothing.

Souta was much stronger than Akagi when I watched him duel... Stronger even than Akagi's opponent, Kariya. No wonder he hadn't bothered telling anyone his level. He was too strong for it to matter.

Afterward, we met back up with Souta's sister, Kano—who was just as strong as Souta!—and repeated the bridge-dropping trick several times, killing many orcs. Every time we did that, I'd wince as the orcs screamed and plummeted to their deaths.

At some point, Kano and Souta turned it into a contest to see which of them could lure the greatest number of orcs to the bridge. Things came to a head when Kano, wanting to beat Souta's score of 150, accidentally caused the orc lord to pass out due to lack of mana after she'd gotten him to summon two hundred orcs.

Thanks to the trick, I reached level 6 in a few hours. I couldn't believe how easy it was... I'd spent most of the time just chatting with the others. Level 6 had been the target I'd set for myself to reach by the end of summer vacation, expecting to pull out all the stops and work hard for it to be realistic!

Today's raid had been so full of surprises, so packed with fun, that I found myself freed from the gloom that had clung to all of Class E at school. I couldn't remember the last time I had laughed from the heart like this. And I'd never

known that Souta was such an interesting person!

We agreed to continue to go on raids together for the time being, and I had a feeling there'd be plenty more fun if I stuck around with this group. I sensed the dull, gray, faded world inside my heart glow with bright new colors.

Mom, dad, just you wait. Your girl will come home so much stronger than when she left!

Chapter 23: Time to Chat and Relax

While waiting for the orc lord to respawn again, we sat down with our snacks and began chatting.

“I wanna be part of your circle too!” chimed in Kano. She’d wanted to hear about our time at school, so we told her about the circle. I tried to let her down gently, but she wouldn’t listen. She rolled around on the floor and whined, “But I want to come to the dungeon more often! You don’t want me around, bro.”

I tried to explain that we couldn’t let an outsider join one of Adventurers’ High’s circles, much less a middle schooler with no permission to be in the dungeon. That didn’t get me anywhere. Ultimately, she pulled the same trick she had an hour before, clinging to Risa and Satsuki while crying and making me out to be the villain.

“I don’t see the problem,” said Satsuki. “It’s just for training anyway.”

“And we’ll definitely need her help in the dungeon anyway,” added Risa. “I vote to let her join.”

“Yay!” Kano squealed with delight.

The two girls argued Kano’s level was as high as mine, and she knew just as much about the dungeon as I did. We’d need her in our party to raid deeper into the dungeon, so it would be best and safest if we used the time training in the circle as a chance for the rest of the party to get to know her better.

Kano ran over to each of the girls and hugged them with tears in her eyes. What annoyed me the most was that this set a bad example: it taught Kano that crying worked. It surprised me how close she was with the girls that she’d already exchanged contact details on the wearable tablet I’d bought her. Jealous!

I’d already bought Kano a school uniform and tracksuit to enter the school grounds without arousing suspicion, so she could probably participate in the circle without being discovered. After contemplating it, I concluded there was

no harm in letting my family take part in the circle's training sessions.

"What's the circle called?" asked Kano.

"It's not called anything," I replied. "It's just a temporary solution so our classmates can train together."

"That's no good," she tutted. "I'll give it a name! How about Shining Colors?"

Kano promptly came up with an extremely derivative name. *You can't just riff off a famous clan's name. Anyway, I don't exactly have good feelings toward Colors.*

"I vote for The Beauty Squad!" suggested Risa.

"How about Meowy Family?" said Satsuki.

I wasn't sure I'd still belong in a group called The Beauty Squad... Was this their way of kicking me out? Satsuki's naming sense with Meowy Family was atrocious, so I put forward a suggestion to keep hers from winning.

"It's for Class E students, so how about something beginning with the letter E?" I suggested. "Like Evolve?"

"E?" repeated Risa. "How about... End?"

"What about Exodus?" stated Satsuki. "Because we're trying to escape from Class E."

"Or we could go for Enigma, like we're shrouded in mysteries!" Risa piped up.

Several more suggestions with the letter E rained down, but none sounded right. We settled on the placeholder name of Triple E, which made us sound like a secret organization. But we had to put *something* on the application form, and this would do.

"Now that I think of it," started Satsuki, peering at my sister intently. "How old are you exactly, Kano?" She'd noticed how small my sister was, putting two and two together. Except for students of Adventurers' Middle School, only people of high school age and above were allowed to enter the dungeon.

It wouldn't help to keep her age a secret from these two, so I admitted that we got Kano into the dungeon by sneaking her through the gate. I also

explained I'd centered my raiding plans on leveling up with my family rather than my classmates. Satsuki bought my explanation more quickly than I'd expected; maybe she'd expected as much.

"Looks like it'll just be us four for the time being, then," said Satsuki.

"Yeah," I agreed. "The four of us will see more benefit from raiding the dungeon after school than from training on the school grounds."

"Yep!" Risa said. "And I wanna get to level 20 quickly so we can be ready to handle any trouble at school."

"Tw-Twenty?!" blurted Satsuki.

We would eventually invite more classmates to our circle. But it would be at least a month before we could get things up and running, even if they approved our application. In the meantime, it would be best for the current members to focus our efforts on leveling up in the dungeon using the gates.

In the game, the upper classes and older students interfered soon after the circle's establishment. It would be prudent for us to level up quickly to be ready if the same happened in this world. The records in the school database showed that the strongest students in the student council and the major factions were around level 25. We'd be in good standing to defend ourselves if we all reached level 20.

Satsuki freaked out at the mention of level 20. My pip-squeak little sister was already level 19, so I was sure Satsuki would have no problem catching up.

Because of the level difference in our group, I decided that Kano and I should spend some of our time independently gathering equipment in between power leveling Satsuki and Risa. Kano wanted to explore deeper floors of the dungeon, and I hoped to take her to some raiding spots where we could also collect dungeon coins.

"Speaking of training," said Satsuki. "Have you seen Tachigi's email?"

"Yep," said Risa. "I haven't replied yet, though."

Satsuki showed me the email on her terminal as she chewed on a candy bar. Tachigi wrote that he would hold several training sessions in preparation for the

Battle of the Classes. He'd invited the classmates struggling the most with increasing their level. Risa and I appeared as level 3 in the school's database, so we'd received an invitation. At level 4, Satsuki was above the cutoff for being urged to attend and had only gotten an informational email instead.

She was thrilled Tachigi was trying to support the rest of the class. Incidentally, Tachigi had been the student hit hardest by Satsuki being driven out of the school in the game's main story. I could see the two forming a strong bond in this world.

"Hmm..." Satsuki hummed in thought. "You're clearly not level 3, are you, Souta?"

"I'm not either," uttered Risa. "I'm actually level 5, but I haven't bothered to update my data."

Students usually appraised themselves at school whenever they leveled up to record their level in the database. I'd avoided this because my level was so high that it would stir up trouble, and the same would be true of Satsuki now.

"You should hold off from updating your level in the database," I advised Satsuki. "People will ask questions if you level up too quickly."

"B-But we can't keep that up forever, can we?" inquired Satsuki.

Refusing to update the database meant that Satsuki's level would remain showing as level 4. Some of our end-of-term exams would require an appraisal, so Satsuki worried that the truth would come out eventually.

"It's fine," I said. "If you pick up the Thief job, you can learn the Fake skill that lets you fake your stats."

"Fake?" echoed Satsuki, tilting her head while staring down at her terminal. "I didn't know there was a Thief skill like that."

One only needed to increase their job level by one as a Thief to unlock the Fake skill. I recommended to Satsuki to get the Thief job first, even if she ultimately wanted to become a Caster.

Still, I really can't be bothered to attend the training session, I thought.

The sessions were due to start tomorrow, but I wasn't happy that I had to go;

I didn't need any help leveling up. I'd thought about not showing up, but Kaoru had anticipated this and sent me a message saying she'd come to my house to pick me up and make sure I went along. Thus, it didn't look like I'd be getting out of it.

"Kaoru's coming to my house to take me to the session, so I sort of have to go along tomorrow," I said.

"Hmm," said Risa. "If you're going, then I'll go."

"I wanna go too!" chirped Kano.

The training would only last about two hours, and I decided to get it over and done with. They meant well, so it was only fair that I tag along.

Also... You're not coming, Kano.

Shortly after, we bridge-dropped a few more times and had to put up with some of Kano's tantrums. When it was time for dinner, we called it a day. Fortunately, we could accomplish more on our next raid because we'd enter through the gate.

We gathered up our things, and I led the group to the fifth-floor gate room. The place was deserted, as always. After I'd explained how the gates worked and gotten Satsuki to register the gate with her magic, she looked at her terminal to say something that took me by surprise.

"This area isn't on the map," she remarked. "I wonder why."

"It isn't?" asked Risa. "Wow, you're right."

I loaded the map on my terminal screen to check, and sure enough, the area around the gate room wasn't there. The terminal pulled its map data from the Adventurers' Guild, which their survey staff created. Although the gate room wasn't far from the fifth-floor rest area, I found it hard to believe that they'd simply missed it.

"Maybe there's a reason..." I wondered aloud. "Like to keep people away?"

"Maybe," said Risa. "But we can talk about it tomorrow when we're less tired."

She was right. There was no need to think about it right now. Risa's

suggestion stopped my mind from plunging too deep into a rabbit hole, and we left the dungeon.

“Bye, Satsuki, bye, Risa!” said Kano. “Let’s hang out again sometime!”

“Definitely!” declared Satsuki.

“Bye, Kano,” said Risa.

The girls hugged each other and continued to wave as we parted ways. Satsuki and Risa lived in the school dorms, which were close enough for Kano to visit whenever she wanted.

I walked down the twilit path between rows of trees on the school grounds with my ever-chirpy younger sister.

Today was a massive leap forward, I thought. Now that I had teamed up with the girls, I’d have a much easier time dealing with the game events at school and with my dungeon raids. They got on well with Kano too. *Let’s see if I can create a plan to level up even quicker!*

Chapter 24: A Midnight Rendezvous - Part 1

I returned home from the eventful raid, ate some dinner, and bathed. After that, I lay on my bed thinking about my next steps when I received a call from Risa on my terminal.

I'd taken my chance to snag both girls' numbers when Kano had brought up exchanging contact details, for which I was extremely impressed with myself. Plus, I couldn't have done it without Kano. At times like this, I was proud to be Kano's brother. And so, my barren contact list now featured nonfamily contacts for the first time!

As I savored the feeling for a while, I answered the call. I wondered what she wanted.

"Did I wake you?" asked Risa. "Sorry for calling so late. Are you okay to talk now?"

"No, I was up," I replied. "And you're not interrupting anything important."

It was past ten at night, but I could hear the sounds of passing cars over the phone. She was out walking somewhere.

"I've been mulling things over and wanted to hear your thoughts," explained Risa. "You know, about how this world works, its relation to *DEC*, that sort of stuff. We've had no one to talk to about those things, you know?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "I've picked up on quite a few things since I got here, and it'd be good to have someone to share my thoughts with."

