



After Being Reincarnated as an Overweight Villain,

I'm Determined to Shed the Pounds

and Get My New Game +

as an Unsung Hero

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# FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER





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**“This ends now!  
Blade of Agares!!!”**













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# Prologue

In an instant, all sounds stopped.

Flickering flames illuminated a landscape of soot and rubble.

*It's...raining*, I thought.

The rain mixed with the ash and fell in cold, black drops.

And there was pain. That's what it was, right?

*No bother*, I thought. *A quick spell will get rid of that.*

But my restorative magic had no effect. Satanachia's Stem Cells proved ineffective, and Temporal Traversal didn't even activate when I tried casting it. Every healing spell in my arsenal had failed to work. *What's going on?* There was so much I couldn't understand, though I certainly knew one thing: something strange was happening to me.

"There's no use," a voice called out. "No one can escape the effects of my sword—my Felbinder. Not even you."

It was a girl's voice, clear and high-pitched. The voice drew my attention, and I found a beautiful face when I looked down. She was smiling widely, tears beginning to well in her eyes. I thought I recognized her, but I wasn't sure.

My vision blurred as my consciousness began to fade. She was speaking, but her words didn't reach me.







An endless stream of blood coursed from my chest, warming my skin as it passed. *Ahhh*, I thought, realizing the source of my mental fog. The girl's sword had been plunged deep into my heart.

I racked out a cough, and a globule of blood shot out of my mouth. I then turned to the dark sky above, noting the rain was still relentless. *It's a horrible, cold place.*

The girl gently cradled me and whispered in my ears. "Goodbye, my sweet, sweet ■■■"

*She must have a heart of gold to shed tears for a guy like me. But how did it come to this?* I turned the question over in my dulling mind, using the few remaining moments of consciousness I had left to think.

As she held me in her arms, I recalled the pleasant memories of the time I shared with the people I loved.

*Oh, right. That's where it all began.*



# Chapter 1: A Man You Might Mistake for a Pig

“I would like to congratulate you all on your admission into our school,” a middle-aged man announced through a microphone from atop a stage. The broadness of his shoulders and the fierce glare he directed at the audience marked him out as a thug. He was a well-dressed thug, though, and one who was apparently a school principal. “Welcome to Adventurers’ High School, the pride of our country. Here you will find the latest knowledge and gain insight in the best environment to do so.”

As he’d said, this was apparently the entrance ceremony for Adventurers’ High. Why “apparently”? That’s because—

“You have all overcome many challenges in your efforts to secure a place here, and I have the utmost faith that we will further nurture your talents so that you can live up to the expectations of our people.”

I had no memory of being seated among the annular rows of seats in this lecture hall until a few moments ago. I’d tossed around the idea that I might be the victim of an elaborate prank, but I quickly ruled it out. No producer would waste airtime trying to wring out a reaction from a petit bourgeois schmuck like me unless they didn’t care about a hit to their ratings.

“You will each have aspirations for the path you wish to follow, whether you intend to advance to Adventurers’ University, enlist in the Special Operations Squad, or join the elite adventurers of the Assault Clan. Whichever you choose, I hope you strive together with your fellow students—”

Even so, I’d seen this massive lecture hall and the rough-looking principal before. I also recognized the cropped crimson hair on the boy a few rows closer to the stage and the girl with wavy, medium-length pink hair. Some students had come to the ceremony with lances, double-headed axes, and other weapons. A girl in a brightly colored kimono and a figure in a full suit of armor next to her were in the front-row seats at the center of the room. There was no mistaking it. It was the opening scene of *that* game.

“—to turn this into a valuable and fulfilling experience, one that you can look back on for years to come with no regrets.”

*No way, I thought. All that stuff about entering the world of the game was true.*

\*\*\*

This was *Dungeon Explorer Chronicle* (or *DEC* for short), a VRMMO that was both a hardcore action and a school romance game. You could search the world for strong, rarer weapons and items to prepare to head for the deepest parts of the dungeon. There, one would brave grueling battles against vicious, mighty foes while enjoying a romance with one of a cast of cute girls. Or guys—a postrelease DLC\* had added a few studs to the cast to attract female fans. In short, it was a dungeon crawler spiced up with romance.

\*TIPS: DLC is an abbreviation for downloadable content. It refers to content developers distribute through the internet that the user can download and play. DEC regularly released free DLC.

The game was expensive to get into, requiring a head-mounted VR display, controllers worn as gloves on your hands, and a motion-capture camera. If you added that the game’s creator wasn’t a big name, it shouldn’t be surprising to know that it bombed on launch. Only the most devout gaming enthusiasts were aware of it.

Comment by comment, word spread about its gorgeous artwork, polished fighting system, and complex gameplay mechanics. The game’s popularity skyrocketed when the devs added extra characters for romance, enhanced customizability, PVP, and a battle mode that hundreds of players could participate in. Before long, every gamer had a copy.

I got hooked as a student and kept my obsession going after entering the workforce. The controls confused me at first, but I’d poured so many hours into boss fights and PVP battles that I considered myself an expert at the game. I was a hardcore gamer.



On the day this all began, I took a shower right after arriving home, microwaved a frozen meal, and wolfed it down. Later, I donned the controller gloves. I found a good spot to stand so I wouldn't hit the wall or furniture while swinging my arms around, then I loaded up the game. I waved my palm and proceeded through the biometric login screen. An icon told me I had mail from the *DEC* devs.

“There it is, the update email.”

A few days earlier, the devs had hosted an in-game event where the winning prize was an opportunity to beta test the next major update. I'd leaped at the chance, but the event turned out to be pure chaos.

Tens of thousands of players gathered at the event's location, brimming with excitement as they waited for the quest to start. The players greeted familiar faces they'd spotted in the crowd, chatted about their excitement, boasted about how well they'd fare, and at least one guy had proclaimed that he'd propose to his girlfriend after completing the quest. Everyone had feigned good-spirited camaraderie, but the keen look in their eyes had betrayed what they were gunning for. They wouldn't let anyone stand in the way of winning the prize and accessing the beta test.

However, the sudden arrival of a colossal jet-black dragon that plummeted to the ground and crushed a swath of participants beneath its body cut short the frivolous conversations and subtle misdirections. The event had claimed its first victims.

Amid the ensuing confusion, the best players had regained their footing to mount a counterattack. But the dragon's thick skin had repelled their strikes. Not a second later, the dragon fired a mad flurry of wide laser beams, each delivering enough damage to be an instakill, reducing players to ash.

The players who'd turned up had fought their share of battles before, and it showed. They'd regained their bearings and avoided total annihilation. After two intense hours of mortal combat, by which time half of the entrants had fallen, the players had come up with a strategy and slain the Balance Breaker Dragon. But that had only been the beginning.

As the survivors thronged around the dragon, aiming to loot its corpse, the

floor of the event stage had collapsed. The next round had started, and the rules had been simple: escape or die. Picking the wrong escape route meant death, and undetectable lethal traps had lain around every bend. Boss-level monsters had waited on the paths in groups, launching attacks on players in perfect coordination. As if that hadn't been enough, we had needed to escape within a time limit.

I'd made it through alive, but that had been luck more than anything else. The balancing had been shit. The difficulty had almost been too much, even for me, so nobody else had stood a chance.

Of course, luck was an asset too, and a win was a win.

I opened the email, read it, and checked the attachment that gave me beta tester access to the major update. I couldn't help but smirk and wasted no time before installing the program. While I skimmed the terms and conditions, I noticed something.

“‘Once you have installed the patch and opened the game, you will be transported to the game’s world...’ Hang on, transported?” I said. *What’s that supposed to mean?* I figured it might be part of the backdrop to the game’s story. Or perhaps the devs were trying too hard to be imaginative with their wording. They could be weird like that, so I didn’t feel any need to dwell on it. “Looks like you can’t bring your existing characters in because it’s a test. Guess I’ll be starting from scratch then.”

I could use a random character or create a custom one, so I went for a random character. That way, it was less work, and I could always make one later if I got fed up with it after playing for a while.

“Cool, the installation’s complete. Let’s get playing!”

And with that, I pushed down firmly on the start button.

\*\*\*

*Hmm... After running through everything that’s happened up to this point, the only thing that could’ve caused this is the update. Is that even possible?*

I knew I wasn’t being delusional, even if I’d often gotten carried away in fantasies where I was an OP beast in *DEC*’s world that everyone loved and who



smooched with my favorite heroine... Which was nothing to be ashamed of! Sure, I was a grown-up, but adventure is what men of all ages live for.

I decided to clarify a few points in my head.

My first question was whether I was in a game or whether this was reality.

In DEC, the principal's speech appeared as text in a dialogue box like in adventure games, as had other announcements, but I couldn't see any. Plus, everything in sight was at a higher resolution than should be possible in a game, and it would've stored far too much information. *DEC's* graphics were excellent, but you could tell they were computer generated if you looked closely. In contrast, every detail of this world appeared genuinely realistic. That was if I ignored the fantasy characters lugging huge weapons and equipment around. The clothes worn by a student sitting nearby rustled when they adjusted their position, and there was a faint creak as someone leaned back on a chair. The game hadn't featured these minute details.

The natural conclusion was that I wasn't inside a game but rather a reality based on the game. DEC had been conceived as a metaverse, a virtual version of the real world, meaning it contained an extreme amount of information. Even so, I had to admit that this was on another level. I still felt I could do with some more.

My second question was whether I could log out if I was in a game.

When I'd played before, there'd been an interface on my screen that featured a log out button, but it wasn't visible. I always had the option of exiting the game simply by removing the head-mounted display from my head as well... I wasn't currently wearing one though.

Actually, I remembered that the interface had only appeared after the school had handed out terminals to the students. That wouldn't explain the absence of the dialogue boxes. Still, I decided to wait until I got a terminal before checking if I could log out.

My third question was: what had happened to my original body?

It wasn't clear. It was conceivable that my mind was here while my body remained where it had been, but the update program used the word

“transport.” If that was true, my body had disappeared from Earth. There’d be no way of knowing unless I logged out.

My fourth question was: did I even want to return to Earth?

I had reasons to go back. I’d only been at my current job for a few years, but with me gone, the work on my desk would pile up until it spilled over and ruined many people’s days. Also, I had rent and bills to pay. It didn’t cost much as I lived alone, but they wouldn’t pay themselves.

If my body no longer existed on Earth and was fully transported here, I should make the most of it and have fun. There’d be no point trying to fix an unsolvable problem. For better or worse, I had no family and nobody who would miss me. Should I ever make it home, I could cross that bridge when I came to it.

Plenty more questions popped into my head, rabbit holes to run down, but I had no clear answers. With my head a mess of confusion and excitement deep down, I desperately wanted to launch a barrage of questions at my unsuspecting classmates. Regardless, I knew that I needed to be rational. *Calm down*, I told myself.

On the stage, several teachers gave lengthy addresses that boiled down to “Best of luck,” and then the entrance ceremony was finally over.

“—And that concludes Adventurers’ High School’s entrance ceremony. Each class will now hold a homeroom. Will Class A please exit the hall first?”

In *DEC*’s storyline, Class A had been home to a few distinguished, elite students, one becoming the student council president and others apprenticing under renowned adventurers or at famous trading companies. Class B was the next to depart, with class C following after, where I spotted characters who’d have questlines revolving around them or who’d been the protagonist’s rival.

While I was scanning students’ faces and lining them up against my memories of the game’s main story, the announcer said, “And finally, will class E now head to your classroom?”

With that, the students around me all rose and began walking toward the exit.



That settled the question of which class I belonged to. I wondered whether I'd been assigned to a custom character instead of the random character I'd opted for. In the game, Class E was the starting point for the protagonist and custom characters.

The students fell into a nervous silence after they'd left the lecture hall. Their eyes flitted in every direction as they tried to orient themselves and find their way to the classroom.

The view outside the window was breathtaking. There was a gigantic training facility, a large on-campus shopping center, a workshop, and more. A lot of money had undoubtedly been invested into making these buildings.

*It must be a dream come true for a student to study at such an incredible school,* I thought. The facilities here were leagues above those of the old and utterly unremarkable school I'd attended in my world. I remembered mentions in the game that the government ran the Adventurers' High School out of national concern to secure the fruits of its labors for commercial and political reasons. The treasury had also written a blank check for the school's budget.

I ascended the stairs while reminiscing about my first journey through high school as a teenager and wondering with mixed feelings what my second one would be like. Before long, I reached a classroom with a sign outside reading 1-E.

For some reason, I was panting. *That's odd,* I thought. *I shouldn't be this out of breath.*

The climb up the stairs had taken a toll on me. I looked down and noticed that my belly was protruding more than I would've expected. My arms and legs also looked a bit plump...or more than a bit. They were positively chunky.

*I'm not, uh, fat, am I?*

Wanting to get a better look at the character I'd become, I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror... It took a second to realize that it was me in the mirror, not a pig! I had cheeks filled to the brim with fat. My body was almost spherical, and I wore a jumbo-sized school uniform. And I recognized my face...it belonged to one of the story's villains, a pervy creep who'd constantly harassed one of the heroines.

He was known as...

“Oh shit, I’m Piggy!”





## Chapter 2: Souta Narumi

I'd let the game give me a random character, and it had decided on Piggy.

Mere seconds ago, the prospect of my new school life in *DEC*'s world had looked like an opportunity to meet girls and be an all-around badass. Those hopes had been shattered into dust and scattered into the wind.

In the mirror was a scruffy-haired high school boy with a hunched back. He was severely obese, easily weighing over a hundred kilograms, and his fat obscured the dividing line between his head and neck. He was out of breath and sweating profusely, despite the mild temperature.

"Is that really me?"

The figure stared back at me with the same surprised expression, his movements a perfect replication of my own. The sight caused my brain to grind to a halt. I wished I could've pretended this wasn't happening.

I'd always kept my weight under control in my old world, so becoming breathless after a short climb up some stairs was a new experience. I pulled a funny face and cycled through some poses, hoping I might catch the figure off guard and prove that this was all a ruse, but of course it wasn't.

"Oh," I wailed, dropping to my knees and cradling my head. As I did so, my stomach pressed against my elbows. "I wish I'd just made my own character."

I'd thought that "random character" meant a new character with random stats and appearance, not that the system would choose an existing one. Of all the cool characters I could've become from Class E, my rotten luck had to spit me out as Piggy.

From what I remembered, Piggy had been a villain in one of the heroines' romance storylines and had played pervy tricks on her. When the protagonist entered the picture and started getting close to her, Piggy tried to make his life miserable. The arc had a happy ending after the protagonist drove Piggy out of the school and he and the heroine became a couple.



Although Piggy was a villain, he wasn't a rival to the protagonist. He was nothing more than a background character, too weak to be more than an annoyance or leave much of an impression. I couldn't even remember his real name. He'd just been Piggy in the game.

"Oh yeah, now that I think about it, Piggy and the heroine—Kaoru Hayase—grew up together. I think they were engaged as well."

I thought back to what I knew of Kaoru Hayase. She had slender arms and legs, long eyelashes, and almond-shaped eyes. Her light blue hair fell to her waist, and she tied it into a long braid behind her back. She dressed in traditional Japanese style. She was a skilled practitioner of kendo, a Japanese martial art that uses bamboo swords, and her prowess had earned her first place at a national competition for middle schoolers. On top of that, she'd mastered the pen as her academic record was spotless. Beauty, brains, brawn—she had it all.

She was honest and upright and treated everyone equally. Everyone except Piggy.

In her story, Kaoru Hayase became a powerful ally to the protagonist and eventually his lover. It must've been too much for Piggy, watching some charming pretty boy swoop in and run off with his fiancée, the girl he'd had feelings for throughout his childhood. Although my sympathy for him ended after he took to sexual harassment as retaliation.

The bad news for me was that the relationship between Piggy and Kaoru had already soured by the time they'd joined the school. It was impossible to know how closely my current situation in this world followed that of the game. I might already be in her bad graces, so I decided to keep my distance to avoid stirring anything up.

For some reason, I got riled up the more I thought of Kaoru. Did my brain still contain some of Piggy's memories and feelings? I felt like there was something there, like I could remember if I tried hard enough. But I couldn't dislodge the memory from wherever it had snagged, and I let out an irritated huff. As such, I gave up before the stress could drive me crazy and left to return to the classroom.

Still heaving, I walked into the classroom. As soon as I entered, I could feel someone glaring at me. It was Kaoru, but I pretended not to notice.

*Guess she has it in for me already,* I thought. Without access to Piggy's memories, I had no clue what had driven a wedge between us or how to remove it. I could only hope that time would fix it for me.

I took a moment for my spirit to recover, then looked for my seat. Seats here were assigned from front to back based on academic merit. Mine just so happened to be at the back, the spot reserved for the kid with the lowest grades in the year group.

*Hmm,* I thought. *What was the entrance exam like here?*

Adventurers' High School ran on the escalator system, where students from the middle school section progressed to classes A, B, C, or D. The government had handpicked these students based on their aptitude for dungeon exploration.

Class E, however, was for external candidates. There were certainly a hundred applicants for every place, so any student who made it through had to be remarkable. Piggy was a student here, so he must've beaten that abysmal admission rate. Maybe he had a special skill? Having the worst grades of the whole year group sounded bad, but getting in was already an accomplishment by itself, so I had reason to hope that I would do okay here.

A few of the students were chatting together, probably kids who already knew each other, but the overall mood in the room was tense. Everyone was a little nervous.

*Aww, look at that,* I thought. *The protag and all the heroines are still so fresh-faced and shy.*

A young man entered the room. I stopped observing my classmates and looked up at him instead. He was wearing a suit and appeared to be in his twenties.

"Everyone to your seats," he said. "Homeroom is about to begin. I'll start by telling you a little about myself and this school. Then we can talk about how grades work here and what options you'll have after graduating."

The teacher introduced himself as Hajime Murai, a graduate of Adventurers' University. That meant he was likely also an alumnus of this high school and had graduated with top grades. Murai would manage our education for our first year here. He looked more like a soldier than a teacher, though. Despite his slender frame, his movements showed how he could handle himself.

After he finished introducing himself, he began writing bullet points on the whiteboard as he explained how the school worked.

“Strong academic performance at this school will make you a priority candidate for Adventurers' University,” he explained, “and you will also receive preferential treatment if you become an adventurer. The top clans and private sector businesses like to scout our students. The more popular postgraduation placements tend to go to students with better grades first.”

The purpose of Adventurers' University was to prepare students for enlistment into combat units that specialized in operations within the dungeon or admission into the Ministry of Dungeons as a public official. It seemed to work like the National Defense Academy and the Meteorological College back in Japan. According to Murai, most students chose to advance to Adventurers' University and follow this path.

Enrollment at this school also had several privileges, like how civil servants got certain perks. Firstly, students could use the dungeon facilities at the Adventurers' Guild at half the price or, in some cases, for free. It was similar to the discounts that students of public universities get in Japan. But in such cases, students needed to apply for the price reduction before they could take advantage of it.

Also, students would be able to start out with an adventurer rank of nine—there were ten ranks, with ten being the lowest and one the highest. They could jump straight into the dungeon if they filled out a few basic forms. Ordinary people had to complete more forms, background checks, written examinations, and on-and off-site training. Even after slogging through the administrative hurdles, they'd only start at rank ten.

The rank boost was significant because the Adventurers' Guild set minimum rank requirements on their quests, and the government incentivized



adventurers above a certain rank. There were no drawbacks to ranking up, so Murai urged us to keep it in mind and that we complete quests and written rank-up exams.

In addition, this school opened up a wide range of career paths after graduation.

The dungeon was all the rage as it had a booming industry built around it, with plenty of investment in research and development. For example, the energy sector relied on raw materials extracted from the dungeon, like magic gems that powered most of this world's power stations. The generators using magical gems as fuel were cheaper to run than fossil fuel ones and produced no carbon dioxide emissions. There were even compact-size versions of them, so their use was widespread.

Moreover, the raw materials harvested from the dungeon spurred huge technological innovations. The arms industry and cyber industry, among others, saw the massive benefits in using these harvested commodities. Their new products generated copious amounts of wealth, leading to fierce worldwide competition as countries sought to invest in further research and development.

Because of this, public and private institutions were desperate to attract skilled dungeon crawlers. Their scouts stalked the grounds of Adventurers' High to poach potential talent.

Of course, students also had the choice to apply to regular universities. Kids at Adventurers' High usually scored several standard deviations above the national average. The universities that last year's graduating class had gone on to included many of the most prestigious in the country.

Murai then explained the grading system, "For the most part, we will grade you on two things: your academic studies and dungeon raids. Your performance in matches and events held within the school will influence your grades, but I'll let you know how that works some other time."

Our performance in the dungeon wasn't all that mattered, as grades would also factor into our studies. Studying was important because it would improve our ability to respond to unfamiliar situations in the dungeon and increase our intelligence stat. I felt that I'd have a slight advantage over my classmates when

it came to studying because I'd already finished a degree in my old world, even if I hadn't gone to a top university.

"Your classmates are the allies you'll need to work with to raid the dungeon, but at the same time, they are the rivals you'll contend against for the best grades. I expect the highest standard from you all."

Dungeon raids in the game hadn't been a solo endeavor either. It was generally most effective to enter as a group, with a good balance of combat and support character classes. The first few levels of the dungeon were the exception, and it had sometimes been better to go alone. I briefly wondered whether I should look for party members to form a group with or try creeping into the dungeon by myself. I figured the decision could wait a while.

"With all that said, I'll now be handing out your terminals. Come to the front when you hear your name called."

The terminals were high-tech devices, intended to be worn on the arm, that projected a visual display at eye level when you pressed a button. This was likely one of the technological innovations that exploring the dungeon had brought about. My old world had the technology to project text midair, but it had never produced a wearable terminal like this. I loved gadgets, so I couldn't wait to get my hands on one.

Just as I received mine and pressed the button, a fifteen-inch virtual screen popped up. I could see other people's screens too, so I could tell that the image was being projected into the air rather than directly into my eyes.

The top page listed my name and stats.

Name: Souta Narumi

Level: 1

Job & Job Level: Newbie, Level 1

Adventurer Class: Unregistered

Status

Maximum HP: 7

Maximum MP: 9

Strength: 3

Intelligence: 9

Vitality: 4

Agility: 5

Mind: 11

Skills (1/2)

Glutton

(Empty)

*Hmm, I thought. So Piggy's real name is Souta Narumi?* The name sounded familiar now that I thought about it. One good thing had resulted from becoming Piggy, which was the second chance at youth and high school life. I'd been well on my way to middle age back in Japan.

My level and job level\* were both one, probably because I hadn't participated in combat yet. "Newbie" meant "beginner" or "novice," and, barring a few exceptions, it was the job that most people started out with. Adventurers could learn certain skills and change jobs once they'd increased their job level by earning enough experience points.

\*TIPS: For Level and Job Level, increasing a character's level increases their status scores and allows them to receive certain benefits. The level cap in *DEC* is level 90. Job levels go up to level 10. Some skills become acquirable at certain job levels. Changing a character's job resets their job level to level 1. Some jobs increase the character's status scores.

The slot for Adventurer Class was probably showing as unregistered because I hadn't signed up at the Adventurers' Guild yet. I made a mental note to visit the



guild soon so that I could enter the dungeon.

*My stats are not so great...*

Whenever I'd used the game's character creation tool before, I'd run reset marathons\* until I landed on a character with a rare skill and all base stats above ten.

\*TIPS: Reset marathon is a term used to describe resetting a game and starting from scratch, then recreating a character over and over to obtain beneficial skills and stats.

The base stats would become more or less meaningless once the character had leveled up enough, but it was still annoying. Complaining wouldn't fix it, so I'd have to live with it.

The figures on the terminal's display came from the school's database. Apparently, the school had measured my stats at the entrance exam and input those results. I'd have to consider that my stats wouldn't update in real time.

I then glanced down at the next line.

*Hang on... Glutton?* I thought. *I've never seen that skill before. Do I have this to blame for my weight?*

Most people in this world obtained new skills by going to the dungeon and increasing either their regular level or job level. Only a few possessed innate skills from the outset. Having combat skills or healing magic made the first couple of dungeon raids smoother, so I'd always recreated my characters until I had a handy skill. Yet I couldn't see how a skill called Glutton could be helpful.

From the name, I guessed that the skill involved devouring huge amounts of food. But if keeping it meant I'd have to spend the rest of my life in this overweight body, I'd be better off overwriting it with another skill and going on a diet. That would be a hell of a lot more practical than losing my breath every time I climbed a flight of stairs.

The terminal could also send and receive calls or text messages as well as take

pictures. These features would allow me to communicate with my teammates while in the dungeon to supervise and relay strategic orders. There was also a function to submit reports.

*But more importantly, I thought, what about the log out button? I don't see it. There isn't one. So I can't log out?*

This made it more likely that I'd been completely transported to this world rather than just my mind. The terminal's log out button had been my best guess at how to get home, but there was nothing like that on the interface.

While I wasn't desperate to get home, I wasn't thrilled at turning into Piggy. I'd always dreamed about what it would be like to live in *DEC's* world, but now that I was here, I felt depressed.

## Chapter 3: The Handsome Protagonist

Class was dismissed once all the homeroom announcements and explanations had finished. Lessons would begin on Monday of the following week.

Some students gathered groups to discuss forming a party, eager to hop straight into the dungeon. Everyone here was a Newbie with no experience, so their plan of action was simple: swarm around any monster they might find and have everyone pummel it to death. They had the right idea. The monsters in the early levels were weak, so an entire group using brute force would get the job done without wasting time coming up with a balanced party of fighters, support roles, and healers.

As for me, I stayed out of it. All I had to offer was my bizarre Glutton skill and massive body. I couldn't imagine them welcoming me with open arms if I asked to join.

*I might as well do some solo expeditions for the time being, I thought. Although trimming some of this weight first would make that easier.*

Suddenly, my train of thought was disrupted when a muscular guy with a crew cut entered the classroom along with some other students who appeared to be his cronies.

"Listen up, you class E flunkers!" shouted one of the cronies—who I thought of as Crony A.

As this was the first day of school, there hadn't been time to flunk any exams or classes. But that subtlety didn't bother Crony A, a slim boy who wore his uniform scruffily.

"This here is Isamu Kariya," he continued, pointing to the muscular guy standing at the teacher's lectern with his arms crossed and eyes closed, filling the room with his presence despite not uttering a word. "He runs the show in Class D. He wants to know who here's got what it takes to work for our crew. So, you're gonna show us your stats and skills."