Risa's slow, drawn-out speech mannerisms made her sound like a bit of an airhead. But she was a top *DEC* player with sharp observational skills, so she'd probably discovered some details about this world that I'd missed.

"And since I've got your number now," said Risa, "I thought, why not give Souta a ring?"

"Right," I said. "Should I come over to you? It'd be better to talk these things

through in person.”

We had a low likelihood of being under surveillance already, but I didn’t want to discuss it over the phone.

“Sounds good,” answered Risa. “Let’s meet up at the park on the hill behind the school.”

“Got it,” I responded. “I’ll get ready quickly and head over.”

I hung up and clambered to my feet.

The park on the hill? I thought. *Meeting someone there at this time of night...*

The scenic park on the hill behind the school offered an impressive view of Adventurers’ High and the rest of the town, which made it well-known as a popular date spot at night. My heart started beating faster. I was heading to a prime date location to meet up with a cute but unhinged girl.

Feeling a little excited, I threw some clothes on. I also picked up one of my items—it would be handy to have when seeing Risa, just in case.

I descended the creaking stairs and went to the door until I bumped into my mother. She was in her pajamas, wearing a beauty face mask.

“Oh, are you heading out?” she asked.

“For a bit, yeah,” I said. “I’m taking a key with me.”

“Be safe,” she said, waving at me and beginning to rummage through the fridge. The Narumi house was as tranquil as ever.

I walked at a fast pace, not wanting to leave Risa alone too long this late at night.

The hill was originally two hundred meters high. Excavations following the discovery of the dungeon at its base led to the reduction in height to eighty meters. Nevertheless, the hill’s peak offered a wonderful view over the town, adored by families during the daytime and couples at night, who visited the restaurant on the peak and looked out from the observation deck.

I navigated through the darkness of night up the hiking path that led to the

peak. Even though I passed a few lovey-dovey couples holding hands on the way, I felt generous tonight and did *not* wish for their destruction.

About ten minutes later, I reached the park in the dead of night. The usually busy park was practically empty. It was nice and quiet here, the perfect place for our conversation.

“She told me she’d be waiting on the bench,” I said aloud, scanning the park that was illuminated by fancy bollard lights. “Oh, there she is!”

Risa had noticed me already and lifted her hand to wave. She wore a light brown blouse with cute shirring and a casual pair of beige wide-leg pants. Her mature appearance helped to make her fashion sense look quietly confident. Before now, I’d only ever seen her wearing school clothes or dungeon armor, so her outfit made my heart flutter.

“That was quick,” remarked Risa. “I didn’t think you’d get here so soon.” She smiled and invited me to sit beside her on the bench, seeming to be in a good mood.



“I need the exercise, so I power walked here.”

I was glad to have the chance to sit down since I felt worn out. The area was outside the magic field, so I needed to use my muscles to climb the hill without relying on physical enhancements.

“Sorry for calling you out so late!” apologized Risa. “But I got to thinking about something, and it kept me up.”

“I’ve had some things on my mind too,” I said. “And finding the right time and place to talk about this stuff wasn’t easy, so I’m glad we’re here now.”

Risa and I were each one of the few players who’d come here from another world. I trusted my family with almost anything, but I couldn’t talk to them about my world or *DEC*. With Risa, things were different, and I’d been hoping to get the chance to talk things through with someone in the same position as me.

“Ha ha, me too,” said Risa, giggling. “We’ve chatted at school and haven’t had a proper discussion since finding out we’re both players. Strangely, we’re in this position now when you think of what our relationship was like in the game.” She stared at the night sky as though she were recalling old memories.

Both of us had been bitter foes in the game and would kill each other on sight. Now that we’d been dropped into this peculiar situation, we somehow sat together on a park bench to consult each other. It was definitely strange, even a little funny.

I looked up at the night sky too. Yet the lights from the town made it difficult to see even the first-magnitude stars. This spot was a great vantage point for admiring the nighttime town but not so much the stars.

Risa paused briefly before asking whether there was anything I wanted to talk about first. I deferred to Risa to choose our topic in the spirit of ladies first for our talk.

“Thanks,” she said. “Okay, so first... I wanna talk about what we found out about the gates today.”

“You mean how their room isn’t on the map?” I asked.

Risa nodded.

The Adventurers' Guild would send large numbers of their staff into the dungeon to construct the maps they distributed to our terminals. However, the gate room was missing from the map. Perhaps this meant nothing, but I found it strange, as did Risa.

Moreover, the fifth-floor gate room was close to the floor's entrance and in a spot possible to stumble into while raiding due to the large volume of adventurer traffic. Despite that, I'd never encountered another adventurer in the vicinity, and it didn't appear on the map.

"One possibility is that there's a spell on the area around the gate room to keep players away," I suggested.

"That's what I was thinking," agreed Risa. "If so, why doesn't it work on me or you? Or on people like Satsuki and Kano, who've learned the secret about the gates?"

"Maybe it depends on whether you're aware of the gates?" I noted.

It was possible that being aware of the gates was the key to bypassing the spell, which suggested the magic being used was one that manipulated perception.

"But if it were just the gates we had to explain, then I'd say it's a spell," said Risa. "There are some other things I've noticed that depend on awareness."

When I asked her to explain, she mentioned that Satsuki hadn't known about Fake. This skill was the first one adventurers would learn from the Thief job, so it was inconceivable that a student of Adventurers' High would be unaware of it, especially a high-achiever like Satsuki.

Risa had wondered whether Fake wasn't common knowledge, so she'd checked in the guild library and could not find any record of the skill. Apparently, adventurers who'd become Thieves hadn't received Fake.

She believed this meant that one prerequisite for acquiring the skill was being aware that it existed. If you didn't think it existed, you wouldn't get it. Risa hypothesized this system generally applied in this world.

"That makes sense," I said. "It would also explain why you can acquire Plus Three Skill Slots or find the gate rooms if you've learned about them, like Kano."

“So far, there’s Fake, Plus Three Skill Slots, and the gates,” said Risa. “But I expect plenty more things in this world that require awareness to work.”

The remaining question was what criteria determined which things were universally known and which weren’t, but this seemed simple enough.

“I bet the features packaged in the original version of the game work for everyone, but those added in updates need awareness to work,” I said.

“Yep,” agreed Risa. “That seems the most likely.”

The state of knowledge about the dungeon in this world was like what was in the game at the time of its release. Most of the jobs and skills referenced in this world were those available from the initial release.

But Fake, Plus Three Skill Slots, the gates, the slime room, and other places were content added shortly after the game’s release. Generally, the people of this world didn’t know about any of these or guarded them as secrets restricted to small groups if they did.

Maybe this world was a simultaneous recreation of the initial *DEC* release and the heavily updated version I’d been playing before arriving here. People’s awareness allowed the two worlds to coexist as one.

“The good thing is,” continued Risa as she giggled, “this makes it a piece of cake to figure out what’s okay to share and what isn’t.”

“It makes it clearer what advantages we have as players too,” I remarked.

I’d already known about a few cheats available to former players, like the use of Manual Activation or skills from our game characters. Now, I’d discovered that every bit of content from updates was a potential weapon that could give us an edge. This fact could change my strategy. However...

“There’s a bit of a problem with Fake, though,” I said.

“Yeah?”

I told Risa about the big-breasted ninja—I didn’t know her name—from The Red Ninjettes I’d met during my rank-up exam. I was sure she had been using Fake and had become incredibly interested when she learned that I was using it too.

Fake wasn't common knowledge, but it was likely that particular groups like The Red Ninjettes were aware of the skill and guarded it as their own secret. If so, that was a significant privilege they'd be sure to want to keep to themselves. The ability to hide your strength and disguise your abilities allowed you to trick your opponents into underestimating your ability. Thus, you could get away with that as much as you wanted if your opponents had no reason to suspect you could fake your stats. Such would be a huge advantage in war and espionage. So, how would they react when they saw an ordinary high school student using their secret skill? I understood why Kirara Kusunoki had delivered me an invite to attend their clan celebration.

"When is the celebration?" asked Risa.

"After the Battle of the Classes," I replied. "I was planning on going, but I'm not sure that'd be a good idea anymore."

They would probably think their top secret information had leaked and might even consider me a threat. I'd need to keep a careful eye on The Red Ninjettes.

"They've probably looked into you and your family already," warned Risa.

"And after looking into me, they decided to meet with me directly..."

"How much do you know about The Red Ninjettes, anyway?"

Their public persona was that of a flashy clan of sexy Thieves. Their leader, Haruka Mikami, was a celebrity who was a frequent conversation topic in the media. But their true identity was an elite clan that performed missions for the Adventurers' Guild and the government. That was what the ninja I'd met had said, at least.

"They show up in Sanjou's main story in *DEC* too...as the bad guys," elaborated Risa.

"Really?" I asked. "I didn't know that. I never gave BL mode a go."

I'd known Kirara had joined forces with Sanjou and supported her, so I'd assumed The Red Ninjettes were good people. The invitation I'd received and Kirara's attitude hadn't seemed threatening, not giving me any reason to doubt my assumption.

Still, Risa explained that The Red Ninjettes were an extremely conservative clan, and they would mercilessly attack anyone that threatened to disrupt tradition or the state.

“Knowing that, are you sure you wanna go to their main base alone?” warned Risa.

She had me there, and I said, “But ignoring their official invitation and running away won’t work forever either. I’m at a loss...”

“You probably wouldn’t be in any immediate danger,” said Risa. “If that’s what they wanted, they would’ve come after you by now.”

She reasoned that the game’s version of The Red Ninjettes would’ve acted swiftly and unhesitatingly if they had wanted to force me to reveal information or to silence me. Instead, they’d chosen the more leisurely route of inviting me to enjoy their party, suggesting they weren’t planning to attack me.

They’d likely investigated me to find out which organization I worked for. Since I didn’t work for anyone, their investigation wouldn’t have any results. So, they were still treating me with caution and likely planned to use a face-to-face meeting as a chance to investigate further.

“I think I’ll go along,” I declared, “but I’ll take appropriate precautions.”

The meeting wasn’t likely to become a battle, but it wasn’t impossible either. I’d send my family to the dungeon on the day of the party to be on the safe side.

Risa smiled at me. “In that case, let me teach you something cool as thanks for power leveling me. You might find it useful.”

She thrust her arm forward and began drawing symbols in the air. I watched closely, wondering what was about to happen. Suddenly, even though we weren’t inside a magic field, her skills activated.

Chapter 25: A Midnight Rendezvous - Part 2

In the dark, quiet park, Risa released her Aura without a magic field present.

“The look on your face tells me you knew about this already,” said Risa, chuckling.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Everything that works in the game, I’ve tested in this world.”

Ordinarily, skills and physical enhancements only activated if you were inside the dungeon or within the magic field that encapsulated a 150-meter radius around the dungeon portal. Some magical tools could create artificial magic fields anywhere you wanted. But we were unlikely to get our hands on one because of strict government restrictions on possessing and using these tools.

Releasing Aura was an exception to this rule. You could use Manual Activation to release your Aura even outside a magic field, and a continuous release of it would saturate the air with mana particles. This reaction generated a pseudo-magic field and enabled physical enhancements and skills for a short time, an exploit that most players in *DEC* knew about.

“Okay... But did you know you can do this?” Risa slowly shut her eyes and suddenly blended in with her surroundings, disappearing... Or so it seemed. She was definitely still there, but I had to concentrate hard to be able to notice her. There were a few skills that had similar effects. One was the Hide skill that would make you less noticeable; Risa was using the Invisible skill that would almost erase your existence from other people’s perception. She didn’t appear to be using a scroll or any magic items, meaning she could only activate a skill from an advanced job if it was one of her game character’s skills.

“My character didn’t have this skill,” said Risa.

“Then how did you learn it?” I asked.

If it hadn’t come from her character, she would’ve needed to learn the skill in this world. You could only acquire an advanced job if you were level 20 or

above.

“I realized that, unlike in the game, you can control how much Aura you release. If you match your body’s Aura output to the same amount as your surroundings—” Once again, Risa faded from my perception. “—then Invisible activates.” As in the game, the spell broke when she moved or spoke.

Risa explained the different ways that one could use Aura. You could unleash a large burst of Aura at a target to intimidate them, match its output to the background level of mana particles to activate Invisible, or reduce your Aura output to zero to activate Hide. In essence, it was a new way to manually activate skills.

“That’s so simple that other adventurers must have tried it,” I argued. “Oh, wait, I see. This is another case where you must be aware of the skill to use it.”

“I think so,” admitted Risa. “If you don’t know about Invisible, then the skill won’t activate no matter how you tune your Aura output, and you won’t be able to acquire the skill either.”

Risa believed performing the skill motions and channeling mana were not enough. For example, there was no difference between the motion of the Samurai skill *Iai* and an ordinary sideways swipe attack. But the swipe wouldn’t benefit from large increases to attack power and slicing damage unless the skill was activated. Therefore, other adventurers couldn’t activate Invisible by tuning their Aura output.

She recommended that I only use Invisible while in a safe location or after adding it to my skill slots so it activates automatically. It required a lot of concentration to get it to work otherwise and would be dangerous to use in battle.

Even so, Risa’s discovery was big news. We could now activate any Aura-based skill with this method, allowing us to add it to our skill slots.

I tried it out; manually activating the Aura skill required drawing a magic circle in the air rather than performing a motion. I traced a pattern with my hands, channeled a small amount of mana through, and slowly drew the rest of the circle. Aura began emanating from my body. If I let my Aura continue to release, I’d generate a temporary magic field around us. Although, there’d be no point

because mana particles from Risa's Aura still saturated the air.

Next, I tried to adjust the amount of Aura I was releasing. I needed to perfectly match my Aura output with the mana density in the air. But I had trouble adjusting that a tiny bit.

"Do you have any tips?" I asked.

"Fine-tuning your Aura is really tough," said Risa. "You need a lot of practice."

I realized I would not figure out how to freely manipulate my Aura output immediately. On the other hand, I would risk running out of mana if I practiced for too long.

"You might find it easier to practice Meditation first," suggested Risa.

"That could make things easier, I guess..."

Meditation was a handy skill that restored your mana and HP while the skill was active. It wasn't valuable enough for high-level players to keep in their skill slots but had become godsend for low-level players who were more likely to use up their limited mana reserves. I was glad to hear that I could unlock it now because you could only acquire it when you'd maxed out the job level of Caster.

Just then, Risa clarified I could activate Meditation by shutting my eyes and swirling my Aura around my belly button... Of course she made it sound simple. I was amazed that she'd mastered the ability to perfectly control her Aura in such a short time frame despite having no prior experience with it. Maybe she had a natural talent that I did not.

She heaved a long sigh and released a self-deprecating chuckle, then said, "There's a reason I practiced so hard to master the Aura-based skills. I wonder if you've got the same problem."

"What problem is that?"

"I got saddled with an inconvenient starter skill."

Ah. So she's got one too. "Do you mind if I use an appraisal item on you?" I asked.

"Go ahead," she replied. "I don't mind anymore."

I'd brought along an appraisal item in case Risa had an unusual skill like my Glutton and looked at her listed skills.

"So you have Basic Appraisal...and 'Libido'..." I remarked. "That doesn't sound good."

Just as I was stuck with Glutton, Risa had to deal with Libido, which I suspected was a handicap for players. In my case, my skill's debuffs were a loss of physical ability due to large reductions in my strength and agility stats, including a continuous increase in my appetite. I read through the details of Risa's skill.

"You receive larger increases to mana and agility stats when you level up," I read aloud. "Your sexual desire increases and your HP reduces by thirty percent. Vitality is reduced by fifty percent. You can upgrade to the Lust skill... Sounds rough!"

The increases to mana and agility were fine, but HP and vitality were stats that I really wouldn't want to see reductions in, and there was the increase to sexual desire to boot... I wasn't sure how much it would increase her libido. Even if it were half as powerful as my desire for food, then Risa would be in an extremely difficult situation.

"And when it says my sexual desire goes up, it means *all day long!*" exclaimed Risa, sighing. "It was like I was in heat twenty-four hours a day! I could barely function. I don't know how I got through the first weeks of school." She smiled and said, "I don't mind bringing it up because it's mostly better now."

I could understand her predicament and would go crazy if I had to constantly deal with those effects. And Risa was a woman, which meant an unrestrainable sexual desire could put her in dangerous situations. Her skill was like mine in that it remained active outside of the magic field, so she couldn't just run away from it.

Risa explained the steps she'd taken. She'd wanted to free herself as soon as possible, and her first plan had been to change jobs and overwrite Libido with another skill. Unfortunately, her mental state was in a precarious position to spend weeks slowly leveling up in the dungeon, and she'd felt no hope of improving.

“And then,” she said, “sometimes, when I had time, I’d go to the dungeon and meditate to clear my mind.”

Apparently, she’d meditate whenever she worried or had something on her mind. It was a habit she’d kept up from her life in our world. One day, while meditating, she started playing with her Aura, feeling odd when she concentrated it near her stomach. That had been when she’d inadvertently acquired the Meditation skill. Realizing she could acquire other skills that also used Aura, she started experimenting.

“And the three skills that taught me were Invisible, Hide, and Meditation.”

She’d practiced trying to learn other Aura-based skills, but most didn’t work. For example, she failed to acquire Dragon Aura, Sacred Aura, and Magical Warfare. It wasn’t sufficient to simply alter the flow and volume of your Aura for these skills, and she had yet to confirm what extra conditions were needed to unlock them.

“Couldn’t you use a skill you learned to overwrite your starter skill?” I asked.

“Nope,” she replied. “It can’t be overwritten. Yours too, I’d guess.”

I had a feeling that would be the case. These starter skills carried huge debuffs, were only given to former players, and transcended our knowledge of the game. I expected plenty more secrets to how they worked.

“Thankfully, I managed to learn Flexible Aura, which was the one I really needed.”

Flexible Aura was an anti-debuff skill that reduced the effects of status impairments and decreased your probability of being inflicted with a status impairment. With a heavy sigh, Risa pointed out that Flexible Aura watered down Libido’s effects, letting her finally lead a normal life again. Still, Libido was a surprisingly powerful skill. While she needed to recast Flexible Aura several times a day, it was helping. Perhaps it could help with my Glutton skill.

Another thing that I was curious about was the possibility of upgrading to a more advanced version of the skill.

“We can upgrade our starter skills if we defeat a ‘qualifier,’” I said. “What are your thoughts on that?”

“Yeah, I saw that when I appraised Libido,” responded Risa. “I don’t know what a qualifier is, but I worry that upgrading the skill will make the effects worse.”

The appraisal wand hadn’t shown me what effects the upgraded skill would have. Although effects were enough of a challenge as they were, they’d be unmanageable if they got worse. The smart move was to hold off on upgrading the skill until I could examine it with a more advanced appraisal spell or obtain equipment that severely reduced debuffs.

Also, on the topic of the qualifier...

“Apparently, I’ve satisfied the conditions to upgrade mine,” I informed her.

“What?” she said, gasping. “When did you beat a qualifier?”

“I think I know when,” I replied. “It’s him. I’m sure of it.”

It had to be Volgemurt, the unique boss who exuded a pitch-black Aura and a menacing desire to see me dead. I could still clearly remember every second of my hard-won fight against him.

“Sounds like he was a tough opponent,” expressed Risa. “I’d figured the qualifier would be another player like us, but I guess not.”

“About that...” I said. “When I think back now to the fight—”

Volgemurt had displayed emotions, something out of character for undead monsters. He’d had an expert grasp on the effects of skills and the best distance to keep between us, used a wide range of tactics to create feints, and suspiciously tricked me into attacking in certain ways to counter. It had been like fighting a PKK from *DEC* with copious battle experience or maybe a top Arena fighter. When I thought about the fight rationally, it was bizarre to come across such a cunning monster.

“He must’ve been tough to warrant you of all people to say that,” commented Risa. “But a monster like that...”

“The way he fought, it was like he was a *DEC* player,” I said.

Was Volgemurt a player?

I didn’t have the evidence, but my instincts told me he was. The terrifying

implication was that players weren't guaranteed to become students of Adventurers' High. They could become monsters too.

Was it any harder to believe than the fact that we were living inside the game that had become a reality? I wondered what would've happened if I'd lived as an undead monster. I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay sane.

"I don't like the thought that I might run into a monster like that in the dungeon and get into a fight," said Risa. "My life would be in danger even if I used my character's skills."

"Be extra careful if you encounter any monsters you don't remember from the game," I advised. "Your first thought should be that they're qualifiers rather than new monsters."

Volgemurt had been slightly sluggish at times and hadn't used any player skills, possibly because he'd only just awoken. Even so, his experience in fighting against adventurers was evident. I would've been in deep trouble if he'd taken the fight in an unexpected direction.

"I just hope us players don't start fighting each other to upgrade our starter skills," I said.

"It's worrying, isn't it?" inquired Risa. "We'll have to watch out."

It would be fine if the qualifiers referred to certain monsters. But if the former players were the qualifiers, that would give us a reason to hunt and kill other players to upgrade our skills. I wanted to come up with a countermeasure to prevent this.

One option was to use contract magic to forbid us from fighting each other. Another was for Risa and I to level up so much that we could become deterrents against infighting. Or perhaps we could devise a rule so players would have to observe one another for any signs of conflict. Each option would take time to achieve, and they were pointless at the moment because we didn't know the identities of the other players or their strengths.

"I wonder how many other players made it here," I said. "Maybe it's more than I thought."