I could recall the same situation occurring in the game. In that scenario, the bullies had set their sights on one of the girls, the protagonist had stepped in to protect her, and that had initiated a duel that would take place a month later.

“Get a move on!” Crony B barked. He was a little overweight and had long hair that looked disastrous. “Kariya doesn’t like to be kept waitin’.” He then pointed to a nearby schoolboy. “You first. Show us your status.”

The boy didn’t seem pleased receiving orders from these condescending bullies who’d shown up out of nowhere. “You march in here and expect us to show you?” he complained. “Why should we?”

At that moment, the look in Crony B’s eyes changed, and it seemed as though the air in the room suddenly grew thicker, making it difficult to breathe.

“Careful. We ain’t askin’. We’re tellin’, got it?”

I realized he must’ve been projecting his *aura*, proof that he was stronger and at a higher level than us. It was as intimidating as if a ferocious beast were facing off against me.

Adventurers’ levels would increase after they had accumulated enough experience points by defeating monsters in the dungeon. This would also enhance physical characteristics like health and stamina, enabling adventurers to perform feats of superhuman strength. However, this physical enhancement would only take effect in areas rich with mana particles flowing from the dungeon. The dungeon, and places within about a hundred fifty meters of a dungeon entrance, were magic fields.

Looking at it the other way, adventurers outside of magic fields wouldn’t experience any boost to their stats. Adventurers’ High had been built on top of a dungeon entrance, and this classroom was within a magic field. This meant that the physical enhancements that came from leveling up would be in full effect.

Crony B was projecting his *aura* in that strengthened state as a show of force. The poor boy he’d picked on was cowering before them.

“H-H-Here it is...” he stammered.

“We wouldn’t have had to frighten you if you’d just done what we said. So

you're a level 1 Newbie, eh? Sounds about right for Class E."

Classes A to D were for students from the middle school branch. Most people were prevented from entering the dungeon until they'd turned fifteen, but these students had a three-year head start and leveled up in that time. The strength difference between them and the students in Class E, who'd never leveled up, was immense. It would be over instantly if we tried to fight them since they could knock us out with a single punch.

"Your turn, fatty! Make it quick!" The chubby, long-haired Crony B jabbed his thumb at me as though the "fatty" remark hadn't made it obvious who he was addressing.

*People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones*, I thought but showed him my stats anyway, as I wasn't looking to start an argument.

"Yeesh, these stats are awful, and that skill looks useless. What a scrub!"

*There we go, it's now public knowledge how weak I am*, I thought. *But whatever! I'll be invincible once I level up! And no, I'm not taking this personally!*

Oblivious to my internal retorts, Crony B picked out a girl with soft, fluffy pink hair and said, "You're up next."

*That's her*, I thought. She was the one that they'd targeted in the game.

The girl was Sakurako Sanjou, one of DEC's heroines, who players could choose to play as if they wanted a female protagonist. People had called her Pinky. She had large, friendly, attractive eyes that drooped at the corners, and a pair of huge breasts. Her mild-mannered nature made men want to swoop in and keep her safe.

As the female protagonist, the devs had written plenty of storylines where she played with the hearts of countless men. Getting on her bad side spelled big trouble, so it would be best for me to stay out of her way.

"You're gorgeous, ain't you?" Crony B said. "Your stats say..." he started as he peered at her terminal's display, "Level 1. Okay, we don't usually do this for level 1s, but we'll make an exception and let you into our party."

"Huh? I, err, umm..." she sputtered nervously.

Crony A was leering at her face. Then Crony C walked up, wearing a lecherous smirk, and he was about to grab her by the shoulder when a voice rang out.

“You’re making her uncomfortable.” The voice belonged to a male student with a face so handsome that it stood out in the crowd. He had blocked Crony C’s hand before it could reach Sakurako. He had blazing, bright red hair and eyes the color of gold. The smile he was showing them was charming, but even so, the cronies flinched as if a mysterious force had struck them.

“Wha... Who are you supposed to be?!”

“My name’s Akagi. I’m only level 1 now, but one day I’ll be the strongest adventurer in the academy.”

The cronies burst into thunderous laughter at his declaration.

Akagi didn’t appear rattled or angered by their reaction, his smile never faltering, which spoke volumes for his self-confidence. He must’ve had nerves of steel.

He was Yuuma Akagi, *DEC*’s protagonist. His stats were exceptionally high, even at the level one starting point, and he could obtain the powerful *Hero* job during his character quest. Thanks to his gorgeous face, players could pursue over ten heroines simultaneously. He was an overpowered character in every sense of the word.

When I played the game with him as the main character, I became enamored by his ambition, stoic personality, and relaxed demeanor. Now that I was Piggy, I couldn’t see him as anything but a repugnant playboy. The possibility that I might get expelled from school because of him certainly didn’t help.

At this point, Kariya finally opened his eyes and glared at Akagi. Here was some Class E loser mouthing off about becoming the strongest adventurer, and he clearly didn’t appreciate that.

“You’ve got a big mouth for someone who doesn’t know the first thing about what it means to be an adventurer,” he growled, the bulging vein on his forehead a testament to his rage.

“W-Wait, Kariya!” yelped one of the cronies, frantically trying to calm Kariya. “He’s just a Class E scrub, so he doesn’t know any better!”



Kariya was a good deal tougher than most students, even those in Class D.

“Tell you what,” said Kariya in a flat tone. “You and me are gonna find out whether you have what it takes to be the strongest, one-on-one. Let’s see...” He looked at Akagi’s terminal display as he made his threat, apparently checking his schedule. “This time next month should work.”

Kariya’s levelheaded response drew relieved sighs from his cronies, who’d probably been expecting their boss to lose his temper and start throwing punches.

*Everything’s playing out like it did in the game so far, I thought.*

The event happening here with Kariya had been a side plot in the game rather than part of the main story, and fulfilling it had been optional. Accepting Kariya’s challenge would prompt a duel a month later in the school’s arena. Victory would increase the player’s affection scores with all of Class E’s heroines and lead to an encounter with the boss of Class B, the puppet master who pulled Kariya’s strings. Refusing the challenge would cause the player to fail the event and result in a slight drop in the heroines’ affection scores, as would accepting the challenge but losing the duel.

All this made accepting the challenge seem like the obvious choice if not for one big problem: defeating Kariya was next to impossible without an expert player’s thorough knowledge of the game’s mechanics. In short, this was an event reserved for a second playthrough. To defeat him, the player needed to gather the right gear, level up efficiently, and perfect a fighting style to combat Kariya’s weapon specialties and skills as well as enable attacks and counters on his weak points, all in under a month. Even then, it would be close...

While running through the strategy for beating him in my head, I thought, *Oh, hang on. I’m Piggy, not the game’s main character.*

It would be a lie to say that I wasn’t interested in Akagi’s choice, but his decision wouldn’t affect me. The only thing on the line was the fate of Akagi’s harem-in-the-making. These romantic mishaps deserved no more room in my thoughts than the timing of my next meal or the size of Pinky’s boobs. I could sit back, relax, maybe scratch my nose a little, and watch the argument with Kariya play out.

The two people that actually had to take this seriously, Akagi and Kariya, continued to face off against each other.

“This school is teeming with monsters,” said Kariya. “I’m a small fry in comparison. If you can’t beat me, you never stood a chance to be the strongest. Am I wrong?”

After a brief pause, Akagi stood up straight, looked Kariya directly in the eyes, and answered, “You’re not wrong. I accept your challenge.”

Kariya’s cronies ridiculed Akagi’s declaration while a rush of startled whispers came from our classmates. The students of Class E expected Akagi would turn the challenge down rather than take on the experienced Kariya with a mere month of hard work.

“We’ll hold the duel in the arena with safety rules. You’ll survive...but you might not leave with as many arms as when you arrived.”

“Fine.”

Akagi, proving that he deserved to be the main character, faced Kariya’s *aura* with no change in his demeanor.

I, on the other hand, was absolutely petrified. My heart was beating a thousand times a minute, and I might’ve wet myself a little. *That guy’s terrifying.*

“Watch out, kid. We know who you are and how to find you,” warned one of Kariya’s cronies as the gang left the classroom.

Akagi gave a reassuring wink to Pinky, who was trembling with anxiety.

With the class free to express their worry, they hurried toward Akagi to encourage him and wish him luck in the duel. In no time, he’d become the class’s central figure, its moodmaker—a stunning feat of charisma. He’d turned the tense mood in the room on its head with his supreme self-confidence while finding the time to tend to the needs and wants of the opposite sex. This made him the polar opposite of the petty scoundrel that was Piggy.

Pursuing Kariya’s storyline would bring more trouble than merit, though. In my opinion, declaring yourself to be the strongest wasn’t something you could

do. You had to earn it by gaining the recognition of your peers, making it appear that Akagi was letting Kariya goad him into a risky situation. Although that difference in perspective could very well be what set main characters apart from minor ones.

At that point, I decided to call it a day and head home. I had plenty to do and much to think about. So I packed up my belongings and walked toward the door when—

“Wait a minute,” an annoyed girl called from behind me.

When I turned around, I found Piggy’s childhood friend, Kaoru Hayase, standing with her arms crossed. Her features were enough to draw the eyes of the students around her without doing anything in particular. She’d tied her light blue hair into a high-side ponytail, which made her look more noble.

I couldn’t get into the right mental state to talk with such a bombshell. Being here made me realize how much prettier she was in real life compared to the game’s graphics, so I fought the urge to run away.





“About today,” she said. “What are you going to do?”

I wasn't sure what she meant. Perhaps we'd made plans? Her relationship with Piggy in the game seemed entirely one-sided. Since they'd grown up together, there might have been more interactions behind the scenes besides Piggy's desperate clinging.

“Don't you have anything to say?” she asked, drumming her index finger against her upper arm. It was safe to say that she was pissed about something.

But I had no means to guess what that “something” was. I'd been transported here and turned into Piggy mere moments after turning my game on, so the only information I had was from playing *DEC*. Assuming someone else's life at the drop of a hat was a difficulty mode far more challenging than I'd bargained for.

Whining about the unfairness of it all wouldn't solve the problem. The best course of action was coming up with a random excuse and getting the hell out of there. I needed time to gather more information.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just remembered that I've got somewhere to be today.”

“Oh,” she said with disinterest. “Fine then.” With that, she turned away and walked to the crowd surrounding Akagi.

That was apparently the end of the encounter, so I left, glad to have survived.

*What's this restless feeling I'm experiencing?* I wondered. *Am I feeling Piggy's emotions?*

Perhaps some lingering part of Piggy was worried about the handsome main character snatching up his childhood friend. Granted, Kaoru was hot and would have men lining up for her, so the concern made sense.

If the game was anything to go by, trying too doggedly to get involved with her would ruin my reputation and culminate in my expulsion. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to remain enrolled at this school, but I needed to keep these emotions under control before they blew up in my face.

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## Kaoru Hayase

“You’re spacing out, Hayase,” called out a girl, a new classmate of mine.  
“What’s up?”

Her words snapped me out of it with a startle, and I smiled for her.

*Not good, I thought. It’s not like me to let my mind wander.*

I hurriedly exchanged a few more words with the girl, then gathered my belongings like everyone else, ready to leave for home. When I raised my head, I caught another glimpse of the overweight boy, and a sigh escaped my lips.

*This was supposed to be my chance to get away from him.*

I felt relieved because the opening ceremony had gone well and sullen because of Souta Narumi. My childhood friend and begrudged fiancé had passed Adventurers’ High’s entrance exam, albeit with the lowest score, and I couldn’t help but feel upset he was here.

I’d applied to Adventurers’ High out of an infatuation with adventurers because I wanted to be like them. However, my second—or maybe third—most important reason for joining was to distance myself from Souta.

When we were children, he wasn’t so bad. His personality was flawed even then, but he’d been much more thoughtful, and the smiles he shared with me had been so sweet. He had been dependable; whenever boys picked on me, he’d jump in and defend me.

Around the time we’d entered middle school, that changed as his eyes lingered on my body, particularly around my chest. For the last two years, he’d talked about me to other people as if I belonged to him, and at times he’d humiliated me with sexual harassment. I’d spent my middle school days feeling so withdrawn.

I’d pleaded with him to treat me properly, but far from listening, his fixation with me had gone from bad to worse. Taking the exam for Adventurers’ High had been my chance to get away from him... But he had passed as well, and now we were classmates.

A few days earlier, Souta’s parents had asked me to use my good sword

fighting skills to teach their son the craft. I wished I could've declined, but I couldn't. The two of them had always been there when I needed them ever since I was a child.

I had dragged my feet to a training session with him, but it had been a complete waste of time. He'd been too fat to get the movements right and too impatient to put in the effort. Instructing him on technique wouldn't have done much good at that point.

Thus, I'd attempted to improve his eating habits by crafting a balanced diet low in sugar and fat, but that also failed. He'd snuck out to munch on mountains of snacks, and when I'd invited him out for an early morning jog, he'd mistaken it for a date. He'd thrown a tantrum after I ran off without him because he had absolutely no desire to run.

We were supposed to be practicing swinging swords today, but, as ever, he showed no enthusiasm.

I'd done all I could over these last two weeks, but there was nothing to show for it. The only reason I'd tried was because his parents had asked me. It wasn't out of any sense of love for him; that was long gone.

And I was sure that I'd gone far enough now. Souta would never fend for himself if I were always there to bail him out. I needed to focus on getting myself in top form to keep up with Adventurers' High's heavy workload. That was why I had to solve my greatest problem as soon as possible.

His persistence in following me all the way here definitely surprised me, but there was no way I could marry him as he was. I did feel a pang of guilt about how Souta's parents would take this, but at the same time, I had my priorities. I was a teenage girl, and I wanted the freedom to find the perfect guy and fall in love.

I could look past Souta's appearance. He'd looked better as a child, so there was hope for improvement. What I couldn't tolerate was his personality, which was spineless, lazy, and devoid of ambition.

So I had to nullify our engagement by any means necessary, but I couldn't do that without first getting my hands on our nuptial grimoire. Souta might seem dumb, but he could play smart when necessary. I'd searched for the grimoire on

my visits to the Narumi house over the last few years and found no hints of where he'd hidden it.

As long as the grimoire was in his possession, I lacked the power to resist him. Unless I could come up with something, my time at high school would be a repeat of middle school, with Souta forever by my side. Some day soon, he might intensify his usual behavior and order me to do something obscene and ravage my body. The thought alone filled me with fear and anger.

*Why couldn't Souta be...* I began to think, then I caught sight of the class's new celebrity. It was the boy that had chased off those punks from Class D earlier. *More like him. Brave and strong-willed.*

The boy's name was Akagi or something like that. The supreme confidence he displayed and everything he did seemed noble. His ambition to grow stronger comforted my worn and weary heart. Everything about him made it obvious how different he was from Souta, and the contrast brought a deep sigh to my lips.



## Chapter 4: The Setting

With the first day of school over, I set off for my room.

I walked toward the dorms adjoining the school grounds where most students resided, as they had traveled from across the world to attend. I imagined I'd be no exception and made that my destination. I'd plunged into *DEC*'s world without warning, and I wanted some time alone to calm down and get my head around what was happening.

However, I couldn't find the name Narumi on the room list by the dorm's entrance, so I asked one of the dorm staff.

"Narumi, wasn't it?" the woman asked. "You're not registered here. You must commute in."

It seemed that I lived at home. "Err, yeah...I do. Could you tell me my address? I seem to have forgotten."

She handed me one of the school's introductory pamphlets and told me the address. I also heard her mutter under her breath, "And he's just a kid" as she pointed a pitying look at my bulk.

I flicked through the pamphlet and found a map of the local area, and I recognized the names written there. That was when I recalled *DEC*'s setting was in an alternate reality version of modern-day Japan. My memories of visiting this area in my previous life told me I should see tranquil residential streets and scenic parks overlooking mountains and the sea. But tall buildings and apartment complexes instead blocked the view from within the school grounds. I wasn't likely to figure out the reason for the discrepancy by thinking about it now, so I thanked the woman and headed to the address that she'd told me was my home.

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I passed through the thick and robust school gate only to land in a bustling shopping district. The street in front of the school had hotels, department

stores, and commercial complexes all lined up. The scene wouldn't have looked out of place in my Japan were it not for its citizens. Some wore suits of armor, others carried large weapons, and all of them unmistakably belonged to *DEC's* world. I stared at the buildings and passersby as I walked on, and after a few minutes I reached my home.

The first floor of the house was a store, and above the door was a sign with "Narumi's General Goods" written in large letters. The door-plate also read "Narumi," spelled with the same characters as Piggy's family name, so I'd found the right place. I hadn't known that Piggy's family ran a convenience store. A car was parked outside, so I could tell that I wasn't the only one living there.

*Is it okay to go inside?* I wondered. *It doesn't feel right barging into someone else's house. Wait a second... I know this place.*

A fragment of Piggy's memories had found their way to the surface. Looking at the building again, I felt a spark of recognition and a warm sense of belonging. Of course, Piggy *did* belong here. It was home.

After I'd been loitering outside the house for a while, a woman in her forties emerged from the shop wearing an apron.

"Oh, it's you, Souta," she called. "I thought it was someone up to no good."

She had a gentle face and a slender figure, so different from Piggy's huge frame that I assumed we couldn't be related. Yet Piggy's memories told me that this middle-aged beauty was my mother!

"Umm... I'm back," I said.

"Hey, bro!" another voice chirped. "Welcome back." A girl wearing a large hoodie came out of the shop while tying up her long hair. She had a young-looking face and must've been in middle school or the upper years of elementary school. She was adorable...and had called me "bro," but surely she couldn't be Piggy's sister!

"What are you staring at?" the girl asked, puzzled.



“Oh, err, nothing.”

I’d stumbled across one of this world’s oddest mysteries: into this house of beautiful thoroughbreds, a mule had been born...or perhaps a pig. I entered the house in a daze, my mind preoccupied with the impossibility of my family.

Mother and daughter were standing in front of the refrigerator discussing tonight’s dinner and paying no attention to me. I searched my mind to see if I could find my room. *Up the stairs, second from the back.* I was gradually getting the hang of how to draw upon Piggy’s memories. The process worked differently from remembering my own as I had to visualize Piggy’s mind as separate from mine and stare into it, which was why my past attempts had failed. Most of the time, *I* was the basis for my thoughts, and the memories that came most readily were much the same as when I’d lived in my old world.

Sometimes Piggy’s emotions resurged unbidden, especially when I’d spoken to people he shared a bond with, like his family or Kaoru Hayase. It was easy to recognize these emotions because they were too different from mine. For example, I’d started to feel anxious when I first thought about Kaoru Hayase, and seeing Piggy’s mother and sister had filled me with comfort. I didn’t have a family, and I certainly didn’t have a hot girlfriend, so the sudden rush of these emotions had confused me. I’d never felt them before.

This emotional link suggested I hadn’t simply taken over Piggy’s body. I’d merged with him—my consciousness coexisted with his emotions and memories. Or, at least, that was my hypothesis. I wished I knew a way to leave Piggy’s body and let the poor boy take his life back from this parasitic stranger who’d warped in from another world. Although, *DEC*’s devs were ultimately to blame for everything, not me.

Anyway, there were a few things that I’d need to find out to overcome the challenges of this world, regardless of whether I’d live out the rest of my days here as Piggy or return to my world. I thought about what I should investigate first.

I reached Piggy’s room, on the northeast side of the house and away from the sun, so it was dark inside. As I went in, the floorboards groaned slightly either due to their age or the heavy mass walking on them. I gazed across the room



while pulling from Piggy's memories, and nothing felt out of place. In fact, I felt remarkably at ease. For the first time, I realized how strained I'd felt until this point, thrown into this world so suddenly and clueless about what to do. I chucked my school bag onto the bed and breathed easy, but then I noticed something.

*Gross! I thought. This room is a complete mess!*

Nothing felt out of place here, but the floor had discarded clothes and candy wrappers scattered across it. And there was a huge, messy heap of books and manga. The place was a dump. I decided to turn the TV on and tidy up. I had to do something about this mess.

A broad-shouldered middle-aged man appeared on the screen, saying something from the National Diet's podium. Text at the bottom of the screen listed his name and explained that he was both a member of the Diet's upper house and a count.

*A count, eh?* I thought.

DEC's setting was based on Japan, but was not identical to it. The political systems, international relations, and views of their citizens differed greatly between the game's world and modern, democratic Japan. The militaristic authoritarian political regime and the existence of the aristocracy bore a closer resemblance to the prewar Empire of Japan.

The political system consisted of an upper house called the House of Lords that only the aristocracy could join and a lower house called the House of Commons that even commoners could enter. The nobles didn't rule over traditional fiefdoms, but the titles came with societal privileges and vested benefits, such as immunity from prosecution and exercising political powers. The exact amount depended on how noble their title was.

Some students at the school were nobles or retainers in the service of nobles, usually descendants of the defunct samurai class. It would be important to take care in my interactions with them. Though I was pretty sure that the old law that allowed the upper classes to cut down anyone who offended them was off the books now.

The Narumis were...clearly commoners.

After a little investigation, I discovered that this world mirrored Japan's history until the early Meiji era when the dungeons first appeared. I used my textbooks and terminal to look up the names of the commanders in the Warring States period and the Shoguns of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and everything looked right. The Meiji Restoration appeared to have progressed the way I knew. After the dungeons appeared, the path this world took to reach modern-day Japan branched off severely from what I remembered. The names of the imperial family and politicians after Emperor Meiji were different from my Japan. I wondered whether something related to the dungeons had caused a change in the line of succession or whether pre-Meiji Japan had merely served as inspiration for this world but was a different country. The second option seemed more likely to me, but I'd need to research more to know for certain.

I changed channels. A news broadcast announced that a dropout adventurer had turned to terrorism and abducted a politician. Law and order seemed far weaker here compared to modern Japan.

Adventurers' physical enhancements should have only taken effect in the presence of a magic field. But about fifteen years before, scientists had succeeded in creating an artificial magic field. Since then, society had endured more and more acts of violence perpetrated by disgruntled adventurers, who'd leveled up so high that bullets bounced right off them. Several terrorist organizations had enlisted these outlaw adventurers as muscle to further their political agenda. In response, the state had invested in making more adventurers and deployed them to combat the threat. Apparently, the diplomatic and intelligence services were teeming with secret agents with superhuman strength. Three cheers for the Age of Adventurers! Hip hip... No? Okay.

Magic field detectors at sporting arenas screened players for the use of magical enhancements, allowing the sporting world to brag of their fairness. That made sense. Imagine if a superhuman capable of taking down a giant dragon went out and played soccer. Actually, I'd watch that.

I switched the television off and picked up a newspaper from the floor, and the date was...four years earlier than it should be. I compared this to the date in my terminal and found that the newspaper was only a day old. *DEC* had been

released four years ago. Perhaps that fact was related somehow.

I turned to the paper's economic pages, hoping I could cheat on the stock market if this world really were four years in the past. I recognized some names, but the economy here functioned on the so-called zaibatsu system. And the same handful of names appeared in all the companies with controlling stakes in the economy. The Nikkei index differed from the numbers I remembered, so my knowledge of the other Japan wouldn't be helpful. I turned to the four-panel comic strip pages... *Oh look, they have Boko, the Li'l Rascal*, I noticed.

Afterward, I sat in front of the room's PC and browsed the internet. The news sites and video-sharing platforms looked almost identical to the ones I knew. As I continued to browse, I noticed something strange. Sites with glamor models posing in lingerie showed up in the search results, but I couldn't find any nude images. Perhaps there was a strict censorship regime in place? Such restrictions on thought and freedom should've been detrimental to the country's development, but maybe I was wrong.

All these things led me to believe this country was an alternate version of Japan that had resulted from the continuation of prewar Japan's political system. Based on this, there had been a divergence between the 1910s and 1930s.

The Japan of this world had avoided a decisive defeat in the Second World War, even if its territory remained the same as my reality. It wasn't clear why the Empire had ceded its possessions despite there not being an unconditional surrender. I'd been able to ignore these details as simple fiction when I'd played the game. Now that I'd taken up residence here, I couldn't be so blasé.

At first, I was excited to read about how the dungeon had changed this alternate Japan's history. It felt like I was reading one of *DEC's* behind-the-scenes articles. The problem was that the game was my reality now, and what I was learning was telling me that this version of Japan was unstable and full of trouble. How safe could a world be with ideologically driven bands of superhumans running rampant? The Adventurers' Guild supervised all active adventurers, but terrorists and dropout adventurers were damaging the political landscape and public order. Even worse, the enshrinement of the aristocracy in the legal system gave me doubts about the state of civil rights. I

couldn't fall into the trap of thinking that my Japan's notions of civil liberties, fair trials, and trustworthy policing carried over to this society. I'd need to readjust my preconceptions, and soon.

I also had to remember that this was the world of *DEC*, meaning events or storylines could happen at Adventurers' High or anywhere in the world. The familiar Kariya event from the game's opening scene had already started, playing as in the game, and was definitive proof that the events could become real. This event's outcome wouldn't affect me, though. It was the game's other events that worried me. Battles against a secret service, a full-blown war between states, the eradication of an entire dungeon floor... Plenty of catastrophic events had occurred in *DEC*'s story. I didn't think I could survive any of those. Unfortunately, I shared a class with the protagonist, who was naturally inclined to get caught up in everything. It'd been possible to play the game and avoid such events, but the ones in the main story might be inevitable.

A player would think that the riskier the event, the greater the enjoyment. To someone who had to live in this world, it was nothing but trouble. I needed to hurry and start raiding the dungeon to level up to be ready for those events if they happened. School was out for the next two days, and they'd assigned us no homework. There was plenty of time to go on a raid and jump at the opportunity to have fun in the dungeon.

After an hour of thinking about that, I finished cleaning the room. I'd sorted the trash into bags, tied the bags with string, and piled them in one corner of the room. I'd leave them there for now and take them out another day.

While cleaning, I found something labeled "Nuptial Grimoire" but had no idea what it was. It looked like regular colored paper, but the word "grimoire" suggested it had a spell cast on it. Curious, I searched Piggy's memories and learned the book was a written promise to marry Kaoru Hayase they'd made when younger. Nothing about that sounded the first bit magical. Little kids promised to marry each other when they grew up. The thought *was* cute, though. The book probably held sentimental value for Piggy, so I decided to keep it, storing it away in the back of a drawer.

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The cleaning was more or less over, and it was a little past noon. A lot of time remained in the day, so I planned to take a trip into the dungeon.

But first, I wanted to eat something, and my stomach had been growling incessantly for some time. Piggy's memories showed him devouring a huge breakfast that morning, yet I felt so starved that I feared passing out. I suspected that Piggy's Glutton skill was responsible for this abnormal hunger. And, in turn, my obesity. I couldn't trust Piggy's fat body to cope with deep dives in the dungeon, so dieting was a must, and I needed to keep my meals small. But...

*This is way too much*, I thought, looking down at the mountain of food on the plate in front of me. There must've been at least two thousand kilocalories. Worse, everything on the plate was either deep-fried or high in carbs, with hardly any vegetables. Somebody was trying to fatten me up.

"Sorry about this, but could you cut down on how much you give me from now on?" I asked. I felt rude requesting this after my mother had gone to the trouble of making my lunch. Still, I'd never get my weight under control with meals like this every day.

"But, Souta, fried chicken with korokke is your favorite!" my mother exclaimed, placing her hands on her cheeks in concern. "Have you come down with a cold?"

My eyes were watering at the sight of the meal, and my stomach screamed at me to empty the plate. It took all my mental fortitude to resist.

"The thing is," I said, "I want to go on a diet. I want my meals to be mostly vegetables."

"You can eat vegetables now?" my sister asked, her naturally arched eyebrows arching further. "When did that happen?"

Worried that I'd tripped up, I hurriedly rummaged through Piggy's memories. It turned out that he had an aversion to vegetables. He wouldn't even touch fruit! I'd have to make something up to explain the inconsistency.

"Now that I'm at Adventurers' High," I said, "I figured that I should make some changes."



“You *are* a bit chubby,” my mother said, “so I suppose that makes sense.”

I smiled agreeably, straining to hold my tongue. Despite my height of a hundred and seventy centimeters, I easily weighed over a hundred kilograms. I was probably closer to a hundred and twenty. I wanted to shout that I was well past the point of “a bit chubby.”

“I think bro looks perfect the way he is!” my sister said. She then looked at me and asked, “Are you really going to the dungeon already?”

I nodded and said, “I’m itching to level up.”

“Hmmm,” the girl hummed. She was a youthful girl with short bangs who wore her emotions openly and was so damn cute that I had to question Piggy’s parentage. Her name was Kano Narumi, a third-year middle school student aspiring to attend Adventurers’ High with me, her brother. To that end, she assisted at a martial arts school and worked hard at her exam prep.

She was muttering something under her breath, her head lowered. Did she suspect me?

“Bro, take me along with you.”

“What?” I said. “I can’t. You’re still in middle school.”

“Don’t be selfish, Kano,” our mother chimed in.

“But I wanna go!” she whined.

Children under fifteen couldn’t dive into the dungeon, and the law forbade middle schoolers from entering. The government had restricted entry based on age to prevent unnecessary harm. The monsters in the first two levels of the dungeon were weak enough that middle schoolers could probably win the fight, but that didn’t guarantee they’d be safe.

The minimum age requirement had previously been eighteen instead of fifteen, but that changed after the invention of AMFs, artificial magic fields. Seeing that criminals abused this invention and destabilized the country, the government passed reforms to lower the age requirement. They hoped to raise the number of well-trained adventurers and expand their skill sets.

Even so, Kano was under fifteen and still in middle school, so it was doubtful

that she'd get permission to enter the dungeon.

I watched the scolding mother and the daughter trying to get her own way. The scene was touching and distant for someone like me who had no family. Of course, I had one when I was very young but could barely recall them. As I watched Piggy's mother and sister, I tried to remember whether my own family had behaved the same way together.

So I wanted to keep these two safe no matter the cost to help them get what they wanted, for Piggy's sake. He loved them dearly, and I felt that might make up for my taking over his life. Kano wouldn't ordinarily be able to enter the dungeon, but a few secret passages leading inside existed. As long as I gave her an escape item to use if things got bad, there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

"You can't come right now. If you're a good girl, I'll take you along with me someday."

"Yippee! It's a promise, okay?" Once she'd heard the promise, Kano skipped to her room, humming as she went, her excitement palpable.

Then Piggy's mother left to tend to the store.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched them leave, believing they hadn't suspected I was an impostor. They must have noticed that Piggy was acting out of character. I couldn't admit I'd switched places with their son and brother. They'd think I'd gone mad, so I planned on keeping it a secret. To keep up my life and avoid undue stress on Piggy's family, I needed to meticulously familiarize myself with who he was, how he acted, how he sounded, and all his little quirks and ticks.

But I'd spent so much of my life alone that I'd tripped up, missing the social cues and people skills from being with others. I was still partly Piggy. His memories and feelings rose to the surface sometimes, whether I summoned them or not. I was Piggy 2.0, and it was a strange state of affairs.

His family life did raise questions for me. As far as I saw, Piggy had gotten along with them, and they didn't appear to have any concerns about his well-being. Why had he started school so insecure? What had caused his personality to become so self-destructive? His obsession with Kaoru Hayase was clearly the

root cause, but there was more. The devs had put Piggy in the game for fans to hate, so his backstory was too minimal to draw any conclusions. My best plan was to tread lightly. I wouldn't stand out in school or interact with Kaoru Hayase more than necessary.

I finished my small lunch, too modest to be fit for a beggar let alone a king. Then, I fetched Piggy's middle-school tracksuit from a drawer, got changed, and began gathering the supplies for my dungeon raid. The tracksuit was tight around my chest and thighs, so I concluded that Piggy had put on more weight since middle school. Honestly, that boy.

I picked up my rucksack, where I'd stored some magic gems. As I descended the stairs, I saw my mother rummaging around in front of the store's register.

"I'm off to the dungeon," I told her. "I'll be back later."

"Aren't you going to take anything with you?" she asked. "You can't go empty-handed."

"I'm taking a bat I found in my room. That'll do for today since I'm only going to the first level."

The bat would be all I'd need. Other than an occasional hidden monster, which could spawn under certain conditions, the only monsters in the dungeon's first floor were slimes.

I'd be able to access the school's weapon rental program once I'd completed an orientation session, so I'd book one out after if any struck my fancy. My priority had to be getting strong enough to protect myself and Piggy's family from the crises that awaited in the future. I had a long road ahead but was willing to walk it.

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I left my house and headed for the school and the dungeon beneath it. I decided to jog there, fitting the journey into my exercise plan. My rolls of fat heaved from side to side as I spurred my legs on, but my pace was barely faster than the pedestrians walking along the street. The school was only a few minutes' walk from my house, but my lungs gave out in half that time, and sweat drenched my skin. I opted to walk the remaining distance, fearing I'd pass

out from exhaustion inside the dungeon. My body probably wasn't accustomed to sudden bursts of activity.

The many people milling around as I looked at my surroundings struck me. I remembered this place being a peaceful garden city in my old world, full of residential areas and parks. Here, adventurers and workers involved in the various dungeon industries swelled the population to over eight hundred thousand, transforming the city into a giant economic center. They had nowhere else to go; this was Japan's only dungeon.

Property prices had skyrocketed in this city as well. A renter could find a one-bedroom apartment in the heart of Tokyo at cheaper rates than here. Even a small house in a back alley like the Narumis' home fetched a large sum.

*Everywhere I look, there's a vendor selling food or snacks,* I mused, scanning the nearby stores. *I'm gonna have to fight the temptation.*

I tried remembering how to get inside the dungeon as the standard process was laborious and took months. Prospective entrants had to register, attend an interview, undergo a course, and finally do a written exam. Adventurers' High students, however, had already passed the government's strict vetting process. We could get our Adventurers' Passes printed on the spot by showing our terminals to the staff.

Thus, I stopped off at the Adventurers' Guild first.

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Adventurers' Guilds were commonplace in fantasy fiction, and this world's guild fulfilled most of the familiar functions. People could come here to register as adventurers; buy, sell, and store items; and accept quests or submit new ones.

There were some noteworthy differences, though. For starters, the guild was an enormous organization with over ten million registered adventurers worldwide. Footfall in the guild building surpassed ten thousand people every day. Their office also housed shops run by private businesses and public facilities, so many ordinary people used the services provided. Another difference was that this world's guild managed the care and treatment of wounded adventurers, regardless of whether they had sustained their injuries

in the dungeon. The guild also functioned as a sort of police or military force, and they dispatched high-ranking guild-sanctioned adventurers to settle disputes between adventurers. To house all these additional services, the Adventurers' Guild occupied a modern high-rise building with over forty floors.

When I reached the guild's entrance, I stood frozen and looked up in awe at the building's towering height.

"It looked massive from the classroom's window, but to see it up close..." I said to myself. Realizing I was blocking traffic, I got moving again and went in.

The interior space was large enough for hundreds of people to walk around without being crowded. The floor was marble, and there was a modern brick-effect wallpaper. On the left was a line of customer service booths like in a bank; on the right, busy passengers bustled on the many escalators and elevators. In the game, NPCs occasionally picked a fight with the protagonist. Luckily, the guild was comparatively empty at this time of day, and I couldn't see any nasty-looking adventurers. I scanned the booths, looking for the one handling new registrations. After finding the right one, I walked over.

"Good evening," said the woman behind the desk, smiling brightly. "How can I help you?" She displayed perfect professional courtesy too. I'd been worried that the staff here would abide by the fantasy stereotype of snubbing adventurers based on their appearance or rank.

"I'd like to register as an adventurer, please."

"I can see that you're a student of Adventurers' High," she said after a glance at the terminal on my arm. "Would you kindly write your name and your terminal ID code here?"

She passed me a form, and I adjusted the terminal on my arm to find the ID code.

"Here is your Adventurers' Pass," she explained. "The registration fee has been waived as you are a student at Adventurers' High. You will have an adventurer class of nine, to begin with. You can refer to this manual for any questions about adventurers. But please come back here if there's anything you don't understand."

I could now enter the dungeon by scanning my Adventurer's Pass or my terminal in a machine by the dungeon portal. The pass was accepted as a personal ID as well, so I stored it safely in my rucksack with the manual for later reading.

With this, I was ready to head to the dungeon portal, and I could barely contain my excitement.



## Chapter 5: Into the Dungeon

The dungeons had appeared unexpectedly in the early 1900s as entrances to another world.

People could travel in and out, but no light or radio waves could pass through, so the portals separating this world from the dungeons' were pure black. The space they connected to was abnormal, another dimension.

After the initial discovery, people's fears painted the dungeon as Hell itself, a source from which demons sprung, or a paranormal spot responsible for mysterious disappearances. Upon learning that slain monsters dropped magic gems that could generate energy, Japan mobilized its armies to the dungeon, prioritizing this more than war.

The first expedition into the dungeon's depths equipped its soldiers with bayoneted rifles. As the teams descended, the awaiting monsters proved impervious to bullets, and the military suffered heavy casualties. After reaching a certain depth, the expedition stalled entirely.

This setback didn't deter Japan's leaders from their desire to acquire the magic gems for energy generation and any other undiscovered resources. The government redoubled its efforts and invested huge sums from its treasury into research and development to enable further conquest of the dungeon. To bolster the army's numbers, the government embarked on a recruitment drive of ordinary citizens who would become the first adventurers. The state trained these citizens and helped them level up. They drew up new legislation, opened educational facilities, enacted administrative reform, created the Ministry of Dungeons... Later, they launched the second expedition with the full weight of the country behind it.

Conflicts and civil wars scattered refugees across the globe as countries fought for control over the dungeons to secure the energy resources within. Fortunately, Japan didn't need to fight for a dungeon—only one had appeared within the country—and no other nation tried to invade, giving them unfettered

access to its resources. The magic gems extracted from the dungeon eliminated Japan's reliance on imported energy, and several world-leading magic-gem energy companies sprang up. Japan became a net exporter of energy, which led to a surge in economic growth.

Up to this point, Japan and the rest of the world had retained some sense of normalcy.

That all changed fifteen years ago when a French private company announced the successful temporary generation of an artificial magic field. The physical enhancements gained from leveling up only occurred inside the dungeon or within a hundred and fifty meters of a dungeon portal. However, this invention made it possible to activate the physical enhancements anywhere.

With this, the world entered a new era. I want you now to imagine a world overrun by superhumans impervious to bullets, who could slice through boulders with a single slash of a sword, and sprint hundreds of meters in seconds. AMFs certainly brought economic benefits, particularly to the agricultural and construction industries. But terrorists, politicians, and religious organizations naturally took advantage of the technology for their evil ends. Things came to a head with the assassination of a US president.

His host of armed bodyguards hadn't been enough to keep him safe. People sat awestruck in front of their televisions as shocking footage played of a lone terrorist slicing through the president and all his bodyguards with nothing more than a sword. States and organizations keenly observed the spectacle and found inspiration from it. They hired adventurers and dispatched them to fight their wars. The presence of adventurers as spies and assassins changed the parameters of war and diplomacy. Around this time, mercenary forces with various political and religious ties took center stage, spelling dire consequences for national security in every country.

The UN assumed management of the dungeons and enacted strict measures to prevent the misuse of dungeons and magic fields. This did nothing to quell the flood of crimes committed by adventurers, possibly because of the existence of other dungeons not yet known to the public. The authorities were constantly on the back foot.

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I closed the adventurer's manual, which contained a lot of useful information about the history of the dungeons.

Most of this had happened over the last ten years, and things seemed awful. I'd come across some of the info browsing at home, but I never would've guessed that a US president would be among the victims of AMFs. While playing the game, the history of the world had taken a back seat to the enjoyment when I was storming through the dungeons like a badass or winning the hearts of the heroines. Looking back, I should've spared some time to notice these details.

"Now that I think about it," I said aloud, "wasn't one of my classmates a foreign agent in the game?"

A female student in Class E had progressed *DEC's* story by acting as a trigger for an event where the player fought against spies in a local war. If the player teamed up with her, followed her storyline, and completed the story events, they would receive a reward that made raiding the dungeon easier... I wanted to stay well away from that mess, though.

This train of thought discouraged me, so I wiped the topic from my mind and focused on my dungeon raid.

The main building of Adventurers' School was an enormous facility with ten subterranean levels and eighteen aboveground floors. The middle school, high school, and university subdivisions all used the same facility, which additionally housed private and research organizations. The dungeon portal was on the first floor of the school building. In my original world, this spot had been inside a hill. The builders here had hollowed it out and constructed their colossal building around the portal to maximize the usable area of the valuable magic field. Japan's government clearly hated wasting any of the dungeon's resources.

One also needed to scan a special terminal or Adventurer's Pass at multiple scanning machines in the public square outside the Adventurers' Guild. It was similar to railway ticket barriers, and I could use the wearable terminal the school had given me.

Tens of thousands of people passed through the square each day, so the

space was rowdy with adventurers.

“Looking at all these people, I feel underdressed,” I remarked.

The adventurers with plain clothes wore light leather armor. But the occasional extravagant ones donned shining suits of armor, colorful robes, or long capes while sometimes carrying huge weapons. This was a modern world, but its inhabitants belonged to the realm of fantasy. I must’ve looked like an amateur with my bat and tracksuit...and I was the odd one out!

I passed through the ticket barrier into the building, then joined the slow-moving queue until I arrived in front of the portal. The portal was large, ten meters tall and wide, and its surface was pure darkness, owing to the impassibility of light, a bizarre sight. A slimy sensation enveloped my body when I walked through, so I shut my mouth and halted my breathing. Playing the game hadn’t taught me about this sensation.

After a few seconds, I was through to the other side. I was in a space about one hundred square meters in area, and thick cables connected several communications systems to the outside world around the edges. These cables fed into a single bundle, which led back through the portal. Radio waves couldn’t penetrate the portal, but wired transmissions made communication to and from the outside world possible. The intent was most likely to allow terminals to function inside the dungeon.

There was an area for resting adventurers and even a shop, but the seats were all taken. It was surprisingly busy here, making me wonder what the point of resting so close to the portal was. Why not go back outside to rest?

Still following the queue of people, I proceeded along the path that no longer branched. This part of the dungeon was a large cave. The ground was level, but the rock ceiling and walls were uneven and bumpy, like in a coal mine.

It was bright inside, despite the lack of any obvious light source. The walls weren’t emitting the light, as it appeared light passed through them.

I looked around for monsters but did not find a single one. I wagered that nearby adventurers had overpowered and cut down every spawning monster. There were just too many people here to have a good fight against a monster, so I continued pressing farther into the dungeon.

After an hour of walking, I was about two kilometers away from the portal. I had veered from the main path, which led to the second floor, instead heading to a less populated area. I'd crossed several forks in the road up to this point, but the GPS and automatic mapping software on my school terminal ensured I wouldn't get lost on these early floors.

Having come all this way, I noticed that the dungeon had the same structure as in the game. My future dungeon raids would be much easier to plan with that knowledge. I hadn't counted on it taking an hour to get here, though. There were too many people, and I groaned about how I might have to wade through the crowd every time I came down.

As I slowly walked on, planning the logistics of my future raids, a dark mist appeared before my eyes. A monster was about to spawn. The mist dissipated, revealing a twenty-centimeter light-blue blob, a slime.

Monsters could not move for the first few seconds after spawning. Using that immobility to my advantage, I swung my bat down at the helpless slime, which burst like jelly on impact into a rain of smaller blobs.

After ten seconds, the blobs evaporated into mist, leaving behind a magic gem about the size of a fingernail. A gem this size would be worth around ten yen—an abysmal return on time invested, but that was what one could expect given how busy the dungeon was.

Slimes had a monster level of 1. Because I was also level 1, that meant that I would receive one hundred percent of the available experience points for slaying it. Defeating monsters beneath my level would reduce the amount of experience points received. Meanwhile, slaying monsters above my level would grant me bonus experience points. That was as long as the system worked the same as the game.

I would have to slay at least one hundred level 1 monsters to progress to level 1. I'd hoped I could farm the monsters for experience and reach level 2 in no time, but waiting for monsters to spawn would take longer than I'd initially planned.

"But," I said aloud, "the slime room should be just a little further."

The slime room located northeast of the dungeon's first level was small. If you

could get three slimes inside the room, they'd merge into one large, special monster. This was good for two reasons: larger monsters were worth ten times as many experience points as a regular slime, and it had a monster level of 2, meaning I'd get bonus experience points. Most of *DEC's* strategy guides recommended farming this merged slime at the start of a playthrough.

I walked on for another thirty minutes, finally arriving outside the slime room. A few slimes had scattered around the area, with no other adventurers present, and that did wonders for a slime's life span.

Slimes were passive monsters, meaning they wouldn't become aggressive unless attacked. I would have to pull their aggro\* toward myself and lead them into the room.

\*TIPS: Aggro is a measure of hostility a monster builds toward a player. Monsters will attack the player that has built up the most aggro. As such, parties must pay attention to aggro levels during boss fights to prevent monsters from attacking support characters.

*Let's give it a go!* I thought.

I pulled the aggro of three slimes and leaped into the slime room as I'd planned.

"Yes!" I said. "They're starting to merge."

The aqua-blue slimes gathered into one big slime, and a few seconds later, the color changed to a dark blue. It would be quicker now. I'd have to be more careful with this one since merged slimes were active monsters and would attack on sight.

The original slimes weighed two or three kilograms, while the merged slime weighed closer to ten and was twice as big to match. It would attack by bouncing at its target's stomach at tens of kilometers per hour. A direct hit would leave its victim writhing on the ground in agony. In my case, my stomach fat might absorb enough of the blow for it to be painless.



I was cautious, taking my time observing its attack patterns. Thankfully, it followed the same simple pattern as the merged slime in the game, lunging straight toward its target. The next time it did this, I judged its trajectory and shifted my stance to avoid the attack, then hit it with my bat as it passed. Regular slimes would perish after a single hit to their core, but this one needed at least one more strike. That was no problem because it was an easy foe. I was confident I could keep this up and reach level 2 by the end of the day.

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I spent the next several hours using the slime room to farm merged slimes, taking breaks between fights. During my breaks, I walked around the area and didn't find other adventurers hunting merged slimes. In *DEC*, players loved to hunt these monsters as they were easy to kill, unlike other level 2 monsters. Maybe nobody knew about them?

"Woo! A rare drop. Lucky me!"

One of the slain monsters had dropped a brown slime ring that glowed slightly and granted its wearer two extra points to their vitality stat. The resulting HP increase was barely noticeable, but it would still prove useful in the early levels. Despite it being too big to fit on my fat fingers, magic items resized to fit their wearer once equipped, so I had nothing to worry about.

I continued slaying merged slimes, and when I'd killed ten, I leveled up at last.

It was a rather unpleasant process, as I felt my whole body heating up like I had too much to drink and wondered whether I'd made myself ill. But the feeling had subsided, and my body felt light. The movements of my arms and legs felt brisker. My stats had probably risen, though I wouldn't know until I checked at the Adventurers' Guild's measurement office or at the store in the hidden room on the dungeon's tenth floor. Measuring my stats at the measurement office would update the stats in my terminal, so I preferred avoiding it to keep my quick leveling a secret. Although, I doubted whether anyone would bat an eyelid if I went up by just one or two levels.

"Leveling up feels great," I exclaimed. "I feel unstoppable and could get used to this." I then checked the time on my terminal. "Whoa, where did the time go?"

It was already 7:30 p.m. My legs were weary and my stomach empty, so I called it a day and hurried home.

## Chapter 6: Heartache

I trudged along the road home after my first dungeon raid after defeating the merged slimes without exerting too much effort. But the round trip had taken three hours of walking, and my feet were ready to give in.

*Damn you, Piggy, I thought. Couldn't you have tried to get in shape before attending Adventurers' High? What did you think you were signing up for?*

I dragged myself through my front door and took my shoes off. There was nothing more I wanted to do than crawl into bed, though my stomach grumbled its demand for food, and I went into the living room.

Inside, a handsome, kindly man who looked to be in his twenties was eating. On closer inspection, the wrinkles by his eyes and the odd strand of gray hair told me that he was in his forties. He was Piggy's father as well as the owner and manager of "Narumi's General Goods." I'd already summoned Piggy's memories of him, so I'd probably keep up conversationally.

"Souta," he called, "I hear you've been down to the dungeon." He raised an eyebrow as he spoke, sounding genuinely interested. His face was just as expressive as Piggy's sister.

"I have," I replied. "I was just killing slimes, though."

"I wish I could've made a living as an adventurer," he said wistfully. "When you're down there, keep an eye out for anything interesting we can put in the shop window."

Piggy's father had adventuring experience from his youth, and he was currently level 4. To this day, he would still go into the dungeon with his drinking buddies and had even made it to the fourth floor before. That hadn't made him enough money to support a family, and he hadn't been skilled enough to level up further and explore deeper.

Adventuring only paid off if you had talent, he'd said before. He'd still longed for the adventurer's life, and his zeal had driven him to open a little shop selling

adventurer goods. With this, he made the most of his knowledge of the trade and landed where he was now.

Through sips of beer, he grumbled advice at me, saying, “Only the very best can earn a living as an adventurer” and “You had enough talent to get into Adventurers’ High, so make your dad proud.”

He had high hopes for Piggy, but even with my experience from the game, I was all knowledge and no talent.

“I’m gonna try to enjoy the dungeon and the school at my pace,” I said. “And I’ll bring any treasure I find back here to sell, so keep some space free on the shelves.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Aim high, boy! Ha ha ha!”

I had the next two days off from school, so there’d be plenty of time to raid the dungeon. As I was mentally planning my raids, my hands reached for seconds, but I hurriedly drew them back.

“Bro, what’s Adventurers’ High like?” Kano asked. She’d been sitting in the chair next to me, listening eagerly to our conversation, and she pounced at her chance to get the details of my trip.

“What’s it like?” I repeated. “The facilities are amazing.”

“Amazing how?” she asked more enthusiastically. “And what about the dungeon?”

I hadn’t actually used the facilities yet as this was my first day in this world and school. Of course, I’d used them plenty in the game.

“I didn’t get close to the facilities,” I said. “They said we can’t use them until completing orientation next week. And I’ve only been to the dungeon once, so I have little to tell.”

My sister hummed appreciatively and said, “I can’t wait to see the dungeon. I saw some people advertising a dungeon tour in town, but you have to stay behind the guide. They won’t let you fight anything, and I wouldn’t learn anything worthwhile.”

She wanted to learn the ins and outs of the dungeon to help her with her

entrance exam for Adventurers' High next year.

Looking through Piggy's memories, I recalled that the entrance exam measured students' academic skills, athletic abilities, and latent powers.

*Wait, latent powers?* I thought. *Are they like innate skills or unique starter jobs?*

In *DEC*, players could learn skills by reaching high enough job levels in certain jobs. The character creation tool sometimes randomly generated a skill whenever one started the game. An example was Piggy's weird Glutton skill he had from the get-go. While most characters' first job was Newbie, sometimes they could start with a rare job. These weren't always desirable as there was a drawback: Reaching the max job level of 10 as a Newbie awarded the player with an important skill. The Newbie job was unique because players couldn't switch to it from any other job.

I couldn't see the school giving much consideration to either innate skills or different starter jobs in their selection process. A good innate skill provided a slight advantage initially, and the rare starter jobs weren't better or worse than starting out as a Newbie. Both came with advantages and disadvantages. Even if they looked at applicants' innate skills, it baffled me how Piggy had gotten through the supposedly strict exam with his useless Glutton skill and hopelessly unfit body. Was there some secret to Piggy that I wasn't aware of? Maybe he was a child genius.

"Don't worry, Kano, you've got ages to prepare, and I've only been there a day. I'll keep an ear peeled for anything that'll give you a leg up in your exam."

"You mean it?!"

"It's all rigged anyway, isn't it?" our father said, waving his glass of beer with one hand. "You need to know somebody there."

"Bro got in, so networking can't be *that* important," my sister argued.

"You've got me there! Ha ha ha!" our father exclaimed, laughing. He turned to our mother and said, "Pour me another glass, would you?"

"You've had enough, dear," our mother replied. "Go and have your bath, Souta."

I wanted to keep eating but fought the urge and went up to the bathroom. Later, I sank into the tub and massaged my weary feet to get them ready for another dungeon raid the next day. As I bathed, I let my mind wander and thought about this world.

It was strange having a family since I'd been alone my whole life up to this point. I felt perfectly at ease here, like I belonged. Perhaps it was just Piggy feeling this, not me. Even so, I wanted the best for them.