"The event where they screened for testers was insanely difficult," stated

Risa. “I don’t think that many players could have made it through. But...” Risa raised her index finger to her lips and put on a mischievous smile. “I do know one more.”

Chapter 26: Morning Depression

“Uh-oh, I’m gonna be late!”

I was going to be late, but not for school. It was the weekend, but I was supposed to attend Tachigi’s training session.

My hair was messy after I woke up, so I brushed it in front of the mirror before throwing on my school tracksuit. I’d overslept, and that was my fault for staying up the night before until the sun had come out.

“I need a new tracksuit,” I said to the mirror. I had to pull the drawstring as tight as it would go to keep my bottoms from falling now that I’d lost so much weight. This solution was only temporary until I could buy a new pair. I wondered what successful dieters usually did with their old clothes.

“Souta!” my mother called from downstairs. “I’m letting Kaoru in so she doesn’t have to stand out in the cold!”

Kaoru had come to pick me up a few minutes before and had been waiting for me to get ready. I finished dressing and leaped down the stairs. There, Kaoru was sitting upright and holding the cup with both hands, patiently sipping tea. She really did have impeccable manners. Her magnificent beauty was like that of a katana, fitting for a *DEC* heroine. Piggy’s mind was delighted!

“Oh, you’re ready?” asked Kaoru. “This tea is very nice, Mrs. Narumi. Souta, can you wait a minute while I finish it?”

I sat across the table from her, needing to catch my breath after my rushed morning routine. Then, I poured myself some tea and drank.

Ooh, the first tea of the season, I thought. *She was right. It is nice!*

We faced each other but held no conversation. I felt Kaoru didn’t look at me as hostile as the first days of school. This was probably because Piggy hadn’t done anything to annoy her since I’d taken over his body, like touching her inappropriately or hounding her to spend time together.

I couldn't expect her to forgive everything he had done in the past, but I'd be more than happy knowing she felt a little safer around me. Maybe one day we'd reach the point where we could chat and laugh about nothing in particular on our morning commute. The feeling of joy in my heart told me that Piggy's mind wanted the same thing.

Kaoru finished her drink, and we left my house to walk to the training session's location. I expected that she would walk a few paces in front of me like always, but instead—

"As it happens," said Kaoru, "there's something I wanted to ask you today."

—she started walking beside me and struck up a conversation, and that was out of the ordinary. She was tall for a girl, so when I turned my head, I saw my childhood friend's beautiful face beside mine. My heart skipped a beat.

"Ahem." I cleared my throat nervously. "What would you wish to ask of me?"

"That's a weird way to phrase it," acknowledged Kaoru. "Anyway, somebody told me you were speaking to Kusunoki the other day. Is it true?"

Oh, Kirara? I thought. Maybe my classmates had been gossiping about the day she'd found me to deliver her invitation. I replied, "I...did speak with her briefly."

"You spoke with her?" repeated Kaoru suspiciously. "She's a noble and heads up one of the school's biggest factions. How do you even know her?"

Kirara was so famous that even Kaoru knew her name. Plus, it defied belief that an exceptionally beautiful and popular girl would decide to visit someone like me on the lowest rung of the school's social ladder. I knew I'd need to come up with a plausible-sounding explanation. But I didn't think it would be wise to admit that she'd invited me to her clan celebration. Instead, I told Kaoru that I'd run into one of Kirara's friends in the dungeon, and she had come by to let me know how that friend was getting on after our encounter.

"So you don't know her personally?" pressed Kaoru.

"No," I replied. "How come you care so much?"

Kaoru took a moment before replying, probably debating whether to tell me.

“You know our class is in a tough spot right now, right? If you were friends with Kusunoki, I hoped you could ask for her help.”

“I can’t see that happening,” I said. “We’ve only spoken once, and she’s probably forgotten who I am by now.”

I knew that Class E’s situation wasn’t great, but I was also aware things were only beginning to go downhill. Our plight would get much more dire if the game’s story played out. Some of our classmates would be driven from the school by the other students’ threats, bullying, and even physical violence. Should that come to pass, Kaoru would feel the strain more and more as time progressed, growing ever more distraught as Class E’s situation worsened.

But I didn’t want to experience that horrible future or watch anyone else suffer it either. Part of me wanted to take action to prevent these game events from taking place. The problem was that those same cruel situations would shape Akagi into a mighty adventurer; I wasn’t sure I had the right to take that away from him.

Only the game’s protagonist could overcome some of these events, and it would be impossible for me to keep a constant watch over Class E and prevent every little thing that could go wrong. Plus, I needed Akagi and his friends to become powerful or we’d be in trouble further down the line. As such, my best option was to let them put up with the humiliation for the time being and use it for their personal growth.

Of course, I’d step in if Satsuki or Kaoru were ever in real danger and take action to prevent the worst mistakes that could otherwise invite devastating casualties. To achieve that, I might need to mend my friendship with Kaoru and keep an eye on how Akagi’s party was progressing.

“I can’t make that happen,” I said. “But to make up for it, I’m ready to help if you need me.”

“You can help by taking today’s training seriously,” asserted Kaoru. With that, she picked up her pace until we were in our usual walking formation, Kaoru a few steps ahead of me.

I guess I can’t blame her for not believing in me yet, I thought.

While I could try letting Kaoru in on all my game secrets, I expected even that wouldn't be enough to win her trust at this point. So, I had to win her trust back bit by bit over time without imposing too close a relationship on her, hoping that one day we could be true comrades.

At any rate, I had bigger problems to worry about, and one of the biggest was waiting for me at our destination.

I'd first discovered that when speaking with Risa the night before.

At the park, where the bright city lights obscured the night stars, the bollard lights illuminated Risa as she put a finger to her lips and smiled mischievously. "I do know one more."

Without warning, she revealed something absolutely dumbfounding: she'd already made contact with another player.

"I think he'll be at tomorrow's training session," added Risa. "It's Tsukijima from our class."

"Tsukijima?" I repeated. "You mean the poser?"

I recalled what I knew of Takuya Tsukijima. He wore his hair long and dyed it blond in flagrant violation of school rules, which was unusual at Adventurers' High. He was a laid-back guy who didn't care how his uniform looked and chatted to people with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Seemingly, he'd identified Risa as a player and invited her to team up with him!

"Guess what?" said Risa. "He actually memorized the face of every Class E student in the game. Can you believe it?"

Based on that memory, Risa was the only student besides himself who hadn't appeared in the game. He must have realized she was a custom character.

In *DEC*, you could play as one of the protagonists, Akagi or Pinky, or create your own custom character. Choosing a protagonist meant you had to start with their skills and stats, but you'd get to experience the game's main story. For custom characters, however, you could alter their appearance and tailor their build to your liking. However, you would only experience the game's subplots

and various romance routes.

The character selection worked differently in the tester mode update that brought us here, and we had to choose between a custom or random character. If you chose a random character, you'd become one of *DEC*'s preexisting characters, like how I'd become Piggy. Picking a custom character brought you into this world as yourself, as Risa had.

Basically, Tsukijima's method of searching for characters absent from the game only allowed him to find players who'd chosen custom characters instead of random characters.

"Does that mean he hasn't figured out how random characters work?" I asked.

"Probably not," said Risa, faintly smiling. "And I don't want to fix his misunderstanding. We're better off that way."

It appeared Tsukijima had initially thought there were three other players: Risa, who hadn't been in the game, as well as the two protagonists, Akagi and Pinky. After he realized the protagonists weren't players, he concluded that he and Risa were the only ones.

According to Risa, he'd invited her to team up with him and said, "I'm Adam, and you're my Eve."

Pretty creepy, to be honest, I thought.

That was how the night with Risa had ended. And now, I was heading to a training session that this Tsukijima guy would likely attend.

I didn't know what he was like since I'd never spoken with him. His behavior in the classroom seemed rough around the edges, but nothing made me believe he was a bad person. I'd filed him away as an ordinary, boisterous high school student. But his player knowledge could shake this world to its foundations, which Risa and I could get caught in the aftermath. And so, I had to see him in the flesh and observe what kind of person he was. For that, it would be best to stick to Risa's suggestion and let him believe there were no other players.

I just hope he's a decent guy, I thought, walking behind Kaoru.

Chapter 27: The Training Session

The school's exercise grounds and gymnasium inside the magic field had a small free space between each other. Today's training session would take place there. When we arrived, several of our classmates were already present, chatting with each other.

Akagi, Pinky, and Tachigi would serve as today's coaches. Kaoru would too, and she walked over to the other three. They began a discussion. The rest of the class had high hopes for these four; they were having some success in their dungeon raids, and their levels were higher than average for Class E. I hoped they continued to improve without bowing to the interference from the other classes.

I flung my rucksack on the floor while stifling a yawn, then watched Akagi and his friends. Suddenly, I heard a breezy female voice calling to me from behind.

"Hey there," said the voice.

I turned around and noticed Risa, dressed in a tracksuit, smiling and waving at me. Her loosely fastened hair made her look mature, and it suited her well. She laid her belongings down carefully and sat beside me.

But I was glad I had someone to talk to now. Being the odd one out would feel awkward.

"Is this gonna be like sword fighting class, do you think?" asked Risa.

"Kaoru made it sound like they'll be teaching us more thoroughly than that," I replied.

"Ugh, so annoying. I don't really wanna take part."

Our main objective was fact-finding, so we could slack off with the training as long as we looked like we were taking it seriously.

I asked her how she'd slept the night before, and the rest of the participants arrived during our conversation.

One of them was Kotone Kuga, who walked in quietly as if to avoid being conspicuous. Kuga seemed drowsy, and her short bob bounced as she walked. She had infiltrated our school as a secret agent belonging to an American intelligence agency. The organizers had forced her to attend this session because she appeared as level 2 on our terminals but was at least level 20. She looked grumpy and was yawning without trying to hide it, making it clear to everyone that she didn't want to be here.

Behind her walked in a boy with long blond hair and his hands stuffed into his tracksuit's pockets. The person Risa had said was a player—Tsukijima—walked over to us.

"Oh, look who decided to take part!" he said to Risa, sitting down next to her. "Didn't think you'd show up to this session when there's nothing they can teach you."

None of the students he usually hung out with were here, meaning he would participate alone.

"Morning," said Risa. "I'm surprised you could be bothered to come too."

"Tachigi chewed my ear off until I agreed," said Tsukijima. "What a waste of time..."

My terminal said he was level 3, but I wondered what his true level was. Players knew plenty of ways to level up, and it was understandable that he'd find the training session pointless.

"By the way," he continued, "I see you talking to Piggy a lot these days. What's the deal with that?" Tsukijima peered at me suspiciously.

"H-Hi," I said, putting on a fake smile and greeting him to avoid awkwardness. It was always the friendly types that would ask these imposing questions.

I *was* spending time with Risa, though, who he knew was another player, so it was only natural for him to be suspicious. I'd need to create a believable excuse to ease his suspicions.

Risa helped me out by answering first and explained, "We've been raiding the dungeon together. So we're raiding buddies, I guess you could say."

We'd agreed to keep my player status a secret.

"With *him*? You do remember how he ended up, don't you? Well, I guess he reached an okay level by the end. Maybe he could come in useful..."

Piggy was one of the game's villains and would cause scandal after scandal before finally getting expelled in Kaoru's route. It made sense that players would want to keep their distance from me. Even I had needed a long time to stop sulking about becoming Piggy. However, I actually enjoyed being him now because of his caring family.

"Once you get to know him, he's actually quite nice," added Risa. "Right, Souta?"

"Huh?" I mumbled. "Oh, err, sure."

"Why do you call *him* by his first name when you still call me Tsukijima?"

I got the impression that he had a crush on Risa. He probably didn't realize who her game character had been. She was definitely attractive, but on the inside, she was the cutthroat leader of a famous PKK clan.

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask," started Tsukijima, "are you the one that told Akagi about the sword, Risa?"

Risa was silent for a few seconds. "Should we really be talking about that here?"

"Sure, why not?" replied Tsukijima. "Piggy won't have any idea what we're talking about. So, are you?"

He was asking whether Risa had been the person to teach Akagi about the Static Sword to give him the upper hand in his duel against Kariya.

"I'll turn the question back on you," retorted Risa. "Are you the one that taught Kariya how to defend himself against the Static Sword?"

"Yep," answered Tsukijima, chuckling. "It was pretty funny watching Akagi get trounced, wasn't it?"

Risa paused briefly before saying, "But it's good for us if Akagi does well."

So Tsukijima was to blame for Akagi's defeat and Class E becoming such a

depressing place with no status. Kariya had known the Static Sword's abilities and how to counter them. If he hadn't, Akagi would have won.

But why do that? If Akagi had grown in confidence and strength, he would've handled most dangerous game events by himself, giving us less work. By stopping his character's progression, there was no telling which of the game events he'd be able to suppress, and we players would have to clean up the mess.

"I do want Akagi to handle the events for us," admitted Tsukijima, "but he was about to form a harem, so I felt like throwing a spanner in the works."

Apparently, Tsukijima had loved Kaoru in the game. After seeing Akagi becoming friendly with Kaoru, he'd wanted to knock Akagi down a peg. His aim would've been to exploit Akagi's loss to Kariya, which would decrease the heroines' affection scores for Akagi.

Oh wow, so he's a Kaoru fanboy! I thought. It was brave of him to admit that in front of Kaoru's fiancé and childhood friend. Piggy's mind had a fierce new rival to contend with.

Most of the game's heroines were easy to win over, and Kaoru was no exception. She'd devote if you took a dominant approach, and she had an admiration that bordered on adoration for strength, which any player would attain naturally. Tsukijima knew all of this, so it would be easy for him to win her heart by acting assertively while demonstrating his strength.

The same wouldn't work for me, regardless of my strength or assertiveness. She had an abysmally low opinion of me after years of sexual harassment.

I must step back and give her space to forget to win her over... Wait, this is Piggy's mind at work, not me! Dial down your annoyance, Piggy!

"So you'll start being more helpful toward Akagi now?" asked Risa.

While I was still fighting an intense mental battle with Piggy's mind, Risa seized her opportunity to casually inquire about Tsukijima's plans. It was an important question for judging his outlook.

"If I feel like it," he responded. "Besides, whatever game events occur won't affect me."

Tsukijima was confident he could survive the devastating game events even if the protagonist's party failed. When higher than level 30, you could successfully clear any of the game's events. It seemed that Tsukijima had a way to reach that level in a relatively short period. Was his leveling really that efficient?

"Who cares about Akagi?" said Tsukijima. "The only thing that matters is if we have the power to survive."

"You wouldn't say that if you valued people's lives in this town... No, this world," pointed out Risa.

There were many devastating game scenarios in *DEC*. We might survive them, but this world's inhabitants wouldn't be so lucky and suffer staggering casualties. Did he think this was nothing more than a virtual world based on the game? My family weren't just game characters, nor was Kaoru. I pictured the rowdy dinnertimes around my family's kitchen table. My hyperactive younger sister, my laid-back father, my calm mother... Perhaps it wouldn't be right to describe my feelings as love, though I treasured the time I spent with them. And Kaoru... I knew just how determined she was to overcome our class's hardship, how much effort she put in, how difficult it was for her...

Everyone here had their feet planted firmly on the ground, with their own worries, joys, sadness... They were alive.

"That's the world we've come to," stated Tsukijima. "We're the chosen ones. We could reshape the whole world if we wanted. I'll do whatever I want to."

"The chosen ones?" repeated Risa sarcastically. "You really think that?"

"Who else is there?" asked Tsukijima. "AKK's Flash didn't make it. Demon from Rounds didn't either. Even Mav isn't here! We've got this awesome world to ourselves. What more proof could you need that God chose us?"

I am here, I thought. If nothing else, Tsukijima had a vivid imagination.

I disagreed with his opinion about this world, even if he didn't seem like a bad guy. Although he didn't try to sow discord and invite destruction, I wasn't entirely on board with his belief that we were there to use our special powers. I'd also initially thought I was inside a virtual world and everyone around me was an NPC. Had I not felt Piggy's warm attachment to his family or desperate

love for Kaoru, I might have ended up like Tsukijima. However, I *had* felt those emotions that had become precious to me.

Unless he changed his mindset, Tsukijima and I might never be able to work together.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself that you’ll level up quickly,” remarked Risa. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“I’ll let you in on the secret if you say you’ll team up with me,” said Tsukijima, smiling mischievously. “But only if you agree to use a magical contract.”

So, he did have a secret technique of some kind. I hoped Risa could weasel it out of him.

“Ah, sorry, Piggy.” Tsukijima roughly patted me on the shoulder. “Do me a solid and forget you heard anything.”

“Sure...” I replied. *Even the real Piggy would understand the conversation you’ve just had, and he wouldn’t be likely to forget it!*

I continued thinking about what I should do about my relationship with Tsukijima until Tachigi approached us. Tachigi explained the format of the training session while glancing down at some pieces of paper. “We’ll now begin the training session. I want you to arrange yourselves into the pairs that I’ve designated in this list.”

We would first practice in pairs with plastic swords, like during sword fighting class, and we had prearranged partners. My partner was apparently...that girl, of all people. Kuga, the girl yawning drowsily in front of me, clearly had no desire to participate in the session.

She possessed the Appraisal skill, an improved version of Basic Appraisal, so she could see through my Fake skill and decipher my real stats. I’d need to let her have the upper hand in our training. Otherwise, things could get ugly for me.

“G-Good luck...” I said to Kuga.

In reply, she simply yawned. I faced her with my sword ready, but she held her sword in her hand and let it dangle. She wasn’t even looking at me.

What the hell am I supposed to do?!

Chapter 28: Kaoru Hayase - Part 3

Kaoru Hayase

“Like this, Naoto?” asked one of our classmates. “Can you show me again? You’re a great teacher.”

“Look at Yuuma,” said another classmate. “He’s just as good with a sword as anyone in the upper classes!”

I was at the training session we held to benefit our level 3 and below classmates. The girls in attendance were swarming Naoto and Yuuma, trying to charm them with their soft voices. Their attitudes toward Sakurako and me were decidedly more hostile. At first I’d thought that they wanted to get to know us so they could join our party, but I realized they believed Sakurako and I had reached level 6 because we’d teamed up with the two boys. Naoto and Yuuma had definitely contributed a lot to our dungeon success, as both had natural talent and an aptitude for raiding. However, it annoyed me that the girls had entirely dismissed the hard work that Sakurako and I had put in.

It wouldn’t do any good to say that out loud, so I left the girls to Yuuma and Naoto, then walked away to instruct the other attendees.

The first pair that caught my eye were Nitta and Tsukijima. I’d had a brief glimpse of Nitta’s swordsmanship during our sword fighting class. Her form had been a little unusual but hadn’t been bad. Therefore, the reason she was still only level 3 was likely because she wasn’t able to spend enough time in the dungeon or spend it there fruitfully. Rather than instructing her on sword fighting, the most helpful advice I could give her would be how to schedule and where to go in the dungeon to find the best monsters.

Then there was Tsukijima, who’d started trying to get closer to me recently. He’d even invited me out on dates several times. I knew my classmates called me a tomboy behind my back, but it felt good that a boy was interested in me for a change. His laid-back attitude needed fixing, though. He seemed oddly confident in himself, which I found strange.

Nitta and Tsukijima had just been chatting with each other the whole time I'd been watching them, not bothering with training. It didn't seem like a light chat either... They seemed to have a serious conversation. Tsukijima gestured animatedly with a menacing look like he was trying to convince Nitta of something. From the few words I could make out, they were talking about the dungeon and were at least on topic. But the point of the training session was to train, not to talk, so I decided that I'd step in if their conversation didn't end soon.

After I made a mental note of that, I looked at the next pair. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Souta and Kuga facing each other but not actually doing anything. Kuga was simply standing there with her usual drowsy expression. Souta at least had his sword at the ready, but he seemed nervous for some reason. Their names came up frequently as persons of interest when we'd discussed Naoto's plans to enhance Class E.

At level 2, Kuga had the lowest level in the class, and she was clearly struggling to progress in the dungeon. She possibly hadn't formed a party with anyone; she was always alone.

Souta was level 3, but we suspected that was due to power leveling, and there was a high possibility that his fighting skills were lacking. That was definitely true of the Souta I'd known before we'd joined Adventurers' High. But it was technically possible that he'd worked hard by himself to raise his level.

Because of that, I wanted to gauge their sword fighting abilities in today's session and instruct them on how best to improve. Unfortunately, however long I watched, the two showed no signs of wanting to start their training. They remained there, simply facing each other. After a while, I got fed up and called over to them.

"What are you waiting for? Get started and make the most of the training session!"

I waited, but neither of them replied.

Just as I was about to scold them again, Kuga, annoyed, spoke up, "Why do I have to be here?"

I explained to Kuga that she was here because she was level 2, the Battle of

the Classes was right around the corner, and we wanted to help her level up.

Her reply was astounding, “In that case, I’ll see that I’m on the same level as you by the next session. Okay, I’m leaving now.”

I wouldn’t let that slide. Why was she still level 2 if she could level up so quickly? I responded, “If you want to leave, you’ll have to convince me that you can make good on your word first.”

We needed our classmates to be in top form to take on the upper classes, and the training session would also benefit Kuga directly. She said she’d climb to level 6 by herself, though, not knowing how hard I’d needed to work to get there!

“Okay, here’s what I’ll do,” said Kuga, growing impatient. “I’ll wipe the floor with this guy, then I’ll leave.”

“Eek!” shrieked Souta.

Since the swords were plastic and everyone wore protective gear, there was nothing wrong with striking at each other as hard as possible. In fact, that was what I wanted them to do.