Moreover, I still had no idea how to return to my world. I could not confirm whether my body still existed there or how to log out. I still wasn't sure whether this was a game or real life. It could well be an elaborate virtual world, but the sheer amount of detail made real life the most likely option. Was my knowledge of the game enough to help me live here? I planned to go to the dungeon tomorrow and could gather more information by experimenting while there.

I noticed then that my stomach was empty. *I've only just eaten!* I thought. *How much room do I have down there?*

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I woke up early the following Saturday. After all, it was when Narumi's General Goods was busiest.

My parents were still rushing around the store, checking the goods and getting vouchers to give out. They'd been at it since waking up.

Meanwhile, I did stretches in front of the house while wearing a rucksack filled with everything I'd need for the dungeon. I paid particular attention to stretching my thick legs. Getting cramps inside the dungeon could be fatal. While I grinned in surprise at the flexibility of Piggy's body, I heard a hoarse voice call out to me from behind.

"Morning, Souta. How are you doing?"

I turned around and saw a rugged-looking middle-aged man... He was Tatsu Hayase, the owner of Hayase's Metalware and Kaoru Hayase's father.

"Good morning, Mr. Tatsu."

His wares ranged from everyday goods like pots and kitchen knives to

weapons and other tools for adventurers. He made all these as he was a skilled craftsman. The Hayases and the Narumis had been family friends before Piggy's birth. Tatsu even joined Piggy's father and their friends on their raids in the dungeon. In *DEC*, Tatsu had been a minor character who would come to the player's aid if they had befriended Kaoru Hayase. He was a kind man, even to Piggy.

"Kaoru's practicing her sword fighting techniques in the garden," he said. "Why don't you join her?"

He had good intentions but didn't know how much Kaoru loathed me. It would've been rude to refuse, so I went to greet her.

The Hayases' garden was of the traditional Japanese style and smaller than average. Flowers and trees of all seasons resided there and said trees had their branches artistically pruned. The goldfish pond was a lovely touch as well. Looking at the garden brought up years' worth of memories of Tatsu tending the garden for hours. Evidently, I was growing accustomed to drawing on Piggy's memories.

Kaoru stood in the center of the beautiful garden, diligently swinging her wooden sword. I gazed at her from a short distance away, mesmerized. Although I wasn't sure whether I should disturb her, Kaoru settled the matter by speaking to me first.

"Is that you, Souta?" she asked. "A bit early for you, isn't it? You *do* know it's the weekend, don't you?"

"Hi, Kaoru. I bumped into Mr. Tatsu outside. I thought I'd better come and say hi."

"I see," she said and paused briefly. "I'm afraid I'm busy and am about to head out."

Piggy had addressed her as "Kaoru," so I'd done the same to avoid coming across as unnatural. Not that it did me any favors. She'd been glowering at me from the moment she noticed my presence. Her pretty face, so serene a few moments before, was now scrunched up in irritation.

I'd done what I'd come for, so I turned to run away and resume my stretches.



Before I could do so, a cheerful voice rang out.

“Morning!”

Mr. Tatsu had sent more visitors this way. Among them was Akagi, whose upright posture and bright red hair that glittered in the sunlight gave him a dignified impression far greater than the average first-year high schooler. Sakurako Sanjou, AKA Pinky, scurried in behind him with her voluminous, curly pink hair and adorable skittish movements. Another boy followed them, and I recognized him as Naoto Tachigi. He was intelligent and looked the part with his glasses and middle-parted chin-length dark hair. He was Akagi’s roommate and a major character in the game’s main story, where he acted as the protagonist’s trusty partner.

“There you are, Kaoru,” said Akagi.

“Oh, it’s you, Yuuma,” greeted Kaoru with a broad, happy smile. “I wanted to practice a little before we go to the dungeon.”

She hadn’t been as pleased to see me. But Piggy was there to be hated, so it made sense. It surprised me that they were already on a first-name basis. Akagi’s main character charm was at work, turning strangers into friends in no time.

“Ah?” After the four of them finished their morning greetings, Akagi noticed the interloper standing awkwardly near them. “Oh, you’re, err...” he started, but it seemed he’d forgotten my name. That was fair enough. After all, I hadn’t hung around after the entrance ceremony.

Tachigi leaned over and whispered into Akagi’s ear, meaning he’d at least recognized me.

“Oh, you’re in our class too?” asked Akagi. “We’re about to go to the dungeon. Wanna come with us?”

His friendly tendency to welcome anybody into his group was probably one of the sources of his charisma. It also showed that he sometimes didn’t read the subtleties of social situations. Kaoru and Pinky looked aghast that he’d invited me, but he was oblivious.

I wasn’t sure what I’d done to make Pinky so wary. Maybe it was my

appearance? My awful, sweaty appearance? Yep. Say no more.



Tachigi sensed the problem and acted quickly, saying, “You’re putting him on the spot, Yuuma. Let’s go by ourselves for today.” He’d smoothed out the creases caused by Akagi’s obliviousness—his sole flaw—offending no one.

“Y-Yeah!” Pinky added. “I only brought lunch for four, anyway.” She cradled four lunch bags decorated with bunnies that it looked like she’d prepared.

I’d been planning on raiding the dungeon solo. I worried that, in my unfit state, I’d get in their way if I tagged along. Plus, I wanted to run experiments to test the applicability of my game knowledge, which would go smoother alone.

“Don’t mind me,” I said. “I have things of my own to do. Best of luck!”

“Okay then,” Kaoru said. “I’ll get ready.”

The four of them began chatting about their coming dungeon raid with excitement. Kaoru was beaming with the rest, her enjoyment different from when I’d shown up.

The sight caused my heart to ache, and a voice inside me pleaded, *Don’t lose Kaoru to them. Don’t give up on her.* These emotions didn’t belong to me, indicating Piggy really loved her. But I wished that what remained of Piggy’s heart could see things my way.

Kaoru’s opinion of me was decidedly negative, unlikely to change if I started a fight over her with the handsome protagonist. I’d have better luck forgetting about her and finding love elsewhere than stalking and harassing her, hoping that she’d look my way. That path would lead to my downfall.

I couldn’t deny that Kaoru was a catch. She was both breathtakingly beautiful and adored by all for her kind personality. But the classes of Adventurers’ High had plenty of beautiful girls and handsome boys. Since this world originated from a game, they looked for skill in a partner rather than attractiveness. My best plan would be to find a nice girl of my own while working hard at getting fit and leveling up.

The girl who would become the student council president came to mind. She’d been my favorite heroine in the game, and the idea of pursuing her was appealing. In essence, she was wise, beautiful, rich beyond belief, and a member of the titled nobility. Also, she wanted her future husband to be a

skilled adventurer, and she didn't care what he looked like, how he acted, or how lowly his birth was. In short, she was a prime target for a gold digger and Piggy's best hope of snagging someone with all his faults.

I hadn't come across her yet, but I hoped I'd get the chance to let Piggy's brain get a glimpse of her.

## Chapter 7: Getting Confused

After leaving the Hayase house, I got back to doing stretches.

Once I'd warmed up, I packed a lunch box and a flask of water into my rucksack and revisited the slime room. Despite a couple of close scrapes, I made good progress slaying the merged slimes and even found another slime ring. I took a break to grab my lunch after training for a while.

The player could only equip one ring on each hand, as only two slots were available. As an experiment, I put all three on my fingers and could equip them all. It wasn't clear whether I benefited from the triple effect as my stats didn't update in real time.

Now that I knew discrepancies in the game's mechanics existed, I'd have to perform more experiments and research to understand what carried over. I could start my research by taking out some of the many books in the Adventurers' Guild library written about the dungeon on my way home.

At that point, I noticed again that I was the sole adventurer there and realized the slime room was out of reach. It stood off in the corner of the four square kilometers of the dungeon's first level map, and adventurers would have to turn down several forks in the path to arrive. Given the sheer number of adventurers down here, it was odd none of them had found their way to the room.

The stairs to the second level were quicker to reach from the portal, so perhaps everyone wanting to fight level 2 monsters preferred the more desirable path to the stairs. While merged slimes and goblins that spawned on the second level were worth the same amount of experience points, merged slimes were easier to kill with a high probability of dropping slime rings, which were rare items. It appeared more likely that nobody else knew about the slime room.

Of course, it suited me just fine that I had the place to myself; slaying merged slimes wouldn't be as easy with a horde of other adventurers crammed into this room.

I ate the few scraps of calorie-deprived food I'd packed for lunch, then leaned back and relaxed since no active monsters were around. Once I'd finished my meal, I got back to slaying slimes.

After another two hours—

“Yes, level 3!”

There was a brief spell of dizziness until I felt energized. I gave my bat a swing to test it out, and I could swing it much faster now.

*Ooooh yeah!*

I couldn't tell how high my job level had climbed, but it was less than level 7. It would've been great if I could check my live stats.

Adventurers with the Newbie job could learn the active skill\* Basic Appraisal at job level 7 and the passive skill\* Plus Three Skill Slots at job level 10, the highest level.

\*TIPS: Active skills only have an effect when the player activates them.

\*TIPS: Passive skills are always active so long as players save them in one of their skill slots.

As the name suggested, Basic Appraisal enabled users to appraise their skills and items. There were plenty of rare skills and items found in the deeper levels of the dungeon that Basic Appraisal wouldn't work on. It became invaluable because it could appraise most things early in the game. You could also use it to appraise other people and monsters, but the results were vague. The skill measured their strength relative to yours, with readouts like “slightly stronger” or “very weak” but only stated how many skills they had and not what they were. You also had to be careful when you used it as your target would realize that you were appraising them; spying on people's abilities was a good way to start a fight.

The other Newbie skill, Plus Three Skill Slots, was incredibly useful in DEC's gameplay. The skill slots players had limited the number of skills they could



learn, so those who wanted an array of skills needed to increase said skill slot capacity. Players started the game with just two slots and gained an extra one with every ten levels. At level 3, I only had a limit of two skills. Those with full skill slots who wanted to learn a new skill would have to erase an existing one. I planned to do that with my Glutton skill, which I suspected was the cause of my weight and unusual appetite. Plus Three Skill Slots, however, gave players more slots to play with. Newbie wasn't the only job with a skill that opened up more slots, but skill management posed challenges even with slot-increasing skills. As such, Newbie's Plus Three Skill Slots was a must-have.

"Right," I said. "Do I want to go up to the second floor or continue killing slimes?"

Being at level 3 meant I'd receive fewer experience points for killing level two merged slimes. Farming slimes here was simple, and other adventurers probably filled the second floor.

"Plus," I argued aloud, "I don't fancy bumping into those four up there."

Kaoru's group had talked about raiding the second floor. Running into them would defeat the purpose of turning down Akagi's offer; the rest didn't want me around to spoil their fun.

And so, I settled on sticking to the slime room until I reached level 4.

I stayed until the evening, racking up a score of a hundred and four merged slime kills and obtaining five slime rings. I put all five on my right hand as a test but sensed nothing different about myself except for a new flush of embarrassment—excessive bling didn't suit me. I'd never put much thought into my appearance in the game, focusing only on my stats, but I'd have to pay more attention in this world.

I could've stayed a bit longer, but I decided to leave the dungeon at this point and headed to the Adventurers' Guild building to hit the books.

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I entered the first floor of the guild skyscraper complex. Besides registration for new adventurers, this floor also housed markets to trade items, raw materials, magic gems, and other goods. Adventurers returning from raids and

others in dungeon-related professions crowded the area. I estimated there were a thousand people in here, and it was like the seafood market at peak time.

None of the pamphlets I picked up from the traders' stalls listed the rates for slime rings. I considered putting them up for auction but knew they weren't valuable, so I decided to gift them to my family.

Turning my back to the market, I got on the elevator and pressed the button for the eighteenth floor, where the library was. Inside was an elegant room with a vaulted ceiling and luxurious wood pattern walls. A famous European library had apparently inspired the opulent design.

Bearers of an Adventurers' Pass could freely browse or borrow any books here. The selection on offer put the average public library to shame, and it did not limit itself to texts relating to the dungeon.

I walked along the rows of shelves searching for books about the dungeon, admiring with a little surprise the quality of the mats on the floor, which muffled my footsteps.

I spotted a book titled *An Illustrated Guide to the Monsters Found in the Japanese Dungeon*, which I picked out and opened. It had been released two years ago, and according to the table of contents, it cataloged the monsters from the first twenty-nine dungeon floors with additional information and pictures. Further research was necessary on monsters from higher floors due to insufficient exploration.

*The twenty-ninth floor?* I thought, surprised. *That's not even in the middle section!*

The game had floors one to thirty, which were the early section; thirty-one to sixty were the middle; and everything higher was the depths. The twenty-ninth floor was still in the early section. For reference, floors ninety to one hundred had been my hunting grounds in the game.

*Now that I think about it, barely any of DEC's NPCs\* had been high-level adventurers.*

\*TIPS: NPCs stand for non-playable characters. This refers to characters in a game world that human players don't control and that act according to preprogrammed instructions.

Assuming that the front lines of dungeon exploration were around the thirtieth floor in this world, members of the clans raiding these areas would be around level 30. That was a big difference to the game's frontline players, who were generally level 90, but this didn't detract from this world's adventurers' skill. Death in *DEC*'s dungeon would strip players of their items and respawn them in a weakened state at the portal. In this world, death was final if a party member did not know a resurrection spell. Without the need to fear suffering pain, exhaustion, or death, players could face the mightiest bosses with a smile. It was logical that adventurers from this world planned their dungeon raids to minimize the risks involved. The two just weren't comparable.

*There's a chance this world might be based on the pre-DLC day one version of the game as well, I thought.*

At launch, the game's level cap was level 30. The NPCs in that game version hadn't been close to that level cap in any of the storylines. Piggy hadn't reached level 10 when they expelled him in the main story's second half. In the early days, players had rarely raided deeper into the dungeon than the fortieth floor. Subsequent DLCs raised the level cap to level 90 and added jobs, quests, and items. It was reasonable to conclude there were few expeditions past the thirtieth floor because this world was the same as the pre-DLC game.

Up to this point, I'd assumed that this world was a copy of the latest version of the game and that the level cap was at level 90. In that case, the best character builds were balanced ones with equal proficiency in weapons and magic.

If the level cap were 30, and only the items and jobs from the base game were available, it would be best to specialize as either a combat or support character. There were several reasons for this, the foremost being that the base game had limits on the number of jobs and skill slots.

*I'm gonna have to investigate what the max level is, I thought. But the dev's email clearly said there was an update, so would it make sense for things to roll back to the max-level 30 days of the game?*

There were several ways I could test my hypothesis. If I could find even a single DLC-exclusive item, job, area, or monster, I'd be able to at least rule out that this world was the base game. I'd have to dive a little deeper into the dungeon.

Afterward, I picked up a job encyclopedia that had "latest edition" written on it and found the publication date on the back cover, which was last year. Jobs could be divided into five categories based on power: starter, basic, intermediate, advanced, and expert. I could determine whether the DLC applied in this world by checking how many of the five categories were present. There hadn't been a single expert job included in the base game, so finding one in this encyclopedia would show at least one DLC was in effect.

I immediately got to work skimming the table of contents. Newbie was the only starter job listed. For basic jobs, there were Fighter, Caster, and Thief. None of the DLCs had changed or added jobs to these two categories. In the third category, intermediate, the book listed Warrior, Archer, Priest, Wizard, and...nothing else. Just those four? The fourth category of advanced jobs listed only Holy Woman and Samurai. None of these jobs were DLC additions. Still, the encyclopedia was missing jobs that were in the base game. At launch, *DEC* featured Knight and Warrior Mage as intermediate jobs while Assassin and Berserker were advanced jobs. I flicked through the pages but found no references to the missing jobs.

Why could that be? Did nobody know about them, or was their existence kept a secret? Governments and international agencies would seek to cover up information to avoid it falling into the hands of marauding adventurers, dropouts, and terrorists.

The encyclopedia entry on Newbie struck me as odd. Basically, the entry recommended adventurers switch to an intermediate job at the first opportunity because of the few benefits. There was no reference to the Plus Three Skill Slots skill available when one reached the max job level of 10 in the Newbie job. Adventurers without it would have a tough time in the long run, so

how could the book ignore such an important skill?

Next, I picked up an encyclopedia of skills and scanned the table of contents once more, and I spotted Basic Appraisal but not Plus Three Skill Slots. I searched for references to the advanced jobs of Samurai and Holy Woman, finding no instructions about how to get those jobs or the skills they unlocked. This encyclopedia's publication date was also a year ago, yet the information presented within was severely lacking. The publisher had been bold to label it an encyclopedia at all.

I picked ten more books off the shelves, but each and every one recycled the same gap-ridden information.

The lesson learned from my library research was that this world was based on the base game, as I'd failed to find any reference to DLC additions. Even if that were the case, the documents here were far from complete. Was it sensible to conclude that no DLC additions existed because of no written record in these books? My confidence was fading fast.

Whatever the case, there was no reason to jump to a conclusion there and then. I could take my time gathering information during my dungeon raids and explorations to fill in the gaps and reveal the truth.

I could continue this mission tomorrow by checking whether Manual Activation worked for skills. This skill activation method was not in the base game, so if it worked I could prove the presence of DLCs. I was going to be a busy man.

TIPS: Below is a list of jobs. Entries in parentheses are jobs not yet known to this world.

Starter job: Jobs that the player starts with.

Newbie.

Basic job: Jobs that one can reach from a starter job. Some characters may start the game with one of these jobs.

Fighter, Caster, Thief.

Intermediate job: Jobs available after reaching a certain job level in a basic job.

Warrior, Priest, Archer, Wizard, (Knight), (Warrior Mage).

Advanced job: These jobs may become available after reaching a certain job level in an intermediate job or may require the character to have an aptitude for the job.

Holy Woman, Samurai, (Assassin), (Berserker).

Expert job: The final stage of jobs. There is only one expert job, Weaponmaster, which is the job Piggy used before arriving in this world.

(Weaponmaster).

## Chapter 8: Experimenting with Skills

The next day was a bright, sunny Sunday with a cool southerly wind that rattled my windows.

I'd suffered hay fever in my previous world, so the bright sunshine and strong winds had come with a snively nose and itchy eyes. As Piggy, however, I could enjoy this time of year without those depressing symptoms.

Kaoru and the others had set off for the dungeon first thing in the morning.

At the start of the game, the player had many students to choose from to include in their party. Akagi had honed in on the top picks: Kaoru, Pinky, and Tachigi. This grouping was well-suited to tackle the main story, side stories, and events. He clearly had a discerning eye and would need all the help he could get since he'd accepted Kariya's challenge. Becoming strong enough to defeat Kariya in a mere month was a tough feat, but I hoped he could pull it off. Failure would make Class E a gloomy place.

The remnants of Piggy's sentimental mind had a more irritated take as he whined, *Why didn't they invite me?!* I took a deep breath to banish the thoughts to focus on what I was about to do: a test inside the magic field.

I walked toward the magic field area of the school and passed watchful security guards as I entered through the main gate. Several students still came to school over the weekend to attend club activities, so I looked for a quiet spot. On the way to the second playing field, I found a bench and stopped there. I was sure this area was inside the magic field.

The reason I was here was to perform an experiment on my skills. Though I had Glutton in one of my skill slots, a player could use three other skills without taking up any slots. These were Minor Restoration, Torch, and Aura.

Minor Restoration was a healing skill that scaled with the mind stat, but it only healed minor wounds and drained a lot of mana. It was a worthless skill. A player with a high enough mind stat was better off learning the more powerful



Restoration skill. With my current mind score, Minor Restoration would drain nearly all my mana just to fix a hangnail. Such a thing wouldn't even bother me.

Torch created a small sphere of light in your palm that illuminated your surroundings. This one was worthless too. Coming prepared with a flashlight made more sense than wasting valuable mana.

And then there was Aura. One of Kariya's cronies had used it when they intimidated Class E. Aura's intended use was to ward off lower level monsters, though it was effective against people. Plenty of idiots liked to overuse the skill to menace people, which had garnered it the nickname "Dumbass Detector."

I'd chosen Torch as the subject of my experiment by process of elimination. There were no ailments I needed to heal unless Piggy's mind counted as a hangnail, and using Aura might startle the people nearby. The Glutton skill I'd had from the beginning was likely a passive skill that was always in effect, so I couldn't use that for the test either. With that decided, I was ready to start the experiment, but—

"Hang on... How do I activate it again?"

While playing the game, players could activate one of their saved skills by pressing a shortcut button on their controller glove. That did not apply to my current situation. Nevertheless, I tried to will the skill into activating, just like when I'd practiced firing off a Kamehameha in elementary school. It hadn't worked then, and it didn't work now.

"Haa... Hoo-ha!!!"

Nothing was happening, and I was getting frustrated. I was supposed to be good at the game! How could I get skills to work?

I couldn't craft a solution, so I went to the library and borrowed a book called *An Idiot's Guide to Activating Skills*. The image on the cover offended me, but the book had pictures and seemed easy to follow.

The guide explained that the first step to activating most skills was to learn how to feel magic. It was apparently simple to draw magic from magical items, and the book recommended using one that released only small amounts of magic.

I rummaged through a shop in the Adventurers' Guild for one that fit the bill and came across a magical item shaped like a flashlight that shone when active.

"So pressing this switch makes it shine," I said. "I've got that, but how do I get the magic to flow out?"

I disassembled the item to figure out how it worked on the inside. Inside the casing, a small magic gem and a metal plate a few centimeters wide had an inscribed magic circle. The magic circle's function was probably to convert magical energy into light.

Thus, I scratched off a section of the circle and pressed the button, hoping that I'd broken the circuit. As I suspected, magic flowed from the gem. It was impossible to tell by looking, but when I pressed the gem, I could feel an unpleasant tingling like electricity.

"Huh," I said. "So it's completely invisible. Okay, so I need to reproduce this effect myself. Haa... Hoo-ha!!!"

I couldn't help but strain myself as I tried to get it to work. Yet again, I ended up shouting like I was trying to fire off a Kamehameha.

A student laughed at me as she walked by.

*Oops, ha ha.*

As I picked the book back up, I noticed the illustration of a monkey calmly emitting magic from its body and reread the instructions beneath it. I didn't think I'd get it, even with pictures to help... I fixed the magic circle I'd broken earlier and pressed the button on the flashlight to see what would happen.

"It just turns on..." I murmured.

Patiently, I spent the next few minutes using trial and error to activate the skill while repeatedly exposing myself to the tingling magic and switching the flashlight on and off. I knew there was magic in this world, and the nine mana points displayed on my terminal's stats screen showed I definitely had some in me.

*Believe in yourself!* I thought. *Hoorah!*

I was just going in circles, though. Before, I'd been trying to force the magic

out. Now, I tried to mimic the monkey more closely, waving my hands as if I were allowing something inside my body to pass through to the outside world. When I did, I felt some force gathering in the palms of my hands even though I wasn't using the magical item. It didn't tingle like the flashlight had, but I knew I had something.

"Is this my magic?" I said. "Let's see if..."

This time, I focused on the word Torch when I let out my magic. A puff of sparkles whirled above my hands and resolved into a small glowing ball, dimmer than a miniature light bulb.

"I did it! Woo-hoo!" *Oops, not so loud*, I thought. People glared at me again, though they should forgive my excitement. Hitting slimes with a bat had only felt a little good. But casting magic made me feel like I'd truly come to a fantasy world, and I was thrilled.

It was time to test whether I could use Manual Activation on the skill.

The method I'd used a moment ago was Auto Activation. In the game, players could map some of their active skills to a shortcut button on their controller. The ease of use, a single button press, was its biggest advantage. However, this method had a longer cooldown period, larger mana consumption, and limited players to mapping four skills.

Players could also perform certain motions to create magic circles in the air with their fingers to activate skills. This method was called Manual Activation. The game detected these motions using the glove controller and the motion capture camera placed in front of the player. Advanced skills required complex motions that involved the whole body and took a long time to complete, increasing the chances of making a mistake. However, a successful activation greatly reduced the cooldown timer and mana consumption, which made this a valuable weapon in a player's arsenal. Few skills called upon simple motions, so it was a no-brainer to learn these by heart.

Advanced techniques using Manual Activation were invaluable in PVP and boss fights. For example, a player could use "skill chain" to blend the start of a skill with the end of another. There was also "fake skill," which referred to performing the skill motion correctly without actually activating the skill.

For these reasons, Manual Activation was one of *DEC*'s core mechanics and gave players a great deal of freedom in their use of skills. Despite that, there were no instructions on how to use Manual Activation within the game itself. Players would learn how to perform the motions by looking up information on websites, but not every skill was public, and a handful of players knew select skills.

Overall, players used both activation methods in any fight as they each had advantages and drawbacks.

At any rate, I was ready to test Manual Activation. Torch was a magic skill, so activating it required drawing a magic circle rather than performing a motion. I started by waving my hand across an imaginary board in the air in front of me to create Torch's magic circle and an inverted triangle on top of it. After a few attempts, I realized I needed to channel magic throughout the procedure rather than in one burst at the end. When I finally got it to work, there was the same glittering effect as when I'd used Auto Activation, and the light was more powerful.

For my next experiment, I relocated to a far-off section of the dungeon's first floor, choosing a spot where I'd be alone.

In the game, players could only use Manual and Auto Activation on skills in their skill slots or the three starter skills. I wanted to test whether I could activate a skill I hadn't yet learned.

"Which one should I try?" I said. "Let's start with Summoning Magic."

In one movement, I drew a complex series of geometric objects in the air. I'd practiced my ass off learning this skill when I'd played the game, but got rid of it to free up a skill slot.

"You shall be my first pet! I summon you, Jörmungandr!!!"

The magic Jörmungandr skill summoned a giant, divine serpent. It had a high resistance to magic and physical attacks with a powerful debuff skill that lowered the level of every monster around it. It had a monster level of 75. I could waltz down the dungeon's middle section if I summoned it.

As I'd expected, the summoning skill didn't activate. Nothing was wrong with

the magic circle, but the magic I'd channeled hadn't flowed through. Perhaps I was too low level or had too little mana. The most likely reason for failure was that I hadn't mapped Jörmungandr to a skill slot. It had been worth a shot.

I moved on to attempt a motion-activated skill.

"Magic Lance is the skill I used most in the game," I said aloud. "But I might as well try a mace skill and get some use out of this bat."

Without putting too much thought into it, I performed the same complex, dance-like motions I'd done many times before in the game, aiming at a nearby slime. This was a skill that was learnable from the expert job Weaponmaster.