Kuga lowered her center of mass slightly and spun her training sword around to hold it with a reverse grip, and she began bouncing from left to right like a boxer.

What is this? I wondered. *This isn’t the form for any sword-fighting style I know. It’s more like a martial arts stance.*

A reverse grip might work with a shortsword or a knife, yet the training sword was over a meter long. This grip would limit the power of her thrusts and severely reduce their attack power.

Kuga and Souta were four meters apart. As I watched, she closed the distance between them with a single step. Her sword hand wound around to punch at Souta’s head from the side. You’d call that punch a hook in boxing.

She’s fast! I thought. *She used her fists instead of her sword!*

She shot toward him at unbelievable speed and delivered a fast punch from Souta’s blind spot. Souta never stood a chance of dodging. He was still staring

forward, as he had been, stupefied and unable to move. Her punch would strike him on the temple... Or so I thought, but Kuga pulled the punch immediately before impact.

“W-Wow, you’re really good, Kuga,” said Souta, sweating from shock. “It was way too quick for me to react.”

Never mind him. I doubted whether I could’ve dodged the attack, and I was level 6. That was how fast and precise the attack had been. She’d also spun around and leveraged centrifugal force to put her whole body weight into the attack so the power would have been immense. If she hadn’t pulled the punch, her hook would have damaged Souta, even with his head gear protecting him. He’d been absolutely defenseless too, and I’d let out a sigh of relief when she’d stopped her attack. I found my reaction surprising, but more surprising was that there was another facet to Kuga’s attack. Her reverse-grip sword would have sliced into him had he not dodged backward. She would’ve struck him with a body blow from her left hand if he’d ducked. Kuga had won the fight the instant Souta had let her get into close range.

Her combination of attacks wasn’t something an amateur could pull off. Even though she’d pulled it away, that single punch was enough to prove her combat proficiency.

And yet...

“Hey,” said Kuga, staring intently at Souta. “You were following my punch, weren’t you?”

“O-O-Of course not!” replied Souta nervously. “It was too quick for me to see what was happening! You know I’m no match for you, so you should find a new partner. What do you think, Miss Kaoru?”

There was no way Souta would have followed her punch like Kuga was implying. *And who are you calling Miss Kaoru?*

“Oh?” Kuga told Souta. “Let’s do the same once more, then.”

“N-N-No, wait!” blurted Souta. “We don’t need to take it quite that seriously!” He then pointed to a corner of the room and said, “Oh, I’ve actually come down with a stomachache. I’m gonna rest over there for a bit.”

Kuga ignored Souta's excuse and said quietly, "This time, I won't pull the punch." She started bouncing like a boxer again. All of a sudden, she was taking this session seriously.

I believed Souta being one level higher than Kuga would make up for his lack of sword fighting skills. After seeing her attack, I realized she might be too tough of an opponent for him. I scanned the room for other attendees to pair him with for training. That was when I saw a figure in shining metal armor walking from the school building among a group of men dressed in black.

Her, I thought. I've heard rumors that she's weird, but she really does go everywhere in full mail and plate armor.

She was Akira Tenma, the second-strongest student in Adventurers' High's first-year Class A. Her close-range combat abilities apparently surpassed that of even Class A's top student. Nobody knew why, but she always wore armor, and nobody had ever seen her face.

The men in black suits escorting her wore badges on their chests with the Japanese character for heaven—the "Ten" from Tenma. These were Tenma's personal butlers, and they attended her at all times, even at school. They weren't ordinary butlers either since they were also skilled in combat and would support Tenma during dungeon raids. Rumor had it that each was powerful enough to belong to an Assault Clan. For some reason, this oddly dressed group was rushing in our direction. Tenma's heavy armor didn't clatter when she moved because of some enchantment.

I held my breath and waited for them to pass us by, but Tenma suddenly stopped in front of us and focused on Souta.

"You there," said Tenma. "You've lost a remarkable amount of weight. How did you do it?"

Her helmet should have muffled her voice, but it was as clear as someone speaking on the phone. She was probably using a vocal projection magic tool for communication.

"Huh?" expressed Souta. "Do you mean me?"

"Yes, you, Souta Narumi."

Tenma had looked at Souta, used his full name, and remarked on his weight loss. Why did she know who he was? Souta's baffled expression showed he was just as confused as me.

"Um, why do you know my name?" he asked.

"Well, you're about the only really big student at this school," explained Tenma. "I'm plump too, and I felt a sympathetic connection. So, how did you lose so much weight that quickly?"

Souta grew more flustered. It was only natural for him to feel anxious when addressing a member of the Tenma family. Although they were originally a family of business people, the Japanese government had awarded them a barony in recognition of their contributions to dungeon technology. As such, they were legitimate nobility.

However, I was curious to hear Souta answer the question too. He'd never taken dieting seriously before entering high school... In fact, he'd lived an unhealthy, unkempt lifestyle and stuffed his face with food whenever he could. Now he'd slimmed down from that obese extreme, and I could even see muscles on his body. Plus, he'd come along to today's training session without complaint. Did something happen to change his outlook?

"Would you rather not answer in public?" asked Tenma. "In that case, let us talk there." She pointed to a large black car. I'd noticed the unusually long limousine parked near the school gates frequently. But I hadn't known it was Tenma's transport.

Still, I didn't want her to take Souta away in the middle of our training session. What was I to do? I wondered whether I should butt in and explain the situation.

"Stop," ordered Kuga. She stepped forward and brandished her training sword at Tenma as if to shoo her away. "I had business with him first, and you're getting in my way."

I saw the expressions on the butlers' faces grow stern. Suddenly, everyone was on edge.

"Hmm?" hummed Tenma. "And who are you?" She pulled up the terminal on

her arm, pointed it at Kuga, and began pressing buttons. “According to the database, you’re Kotone Kuga of the first-year Class E, level 2... Level 2? Is that all? And you think it is wise to provoke me?” Tenma threw her arms in the air in an exaggerated gesture of astonishment. She was wearing a helmet, so it was hard to tell if she was shocked. Yet her animated gestures were likely her way of making up for this.

“So what if I do?” shot back Kuga.

Tenma’s level was mysteriously missing from the database, although it was definitely high. Otherwise, she couldn’t be the second-strongest student in Class A. Kuga’s combat abilities wouldn’t be enough to overcome the level gap. In addition, Kuga could be in deep trouble when showing disrespect for a noble.

Both commoners and nobles alike enlisted in Adventurers’ High, and the school rules forbade discrimination based on class. But everyone knew this was nothing more than a formality. If people actually followed the rules, the men in black suits behind Tenma wouldn’t be angrily cracking their knuckles and preparing for a fight.

Kuga was temperamental, and Souta hadn’t recovered from his shock. The situation would fall to me to fix.

“E-Excuse me,” I called out. “W-We’re in the middle of a Class E training session. Um, Kuga didn’t mean to be rude. Please, could we resolve this peacefully—”

“Out of my way!” One of Tenma’s butlers grabbed my shoulder and shoved me aside.

“Kyaa!”

We were inside the magic field, meaning a high-level adventurer could bat away a level 6 like me with nothing more than a tap.

Yuuma and Naoto had noticed signs of trouble and came running over. Even so, Kuga continued to stare at Tenma without moving a muscle.

“How should we handle this, my lady?” asked one of the butlers.

“Hmm,” emitted Tenma. “Ordinarily, she should be taught a lesson. But I will

overlook her insolence in recognition of her courage. Another day, Narumi!”

With that, Tenma departed. The butlers left with her at once as though their anger had melted away and they’d lost interest in us. Once the tense encounter finished and my adrenaline stopped pumping, I felt like I might collapse where I stood.

“What was that about, Kuga!” said Tsukijima, laughing. “If you tussle with nobles, you’ll get us all in hot water.”

“Ha ha. I wanted to see how the fight went, though,” added Risa.

Tsukijima and Risa had been watching the encounter but were unexpectedly laughing. Both were more calm than they should have been. With such a massive level gap, it would’ve become more than a “tussle.”

“Hmph!” sniffed Kuga with annoyance. “Interrupting my fight... Now, where were we?” Kuga looked around for Souta to continue their sparring. “Huh?”

However, Souta was nowhere to be seen. He’d run away.

Chapter 29: A Flood of Memories

“Okay, so I just have to tell Kaoru that I’ll help you level up?” asked Satsuki.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Thank you for the favor, and good luck with your leveling.”

“Thanks! I’ll do my best. Speak to you later.”

I’d gone to the training session but ended up sandwiched between Kaoru’s fierce glare on one side and Kuga, who’d been trying to test me, on the other. To make matters worse, Tenma had joined in. Everything had become too much for me, so I’d fled. I ran crying to Satsuki—*ahem*, I’d asked for Satsuki’s help—to sort things out with Kaoru.

I closed the screen on my wearable terminal and trudged along the road on my way home. A sigh escaped my lips, then I said, “I didn’t think I’d have to deal with the two of them.”

Kotone Kuga was just as much of a loner as me, and the rest of the class thought she was useless. But she was a bona fide level 20 spy on active duty with a host of espionage skills. Without meaning to do so, I’d followed the path of her high-speed punch with my eyes, which had alerted her suspicions and caused the whole mess. I’d need to avoid future training sessions to keep my distance from Kuga, or she might try the same thing again.

Kaoru would drag me along if she heard me say that, and I knew that I had no right to be trusted or heard. That was why I’d asked for help from Satsuki and Risa, whom our classmates respected and listened to. I felt Kaoru would take those two seriously when they told her they’d help me. Of course, this meant that I now owed the two girls. I shivered to think of what Risa would ask for when she called in the favor, making me want to pay back the debt immediately.

I was also surprised that Tenma had talked to me when she stopped by. She was famed as one of the strongest first-years in our school, and she was a noble to boot. I could hardly believe such an important person knew my name. That

girl wore her plate mail armor regularly because of a curse and was also a full-fledged heroine in *DEC*. Thinking back to her story in the game, I remembered her mentioning that she was interested in dieting.

Her character hadn't appeared much in the game's early stages, so I hadn't been looking out for her, which made it even more shocking that she knew my name. I would need to keep my distance from her as well... Or I might need to fight her ridiculously powerful butlers, which I wasn't keen on.

While I thought about how I'd escape if I reencountered her, I turned the last corner and arrived in front of my home.

Tatsu Hayase, the owner of Hayase's Metalware and Kaoru's father, was unloading boxes from a pickup truck. He smiled and waved at me when he saw me.

"Good afternoon, Souta," he said.

"Good afternoon," I replied. "Oh, careful!" I gripped one side of the box he was carrying to support him. He'd been staggering under the box's weight. The box wasn't large, but the metal objects it carried made it extremely heavy. I offered to help him transport the rest of the boxes inside; there were plenty of them left in the truck.

I wanted to help him in return for all the help he'd given our family over the years. He had often helped my father supply Narumi's General Goods with metalware, and he'd looked after me a lot when I—Piggy—was a child.