"Void Slice!!!"

Void Slice was an attack that a player could only activate with a large sword or a mace. It propelled a high-density burst of aura in front of its user, damaging all within a certain radius.

"What?! It worked?! Ugh, I feel tired..."

When the skill activated, there was a thunderous, destructive noise, and my vision turned entirely red. Immediately after, my stamina drained away, and my head hurt. As this skill scaled on my strength stat and the quality of my weapon, none of the slimes in the attack radius died, although some received damage.

The bat crumbled into dust in my hands, and my mana dropped below zero, causing me to pass out on the spot.

On Monday morning, news spread in the school of a group that saved me from a group of slimes that had knocked me out. The student council officially designated me the weakest adventurer in the school's history.

## Chapter 9: Piggy, the Weakest Adventurer Ever

“Soutaaa!” my mother called from downstairs. “Kaoru’s come to get you!”

Somehow, Piggy had arranged with his childhood friend Kaoru to travel to school together during their middle school days, and she was continuing to honor this promise at Adventurers’ High.

*You’ve got this gorgeous girl to come pick you up every day? I thought. You’re one lucky bastard, Piggy.*

I threw my uniform on and leaped down the stairs. Kaoru was waiting with her arms crossed, not wearing her irritation openly on her face, but not doing much to hide it.

“I’ve been waiting for ages, Souta,” she complained. “Whatever. Let’s go.”

“Sure thing,” I replied.

Kaoru spun on her heels, sending her hair flying up, and walked briskly. I hurried up next to her, thinking we’d walk side by side, but she started walking faster to keep a space between us. So I got the hint and lowered my pace to fall in behind her, not saying anything. Why did she bother to come and get me at all if she disliked being with Piggy? School was only a few hundred meters away, and there wouldn’t be enough time for a proper conversation. I didn’t question it because sharing the commute with her was enough of a blessing.

However, something else I found strange was the way she kept stealing glances at me. It was easy to notice; she was walking ahead of me, so she had to turn around to see me, and every time I met her gaze, she’d swivel her head back to the road ahead. Maybe our love had rekindled? Probably not, but the thought kept me entertained as we walked through the town.

The spring air was chilly that morning, just the right temperature for my sweaty, plump body. The streets were almost empty. A couple of cleaners swept away the cherry blossoms that had fallen from the now almost bare cherry trees planted along the road. We didn’t encounter many other students

passing through the front gate on their way to school since most lived in the dorms.

I approached the shoe lockers and put my shoes inside. Something was moving about this moment. It marked the true beginning of my high school life. Or my *second* high school life, at least.

However, I realized that a group of kids stared at me while whispering to each other. Had I forgotten to fix my bedhead? I followed Kaoru into our classroom while combing my hair with my hand.

“Hey!” one of my classmates called out to me. “Heard you lost to a slime!”

“A slime?” I repeated.

“Yeah. You lost to a slime on the dungeon’s first level and had to get rescued.”

He was half-right. They had rescued me from the dungeon last night after I got hit by multiple slimes. I’d woken up in a bed in the Adventurers’ Guild’s infirmary. My thick layers of body fat had absorbed most of the blows and prevented serious damage, so they’d let me check out as soon as I recovered.

Incidentally, I overheard a staff member complain, “It was a task and a half getting you onto that bed.” But anyway...

“Wait, you all know about that?” I asked.

“Someone from another class saw the rescue team carrying you out,” someone answered. “It’s all over the school!”

“How’d you lose to a slime in the first place?” a student said. “It’s pathetic. Even little kids can get the better of them!”

“For real, though!” another agreed. “How useless can you be?! Ha ha ha!”

A slime hadn’t beaten me. I’d just tried out a challenging move to see whether it would work, which it had. Then, it sucked me dry of mana, blacked out my vision, and knocked me out.

However, I couldn’t confess to any of that without revealing my knowledge from the game that nobody else appeared to grasp. Intel like that could get me on a hit list. After all, this was a dangerous world where terrorists ran amok.

The class would think I was crazy, but I didn't want that either.

I devised a bland excuse to put the conversation to bed and said, "Oh, I, err... I just wasn't in top form that day. Ha ha."

My classmates weren't about to let me off the hook that easily, though.

"C'mon, I know you've got the worst grades in the year group, but this is ridiculous!" one jeered. "You're gonna give Class E a bad name!"

"Yeah, tell him!" another joined in. "And is it just me, or does he stink as well?"

"Yeah, and he looks like a pig too," a third said. "I know, we'll call you Piggy from now on."

"Piggy?!" someone else repeated, clutching their stomach as they laughed.

*Shit, I'm a laughingstock!* I thought. *This is so embarrassing.*

Was this the reason for Kaoru's repeated glances at me during our walk to school? Now that I thought about it, she'd expressed a hint of scorn. I wished she'd given me a heads-up. Although the cat had been out of the bag, it wouldn't have changed anything.

Also, the class had come up with the Piggy nickname earlier than they had in the game. Did this mean that not everything followed DEC's story? Sooner or later, they would've started calling me Piggy.

I felt stumped about why the skill became active since I hadn't assigned Void Slicer to a skill slot and had less mana than the amount required. Plus, the summoning skill Jörmungandr *hadn't* worked, so what was going on?

I still hunched over at my desk and thought about the experiment until Murai arrived.

"Sit down," he said. "It's time for homeroom." He then drew up an itinerary for the day on the whiteboard. "First, you're all going to introduce yourselves. Then there's an orientation session, where you'll know how your classes will work here and how to use the school facilities. After that I'll tell you how to enter the dungeon..." Murai paused and looked at me. "Although, I hear one of you beat me to it."



The class erupted into laughter.

“Right, onto the introductions,” he continued. “Hmm, let’s start with the person closest to the hall door and work around.”

While most Adventurers’ Middle School students went on to Classes A to D, those from Class E were external candidates from various middle schools. In at least one case, one came from an office job in another world.

I decided to run through what I knew about the students from *DEC* as the class introduced themselves.

The first to start was the leader of the pack.

“I’m Yuuma Akagi. I went to a place called Higashi Middle School in Tokyo. I fight with a one-handed sword and want to become a Warrior one day.”

This attractive boy with short, red hair was *DEC*’s protagonist, Akagi. With enough training, he could get the special Hero job, which was extremely powerful. However, most players stopped using him as a character after the DLCs had made it possible to make even stronger custom character builds. Akagi was still strong and had exceptionally high stats. He was the character I’d have to keep an eye on because his choices could stir up the game’s most dangerous events.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Sakurako Sanjou. I come from Hokkaido and want to be a Priest. I can use both blunt weapons and staffs.”

Sanjou, AKA Pinky, was one of *DEC*’s heroines and a fan favorite. She had soft and fluffy hair and was a little plump, but training in the dungeon would soon see her mature into a striking girl with a perfect hourglass figure. One of the DLCs allowed players to use her as the protagonist, adding multiple storylines and the ability to date the game’s handsome male cast. After completing enough quests, she could get the Holy Woman job. In Boys’ Love mode, she could become a Sorcerer. As you’d expect from a protagonist, her stats were incredibly high, and she could go on to be a powerful character, even more than Akagi. You wouldn’t think it by looking at her adorable appearance.

“Pleased to meet you all. I’m Naoto Tachigi, and I’m from Chiba. I want to be a Wizard.”

Tachigi was Akagi's roommate in the student dorms. He came from a samurai family whose pedigree shaped his attitude, which often caused people to think of him as cold. They were mistaken to believe that, though. He was as friendly and thoughtful a boy as they came. Many female fans drooled over the shipping between the lively Akagi and the more reserved Tachigi. Players with female characters could also develop a romance with him.

"It's nice to meet you all. I'm Kaoru Hayase. I'm from Kanagawa, and I want to become a Warrior. I'm best with a sword."

Kaoru was another heroine whose beauty and abilities were ultra-high specifications. Piggy had been the villain for her route, and he was expelled from school, so I needed to monitor her progression. She lived next door to Piggy and was also engaged to him. Although she hated Piggy, she often found herself with him, like on the way to school. I still couldn't quite figure out how close a relationship they had, and I wasn't planning on sexually harassing her like the game's Piggy. As such, I hoped for improvement in our relationship.

The more pressing concern was her effect on the remnants of Piggy's mind, as it would weep in anguish every time I saw Kaoru and Akagi getting along. I needed to find some consistent way to relieve that feeling, or the negativity would infect my mind.

But there was someone I needed to keep an eye on for an entirely different reason.

"Kotone...Kuga. From Aichi. I'll use a shortsword and a bow. I want to be an Archer."

She was a quest character integral to the "Kuga's Revolt" main quest. Her bob cut made her look like an ordinary, unassuming Japanese girl. Kotone was actually an American-born secret agent working for a US secret service division who'd transferred into the school with a false identity. After progressing her storyline, the game forced players to choose between working with her to defeat a terrorist group or taking her down for stealing state secrets. At this point in time, the safest thing to do was to keep my distance from her.

There was a reason why all the students so far had spoken about getting intermediate jobs rather than advanced jobs. Only a handful of this world's best

adventurers had gotten expert jobs, which wasn't a realistic goal for most students.

Of course, there was always an exception.

"I am Hiroto Majima, the eldest son and heir of Katsuyuki Majima, who is head of a semi-noble samurai family in Niigata. My weapon is a sword, and I shall get the Samurai job! I'm looking for support roles to join my party!" He looked in my direction and said, "That doesn't mean you."

His insult made it more likely that nobody else would let me into their party, so I'd have to clear my name somehow. He came from a samurai family, and taking on someone from this society's upper class would require care.

Next up was a girl that I was fond of.

"My name is Satsuki Oomiya, and I'm from Kochi. I plan to use either grimoires or maces as my weapons, and I want to become a Wizard. Let's all do our best!"

She was a cute, petite girl who wore her hair in two braids on either side that she'd tied up at the ends. In the game, she'd acted as the class's unofficial representative, trying to unite the students of Class E against the discrimination of other classes. Her actions caught the eyes of upper-class students and the various student factions, causing her downfall. Would she suffer the same fate in this world?

The session proceeded, with handsome guys and pretty girls standing up to introduce themselves. I stood out like a sore thumb against the almost exclusively attractive lineup of Class E, but self-consciousness would only bring me down.

My turn came last. I hadn't decided what job I wanted yet, so I thought about what to say and settled on Priest. That would make the most sense with my stats.

"I'm Souta Narumi from Kanagawa. I'm using a bat as my weapon, and I want to be a Priest. All the best!" I made a sideways peace sign, hoping to score a laugh, but a round of mean whispers occurred.

"A bat, really?"

“So that’s the weakest adventurer ever.”

“I heard he lost to a slime.”

“What else would you expect from a Piggy?”

*Hey, what’s my nickname got to do with it?! I thought and heaved a sigh.*  
*What a great start to my high school life...*

“All right,” Murai said. “We can start the orientation now. Follow me and stick with the group.”

He would take us on a tour of the school’s facilities. A glimpse through the classroom window was enough proof that the school boasted several facilities. Excited to see what he’d show us, I joined the rest of the class and followed Murai as he marched us across the school grounds.

There was much to see. Adventurers’ High focused on academic study as much as on dungeon raids. They’d invested significant sums into special classrooms for study, music, and cooking, as well as teaching materials, scientific equipment, and audiovisual educational aids. All this made the public high school I’d gone to in my Japan look like cheapskates. The recording studio alone must’ve cost a fortune.

The government’s sizable budget allowed the school to have a liberal spending policy. Plus, a never-ending flow of donations from private enterprises in bed with the bureaucrats caused the institution’s expenditure to be higher than the average school.

“Be sure to keep on top of your studies,” Murai said as he showed us these rooms. “If you focus on just the dungeon, you won’t get promoted to the higher classes.” After that rousing bit of advice, he led us out of the main school building to inspect the facilities outside.

When he’d said promotion, he referred to the school’s system that allowed students to change classes at the end of the first and second halves of the year based on their grades in the dungeon and classwork. If a student’s grades were good enough, they could move up to Classes D or C by the end of the year, even if they started in Class E. However, students could only get promoted to a class one level higher than their current one. Reaching Class A from Class E start

would require promotions at four of the six opportunities over the three years of enrollment. Conversely, poor grades could result in class demotion.

Graduating from Adventurers' High in Class A would grant instant admission to Adventurers' University, so promotion was highly sought-after by the students of Class E. This undertaking would require a tremendous amount of work. The students of Class E would have to catch up to the skill level of higher classes despite the lack of dungeon experience. Someone like me with knowledge of the game might stand a chance, but that was a huge barrier for the other Class E students.

While I was thinking about that, we reached a building whose size dwarfed everything else.

"This is the arena," Murai explained. "It's inside the magic field and can withstand damage from practicing skills. There's all sorts of blunted weapons and metal tools inside for you to use. Remember that you must file a request when you want to use it."

Students could practice their skills and spar against each other in this area. While students could do this outside, they needed to ensure they didn't accidentally damage school property when they unleashed powerful skills. Murai added that practicing here was essential to advance to Adventurers' University or participate in the Arena Tournament. Proficiency in fights was vital, but I planned to focus on leveling up since that would increase my strength at my low level.

Next, Murai took us to a room that smelled faintly of medicine. "This is the infirmary," he said. "On weekdays, there'll always be at least one teacher with the Priest job stationed here who can treat injuries and illnesses with the magic Medium Restoration skill. Come here if you ever hurt yourself in a dungeon raid or during training."

A handsome young Priest smiled and waved at us.

Injuries during training were probably commonplace. The weapons might be blunt to make them safer, but smacking someone with them would still do damage. Medium Restoration was powerful enough to restore one or two missing fingers, so I had great faith in the infirmary's capabilities. I preferred

never needing them.

Upon leaving the infirmary, Murai led us to a road lined with various factories. One of the buildings had weapons of every kind propped up against the walls, and in the back of the room were several air hammers and equipment for forging metal. This factory's purpose was probably to refine steel and dungeon-mined metals and manufacture weapons.

"The factories here develop and research weapons, equipment, and magical items," Murai explained. "Outside agencies also operate a few food stands here, so be on your best behavior when you come through."

Apparently, we could negotiate with the factory's blacksmiths if we brought raw materials for any equipment order. I'd considered this if I found good materials on my raids since some metals in the dungeon had imbued magic. Still, I wanted to know my other options to get the best value for money. Some shops in the guild accepted orders for making new weapons. I could also trade materials for weapons and equipment in hidden shops in the dungeon once I'd reached a high enough level. Perhaps I could put in requests with Mr. Tatsu if I became close friends with Kaoru, but that one wasn't really an option.

"The factories also lend weapons out to students," Murai continued, "so if you don't own one yet, stop by later to borrow one. You won't find any top-notch weapons lying around here, but they're good enough to get you through the first ten floors of the dungeon."

This privilege was perfect timing for me since my bat had broken in the dungeon the day before. I glanced at the weapons and noticed they had swords and maces of various sizes and weights. Their quality seemed quite good, and it would make more sense to borrow one here than to risk money on a lousy purchase in a shop.

Murai escorted us away from the factories and toward the school's club building. The building housed rooms set apart for club activities and training facilities. Like the rest of the school, the money that had gone into it was staggering. Corporate logos nearly covered everything in sight, advertising the sponsors that had provided the school with training machines, weapons, and funding.

“You’ll find that all the club activities in this school center around the dungeon,” Murai explained. “Each club focuses on a specific weapon or job, so if there’s a job you want to learn more about or a weapon you want to improve at, you should join a club. There’ll be a club fair this weekend, so you should go and think about which one you want to join if you’re interested.”

I remembered that there was a club for archery and two clubs for swordcraft, the First Swordcraft Club and Second Swordcraft Club, which had different sponsors and were home to rival cliques. Clubs had been prime spots for many in-game events, but I didn’t think I’d join any because I wanted to spend as much time as I could raiding the dungeon. I was enrolling in the best club: the go-home club! The real reason for not joining was to avoid bullying and fights. There were benefits to clubs, but I didn’t want to suffer those nasty experiences. I’d let the protagonist do that for me.

Our last stop was the dungeon portal. The school had all its facilities built around the portal to make the most of the magic field, which had a radius of one hundred and fifty meters. Students needed to pass through the Adventurers’ Guild ticket barriers to access the dungeon. One could get close to the portal within the school grounds, but entry was impossible without passing through security.

“If any of you haven’t yet registered for your Adventurer’s Pass at the guild,” Murai said, “fill in this form so we can print them out now.”

So it turned out that I could’ve gotten my Adventurer’s Pass without going to the guild. That was fine. It had let me get into the dungeon a couple of days early.

“Right,” said Murai, looking down at his watch. “Now’s a good time to take a break for lunch.” He pointed across to a building. “That’s the cafeteria. Be sure to buy the coupon book if you want to eat there regularly.”

The restaurant had outdoor seats, and the entrance to the cafeteria was already bustling with students. They chatted among themselves and inspected the menus posted outside.

Obeying the grumbling orders of my stomach, I walked over and took a peek at the menu. The daily special was only two hundred and eighty yen... And it

came with unlimited rice and miso soup?!

*I might stop packing lunch if a couple hundred yen can get me a meal that big!*  
I thought. My stomach growled in approval.

“We’ll reconvene in the square in front of the Adventurers’ Guild at 1 p.m. I want you to split yourselves up into groups of three to five people before your lunch break is over,” added Murai.

It was standard practice in dungeon raids to form a party with other adventurers in case anything happened, such as setting off a dangerous trap or being ambushed by monsters. But with all the rumors about me floating around, would anyone invite me to do that? I pricked up my ears to eavesdrop on the conversations around me.

“Anyone wanna party up with me?” one person asked. “I want two combat roles and two supports.”

“Hey, everyone, I need a group!” another said. “I can use Magic Arrow!”

“We want one more combat and a support role,” a third said, “and we’d prefer people with the Search skill. Any takers?”

“Hey, you. Wanna join me?”

“Ooh, maybe?”

The students had launched into recruitment drives and self-advertisements before they’d even ordered food.

*Looks like people with offensive skills are the most in-demand, I thought. Figures.*

My classmates were prioritizing offensive skills over healing magic. The first few floors lacked deadly traps or powerful monsters, except in a few special areas. So groups with more combat roles were more efficient.

“Akagi, would you like to join our group?” Kaoru asked. She and Pinky had dragged Tachigi off to one side and were calling out to Akagi.

Several girls had been fighting over the right to invite Akagi to their groups. The lucky bastard...with his devilish good looks and awesome-sounding Sword Mastery skill, everyone wanted a piece of him. But he turned down the offers



and joined Kaoru's group instead, and the four of them appeared to be doing well together.

*Uh-oh, I thought. Piggy's mind is gonna have a breakdown unless I can distract myself! It's bad enough that I'm a loner. I'm almost in tears, and I don't need his mind making it worse!*

"Hi, everyone," said Oomiya, the responsible one, pointing toward a vacant area in the cafeteria. "There are empty tables over there, so let's grab some seats. We can continue working out our parties while we eat so we don't block the door to the cafeteria."

Obliging, the students placed their bags on the seats and headed over to the lunch counter.

I hurried after them to order food, hoping it would clear my head of Piggy's negative thoughts. Today's daily special was a nicely balanced meal of rice, miso soup, deep-fried horse mackerel, salad, and pickled vegetables. I piled my plate high with rice and returned to my seat.

"Let's dig in!" Oomiya said.

At her call, everyone started their meals. While they ate, my classmates showed each other their stat screens on their terminals and tried to market themselves. The makeup of an adventurer's first party wouldn't matter much in the long run. Everyone took it seriously since it was the first dungeon raid for most of them.

I invited myself into their conversations and casually dropped that I had a starter skill too. My advances were politely—okay, bluntly—shot down, and I felt like crying. To be fair to them, my Glutton skill sounded more like an excuse for why I was always hungry and could eat so much rather than anything useful.

It was only a few minutes after the meal had begun, but the students had coalesced into full parties. They all had a good time, and somebody suggested they leave to rent weapons.

"Before that," a person said, "has anyone not found a party yet? Oh... Just Piggy."

"Who'd want a guy in their party that gets shown up by a slime?"

“Did he actually lose to a slime? Was it because he’s fat?”

“C’mon, guys, somebody let him join,” someone said, before hurriedly adding, “Ah, you can’t join ours, though. We’re full.”

My school life had hit rock bottom within the first week. *I-I’m not crying. I’ve just got some pollen in my eyes, that’s all.*

However, fate hadn’t abandoned me entirely.

“For goodness sake, he *did* pass the exam to get in here, remember? You’re welcome to join our party if you’d like.”

My head shot up, and smiling down at me was an angel... Well, no. It was Oomiya. “D-D-Do you mean it?!” I exclaimed. “Thank you so much!”

Class Representative Oomiya had just knocked the student council president off the top spot of my favorite characters list.

“Whoa, hold up!” a cute girl in glasses objected. It seemed she was in Oomiya’s party. “Satsuki, you’re not serious about inviting him, right?”

Her reluctance was understandable, given the rumors swirling about me. However, I wouldn’t give in to solitude without a fight! Putting on my brightest, most innocent smile, I said, “Thanks for letting me in!”

This was an all-girl party, so I was a little excited.

“Great,” Oomiya said. “I’ll let the others know we can’t join them.” She then walked off somewhere.

I looked at the girl with the glasses, who explained they’d planned to join a group of three other girls. Oomiya would inform them that they couldn’t form a party anymore because they’d taken me in, and the parties had a limit of five people.

*Ah, I feel kinda bad now.*

When Oomiya returned, she drew her chair closer to mine so we could plan our strategy for the raid. She had big, round eyes that curved up ever so slightly in the corners and was cute. Her shampoo’s lovely fragrance made Piggy’s mind get excited; maybe it was my mind.

“I think we should get to know a bit more about each other and our strengths,” Oomiya said. “I’ll go first. I’m Satsuki Oomiya, and these are my stats.” She pulled up the status screen on her terminal and showed it to us.

Examining the numbers, I noticed her agility was higher than expected from someone wanting to become a Wizard. She also had a skill called Detection, which allowed her to detect nearby monsters. In *DEC*, she had become a Wizard, but as small and agile as she was, the Thief job suited her better.

“Cool, my turn. So I’m Risa Nitta. I originally wanted to be an Archer, but like, I’m starting to think I might prefer something more magic-based.”

Nitta wore glasses and had straight, mid-length hair. She had a sophisticated appearance that made “beautiful” seem a better descriptor than “cute,” and she fit the big sister character archetype. Her soft manner of speech and gentle mannerisms made her seem slow. But something in her eyes made me feel like a cold, calculating mind lay hidden beneath her outer appearance. An aspiring Archer, she’d come along carrying a bow on her back.

“Right, so as for me—” I started.

“We know who you are,” interrupted Nitta. “*Everyone* does. Narumi, right? You’re famous. Did you really lose to a slime?”

“Risa, don’t bring that up!” exclaimed Oomiya.

“No, it’s fine,” I said and continued my introduction. “I told everyone I want to be a Priest, but I’m happy to act in a combat role swinging my mace around.”

I was famous for all the wrong reasons. Perceived weakness impeded progress in the “might makes right” ecosystem of Adventurers’ High. Perhaps I should’ve dispelled the rumors when I’d heard about them. The nurses had measured and updated my stats after I’d been taken to the infirmary yesterday, so I decided to show the two girls.

“Wow, you’re already level 3...” remarked Nitta. She then furrowed her brows and tilted her head in puzzlement. “Wait, so like, you must’ve killed a bunch of slimes and goblins to get there, right? Or did you power level\*... No, I guess not. Nobody does that on the first two floors.”

\*TIPS: Power leveling: When a lower-level player enlists the assistance of a higher level player to gain experience points and level up quickly and safely.



Her confusion was justified. Level 3 adventurers shouldn't lose to slimes, and the only way I could've gotten to level 3 was by successfully defeating slimes.

"I started feeling ill that day, which is why," I answered.

"I knew it didn't make sense," commented Oomiya. "Nobody could make it into this school if they couldn't beat a slime."

It surprised me how friendly Oomiya was to me. She didn't harbor any reservations about being in the same party. Nitta struck me as odd too, as I had no memory of seeing her in the game. Why had someone so gorgeous been left out of the story? Perhaps it wasn't so strange. Characters had only gotten screen time if they'd had some connection to the protagonist or a heroine.

We finalized the formation we'd use in the dungeon while eating our meals, then headed to the weapon factories.

Murai had explained that to rent weapons, we'd have to register them in our terminals. The process was free too, so I planned to rent one if I found one I liked. The factories only had ordinary steel weapons, so none used magical ores mined from the dungeon, but to buy one outright would cost as much as a PC.

"What do you think of this one?" Oomiya asked.

"Wow, check out this bow!" said Nitta. "I think I'll snag this one."

Nitta and Oomiya browsed the selections with giggling excitement.

I joined them in the rental section to hunt down a good mace and picked one up to get a feel for the grip. The metal weapons were a lead weight in my hands, even the small ones, and they'd be a pain to carry around. A wooden weapon would be easier for me to swing around with my low strength stat. I spotted a spiked wooden mace that looked like a troll's club, so I went for that.

"It's almost one," said Oomiya, "so we should get back to Murai."

"Narumi," said Nitta, "you'd better show us how a level 3 does things, okay?"

"You can count on me!" I replied.

We navigated through the crowds of people going in and out of the Adventurers' Guild and arrived at the meeting space. There must've been

thousands of people since many adventurers ran through the final checks of their raid plans. Some people had rolled out mats on the ground and sold goods, like a flea market. Although they needed a license to sell items on the street, the foot traffic guaranteed profit.

I looked toward our prearranged meeting point by the clock tower. Most of the class had already arrived and were chatting among themselves. I stood next to Oomiya and Nitta while we waited for Murai, and I listened to our classmates' discussions to pass the time.

"I'm already level 2," one said.

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"I heard a guy from another class is already over level 10."

I gathered that Akagi, his group, and I hadn't been the only ones that had raided the dungeon on the same day we'd received our terminals, but we were in the minority. Most of our class had spent their time in the guild's library doing research and paperwork.

The government's age restriction of fifteen didn't mean someone who had graduated middle school could jump into the dungeon. They'd first need to take courses, undergo on-site training, and take tests. The entire process would take at least two months from when they applied to receive their class ten Adventurers' Pass. Enrollment at Adventurers' High came with the benefit of printing out a class nine Adventurers' Pass by displaying the school-issued terminal to a guild staff member. You'd get to the dungeon quicker by waiting for the school term to start than through the regular process.

So, the only opportunity to visit the dungeon for Class E students had been during the three days since the first day of school. Most of them had instead spent that time researching monsters, ordering equipment and weapons, practicing teamwork with their parties, and checking out the Adventurers' Guild.

*That seems overly cautious to me, I thought. But maybe I'd do the same if I didn't know DEC inside and out.*

At that moment, a resplendently dressed group of adventurers passed by.

One of them was a combat-role adventurer wearing a full suit of armor that gleamed in the sunlight and carried a large sword with gaudy ornamentation attached. Behind him were several support-role adventurers wearing masks and robes with magical patterns woven into their fabric.

*They're wearing Adventurers' High badges, so they must be students too. They must be third-years if their badges are that color.*

The school had implemented a rule requiring students to wear the school badge on their chest during schooltime dungeon raids to distinguish them from ordinary adventurers. It could be hard to tell otherwise with all the equipment adventurers wore.

I assumed they were around level 20. Few of the adventurers gathered by the guild were higher than level 10, so heavy equipment that required a high strength stat to equip stood out. The other nearby adventurers began whispering to each other, gawking at the group.

"Get a look at their equipment! Someone said they go to Adventurers' High."

"Are they actually level 20?"

"It blows my mind that a high schooler can level up that high."

Without warning, the man in full-body armor activated his Aura. "Move. You're in my way."

Adventurers darted away from his powerful, intimidating Aura and cleared a path. The third-years proceeded through the opening with smug looks like they owned the place.

*Whoa, whoa, whoa, I thought. Being a high level doesn't give you the right to bully ordinary people!*

I remembered when one of Kariya's cronies had used his Aura on us. I'd felt like a gigantic beast had gripped its claws around my heart, and the crony hadn't been as strong as these guys. The way these assholes had used that skill on ordinary citizens for being in their way made me want to sit down with the school's compliance team and grill them for not doing their job.

Seeing this, I remembered that high-level students had been just as



aggressive in the game. Maybe I'd act a bit cocky too if I were their level. But I didn't want to turn out like them, so I would need to keep an eye on myself since it was awful to watch their behavior.

Murai checked his watch and said, "It's about time. Is everyone here?"

Before Murai could take a roll call, Akagi ran toward us from the direction of the school and panted as he said, "I'm...sorry. For being...late."

Kaoru, Pinky, and Tachigi rushed after him, all out of breath. They'd lost track of time while picking out rental weapons at the factory. Choosing the right weapon was a matter of life and death for adventurers, so it was only correct to take time to weigh their options. I wished they'd stop drawing so much attention to themselves. It was making Piggy's mind go mad with jealousy.

"Let's get started then," said Murai. "I want you all to pick one member to be your party leader. Your leader will then report to me the names of the people in your party."

Our leader was obviously Oomiya.

"As soon as you've told me who's in your party," Murai continued, "you can head to the dungeon. You get through this barrier by scanning the terminals on your arms through this machine."

One by one, the party leaders made their reports and Murai handed them badges with the Adventurers' High logo to pin on their members' chests. Then, the party scanned their terminals in the machines and began to walk toward the portal.

The dungeon wasn't as busy at midday, and we made it to the portal without getting in line. My classmates walked through the bizarre, black surface of the portal with ease, but personally, I didn't think I'd ever get used to the gross, sticky sensation.

Our class regrouped inside the dungeon at a spot near the portal, and Murai announced the schedule for our trip. We were to walk down the main road to the second floor, then turn back. He wanted us to walk in our groups and regularly monitor our location on the terminals' maps.

Each party designated one of their members to keep their terminal screen

open and watch the map, who then guided the party toward the second floor.

A long line of adventurers stretched over the main street that connected the first floor portal to the second floor. The occasional slime would spawn only to get cut down immediately, so our group had no monsters to hunt.

*A fat lot of good renting a new weapon did*, I thought. I felt sorry for the students who had rented heavy weapons and now had to lug them around with nothing to use them on. One of the boys looked particularly downcast. He'd been bragging to some of the girls, but now he had no way to show off.

"So many people," remarked Nitta. "It's like we've wandered into a tourist trap."

"Yeah," agreed Oomiya. "We'd have to leave the main street to escape the crowd."

While the number of people had surprised me before, it was natural it would get crowded with adventurers from all over Japan. The main streets that led between floors were the busiest areas, always lined with an unbroken column of adventurers from end to end. The only ways to hunt monsters on the first floor were to veer off from the main street or go at night when it was less busy. This floor had been nearly empty in the game because the only people inside the dungeon had been players, and most wouldn't spend long in the early section. Some aspects of the game didn't survive the transition to reality.

After walking about two kilometers from the portal, the path ahead opened into a clear space. Countless lights installed on the ceiling beamed down on us. It was almost blinding to look at. Toward the rear of the area was a set of stairs leading to the second floor, along with signposts pointing to a first aid station, toilets, and other facilities. This was the final destination for our orientation session.

Once Murai took roll call, our homeroom class began. We descended the stairs, entering another wide area. Vending machines and a rest area that served cheaper light meals than the first floor's landing zone were present. Murai warned us that prices would go up the deeper into the dungeon we went, and he recommended we stock up on provisions before going on raids in the future. I'd spotted several small transport vehicles passing down the main

street on our way, and I realized they provided the supplies for these services. The fourth floor even had a hotel and item trading stalls that only the wealthy and vacation-goers took advantage of because they were so expensive. Since players could zip through early floors using the dash function, none had used the hotel in the game.

“We’ll wrap things up a bit early today,” Murai said. “It’s up to you whether you go home or stay with your party to hunt monsters. Classes will run on the normal schedule starting tomorrow, so make sure to show up on time.”

It was still early in the day. The time was a little past two.

Oomiya invited me to explore the first floor, but I couldn’t wait to raid the second floor, so with a heavy heart, I turned down her offer. Going on a raid with a pair of cute girls sounded like great fun, but I couldn’t fight the urge to plunge deeper into the dungeon.

“Show those goblins what you’ve got!” said Oomiya encouragingly, smiling, then we parted ways.

*Really though, I thought to myself, Oomiya and Nitta are so gorgeous.*

The attractiveness of its students was yet another reason to love Adventurers’ High. Kaoru was stunning, but Oomiya and Nitta were gorgeous even if they weren’t heroines. If I played my cards right at school, I might get to spend my summer vacation surrounded by cute girls—wouldn’t that be one to remember?

I could hardly wait.

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## **Kaoru Hayase**

Luck had smiled on me for my first few days at Adventurers’ High, bringing three wonderful companions—Yuuma, Naoto, and Sakurako—into my life.

I’d gotten the chance to talk with Yuuma on my first day. Well, I’d approached him, but still. Adventuring had delighted us both, and in our excitement, we’d agreed to raid the dungeon together. I was so glad we did because it led to one

of the best Saturdays of my life.

I was so happy to have friends that I could depend on when I wasn't sure how best to get stronger, raid the dungeon, or raise my grades to get into Class A. Without them, I'd be clutching at straws all by myself.

Yuuma was courageous, ambitious, and had the raw talent to do anything he set his sights on. He'd told me before the raid that he only had a little training in swordcraft and wasn't confident in his skills, but then I saw him slice down goblins charging at us. His form had been perfect, had been glorious. And he looked so cool when he'd undauntedly stood up to those thugs from Class D. I was a teenage girl, so how could I see that and *not* feel a stir in my heart?

Naoto looked sour-faced, but I changed my opinion when I learned how caring and gentlemanly he was. I'd also found out that he knew almost everything there was to know about magic. Swords were my specialty, so I was unfamiliar with magic. If I ever became a first-rate adventurer, I'd eventually have to team up with a magic wielder. Getting experience fighting with Naoto and learning from him would be valuable for my future.

Not to be mean, but Sakurako's cuddly appearance and personality hadn't initially filled me with hope for her performance in the dungeon. When we'd gotten into close-quarters combat, she'd been lightning quick, adept at healing magic, and mindful of everything happening in the battle. I couldn't believe it was her first raid! I had to tip my hat to her. She might even have more potential than Yuuma.

My astonishing companions were all gifted, but I had no innate talent like them. The only thing I could contribute was the swordcraft I'd practiced from a young age. That group made it possible for even someone like me to be helpful.

I'd have to work on improving myself if I wanted to be worthy of staying by their side. So I needed to ramp up my training so they could trust me to watch their backs in battle. I was ready and willing to put my whole heart into my school life!

However, the next day at school had been a letdown. Our orientation had just been a trip to the main street, the second floor, and back. There was no fighting or anything new to see—I'd already been down that road.

“The monsters on the first floor are too weak,” said Yuuma, sounding bored. “They could’ve at least taken us to the third floor.”

We weren’t level 1 adventurers, so this session wasn’t the most stimulating. Even the second floor was a walk in the park for us now.

“We can do what we want when this is over,” said Sakurako. “Why don’t the four of us go hunting again?”

“I was just about to suggest that,” replied Naoto. He looked at me and asked, “Will you come too, Kaoru?”

I didn’t need to be asked twice.

“Yes, I’ll come,” I accepted, smiling. “I’ve already rented out a weapon, so it would be good to try it out.”

We giggled and kept walking, treading every step carefully as if to make sure we were really here, inside the dungeon.

I looked ahead to see what awaited us—

—and saw a big-bellied schoolboy waddling along the path. A chill ran down my spine.

That was when I remembered the night before. Just after I’d gotten out of the bath and started studying, my “stress” arrived as a shocking message from Sakurako: Souta got taken to the infirmary after a slime defeated him. The story had made it to the school’s bulletin board, and everyone talked about it.

Slimes were famous for being so weak that anyone old enough to enter the dungeon could take them on safely. Even little kids could probably beat them! So how had he gone and disgraced himself like that? Souta’s parents had been relieved that he didn’t get hurt, but this must have been heartbreaking.

I did feel a twinge of guilt. Perhaps this wouldn’t have happened had I been stricter during our training. Then I remembered that Souta wasn’t willing to put in the effort, so I cut myself some slack.

Souta had shown no remorse over the night before when I’d picked him up for school in the morning. He’d greeted me at the door yawning, his usual passionless self. But I thought he should have at least *acted* ashamed for getting

shown up by a slime. Any good student of Adventurers' High would.

Something else about him had struck me as odd recently. After the school's entrance ceremony, Souta had gone from never leaving me alone to barely having anything to do with me. He used to ring me up out of the blue, barge into my house uninvited, or hound me to go on dates. We spoke a bit on Saturday morning, but he hadn't ogled me as usual or tried to invite himself on our dungeon raid. When Murai told us today to form parties, I'd been sure he'd come straight over to me. He hadn't even looked my way.

Had he lost interest in me?

No. Souta would've given me back the nuptial grimoire. I would have to do whatever he said as long as he had it. The only reason he kept it was because he was still obsessed with me. Plus, I'd witnessed firsthand how much he hated working to improve himself. A guy like that couldn't change so readily.

As if to prove my point, I could see that he had rosy cheeks and leered at the two girls in his party. He was treating this dungeon orientation session like it was a date! It was pathetic.

The two girls by his side, Oomiya and Nitta, must've taken pity on the class outcast and grouped up with him out of duty.

I couldn't help but sigh at the thought. But I wanted to put the work into becoming a top adventurer and the freedom to fall in love with who I wanted. So I wouldn't spare any more time for Souta. I needed to void the nuptial grimoire that bound me to him as soon as possible and clear the way for a future where I had a choice.

Unfortunately, my progress in that regard was nil. I blamed myself for keeping Souta at length for so long that we'd grown distant. The best plan I could hatch was to befriend Kano and get her on my side, but she'd started acting hostile recently whenever I tried talking to her. Maybe she didn't like me anymore. She idolized her older brother, so perhaps she'd noticed the mixed feelings I had for him.

That change stung when I remembered how she smiled so innocently at me, but I had to put it out of my mind. I had too much to focus on to worry about that.

I kept on walking, my mind distressed by thoughts of the many challenges in my future.

## Chapter 10: You Can't Even Handle Slimes?

With great reluctance, I left Oomiya and Nitta to embark on my first visit to the second floor.

“Okay, time to hunt some goblins,” I said.

Goblins were green-skinned level 2 monsters with ugly faces that stood between a hundred to one hundred and twenty centimeters tall. Their bodies were weak, but they were clever and liked to trick the adventurers they found. Instead of attacking immediately, they clung to walls and waited for their prey to turn the corner. They'd then jump out in a group and assault their prey, making them far more dangerous than the slimes on the first floor. Fortunately, they were no more threatening than a child. If one faced a goblin alone, they wouldn't pose much of a challenge as long as you kept an eye on their club.

On rare occasions, a goblin chief would spawn. This monster sometimes wielded metal weapons that required caution. However, they weren't much more powerful than ordinary goblins, if anything. It was good to encounter one because they were level 3 monsters, so they were worth more experience points.

Adventurers filled the main street connecting the second and third floors, like the street on the floor above. I veered off and headed toward the goblin room, where they spawned at a higher rate. The goblins killed here would respawn quicker than in other areas, and rare encounters\* with goblin chiefs were more likely.

\*TIPS: Rare encounters happen each time a monster respawns. There is a fixed probability that a different monster will spawn in its place. Usually, this will be a rarer monster than the original.

“There's nobody here either?” I said. “Well, more for me.”



I peeked inside the goblin room and saw two babbling at each other, and I wondered if they spoke an actual language. After monitoring the situation for a while, a goblin happened to pass close by, so I smacked it from behind with my spiked club.

“Back of the head!” I shouted.

After that blow, the goblin sank to the ground and evaporated, leaving behind a magic gem.

*That works well*, I thought. Taking a hit to that part of the head would down most normal humans.

The remaining goblin let out a piercing shriek, whether in surprise or anger, I didn’t know, and glared at me menacingly, brandishing its club.

“If you’re gonna stay there, I’ll come to you!”

I had the upper hand in reach and strength, so I brought my club down fiercely toward my target. The goblin held its club sideways above its head and blocked my attack. It was putting up a good fight!

“You forgot to guard your stomach, though!”

I drove my knee into the goblin’s belly, sending it sprawling onto the floor. Acting at once to my advantage, I rushed toward my foe and swung my club down again. It didn’t stand a chance this time and turned into a magic gem.

“Phew,” I said. “Killing humanoid monsters is a bit of a downer compared to slimes. I’m glad their corpses disappear, or it’d be much worse.”

Because goblins looked somewhat like people, it felt wrong to kill them. Said feeling disappeared when getting a good look at their faces, which were not like ours.

The magic gems they’d dropped would be worth less than a hundred yen each. That was probably the correct value for a monster that the average person with a day or two’s experience in the dungeon could track down and beat. I needed to keep slaying them, mainly for experience points. The money was just the icing on the cake.

Monsters would generally be defenseless for the first two or three seconds

after they spawned from the black mist, which gave adventurers an advantage if they could land an attack in that time. Being somewhere like the slime room or goblin room, where monsters spawned in one specific place at specific intervals, was essential. Three goblins would respawn in the goblin room ten minutes after being slain, which was a nice pace for solo hunting.

There were only a handful of areas like this on each floor. In *DEC* I could never get one of them all to myself because they would be too popular among players wanting to level up. But nobody was around here in this world. People either didn't know about it or didn't care to use it. The room was all mine!

It surprised me how quickly I'd gotten used to Piggy's weight and lack of strength. I felt bizarre at first, but over just a few days, I understood how to take care of this body, like when it needed a break and how to move around without losing balance.

My figure wasn't fit for combat. I could counteract the sluggishness caused by my obesity with the physical enhancements gained through leveling up. But fights would only get tougher, so I'd need to work on my energy conservation. Otherwise, I wouldn't make it halfway through a drawn-out skirmish without running out of steam, which would be fatal. It might be best to increase my workout load, but I'd have to monitor my muscle aches to not overdo it. That was the easy part; dieting was difficult.

After that, I continued slaying goblins, and after I'd felled my fifth foe—

“Ooh, look at that. This one's got a metal weapon! Is this my first goblin chief?”

I approached the newly spawned enemy planning to hit it on the back of its head while it remained motionless. Chiefs were vulnerable for the first few seconds after spawning like other monsters. Unfortunately, this one wore a helmet.

So, I switched plans and swung my club at the shoulder of the arm it carried its weapon with.

“Hngyaagaga!” The goblin chief screeched in agony and dropped its weapon.

As the goblin overcame its pain, it clutched at the ground where its weapon

lay, but I was one step ahead. I plunged my mace into its other arm and struck the goblin in its side, sending it flying. The monster vanished, leaving behind a magic gem and a rusty shortsword that clattered to the ground.

The shortsword looked ordinary, but it was impossible to tell it wasn't a magic item without appraising it. I could always pay for an appraisal, but I wanted to get the Basic Appraisal skill to cut down on costs.

"Now that I know they sometimes spawn with helmets," I said, "I'll have to come up with an alternative to my back-of-the-head approach for first strikes."

I continued my raid until dinnertime but didn't level up, so I was still level 3. At that point, I called it a day rather than push my body past its limits. I'd picked up three beaten-up weapons as loot, but I had no use for them except to sell them for scrap and get some pocket money.

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The next school day was the start of regular classes. I entered the day confident that my existing high school education would make this a walk in the park. But the assignments were much more challenging than I'd expected from a first-year curriculum. This was truly an elite school.

After homeroom had ended and school was out, my classmates shoved their textbooks into their bags, found their friends, and began planning their dungeon raids.

I'd seen Akagi chatting with Pinky all day, and I wondered whether he was putting as much effort into his raids as he was into flirting. If he couldn't reach level 10 by the end of the month, he'd have a tough time fighting Kariya. He seemed confident, so maybe he had a trick up his sleeve.

I packed my bag and headed to the door while picturing how my goblin fights would go, but someone called me out with a clear, high, and dignified voice, stopping me.

"Excuse me."

I turned around to find my fiancée and childhood friend scowling at me with her arms crossed. Kaoru hadn't used my name, but she never did when we were at school.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I think it’s about time you get back to training.”

Training? I rummaged through Piggy’s memories to check whether I’d arranged to train with Kaoru, but nothing turned up. I *did* find memories of the two of us going outside to do warm-ups. Perhaps that was what she meant.

But I’d planned to go straight to the dungeon for a solo raid, just like every other day. My legs would get enough exercise on the journey through the dungeon, and I didn’t want the two of us to raid together. Teaming up on weak foes like goblins was inefficient.

I needed to phrase my refusal carefully in case she was genuinely concerned about my well-being.

“No, I think I’m fine. I’m doing some training by myself,” I said.

“Like what?” asked Kaoru, her pretty eyebrows knitting in skepticism.

*Not filled with confidence, is she?* Then, I responded, “Like, uh, walking? I’ve been walking inside the dungeon over the past few days.”

“You can’t even handle slimes, but you ‘walk around the dungeon’?”

*Oof.* Her concern for my well-being made more sense when I remembered the rumors about me and the slimes, especially with all the years we’d spent together growing up.

“I was feeling off that day... I’m keeping a better watch on my health now though, and it won’t happen again.”

Although keeping a better watch on my health just meant dieting, that actually increased my risk in the dungeon because my lower calorie intake made me suffer dizzy spells. Still, I should be all right as long as I held back on activating stupidly advanced skills.

“I see,” she said, not showing whether she believed me. So she turned away from me and returned to her desk.

She was guaranteed to become an excellent adventurer while she stuck with Akagi’s party. That would come with many nasty game events, but I wished her the best of luck.

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Over the next few days I slew dozens of goblins and goblin chiefs, but my level didn't budge from three. I'd cut down on my time in the dungeon to focus on my diet and exercise. The third floor had fights that would get tough, and I needed to get my body in good condition. Even the bulletin board by the entrance to the Adventurers' Guild reported several fatalities on the third floor each month. This place was where the real raiding began.

I needed to ensure my body was agile enough to handle the challenge because I'd be going alone, and waiting until I reached level 4 before heading down sounded safest. Going solo was dangerous because there was nobody around to help you, but one could obtain more experience points. Plus, my game knowledge gave me the advantage of monopolizing all the best monsters and hunting spots.

The risks inside the dungeon weren't all I had to worry about. I also had to make sure that nobody found out that I had knowledge of the game. This world was more savage than my previous one, and there was no telling what might happen here. An endless amount of countries and organizations were willing to abduct people to get their hands on insights into the dungeon. The only people I could trust with my game knowledge were my family; they were the only ones I was sure wouldn't betray me. My current plan for raiding the dungeon was to get as deep as possible solo while taking care not to leak any information.

To put that plan into action, I was in the goblin room. After an hour of hunting goblins and exploiting their respawn vulnerability, I had reached level 4.

I took a second to gauge my fatigue levels, then cast Minor Restoration on myself and took a short break. Using Manual Activation to cast Minor Restoration alleviated muscle aches and fatigue. It wasn't the most efficient use of mana, but I had no other helpful skills. That wasn't a problem as long as I monitored my remaining mana.

Now that I was level 4, the level 2 enemies on the second floor would be worth far fewer experience points and hardly worth the effort. I was probably best off packing up and heading to the third floor. I'd already rented out a metal mace to use against the orcs there. The mace weighed a hefty five kilograms,

but my current stats would be high enough to swing it around with little effort.

After level 4, it would become hard to level up. There were two reasons for that issue: the number of experience points required to level up shot up massively, and the enemies from the third floor were tougher. For example, the orcs that spawned on the third floor were as strong as grown adults and attacked with clubs, making them dangerous to face. Goblin mages, on the other hand, used the long-distance Fire Arrow skill. Then there were the fearsome orc chiefs, superior versions of orcs that were almost undefeatable one-on-one if you were level 3 or below.

You could reduce the risks posed by orc chiefs by teaming up with other adventurers, which made the fight relatively simple. The downside was you'd have to share the experience points with your teammates. One would also need to patrol the areas where monsters spawned, searching for your prey. It appeared logical to head to an even deeper floor and fight the monsters there, who'd be worth even more experience points. But those enemies would be stronger and riskier to fight.

Because of this, most ordinary adventurers like my father never got any higher than level 4. I was no average adventurer, though. My game knowledge gave me a few tricks I could use to level up faster.

"Okay then. Time to hunt some orcs," I said.

I rose and collected my gear to set off to the next floor.

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The landing at the bottom of the stairs to the third floor had some cafés and food stalls. I purchased a pack of six takoyaki for seven hundred yen and paused to eat my snack and catch my breath.

*Ugh*, I thought. *I won't be coming here again.* The dough was undercooked, with too little octopus inside.

I looked at the adventurers milling around and shopping, then noticed many wearing black leather armor. Seeing that, I figured I should pick up some armor soon.

I threw away the container the takoyaki had come in and headed for the orc

room.

This floor was also busy, so I didn't have to face that many monsters as I walked down the main street. After I turned off the road at the fork leading to the orc room, I became more vigilant. Three monsters should spawn inside the orc room, if I recalled correctly.

The expected monsters waited there when I reached the room and peeked inside. While they appeared like humans, their necks were large and thick, and their humped backs bulged with muscles. There'd be no mistaking them for people if you got up close since they had piglike snouts and would roar, "Ooh gaaar!"

*I need to be careful how I start this battle,* I thought.

Having leveled up a bit and able to swing a metal mace around, I could just overcome the three orcs with brute force. But doing that risked getting surrounded and wailed by all three if I made a mistake. Thankfully, I had bought a stun grenade and had brought it with me. It had set me back five thousand yen at the shop in the Adventurers' Guild, but the payoff I'd get from farming orcs all day would give me a good return on that investment. It was a necessary expenditure.

Stun grenades in my old world usually produced a simultaneous burst of light and sound. The ones in this world only displayed light because loud noises could attract nearby monsters inside the dungeon. I'd spent plenty of time the night before reading the instruction manual, so I was confident I knew how to use it.

With that, I lobbed the grenade in. A faint hiss escaped the canister, and a blinding flash of light enveloped the orc room. "Ooh gaaar! Ooh gaar!" they all roared. Before they could regain their sight, I crept up to each of them and landed attacks on their heads. Killing all the orcs would make them respawn together. As such, I kept two of them disabled for a while before dispatching them, ensuring a sufficient time lag between them.

I picked up the magic gems they'd left behind and said, "What do I get for these? I think it's two hundred yen a piece."

Using my raiding strategy in a party would net us less money than a standard part-time job. Yet the earnings for using my strategy solo would be high enough

to justify the additional risks.

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After a while, my timer beeped, alerting me that thirty seconds remained before the first orc respawned. Right on cue, a black mist appeared.

I scrambled for my weapon, hurried over while it was still open, and attacked its weak spot. The orc's neck was so thick that my well-aimed first attack didn't bring it down, though it stunned the monster and knocked it off-balance for a while. During that time, I launched a barrage of strikes to finish the job.

The orc slaying continued with no difficulty, then a goblin spawned. It carried a staff, indicating it was a goblin mage. These mages could pose a threat when in a group due to their Fire Arrow skill, but they weren't much of a challenge individually. I could kill it in one hit while they were immobile because they had the same HP as second-floor goblins, making them a bonus monster for me.

"Oh yeah! Level 4 monsters have got nothing on me! Level 5, here we come!"

So I began humming as I picked up the goblin's magic gem, which looked bigger than the one the orcs dropped. I continued hunting, slaying another twenty orcs with a bright smile, slotting in the occasional break. Then, I had my first random encounter with an orc chief.

Just as I'd been doing, I closed in on the monster to get a clear shot at its head, but this orc was wearing both a helmet and shoulder pads, so a strike there wouldn't do much damage. I immediately switched my target to the arm holding its massive club and put all my strength into the blow.

I got in three more strikes while it roared, yet the orc chief stood unfazed. The look in its eyes told me that the fight wasn't over yet. There was a brief standoff, but I knew the monster was on its last legs, so I rushed in and swung my mace up from below.

"Hurry up and give me your gem you... What?!"

Despite its weakened state, the orc dodged my blow with a backstep. With the last of its strength, it swung its mace at my side, but the damage I dealt made its movements more predictable.



I crouched out of the path of the blow, and as I stood up, I swung my mace at the orc's crotch.

"Ooh...gaaar?"

Judging by the feel of the impact, the orc was a male. I cringed in sympathetic pain at the low blow I'd struck against my orc brother. Still, the ends justified the means.

The orc chief clutched at its crotch, sank to its knees, and turned into a magic gem.