"That's everything," said Mr. Tatsu. "Thanks, Souta. You've gotten very strong recently, haven't you? And with all the weight you've lost, you look like a completely different person compared to a few months ago. That is Adventurers' High for you, eh?"

"Yeah, I've been getting more exercise." I struck a pose to show off my muscles. Just then, my stomach rumbled.

"Why don't you pop in for a bit?" offered Mr. Tatsu, smiling. "I got my hands on some lovely tea and snacks the other day."

I did indeed feel peckish, so I took him up on the offer.

I—Piggy—had often visited the Hayase house when I was young. The house itself was quite old and looked crooked due to numerous repairs and extensions over the years. The entrance was a sliding door partially hidden behind some of these extensions. We entered through the door, walked through the external corridor, and arrived in the living room. I sat at the low tea table while Mr. Tatsu headed into the kitchen to make the tea.

“All my memories of this place are coming back to me... I guess Kaoru and I used to be pretty good friends,” I said.

The first memory that returned to me was of an excited young Kaoru smiling at me. She’d usually been quite reserved and shy as a child, very different to the dignified personality she possessed now. I generally tried not to draw up Piggy’s older memories, yet they got triggered once I’d entered the Hayase house.

An old picture frame with a faded family photo inside sat atop the short chest of drawers. The photo showed a smiling Mr. Tatsu, a little girl, and a pretty woman that looked just like Kaoru, all in a family hug. The woman was Kaoru’s mother, who had passed away, leaving father and daughter to live by themselves.

A landscaped garden with beautiful trees and a pond with water plants was on the other side of the external corridor. Mr. Tatsu took great care of the garden to keep it in good condition as his hobby. I remembered Kaoru and me putting the goldfish we’d won at a festival into that pond. We had been so close back then... How had we drifted so far apart? Well... That was easy. It was Piggy’s fault for sexually harassing her, duh.

“Here you go,” said Mr. Tatsu, bringing some tea and youkan—a jelly-based snack—cut into two-centimeter-thick slices. “A friend gave me this tea. It’s fantastic.”

“Thank you,” I said. I ate one of the youkan, and the beans inside felt great on my tongue. The sweetness was just right too. I suspected this was a famous brand of high-quality youkan.

Mr. Tatsu sat opposite me and took a youkan, seeming pleased by my reaction. This was probably the first time since I’d taken over Piggy’s body that

we had been together like this at a table.

“How are you finding Adventurers’ High?” asked Mr. Tatsu. “I hear it’s a tough school to be in.”

Adventurers’ High certainly was a particularly unusual school. It definitely was tough, but more because of the other students rather than the curriculum.

“I’m doing all right,” I replied.

“When I see you these days,” he started, “I see a boy who’s carving out his path in life at his own pace. And you seem to enjoy that, which is incredible to see.”

Mr. Tatsu added that I’d gotten in much better shape since I’d started high school.

Though, that was because I had taken over Piggy’s body and started a strict regimen of dieting and daily dungeon raids. The real Piggy had not taken care of his body before I’d come along, and I was happy to remind his mind of this. However, I had my family to thank for supporting and trusting me while I followed my plans, and I owed a lot to them.

“But when I look at Kaoru...” continued Mr. Tatsu, sighing as he looked out toward the garden. “I get the feeling that she’s struggling.”

Kaoru stayed out raiding the dungeon late into the night and went home exhausted every day. But physical exhaustion wasn’t all she had to deal with; she also had a lot of problems on her mind. She would barely speak after returning home, and this had been occurring since she’d joined Adventurers’ High.

In the game, the first few months after school had started, she’d known the horrible ways the upper classes and nobles could treat others. The main story had been about how she and the other students resisted and overcame this treatment. As this world was based on the game and Kaoru had still joined the protagonist’s party, she’d face trouble at every turn, no matter what she did.

“I’m worried about her,” confessed Mr. Tatsu. “You’d be doing me a favor if you could look out for her every now and then.” He looked at me and bowed his head as he made his request.

“Yeah...”

Kaoru had grown mightier whenever she had overcome adversity, and she'd eventually achieved her dream of becoming a top adventurer. As far as I could tell, this world's Kaoru was just as driven as the game's version. Her combat and academic skills both had huge potential, not to mention her sword fighting ability, so she had what it took to become a great adventurer. I was sure she'd go far if she stuck with Akagi through all the hardship.

But I could only draw that conclusion because I could take a big-picture view of Kaoru's future using my knowledge of the game's ending. Mr. Tatsu didn't have that luxury. For him, he saw his darling daughter struggling to cope and would be concerned. And that concern was strong enough for him to bow his head to someone like me.

My class thinks I'm a no-talent loser, though, so there's not much I can do to look out for her, I thought.

As it stood, Kaoru would probably be angry with me for running away from the training session the next time we met. The way I was acting, I was giving her more to worry about, not less... But anyway.

I looked longingly at the old, battered tatami mats on the floor, the well-kept garden, and the framed picture of the woman and the smiling little girl. As I did, Piggy's memories of how the Hayase house used to look flowed through my mind. The one that gave me the strongest impression was the memory of a young Kaoru hugging her pretty mother. At the time, we'd been neighbors of the same age and only spoken occasionally. This situation had only changed when her mother passed away. Kaoru had taken her mother's death hard and withdrawn from the world, which had made young Piggy desperate to help her, to protect her.

“What's the matter...?” I asked her when I saw her crying alone, her shoulders heaving. I wanted to cheer her up.

She lifted her tear-stricken face toward me. “M-My...m-m-mommy...”

I knew what had happened. Her mother had gone somewhere far, far away,

and I couldn't fix that. So instead...

"H-Here, have this," I said. I'd taken one of my favorite candies from my pocket and shoved it toward her. I remembered how much she'd smiled before and could see how sad she was, and it had made my heart ache. I was so desperate to cheer her up.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Candy," I replied. "It's my favorite one."

"Don't want it," she said.

"Wh-Why not?" I asked. "It's really good. C'mon."

Everyone would smile if they ate this, so I'd been certain she'd smile too.

"M-Me and mommy used to eat that one... Together... But she's gone." Kaoru's head dropped, and tears began streaming down her face again.

I couldn't leave her like that. If I did, I was worried she'd go somewhere far away, like her mother. Looking at the hunched-up little girl in front of me, I felt powerless. I felt like I needed to do something, like I needed to help her.

From that day onward, I would always call out to her and invite her to play, hoping to make her feel better. I even got Kano involved. It worked in the end, and Kaoru ended up becoming very fond of me at the time. It was probably around this time that I'd created the nuptial grimoire.

Years passed, and Kaoru grew into a beautiful young woman. I'd only wanted to make her happy at first, but as her beauty grew ever more transcendent, I started wanting her to be mine and mine alone. Eventually, lust entered the picture as well, and she caught me staring at her breasts and her butt. That was when things started going downhill. Kaoru began to distance herself from me, but the more she did, the more I went out of my way to be together with her, which only added problems. By the time I joined Adventurer's High, any affection she'd felt for me was gone. That was where we stood now.

The desire in my heart to protect Kaoru was earnest and pure, with no ulterior motives. My mind was screaming only one thing: protect her.

Okay, calm down, I thought. I wouldn't abandon her. That was never an option; I might keep my distance, but she was still dear to me. I'd protect her if the need arose, just like my family. But the right thing to do right now was to see how things played out. Trying to help would only make things worse. Why? Because Kaoru was one of *DEC's* heroines who would grow by overcoming challenges by herself.

"I've been around her a lot recently, and I don't think there's any need for you to worry," I said. "She's just learning to cope with the school's high standards. She's working as hard as she can to narrow the gap with the students above her."

"I see," said Mr. Tatsu. "I do hear that Adventurers' High has a lot of exceptional students. Some of them even show up in the newspaper."

Adventurers' High was a gathering point for Japan's most talented students. Some of those students were already making waves in the adventuring world, and a few would likely become top adventurers. Having difficulty fitting in with such an elite student body was normal.

Plus, awful events and fights from the game could take place in this world. Few people might climb the ranks to Class D after joining such a school, let alone Class A.

"But Kaoru's always been a hard worker, and she's got natural talent," I explained. "And good friends too. I believe she can face any challenge that lies in her path."

"Ha ha ha!" Mr. Tatsu laughed. "So that's how it is? I need to stop being so overprotective of my daughter."

Kaoru was strong. Akagi and Pinky were as abnormally talented as you could hope from the game's protagonists, while Tachigi was there to help with his strategic abilities and support. She'd be okay with them and make it far... But that thought pained me a little. A part of me wanted *myself* to be the person she trusted to have by her side. She was the first person I'd ever loved, so I couldn't help but feel that way. I would have my chance.

"Of course, I'll be there to help her if it ever gets too much," I said. "That's why I train so hard every day."

Perhaps Kaoru could face a situation that could threaten to break her resolve. Even Akagi and his friends might be unable to get her out of it. If that happened, I would be there to save the day. Or so I wanted to think since I wasn't at a high enough level for that yet. Plenty of characters from the game's main story were at a higher level than me. To help her, I'd need to get stronger and level up first.

"Ah, I see," said Mr. Tatsu. "You can think in the long term. You're stronger now. Physically, yes, but emotionally too."

"You're overestimating me," I said. "I was just speaking hypothetically."

It would be more challenging than I made it sound. The Battle of the Classes was about to start, and I would need to get through many game events after doing that. Clans like Soleil and The Red Ninjettes were at work in the school even as some of the game's events could shake the world to its foundations. Could I keep my family and Kaoru safe?

"Could" didn't matter. I *would*. I had a plan too. I knew everything about the dungeon and the monsters within, including the game events that would unfold. Fortunately, I had the strongest cheat possible: game knowledge. I wouldn't lose to anyone, even if they belonged to one of the top clans.

The only problem was how Tsukijima and the other players would act. I didn't know how many others there were. So, I had to account that their intervention could cause this world to veer off the main story's course and make my game knowledge useless. As long as I became the strongest out of all of them, I'd find a way.

I already had my next raiding spot in mind to level up quickly and save up more money. With that thought, I reached for my third piece of youkan until I heard Kaoru's voice from the entrance.

"I'm back. These shoes... Do we have a guest?"

I thought I would still have time before the training session ended, but she'd come home sooner than I'd expected.

Shit! What should I do? "Ahem, Mr. Tatsu... I just remembered that I need to do something, so I'll go home now. Goodbye," I said.

“Oh, okay,” replied Mr. Tatsu, smiling. “You’re always welcome here. There’ll be more tasty snacks waiting for you.”

I bowed to Mr. Tatsu and tried to escape through the exterior corridor. But the loud creaking of the corridor’s floorboards gave me away, and I wasn’t sure if their age was to blame or my weight. I started to panic.

“Souta,” exclaimed Kaoru.

When I turned around, I found her staring at me. She’d discovered me, so I decided to act like I was well within my rights to be here.