"He was quite tough," I remarked.

I wondered how long it would've taken to defeat him if I hadn't attacked while he wasn't moving. If a goblin mage spawned during an encounter like that, I'd have a grueling fight. I decided that if any future fight against an orc chief started to take too long, I'd draw it away from the orc room and continue elsewhere. Fortunately, orcs were slow monsters, so I'd have no trouble running away.

Apparently, adventurers often fled from orc chiefs, which made trains\* a typical spectacle on this floor. Of course, creating a train wouldn't make you very popular with other adventurers.

\*TIPS: The word "train" usually refers to locomotives. In gaming, it pertains to several monsters chasing fleeing players. Creating trains is frowned upon because if the player leading the train dies, the monsters in tow will attack other nearby players.

My low strength stat and weapon were most likely why I couldn't one-shot the chief while it was stationary.

A new weapon purchased one day would be as good as scrap the next day when I leveled up. It would be best to try out various weapons using the school's rental facility at a lower level. One option I had was to ditch the mace and switch to a sword, giving me a wider range of stabbing attacks. Maces dealt

little damage to body parts protected by armor. I'd only chosen a mace in the first place because I'd started with a bat, so I decided to try a sword the following day.

I looked down at where the orc chief had fallen and saw a magic gem and shoulder pads lying on the ground. I excitedly grabbed the pads and equipped them. At once, they resized to fit my body, which meant they were a magic item.

*Shit, I thought. It would be bad news if these turned out to be a cursed debuff item that I couldn't take off! I'd look like a reject turning up to school wearing these pads!*

I recalled that the Adventurers' Guild charged ten thousand yen to remove curses. Next time, I wouldn't equip items without inspecting them first. Lesson learned.

Though I considered taking the pads to the guild and paying their ten thousand yen fee to appraise them, I decided against it. Once I reached job level 7 in my Newbie job, I could learn the Basic Appraisal skill and not waste money. High schoolers couldn't afford to make impulse purchases!

At job level 5, I'd also unlock the ability to switch to one of the basic jobs: Fighter, Caster, or Thief. Switching at that point would prevent me from ever learning the Newbie skills I desperately wanted, so I would continue to max out my Newbie job level.

I placed the shoulder pads in a corner, planning to figure out what effect they had later, and kept hunting orcs until nighttime.

No other orc chiefs spawned while I was there.

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"Hey, bro, welcome back!"

As I walked through the door, my little sister diligently took my rucksack and carried my belongings. That was odd... Had she always been so service-minded? Or was she after something?

"Hi, Kano," I answered.

“This came from the dungeon!” she chirped. “Is it a drop item?”

The shoulder pads were poking out from my rucksack and had clearly caught her interest.

“Yeah,” I replied. “An orc chief dropped it.”

“What?! You’re raiding the third floor already?! Who’s in your party? What role are you?”

*Whoa. Take a deep breath and ask one question at a time, I thought.*

I collapsed into one of the living room chairs and stretched my legs. My muscles were a little tense from my hours of raiding. At level 4, the physical enhancements made their presence known, but my body was still weak.

“I’m raiding by myself,” I said.

“What?! You’re going solo? Oh, so you don’t have any friends...?”

“Hey, I do!” I exclaimed. *Get that look of pity off your face! I have friends! A pair of cute girls invited me to their party...out of charity, but still.*

“But aren’t there orcs on the third floor?” asked Kano. “Dad says it’s dangerous.”

Hunting orcs before level 4 would be challenging to do alone. Even at level 4, it could get dangerous if you weren’t exploiting their immobility after spawning or backstabbing\* them.

\*TIPS: Backstabbing is a technique to instantly kill an enemy by stabbing them from behind.

“I know a trick,” I said, “and an even better one we could try out together when you come with me.”

There was a sweet spot for power leveling on the fifth floor, as long as the technique from the game still worked in this world.

“Really?” asked Kano. “I dunno, fighting orcs seems kinda scary.”

“Soutaaa,” my mother called. “Get your bath out of the way before dinner’s

ready.”

“Will do!” I replied.

I planned to have a nice, long rest tonight and prepare for the next day’s raid.

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“Ding! Level 5! And I got Basic Appraisal at the same time!”

The following day, I returned to the dungeon and resumed hunting orcs. When I was about to wrap things up, I was surprised I finally hit level 5. I initially thought it might take a few days, but a few goblin mages had spawned and gave me extra experience points. Changing my weapon to a sword also reduced the time to kill each orc and had let me hunt stray orcs outside the room. I hadn’t faced more orc chiefs since that first tough fight, so their spawn probability must’ve been low.

Learning Basic Appraisal meant that my Newbie job level had risen to level 7. Job leveling was easier than standard leveling. I quickly put my new skill to use by appraising the shoulder pads and a staff a goblin mage had dropped.

“Let’s see...” I said. “The shoulder pads are called ‘Shoulder Pads of Vitality.’ They give a plus two to defense and plus five to HP.”

I only had seven HP the last time I checked, so this armor was perfect for me because it was a flat bonus rather than percentage-based.

“How about the staff? Oh, this one’s a magic item too. ‘Staff of Smoldering Scrapwood’? Increases Fire Arrow’s power by one percent, decreases HP by eighty percent... Not a keeper.”

The staff had seemed flimsy when I’d first seen it anyway. One of the two items had been good, at least.

Next, I appraised the weird Glutton skill Piggy had started with. I’d expected that it would make me hungry quicker. A worrying sequence of text popped up in front of me.

“‘HP and vitality stat increase to a greater extent at each new level... Increased appetite... Minus thirty percent to strength, minus fifty to agility...’ And the last entry is just a bunch of question marks. I guess I can’t appraise that

bit yet.”

There was much more to this skill than I’d bargained for. I’d only expected there to be one or two status effects. The bit about my appetite had come as no surprise, but the rest...

The first effect listed was about a bonus to leveling-up stat increases. HP kept you alive, and vitality influenced your ability to defend yourself and your general health. Both were decidedly essential stats in a place like the dungeon where your life was on the line. I wasn’t sure how big the bonus was, but influencing the stat increases gained at each level was incredible.

At the other end of the spectrum were the thirty percent and fifty percent debuffs to strength and agility, which were dire. When I first possessed this body, it had surprised me how weak it was and how sluggish my movements were. I hadn’t expected these fat arms and legs to move mountains, but the extent of my weakness was unusual. Even so, I put it all down to my obesity and a lack of exercise. However, I now knew that no amount of weight loss or exercise would rid me of my handicap unless I erased this skill that was reducing my stats.

I wasn’t having much trouble in fights now that I’d leveled up some. Although I had a lowered strength stat, I could launch decent enough attacks with my new sword. I was also fast enough to outrun orcs despite my reduced agility. What I feared, though, was that a debuff this large might impact my health.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t examine the last effect hidden behind three question marks. If Basic Appraisal couldn’t appraise it, then it had to be an effect on par with skills from advanced jobs or higher. I prayed with all my heart that it was beneficial and not a debuff.

Contingent on the exact size of the bonus to HP and vitality and the nature of the hidden effect, the skill’s downsides outweighed its upsides on balance. I might keep the Glutton skill for the leveling-up status bump when playing the game because it wouldn’t matter if my character died. But that was far too great a risk to take in real life.

“I wish I at least knew what was behind those question marks... Though, I really don’t want to order an appraisal at the guild.”

Certain items and better skills could appraise skills in greater detail, but I had none yet. To determine what those question marks represented, I'd have to use the appraisal device at the Adventurers' Guild to measure my stats and update my terminal profile. But that information would become part of the school's database, and any student could then check my stats and level on their terminal.

These details being out there wasn't ideal because sticking out for being high-level would unleash a heap of awful game events. If the game's main quest was anything to go by, it would anger the proud students of the higher classes, second and third-year students, and even some ordinary adventurers. I preferred to keep a lid on the information and avoid the hassle altogether.

That said, there was the odd place that would let me appraise my skills without updating the database.

One such place was a shop players had called "Granny's Goods," isolated in a hidden area on the dungeon's tenth floor. It was somewhere I was dying to visit since it sold items for appraisal and even a device that allowed adventurers to change their current job. I'd looked for references to Granny's Goods in the guild library but hadn't found any. It should still exist in the dungeon if everything from the game was true, so why was there no record of it? I couldn't answer that at this point.

At any rate, I was stuck with the Glutton skill until I could appraise it at Granny's Goods. It was physically impossible to erase it. I couldn't overwrite it with a new skill until I changed jobs and got access to new skills. So I'd have to put up with this weird skill for the time being.

I sighed and said, "It's much more than I'd expected, for better or worse. I'll have to keep at it and push down to the tenth floor, whether I want to keep it or not."

Nevertheless, I had three main objectives. First, I had to continue my diet and exercise regimen to reach one hundred kilograms or below. I also needed to level up at least to level 10 to reach Granny's Goods safely. The last thing I had to do was buy an appraisal item and use it on my stats and the Glutton skill.

It would be nice if I could proudly show off how much of a beast I was. But I

wanted to get to the stage where I was powerful enough to protect myself from other high-level adventurers before I started showing off.

High-level adventurers in this world were around the level 30 range, so I had to wait until I was that strong... No, actually. In that case, any enemies I had could still target my family instead of going for me directly. I'd have to help them all level up.

After all, I had promised Piggy I would keep his family safe no matter what.

## Chapter 11: The Gate

Switching from a mace to a sword had been a good decision. Armored orcs would perish if I stabbed them in a weak spot, or they'd at least suffer a fatal wound. Either way, it lowered my risk and increased my turnover. It was a shame that the strength debuff caused by the Glutton skill prevented me from wielding even heavier maces, but what could I do?

My biggest concern was that I had to face more and more enemies armed with metal weapons. The dungeon might grant me physical enhancements, but how much help was that against a knife to the heart? As a solo adventurer, I avoided getting hit in the first place. Still, that was no excuse to skimp on countermeasures for the worst-case scenario.

Because of that, I'd come to the armory in the Adventurers' Guild to buy armor. The school's factories also sold armor, though I'd have to submit an order for bespoke armor and wait until it was ready. My needs were pressing, so I wanted to buy a set straight from the shelf.

A set of plate armor stood glimmering in the glass showcase by the entry to the armory, dazzling passersby. The store stocked pieces of light armor crafted from the skin and fangs of magical beasts, and there was also heavy armor made of mithril alloy, a fantasy metal. The price tags beneath each of these were staggering. I could buy a house at these prices! I was shaking in my boots as I walked around inspecting the stock.

"Hi, boss," said a middle-aged man wearing an apron. "Whaddaya looking for?" He looked a bit like a bandit from how huge he was with bulging muscles and his big, scruffy beard. His apron had the shop's logo printed, so I realized he worked here.

"Oh, err, do you have any good light armor?" I asked.

"Which parts of your body are you looking to protect? And what's your budget?"



Apparently, he was the store's manager. Looking at my age and size, he cupped his hand to his chin and mused, "Must be a high schooler. Big one too. Probably won't want anything too expensive."

"I have fifty thousand yen, and I'd like something to protect my torso," I responded.

"In that case..." the manager said, heading to the back of the store, then returning with a black leather jacket and a pair of gloves. "This is armor made from demon wolf leather. Most ordinary knives won't penetrate it, and since it's made from monster pelts, resizing is easy. I'll sweeten the deal and throw in these shoulder guards for your fifty grand."

I didn't suspect he was scamming me, but I used Basic Appraisal on the items just in case.

Demon wolf jacket. Plus six to defense. Plus five percent to fire resistance.

Demon wolf gauntlets. Plus three to defense. Plus three percent to fire resistance.

So they definitely were demon wolf leather. The jacket would protect my chest and armpits on the front while simple leather straps fastened it to my body from behind, which made the design light. The gauntlets had two components, one worn on my wrist and the other on my forearm, to protect me from my knuckles to my elbows. They reminded me a bit of the gloves worn when practicing kendo. They hadn't been impressive in the game, but these black gauntlets looked badass. I loved them.

"If you had some more cash, I could've fetched something for your legs too," the manager said. "You won't often get demon wolf armor this cheap, boss!"

He explained that he'd bought a large supply of demon wolf pelts the week before at an excellent price from a demon wolf hunting party. Since he was on good terms with them, he sold the demon wolf armor at below-market rates.

Demon wolves spawned on the dungeon's sixth floor and had a small

probability of dropping demon wolf pelts. Tanning and treating the pelts would result in this black leather.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll take both.”

“Pleasure doing business! Wanna try ’em on now?”

I equipped the gauntlets, shoulder pads, and jacket, then brought out my rented sword. Shortly after, I looked in a nearby full-length mirror, eager to see the fantasy warrior I’d become... Alas, looking cool just wasn’t possible with my rotund figure. I seemed more like a generic villain from a late-nineties anime.

I supposed I’d drop by again to buy armor for my legs once I saved up enough. After all, I’d probably go for demon wolf leather again to match what I’d just bought. The gamer in me wouldn’t be happy until I’d gotten the complete set.

So, I made small talk with the manager while I waited for my armor to be adjusted. He told me the market was volatile, and prices were rising because the supply of dungeon metals, ores, and potions couldn’t keep up with the recent surge in popularity of adventuring and dungeon raiding. As he handed me a discount coupon, he warned me to be careful because violence between adventurers was becoming more prevalent.

Now that I had some new gear, I was excited to test it in the dungeon.

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Today, I planned to go to the fourth floor, where adventurers would begin to encounter traps, although they were rare. Some of those disappeared after activating and reappearing in another place sometime later. Most traps stayed in specific locations, so it was best to memorize where you encountered one, sprung or not.

In *DEC*, monsters could get caught in traps, which I found hilarious. If you knew where an active trap was, you could use it against monsters. But the fourth floor only had pitfalls that weren’t fatal since they had no spikes or blades at the bottom. Monsters would only suffer from a twisted ankle, at most. To kill them, you’d have to use long-range weapons or magic.

The only weapons I had at the moment were the close-range ones I’d rented from the school’s factories, so I’d be hunting monsters in my usual style without

making use of traps.

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*Okay, here I am on the fourth floor, I thought. It took three hours to get here... Going down to the fifth floor might be quicker when I want to leave.*

On the fifth floor, I could use a “gate” to travel back and forth to the first floor. I was unsure it would work in this world as I had seen no one else using it, but that was all the more reason to venture to the fifth floor and try it out.

The landing area of the fourth floor was an open space with thirty meters between the floor and the ceiling, and an eight-story building for lodging used the full height of the floor. It looked like they’d tried to squeeze it into the available space. A restaurant took up the first floor with a fancy price list on a stand outside the entrance.

*The Pig’s Tail Inn. Book a stay for forty thousand yen per night. Breakfast is fifteen hundred yen. God, that’s extortion.*

I browsed the inn’s reviews on my tablets, and most had a variation of “five-star price for a shitty motel!” I might have enjoyed staying at the inn for the chance of a bath and to get the genuine dungeon raid experience. Unfortunately, it was beyond the means of a low-level adventurer like me who could barely scrape together fifty grand for weapons and armor.

The inn seemed to be putting up quite a few tourists, who required a visa and a foreign Adventurers’ Pass to visit the dungeon. One could make the trip to the fourth floor safely and without fighting as long as tourists stuck to the main streets that connected the floors. I could make out a few foreign faces in the terraced seating area. There were dozens of dungeons around the world, but only one in Japan, so this was the natural destination for tourists.

Adventurers chose to set up tents or roll out mats and sleep huddled up near the edge of the open space instead of booking a room at the inn. That made sense, given the prohibitive pricing. Other than that, there were stalls trading magic gems and stands selling baked foods.

I was on a tight schedule, so I wanted to skip the amenities and head straight to my hunting spot.

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The fourth floor was less busy than the third, but many adventurers viewed it as their primary raiding spot. I pushed out of the bustling landing area and followed the main street onto the fifth floor until I reached the turning point for the orc room. Then, I passed several holes in the ground, pitfall traps that others had sprung. I wasn't likely to activate one based on how many were in the room.

The orc room on the fourth floor I'd picked out for my raid was about the same size as the one on the third floor. But the monsters that spawned there were all level 4 and above, like orc chiefs, goblin archers, and goblin mages. Occasionally, a level 5 goblin soldier spawned as a random encounter instead of a goblin archer. These had little HP, so you could kill them with a backstab or a single hit when they were immobile and absorb their level 5 experience points.

A party of adventurers had beaten me to the first orc room I tried, and they were fighting inside, so I walked to the next closest orc room.

I peeked inside.

*There they are, I thought. Two goblin archers, one orc chief. The chief's wearing a breastplate.*

I wasted no time starting the day's hunt. I pulled the pin from a stun grenade, lobbed it inside, and shut my eyes until the flash was over. When the light was gone, I charged into the room, found the two low-HP goblin archers, and sliced their legs. The goblins dropped their bows, which I stomped on and snapped. I left the goblins on the ground, injured but alive, and thrust my sword into the orc chief's side.

"Ooh gaaar!" it roared, stumbling.

It tried to regain its footing and pulled its weapon up, but I was quicker. My attack packed a punch now that I was level 5, and the orc's club flew out of its hands. I plunged my sword into its thick neck.

I waited a little before finishing the first writhing goblin, then slew the last, and I finally had a chance to catch my breath.

After swinging my sword around in this encounter, I realized my strength had

progressed since my first dungeon raid, even with the Glutton debuff. Though my sword now weighed the same as the mace I'd stopped using, I could swing it easily using both hands. The feeling was the same as swinging the wooden bat at level 1, and my agility had improved too. I was still fat, weighing over a hundred kilos, but I could reach running speed. If I kept leveling up, I might come to act like a superhuman from a superhero flick, even at my current weight. That was both exciting and a little scary.

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Today's raid was going well. My time slaying enemies was kept short by launching surprise attacks and taking advantage of their immobility. Because they only respawned at ten-minute intervals, I was more than capable of handling the three monsters. Whenever I spotted a nearby monster in my downtime, I backstabbed it or lured it into the room to kill it. Over two hours, I racked up forty kills.

I'd gotten a bit scared when an orc chief roaming the area outside the room had attacked me. But I was better at following its motions compared to when I'd been level 4, so the fight hadn't been too difficult. The experience showed me that leveling up improved your overall fighting ability by increasing physical strength and dynamic visual acuity.

As it happened, I didn't encounter a single goblin soldier during my raid. Remembering back to the orc chief on the third floor, the probability of random encounters was much lower than in the game. I looted two bows but threw them away because they weren't magic items and were in bad condition with their bowstrings snapped, meaning I couldn't even sell them for scrap.

When it was time to go, I headed down to the fifth floor instead of up to the third to test the gate. The fifth floor was also busy with adventurers, and there were shops, food stands, and resting areas. Due to the time of day, plenty of tents had sprung up here and there, with parties of adventurers eating their meals inside. Pitching tents this close to the gate room indicated the gate wasn't common knowledge or usable.

Drawing on my mental map from the game, I recalled I'd reach the gate room if I turned left from the landing area and walked for a kilometer. In the room, I

saw a magic circle of complex geometric shapes inscribed on the wall. If I channeled my magic into the circle and registered the gate, I should warp to the first floor's gate. Or so I hoped, anyway.

Adventurers with the advanced job Sorcerer could learn a magic skill to create gates. Since every fifth floor had a gate room, I was in no rush to learn it. That skill definitely was a great one to learn, though. A Sorcerer could use it to whisk their party to safety in an emergency.

After arriving at the gate room, I looked inside but found nobody. I was the only person in the whole area! In answer to my earlier question, it appeared the gate wasn't common knowledge.

But this meant adventurers on the deeper floors must spend weeks or months traveling from the first floor to their raid destinations. The idea of anonymously posting about the gate rooms online briefly passed through my mind, but I rejected it. The gates *could* ramp up the speed of dungeon exploration and strengthen terrorists and other violent organizations, throwing the world into more chaos. The cat might come out of the bag eventually, but I wouldn't be the reason.

Once I confirmed I was alone, I began funneling magic into the magic circle. The grooves in the circle started to glow deep blue, and I heard the low rumbling of a mechanism activating. The gate appeared, a shining, whirling pool of purple.

"So it *does* work! Right, in I go!" I exclaimed.

There might be adventurers in the first floor gate room, but I didn't need to worry because I had no way of telling. So, I jumped in.

A whooshing sound passed by, and a world replaced another instantly. On the other side, I found myself in a dark room.

"Hang on, this isn't the first floor. I'm...inside the school?"

This location had a magic circle for a gate, meaning this *was* a proper gate room. Although the room looked like an ordinary Adventurers' High classroom, it lacked windows. About twenty seconds passed while I examined my surroundings before the gate closed, leaving the magic circle on a wall. On the

opposite side of the room, someone had stacked desks against the wall.

I exited the dark, classroom-like gate room. The hallway made me more convinced that I was in the school. When I climbed up the stairs, I got my confirmation. I recognized the entryway to the school's first floor, which meant the gate room was in the basement.

"What the hell's going on...? How can there be a gate room *outside* the dungeon?"

I'd frequently used the gates in my gaming days, but they'd never taken me outside the dungeon. It was an unsettling development. If the dungeon and its rules worked differently to the game, then my advantage as a former player would diminish, and it might force me to change my plans.

Why was there a gate room here in the first place? Was it man-made? But if Japan had that technology, we should have progressed farther into the dungeon. I circled back to the gate room and inspected it from top to bottom, inside and out, but nothing stood out.

From a different perspective, I could enter the dungeon from within the school without passing through security. I'd planned to use either the gate skill or magic items to get my family into the dungeon, but a new solution had presented itself. Plus, I was tired of dealing with the crowds when I wanted to enter the dungeon. From now on, sneaking in here was the way to go.

## Chapter 12: The Club Fair

Afternoon classes got canceled to let students visit a club fair in the school's lecture hall. My classmates chatted excitedly about which clubs they'd join.

As said during the orientation session, the clubs at Adventurers' High were geared toward dungeon raiding. Those like the Swordcraft Club and the Archery Club were for students who favored particular weapons. Others, including the Wizarding Development Club or the Warrior Development Club, focused on specific jobs. The school also had popular clubs for students interested in a future career or research position, such as the Item Crafting Club and the Blacksmith Club.

The kids were excited to meet students following the same path as themselves who could give them valuable advice.

First-year students from Class A to Class E had gathered in the giant lecture hall. The dimming of the lights signaled the event start, and a male student sitting on the student council took to the stage.

"We're about to begin the club fair," he announced. "Joining a club will bestow many privileges and can sometimes improve your grades. I'm sure the most promising students will have already received invitations from several clubs. But use this fair to weigh your options. With that said, let the fair begin!"

From what I knew, no one had invited a Class E student to a club. My classmates whispered nervously to each other, and it seemed they were also aware of this.

*I bet the other classes want nothing to do with us.*

I'd expected Class E would have formed relationships with other classes a few days after the entrance ceremony. Given our status as external students or our reputation as weaklings, the rest of the classes were on bad terms with us. If we *had* formed a relationship, it was a hostile one. They looked down on us. From what I gathered, this wasn't unique to our first-year class. The second and third-



year Class E students received the same treatment.

The clubs in the hall practically tripped over each other, trying to poach students from the higher classes, but not Class E students. They weren't turning down my classmates when they offered to join, but they weren't welcoming them with open arms either.

But in among all of this—

"First-year Class E students!" called a girl wearing a hakama. "You're all welcome in the Fourth Swordcraft Club! We don't have any sponsors, but unlike the other clubs, we won't treat you like indentured servants. If you want a fulfilling club experience and strive for improvement, why not stop by for a sample session?"

The girl was a significant character in the protagonist's story, a second-year subheroine called Cuddles... Or that's what the fans had called her. Her actual name was Yuna Matsuzaka. She was a strong-willed woman who, along with Akagi, had led the Fourth Swordcraft Club in a mighty war against the First Swordcraft Club.

Cuddles explained that whenever Class E students had joined clubs run by the higher classes, they'd only done menial tasks instead of training, and bullying had been a problem. Because of that, students had set up clubs run exclusively by and for Class E students, the Fourth Swordcraft Club being one of them.

In contrast to her pleasant speaking manner, the subject matter was dire, and my classmates were more cautious about joining clubs that let in people from other classes.

"Go on, losers, join the losers club!" a student from another class jeered, interrupting Cuddles.

"Nah, then who would we get to scrub the floors?" another asked.

"Exactly!" a third agreed. "And I suppose we can provide a *tiny* bit of training."

It was hard to believe how disrespectful these first-years were toward their senior.

I sighed and thought, *This is why so many events in the game revolved around Class E getting stronger and making these guys eat their words.*

In the game's story, the other classes constantly picked on the protagonist, Akagi, which led to several duel events. If I recalled correctly, Class A would shoo Akagi away when he tried to join their First Swordcraft Club at this very club fair. After that, Cuddles and the other Class E second-year students would take Akagi into the Fourth Swordcraft Club, and he'd train like hell to get payback. Reaching the end of that storyline would boost Akagi's stats, but the journey would be fraught with difficulty and darkness. I wished him luck, anyway.

Majima, my classmate, tutted, "They get a little head start in the dungeon and think they're God's gift to adventuring." He was a proud boy from a proud family.

Of course, he wasn't alone in resenting the other classes because everyone in Class E felt the same way. Even if we all worked together, we wouldn't stand a chance against the other classes. Just look at Class D's Kariya. He had the Fighter job and was already level 11, while most of us were at or below level 3. He could knock anyone from Class E on their backs with a single punch.

I'd raised my level from 1 to 5, and the accompanying physical enhancements were powerful enough to defeat an ordinary martial artist in a fair fight. The difference a single level made to each of your abilities individually was slight. Due to how your dynamic visual acuity, raw strength, stamina, and endurance all increased simultaneously, the overall effect on your fighting ability was notable.

My classmates were staring at their feet, brooding and frustrated. They clearly wanted to fight back but were too weak to do anything.

If a club performed well at the Arena Tournament or competitive fair, the school would show preference to its members when deciding which students advanced to a higher class. The blunt and dismissive attitude of the other classes made joining a club set up exclusively for Class E students seem like the preferable option. However, the clubs that Class A students joined were of far better quality when you looked at their facilities and instructors based on funds

provided by their sponsors. For example, I remembered being amazed at the First Swordcraft Club's room when I saw it. It was basically a luxury condominium! It was cruel to dangle that in front of Class E's eyes, then tell us not to join!