“Oh, hi!” I said. “Funny meeting you here!”

“Is it?” responded Kaoru. “I live here, remember?”

Yes. Technically, this was her home.

“Oomiya said she’d be your partner at the next training session,” she continued. “And that you’d take it seriously.”

“Y-Yep!” I faltered. “So you don’t have to worry about me. Anyway, I’ve got things to do, so—”

“Hold on.”

Kaoru stopped me when I tried to leave again. She seemed to think something over, then began acting awkwardly. She rarely acted like this... Had she come down with food poisoning or something?

“You’ve...changed, haven’t you?” she said at last. “Recently. Or it feels like you have.”

Her question was rather vague, but I knew what she meant. She was talking about how I was different from how Piggy had been before joining the high school. Although her vagueness made it sound like she wasn’t sure what exactly about me had changed.

I definitely have, I thought.

I could’ve said that I was an entirely different person. There was no more sexual harassment, and I was having success with my diet and exercise. Leveling up was going fine, and I was doing well in the dungeon. I could’ve told her to

watch me make it big. But I did not, and I would not.

Instead, I put on an awkward smile and gave her a curt reply. "I'm the same as I've ever been. See you later."

Realizing I wouldn't open up to her, Kaoru lowered her eyes. She looked ever so slightly lonely. But that was how it had to be. She had enough to worry about with school and needed to focus all her mental energy on those problems. That was what would lead her to greatness.



But I'll be there to save you if it gets out of hand, I promised myself. That's why I'm going to become stronger than anyone else.

I turned my back to her and walked down the corridor. She didn't hear the promise I'd made. Regardless, I felt her watching me as I left. She was staring at me, I knew it. Eventually, she called out to me.

"Souta."

I turned around, wondering whether I'd brushed her off too curtly. Looking at me, Kaoru lifted her pretty index finger and pointed—

"The door's the other way."

Afterword

It's nice to see you again! Or perhaps it's nice to meet you. I'm Akito Narusawa, and I want to thank you for reading volume 2 of *Finding Avalon*.

This book's story intended to flesh out the world. Did you like meeting Piggy's new coconspirator and the other heroines? I hope you enjoy reading the bonus story included with this book.

I'd like to briefly express my utmost gratitude to a few people. Firstly, to KeG, for their dramatic artwork. Secondly, to my editor for all their help finishing this book. And also to the reviewers, the graphic designers, and the printing staff. But most of all to you, the reader, for purchasing this book.

Finally, I'd like to announce that *Finding Avalon* will be adapted as a manga! It will be serialized on *Tonari no Young Jump* beginning in March, with artwork from the up-and-coming star Zero Satou. I'm sure it will be amazing, and I can't wait to see it! The light novels will continue in the third volume, which should be released in 2023. I hope that we can all meet again in that latest installment!

Until then.

December 2022, Akito Narusawa

Bonus Short Story

The Narumis Go Shopping

“You need to get good at close combat, even if you want to be a magic user,” I explained.

My mother placed a hand on her cheek and, sounding hopeless, said, “I don’t think I’ll be very good at it though.”

Just then, my family and I finished hunting golems and were heading to Granny’s Goods. My parents would change to new jobs once we arrived because they’d learned all of the Newbie skills available.

When I asked them which jobs they wanted, my father said that he wanted to stick to combat-focused jobs and swing a massive sword around. Meanwhile, my mother wanted to become a Caster to shoot off magical spells. That meant they were both aiming for specialized builds.

Specializing in combat-only or magic-only build had benefits like simplifying skill management and making it easier to deal large amounts of damage. For example, a magic-only build allowed you to fill all your skill slots with magic skills because you didn’t need to waste precious slots on close combat skills. As a result, you could fire off more powerful magic attacks than more balanced builds. The drawback was that you would be helpless if monsters got too close since you’d have no close combat skills to defend yourself with. A party needed a capable tank to keep you safe while you chanted your incantations.

Close combat builds suffered similar limitations. Dealing with flying monsters or long-ranged attacks became difficult if you could only fight in close range, and these builds would perform well in some maps but poorly in others. Thus, you needed to rely on skilled comrades to keep out of danger.

There’d be no problem with my family choosing specialized builds if I could ensure that I was always by their side to compensate for their weaknesses, but that wasn’t realistic. The safest course of action was for them to select balanced

builds with both long-and short-range attacks, and I explained this to them while we were walking.

“Sure, I’d love to learn magic and close combat both,” argued my father. “But everyone says you’ll never be worth your salt if you don’t specialize. What do you say to that?”

“It’s true,” my mother agreed. “That’s what everyone says.”

Every top adventurer in this world had a specialized build, and society derided balanced builds as subpar. My mother also expressed concern that choosing not to maximize firepower would greatly reduce our party’s combat potential. I certainly couldn’t fault them for thinking this way.

There were plenty of good reasons to believe specialized builds, who got the most out of their few skill slots, were the strongest. Nobody in this world had risen past level 30 or knew about all the jobs available. Most adventurers also couldn’t gain more skill slots.

However, I knew how to get more skill slots and acquired varied jobs. The drawbacks of choosing a balanced build would disappear as you leveled up. And there was another reason I wanted my family to have balanced builds.

“We can get more skill slots, so you don’t have to worry about that,” I explained. “And the main reason I want you to choose balanced builds is so that you can protect yourself in fights against other adventurers.”

The easily recognizable weaknesses of specialized builds were simple to exploit in fights between adventurers, making defeat likely if your opponent knew your skill repertoire. For that reason, balanced builds were the strongest because they allowed you to adapt your combat style in many ways to face any enemy. We had plenty of time before we would reach Granny’s Goods, so I gave my family a long lecture on how to fight other adventurers.

“If you say we can learn both, then that’s what I’ll do!” said Kano while slashing through a skeleton blocking our way. “That way sounds so much more —” she swiveled back to face us and struck a pose “—fun!”

Taking inspiration from Kano, my parents began striking weird poses too.

“You can count me in!” said my father. “Wahoo!”

“Me too,” my mother said. “I’ll have a look for a nice sword in the tenth-floor shop. Hey!”

After a second of watching them, puzzled, I remembered where I’d seen those poses before. They were the victory poses from the tokusatsu series *Adventurer Sentai Boukenger* that played in the morning. It was the usual super sentai series; an ordinary high school boy became a Boukenger ranger and fought against the monster Oblowden and his evil organization. The series was popular enough to have several film adaptations, and it influenced many kids to aspire to become adventurers.

I wanted to join until I remembered that the Boukengers were a three-person team.

I guess I’ll play the monster then. So, I squealed like the show’s villain and struck a pose.

“These gloves are stupidly cheap!” remarked my father. “They’d set you back at least a million yen anywhere else.”

“This ring is of gold!” my mother said. She turned to my father and asked, “Can I get it?”

We’d traveled through the gate and arrived at Granny’s Goods, but my parents were far more interested in shopping than changing jobs. It amazed my father that he could use the dungeon coins we had collected through a mere hour of raiding to purchase a set of mithril alloy gloves that usually cost over a million yen at the guild stores. But my mother was obsessed with a golden ring that we couldn’t profitably resell.

I exhaled because I’d spent so much time explaining the importance of changing jobs, and all they wanted to do was shop. To be fair to them, they’d seen an amazing shop like this for the first time and had it all to themselves.

“Bro! I really want this shiny dagger!”

I turned to look at Kano, who was sifting through the shelves with dollar signs in her eyes. She had pulled out a dagger forged from pure mithril, and light reflected off the blade like a mirror. Pure mithril weapons were sharper and

more durable than their mithril alloy counterparts. But their price was usually exorbitant due to the scarcity of the ore they were created from.

“Kano, how about you take a look at the price tag before you suggest we buy something,” I said.

Then, I shifted my eyes to a shelf filled with jars of red liquid. Those were healing potions, the current top product at Narumi’s General Goods. Each bottle would net us seven hundred thousand yen on resale. Customers snatched them up quickly, and I’d been buying them up from Granny’s Goods whenever they were in stock. These potions were our greatest source of revenue at the moment.

And so, Kano picked up one of the healing potions, then said, “We make a bunch of money from these, but I feel like it’ll still be ages before we’ve saved up enough to buy the whole family armor and weapons.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Our leveling up is going okay, so I want to find a way to make more money faster.”

The profits from the healing potions were more than enough to put food on the table. At this pace, it would take several months before we had enough money to buy all the equipment our family would need for raiding. I felt like we’d need to speed things up.

“It’d be perfect if there was somewhere we could raid to make more money, hunt monsters easily, and find great drop items,” said Kano.

“As if such a place could... Oh wait, maybe one does exist,” I commented.

“Really?!” Kano jumped toward me, her eyes sparkling.

I had spent little time in the low-level areas in *DEC*, so my memory was hazy. Yet I’d remembered a hidden area in one of the undead zones that had been a juicy place to hunt. It was a decent place to make money, where the monsters would drop the raw materials needed to make equipment. The monsters were quite strong, but Kano and I were powerful enough to handle them. If we went there, it would be best to speak to Furufuru first and accept a quest from her.

“Well, we can think about that later,” I said. “For today, let’s buy three potions and make our way home, so put that dagger back.”

“Booo!” whined Kano, puffing her cheeks like a hamster with a mouthful of seeds. But complaining wouldn’t fill our pockets with the money we needed to buy the dagger. She reluctantly placed it back on the shelf, then looked at me sullenly. “If we keep leveling up... Will we ever get to the point where we can buy awesome weapons like that dagger?”

“Definitely! In fact, we’ll be able to get equipment made from much rarer metals than mithril.”

“Oh...”

In *DEC*, plenty of rare materials were stronger than pure mithril. There were the fangs and pelts of powerful monsters and precious metals imbued with high concentrations of magic you could only mine in the deepest, hellish pits of the dungeon. One could also get equipment as rewards from quests in the depths of the dungeon, which usually were enchanted with the highest level of magic. We were too low-level to get our hands on any of these, but I was confident that my leveling-up plan would get us there eventually.

“So for now, we’ll kill a bunch of monsters, learn magic...” trailed off Kano. “Oh, and I want to try out that juicy raiding spot you told me about!”

“Is there a good raiding spot?” asked my father after he’d finished changing jobs. “I’ll tag along.”

“Take me too, Kano,” insisted my mother. I noticed that she was wearing the golden ring she had been obsessing over earlier... My father really couldn’t say no to her, could he?

Kano pulled them both into a hug. “Sure! I’ll take you both!”

I smiled when watching over them, admiring they were such a close family.

They’re raring to go, so I just have to lead them in the right direction, I mused. I’d always been alone in my world but had found a family I loved with all my heart ever since I’d arrived here. Even so, I made a vow to whatever remained of Piggy in my mind. *I’ll do whatever it takes to keep them safe and smiling.*



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Finding Avalon: The Quest of a Chaosbringer Volume 2

by Akito Narusawa

Translated by Tom Harris Edited by Mario Mendez

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