Conversely, the Fourth Swordcraft Club got crammed into a shoddy apartment outside the school that they'd had to rent because the school had refused to house them, citing a lack of space. To compound this, the upper classes had monopolized the good training locations within the magic field. The Fourth Swordcraft Club would have to go out and beg whenever they needed somewhere to train. It wasn't their fault though since the higher classes and student council were pulling strings to keep them out.

The students of Class E who'd joined the school hoping to rise to Class A and had worked so hard faced bigger issues than just figuring out which club to join. They had the odds stacked against them.

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Class E had been so excited when the fair had started, but a deep sense of gloom stuck to them as it ended. When we got back to the classroom, hardly anyone said anything. A few of the kids were sobbing into their hands.

"Are we just going to let that go?" said Oomiya, tears welling in the corners of her eyes. "It's true. We're not very strong at the moment. But come on, guys! We can change the way they look at us!"

Honestly, I wasn't happy with the elitism and discrimination rife in this school either. I'd been able to shrug it off and enjoy the game back in my old world, but not here.

"I'm all for setting them straight, but we don't have a hope of doing that unless we can get stronger," a student said.

"Yeah," another agreed. "I wish we could knock them down a peg... But we're too weak right now."

"I'll show them," said a short-haired girl, clenching her fists. "I'll get strong enough. Just watch!"

The problem was the higher classes also aimed to get stronger. Students in

Classes B to D worked as hard as they could to rise to the ranks of Class A. These upper classes had six years to battle it out, from the start of middle school to their high school graduation. Class E only had three years to catch up. Unless you had knowledge of the game, it would take more hard work than most were capable of to accomplish that.

*Although, this year's Class E is a special case, I thought. It has the protagonist and heroines like Pinky who are on another level, and even a foreign agent. I bet they'll turn things around even without my help.*

"I think I'll take a look at the First Swordcraft Club," said Akagi, the charming protagonist. "Sure, we'll have to prove ourselves. But we were gonna have to prove ourselves anyway." He was as optimistic as ever. It looked like he would sign up for the hotbed of Class A students after all, which meant his childish optimism would end soon.

Tachigi had been deep in thought for the past few minutes with his brows furrowed. I only prayed that he, Pinky, and Kaoru would be there to support Akagi through this. Otherwise, Akagi might have a breakdown.

My thoughts turned to Kuga, an American agent and highly skilled compared to the rest of Class E. She rested her chin on her hand and stared out the window, uninterested. Advancing to Class A meant nothing to her, which made sense. But she might get involved depending on how the story played out, so I'd need to keep an eye on her.

While I was watching the rest of the class, Nitta, who sat at the desk in front of me, turned around and looked at me through her glasses. "So, Narumi, did you find a club you liked?"

Like Kuga, she didn't appear worried about what had happened at the club fair.

"There's no rush, so I'm gonna take my time to think about it," I replied.

"Yeah, me too," she said. "I was gonna join the First Archery Club, but if it's too much for me, then maybe I'll go to the sample session for that Class E club instead."

The truth was that I wasn't interested in joining a club and didn't intend to. I

wasn't bothered about attending Adventurers' University, and rising to Class A mattered little to me. While a few competitions required being part of a club, missing out on those was a minor disadvantage. There was no need to join a club, and I preferred to spend my time leveling up in the dungeon. My enthusiasm was high as I had found an incredibly efficient hunting spot that would speed up my leveling.

*I'm so excited,* I thought.

But I was so caught up in my plans that I failed to notice how intensely Nitta stared at me.

## Chapter 13: Bridge-Dropping

I exited the classroom, leaving behind the gloom the career fair had stirred up, and set out to raid the dungeon. At home, I examined my rental weapons and new armor. Putting on the intimidating (in my opinion) armor energized me. I practically skipped back to the school building, then tiptoed down the stairs to the empty classroom in the first basement level with the gate. Like before, the room was dark with nobody inside.

“Cool, let’s see if I can access the gate from this side,” I said.

The other day, I’d registered my magic in the gate room on the fifth dungeon floor, so I should be able to activate the magic circle in this room and open a warp gate back to the fifth floor... But I wasn’t sure it would work.

I allowed magic to go through my hands and slowly concentrated it on the wall. A blue light glowed on the magic circle while it produced a low rumbling, and the gate opened.

“It worked. This is how I’ll get into the dungeon from now on.”

I’d been hoping that I could use this as my entry point, so I was relieved. The usual method of entry into the dungeon, through the ticket barriers outside the Adventurers’ Guild, had hordes of adventurers roaming. Sundays were the busiest day, so it wasn’t uncommon for half an hour to pass to get to the portal.

As I jumped through the gate, my vision stretched and distorted, then restored itself to show my new surroundings. I pulled up my tablet to check my location, which it read as the fifth floor of the dungeon. It was the room I remembered, so I was confident that the warp had been successful.

Opposite the gate room was the main street leading to the sixth floor, which was why no other adventurers were nearby. That was convenient for me as I had plans for the fifth-floor raid.

Unlike the broad, level maps of the first four floors, the fifth floor had a convoluted layout, with some parts divided by ravines and connected by rope

bridges. The terminal's map function compressed this onto a two-dimensional image, making it difficult for navigation. Adventurers needed additional information about such areas to avoid getting lost.

My destination for today's raid was a rope bridge in one of those difficult-to-navigate areas. Players in *DEC* had a strategy: you lured monsters to a bridge to cut the ropes and send them to their demise to get their experience points without fighting. Of course, this meant you'd have to climb down to where the monsters had fallen if you wanted their loot or give up on retrieving it.

The fifth floor was also home to a secret boss, the orc lord. At level 10, the orc lord was significantly tougher than the other monsters that spawned on the fifth floor since it used weapons skills. Even worse, its devastating War Cry skill summoned multiple level 6 orc soldiers and strengthened every orc nearby. Adventuring parties unaware of the orc lord's existence had lost almost all their members upon encountering this monster. It was so dangerous that the Adventurers' Guild had released regular alerts for adventurers to stay vigilant.

However...

The orc lord wasn't fast, and I could use its War Cry ability to create a train of orc soldiers without running all over the dungeon to pick up mobs. I could then lead that train to a rope bridge and take them all out, reaping the big experience point bonus from the high-level orc lord and those who followed it. This defect made the orc lord a valuable target. I was grateful its ability didn't attract orc mages or archers.

Only one orc lord could exist on this floor at a time, and it would take an hour to respawn. The same applied to rope bridges and traps, so I'd know when the orc lord had become active. It was as though the devs had designed everything in this area to make bridge-dropping possible.

But I had to check a few things before I could begin bridge-dropping.

I had to ensure no one else had dropped the bridge I planned to use. If someone had done so, I wouldn't be able to use this exploit. Since many people had known the trick, I'd rarely used this strategy. Although, I doubted anyone from this world knew about bridge-dropping based on the warnings posted about the orc lord. Having other adventurers doing this would mean the orc

lord wouldn't spend enough time alive to threaten them, and the orc lord room would almost always be empty.

Next, I wanted to check which traps lay between the rope bridge and the orc lord room so I wouldn't waltz straight into a pitfall at the head of a train of orcs. Squaring off against the orc lord in a cramped hole was nightmare fuel. I would need to study the map on my terminal to know if I could go to the bridge. I'd memorized the map already, but better safe than sorry.

Finally, I had to probe the orc room to confirm nobody else was there. If there were, they might get caught up in the train.

None of these would take too long, so I started. I passed goblin soldiers a few times on the way, which I got rid of by ambushing them as they passed a corner or backstabbing them.

I reached the rope bridge and confirmed that it was still standing. After that, I went to the orc lord room on the western edge of the map.

*Good thing I didn't come across any adventurers, I thought. How about the orc lord? Ah, yep, there he is. He looks stronger than he did in the game.*

The orc lord was the only monster in the twenty-square-meter room and stood taller than other orcs at over two meters. Its sizable arms bulged with muscles, and it carried a gigantic club, although "log" seemed more accurate. It remained still, making me think it might sleep standing up. Occasionally it babbled, "Ooh! Gaaar gaar..." So perhaps it was dreaming.

Luckily for me, my assumption that nobody else was bridge-dropping was correct. Only one group could do this on the fifth floor at a time, and leveling up would take more effort if I couldn't access this strategy.

*Bingo!* I thought. *Let's get going!*

I used a lighter on the fuse of a firecracker I'd brought and threw it into the room. The firecracker went off with a loud *snap! Snap, snap, snap!*

The orc lord swiveled its head around to see what was happening and spotted me by the entrance. When our eyes met, a cruel smirk formed on its lips, and it activated its War Cry skill.



“Ooh gaaaaaaaar!!!” it growled.

Five clouds of black mist formed simultaneously around the orc lord, from which orc soldiers wearing leather armor and wielding curved swords like scimitars emerged.

*Let's get this train started!* I thought.

So, I sprinted toward the rope bridge quickly, leading a long train of monsters behind me. As it chased after me, the orc lord reused its War Cry skill, summoning more orc soldiers. Stray goblin soldiers that had spawned nearby added themselves to the mix. More passengers for the train.



I knew the orc lord could run no faster than an ordinary orc and figured this stage would be a breeze. But I turned my head slightly and glanced from the side...and saw the bloodthirsty eyes of a monster horde intent on killing me, kicking up clouds of dust as they chased me.

“Oh, God! Running for my life from a train is terrifying!”

If they caught me, I'd be a goner. Cold sweat soaked my body, and I wanted to curl up into a ball out of fear. Instead, I clenched my teeth and ran as hard and as fast as possible through the dungeon for the next minute and a half. Then, the rope bridge came into sight.

The bridge was just a series of planks suspended from two wires, so the whole thing would come down if one cut those wires. Other rope bridges like this resided on the fifth floor, but this was the best one due to its proximity to the orc lord room, and its location made recovering loot easier. Many other bridges were too far away, too close to the ground, or built above areas difficult to reach.

“O-Oh God, stop wobbling!”

I leaped onto the bridge and tried to keep my running pace up, but the bridge was wobbling so much that I nearly lost my footing. My weight probably made it worse. I slowed down, still trying to get across quickly and taking care not to rush so much that I'd make the bridge unstable again.

The monsters caught up and piled up on the bridge, which was only fifty meters long and one meter fifty wide. This new rush of dozens of orcs and goblins made the shaking much worse than before. Leading the pack was the orc lord, towering over the rest.

Between the wobbling and the group of monsters, I almost got scared stiff. But the orc lord was behind me, and I had to keep moving.

My “Aaaaah!” and the pursuing orcs’ “Ooh gaaar!” harmonized and echoed throughout the dungeon ravine. I felt my heart was about to burst, yet I pushed myself forward for one last spring, diving head-first past the end of the bridge and back to land.

I snatched a rented knife from my belt and held it aloft. Then, I swung it down

with all my strength toward the wires supporting the bridge.

“Ha...ha... See you in hell!!!!” I yelled.

“Ooh gaar? Ooh gaaaaaaaar!!!”

The orcs stared at me in shock as they fell. Dropping the bridge had taken them completely by surprise. The drop was a good eighty meters, and the potential energy from this height was too much to be survivable.

Ten seconds later, my body grew hot, the signal that I was about to level up.

“So many...experience points,” I said, panting. “Level 6...in just one go.”

About thirty or forty monsters had followed me. The orc lord and orc soldiers came with bonus experience points because they were at higher levels. Plenty of goblin soldiers were also mixed in, so a single bridge-drop had earned me many experience points.

After catching my breath, I rose unsteadily and walked toward the ravine the monsters were in so I could collect my loot. There, I found several magic gems and a few glimmering metal coins.

“Hmm... Oh! These are dungeon coins.”

People from various fantasy races ran specific shops in hidden areas of the map, which were difficult to find. But players loved visiting them because they sold rare magic and appraisal items, and they had enabled players to change their job. These special shops didn’t accept Japanese yen for payment, and players had to remember to bring dungeon coins or try to trade magic gems if they wanted to buy items. The exchange rate for magic gems wasn’t great, making trading expensive. So, it was best to collect a decent supply of dungeon coins before venturing in.

The coins the orc lord had dropped were three copper pieces. Each copper piece was one lir, the lowest division of the currency. A silver piece would be ten lir, and a gold piece would be one hundred. A lir was worth the same as a magic gem from a tenth-floor monster. I wanted to keep these coins to spend them in the hidden store on the tenth floor.

I had an hour before the bridge repaired itself. After I picked up the magic

gems and the lir coins, I stopped for a break and took sips from the sports drink I'd brought. I unfurled a mat on the ground, lay down, steadied my breathing, and thought about the chase.

Before enacting my bridge-drop plan, I'd convinced myself I was fast enough to outrun orcs despite my weight and debuff halving my agility. However, my lead on the monsters in the train had been much narrower than I'd hoped. I also hadn't anticipated how much the orc lord's loud pursuit would paralyze me out of fear. The aftermath of the chase let it sink in that I was betting my life on this plan, which I hadn't grasped in the past. Now, I understood how difficult the people of this world had it compared to the game.

Because of the short travel time, I'd initially planned to bridge-drop another five times. Yet, the first one had worn me out mentally and physically. I needed to remember that, although I was level 6, Piggy's obesity and debuff skill meant I was weaker than I thought. My body needed more time to rest for it to function.

That said, I was ecstatic that bridge-dropping worked like in the game. I now had a surefire way to power level.

"I'll let my level get to a comfortable number, then bring my family," I said.

The bulk of experience points gained from bridge-dropping went to the person who cut the rope, which meant another person could steal my points by cutting it, even after I'd lured the monster to a bridge. I'd need to level up more to ensure I kept the train at a safer distance than today. Essentially, I wanted nothing to go wrong when my family was around.

There were a few other spots deeper in the dungeon where we could power level by exploiting the geography or traps. Still, my sister was dying to go on a raid, so I wanted to bring her here with me soon. My father would probably benefit from the bridge-drop trick, seeing he got stuck raiding the fourth floor for years. As for my mother, I wasn't sure whether she was interested in raiding. I'd have to ask her at some point.

"Okay," I said. "Time to start the next train. I'll kill some goblins on the way."

I slew a few goblin soldiers as I headed to the orc lord room and had no trouble following their attacks. Even my response time was great, so I was in no

danger. I was now strong enough to beat them in a fair fight without ambushing them.

Overall, I led another three trains to the bridge that day before my body and mind reached their limit, so I called it a day. By then, I was level 7.

## Chapter 14: Meanwhile, at the Front Line

I arrived home a little after eight.

Somehow, I felt hungrier after I'd leveled up. So, I went to the living room to search for snacks, where I found my family with their eyes glued to the television screen.

"We have just arrived at the boss room on the thirty-second floor," a man announced on the TV. "The temperature here is—"

The broadcast was coming from the dungeon. I asked what this program was, and Kano told me it was a news broadcast of a raid. Apparently, adventurers might break the record for the deepest raid into the Japanese dungeon, meaning everyone in the country was watching.

*So, the current record for the deepest successful raid in Japan is the thirty-first floor?* I thought.

The thirty-first floor was the start of a series of floors that had arctic conditions. On the TV, the party's male leader spoke to the audience, his breath rising in white clouds. He explained that anticold equipment and anticold spells cast by their priests allowed most of the combat role adventurers in the party to wear metal armor. This armor would usually be useless at that temperature because the wearer's skin would get stuck.

"It's the Colors Clan, bro!" exclaimed Kano. "That's Kotarou on the TV!"

Kano was a big fan of theirs. Her eyes sparkled as she launched into an excited spiel about them and showed me their trademark flag, which had five vertical stripes of white, red, blue, yellow, and green. She even told me they were one of Japan's foremost raiding clans.

Raiding clans were those that specialized in taking the front lines of the dungeon. They were larger than ordinary clans, usually having more than a hundred members, because they needed to assemble talented adventurers with various skill sets to thrive. They also had multiple sponsors thanks to their

deep ties to big business and the government. Around ten large, well-known raiding clans existed in Japan and were competing relentlessly with each other.

“The boss fight will begin in thirty minutes,” proclaimed a reporter in a thick coat. He then pointed to a whiteboard filled with information. “Before they get going, let’s explore Colors’ accomplishments and their current lineup for this raiding party.”

The clan leader, Kotarou Tasato, was a devilishly handsome man often featured in fashion magazines and TV shows. The state had recently granted him the title of baron. His popularity was most noticeable with young women. He was one of about a dozen adventurers in Japan to hold the advanced job of Samurai. Moreover, his main weapon was a meter-and-a-half longsword called an odachi, whose blade glowed a dark red, possibly due to fire magic.

Tasato was not just Colors’ leader but also its founder. He had graduated from the twenty-ninth class of Adventurers’ High, becoming an adventurer immediately instead of attending university and forming the Colors Clan with four other founding members. The fledgling clan gained a reputation for their aggressive dungeon raids, and their ranks rose to a hundred and twenty-eight members. Of all the current raiding clans, Colors had the most momentum.

The Colors Clan had picked seventy members to participate in today’s raid. They also had five subsidiary clans, each representing one of their constituent flag colors and with people vying for promotion into Colors. Including these clans amounted to more than one thousand members, which staggered me.

On a different note, it surprised me how many of this world’s TV programs were about the dungeon. Every day, one channel or another would broadcast a special on the dungeon, and famous adventurers would act in television dramas regardless of the genre. Other forms of media followed the same trend. Bookshops dedicated a lot of floor space to the dungeon, and specialist magazines about the dungeon and adventurer clans got published. The most popular ones produced top ten lists of adventurers and exposés on clans with many pictures of the Colors Clan frequently adorning these magazine covers.

“Sanada’s *my* fave,” said my mother, sighing.

Yukikage Sanada was the Priest who was second-in-command of Colors,



leading the raiding party's support roles and deciding when to retreat. He was intelligent and could heal or cure dozens of people simultaneously. And he was attractive, even when wearing glasses and his signature blue robe. His fan base skewed toward older women like my mother, who was an avid fan. One of her favorite stories was the day she'd served Sanada and his comrades at her part-time job at the Adventurers' Guild.

"Yeah, he's a looker," Kano agreed. "But, I don't know, I think the wild guys are the best..."

"Hmm, I prefer the cool types," replied my mother.

They sounded like girls discussing pop idols, but I could see why. Men as powerful and attractive as that had a guarantee of building a fervent fan base. Plus, their yearly earnings would be huge if they were raiding the front lines. Ugh. I wasn't jealous, though. I promise!

"I like The Red Ninjettes the best," chimed in my father.

The Red Ninjettes was an all-female Thief clan that oozed sex appeal as their uniform was a revealing red ninja costume. Their leader, Haruka Mikami, was a woman shrouded in mystery. Some claimed she was a daughter from a noble family; others claimed she was the holder of the legendary Ninja job. All I knew was that she had large breasts.

On the other hand, the Ninja job was an expert level job one could attain by clearing a trial after maxing out the job level of either the Assassin or Shadow Walker advanced jobs. I would be very interested in getting the Ninja job if it gave me an in with The Red Ninjettes.

"Don't even compare that trash to Colors," spat Kano.

"Honestly," added my mother. "No clan should be so indecent."

The Red Ninjettes weren't winning any popularity contests with the women of the house. So, I stopped listening to my family's meaningless conversation and continued watching TV.

"The floor boss is a lich, the strongest variety of undead monster. On the previous raid attempt, four adventurers lost their lives. How will today's raid fare? All of Japan, no, the entire *world* will be watching closely..."

*A lich, eh?* I thought. Liches were troublesome monsters that had mastery over distinct varieties of magic and possessed a summoning skill, like the orc lord, that could summon undead servants. Their magic resistance was immense, and their HP regenerated at lightning speed. In the game, the best strategy had been to overwhelm them in one short, powerful burst of physical attacks. I was interested to see how Colors would handle it.

The room the lich was in was a hundred square meters in area with a fifty-meter high ceiling—spacious enough to fit the whole seventy-person raiding expedition inside with plenty of room to spare. The cameraman filming the event was a news station employee whom I could distinguish from how a few adventurers guarded him.

Colors' raiding party was well prepared to fight a lich because it mainly had adventurers skilled in physical attacks, like Warriors and Archers. There weren't many Wizards, likely from liches having significant magic resistance. Each adventurer had equipped three magic rings to resist fire, ice, and lightning.

Several priests began casting Antimagic I, which raised magic resistance, and Strength I, which raised the strength stat, on the combat roles that would lead the attack, making the entire party stir. Buffs only lasted for a limited time, Priests commonly cast them at the last moment before combat began. In other words, it was time.

"The Archers will begin the attack," the reporter said. "There they go!"

"Archers, get in there!" shouted a Colors member.

Oddly, the Archers struck first. When they entered the lich's room, the dozen or so Archers launched a coordinated attack using the Triple Shot skill, which fired three simultaneous arrows with increased penetrative capabilities. A cacophony of thunderous booms spread across the lich room, louder than I ever thought arrows could make.

Seconds later, a twenty-person assault team of Warriors wielding massive swords rushed in, consecutively unleashing their Delay Slash skill. The lich tried to defend against the blows with its large staff as sword attacks came from every direction, successfully hitting their target.

The adventurers had gotten off to a good start. If they'd chosen to start with

close-range physical attacks, the lich would've had time to react before they got near and prevent most of the damage.

Sanada kept the rest of the party up to date about the lich's condition by using an appraisal item. He said the initial attack had reduced the lich to thirty percent of its original HP.

The lich hissed a wordless incantation and a magic circle formed of a hexagram inscribed within two concentric circles—a pattern used for summoning magic. It was likely trying to raise its undead servants, chaos soldiers. Four black clouds materialized, and spectral forms of skeletons clad in heavy armor emerged.

Archers launched another barrage of arrows to erode the HP of the monster to a vulnerable state.

The tower shields the chaos soldiers carried gave them a similar amount of magic resistance to the lich, and they could use the Sonic Slash skill, which had an effective range of twenty meters. These monsters would be dangerous if they got near the support roles.

The Warriors split into groups and surrounded one of the four chaos soldiers to prevent that. A Priest joined each group to support them.

From here on out, it would be a war of attrition. Some skills had cooldown timers that hindered repeated activation, so most damage dealt to the enemies would be through regular attacks. The Colors Clan provided a seamless rotation of fresh adventurers to the front line while blending their movements with strikes, a strategy designed to stop the lich from focusing on a single target.

The lich unleashed a burst of lighting in all directions and attempted to get away from the Colors so that it could regain the initiative. A band of Warriors jumped out in front of the lich, blocking its path and closing the distance.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to the attacking side was Tasato, whose Samurai job gave him many skills with short cooldown timers. Skills like Delay Slash and Triple Shot packed a ton of firepower but came with cooldown timers that ranged from three to ten minutes. In contrast, the Samurai skills Iai and Taishin no Tachi were ready to use again after a single minute. As a Samurai, Tasato also had access to the Mikiri skill, which let him predict the path of his

enemies' attacks and evade them. And he could also function as a no-hit tank\* for brief intervals. The Samurai job was an upgraded form of the Warrior job, so he also had Delay Slash. His offensive capabilities were unparalleled in the Colors Clan.

\*TIPS: Tanks generally use shields with a high defense score to block enemy attacks. No-hit tanks perform the same function as other tanks by dodging enemy attacks instead of blocking them.

“Take this!” Tasato yelled. “Let my foe taste my blade! Taishin no Tachi!”

“Priest team one!” an adventurer shouted. “Bring Tasato’s HP back up! Now!”

Tasato’s odachi was a gigantic sword, and he put all his strength into the Taishin no Tachi skill. The slash was over instantly, and it was clear how much Aura and physical power had gone into it.

The lich imbued its staff with purple lighting and fought back against Tasato. But the Priests in the party backed their leader by chanting their healing spells immediately.

“They’re in with a shot, I think,” remarked my father. “What do you think, Souta?”

The fight appeared to be going well so far, so I could understand why he thought that. However, this boss still had a trick up its sleeve.

“Depends on how they do after its HP drops to twenty percent,” I replied. “This lich has a berserk mode.”

Some bosses would enter a “berserk mode” when their HP dropped low enough, allowing them to use certain powerful skills. In this lich’s case, it would unleash an Area of Effect dark magic skill called Dark Vapor when it reached the HP I told my father. Adventurers hit with this would suffer damage as well as status effects that blinded and paralyzed them. This attack could incapacitate adventurers in active, close-range combat.

For a lich in berserk mode, the best strategy was to stop attacking and

prioritize healing and strengthening magic until the party was ready to let out a single, massive assault to slay the monster. But that was easier said than done.

“Remaining HP at twenty-three percent!” Sanada yelled. “Attackers, it’s time to switch your armor to gear with dark resistance!”

Apparently, the previous attempt to slay the lich failed when it entered berserk mode. The raiding party’s cohesion had broken down as several Warriors had lost their lives, forcing the rest to flee. This time, they’d come prepared.

“Here it comes!” Sanada shouted. “All Priest teams, support!”

“Signal for a Priest if the status effects don’t go away!” one Priest yelled.

“Form a defensive line, stat!”

Just as the lich’s HP fell below twenty percent, a gigantic magic circle formed on the ground, and waves of darkness scattered in all directions. It was Dark Vapor.

The adventurers of Colors formed a defensive line against this attack, raising their shields. Two of the Priest teams immediately began chanting their spells, the first team activating the Cure skill to remove status effects and the second team using the Area of Effect Circle Heal skill. Sanada called the remaining Priest teams into action, ordering them to observe everyone’s HP and to cast individual healing spells to the frontline attackers for whom the AoE healing skills weren’t enough.

“As soon as your cooldown is done, hit it with your skills!” bellowed Tasato.

He emitted a war cry as he lunged at the lich and activated his weapon skills. The Warriors changed their attacking line and readied themselves to release a combined volley of Delay Slashes.

On this day, the Colors Clan broke the record for the deepest successful raid on the Japanese dungeon on the thirty-second floor.

## Chapter 15: A Sleepless Night

Every channel on television ran breaking news alerts to inform viewers of the Colors Clan's heroic victory against the lich. The station that aired the broadcast extended its programming by four hours, and retired adventurers commentated on footage of the thirty-second-floor raid.

My mother and sister, mega fans of Colors, sat glued to the television all night as they celebrated. Incidentally, my father had gone to bed since he had work the next day.

The spirit of celebration that seemed to grip the country after the successful raid astounded me. It didn't look like the broadcast was ever going to end.

"It's past midnight," I said. "Shouldn't we all get some sleep?"

"I'm good," Kano said. "There's no school tomorrow."

"Oops. I need to get up for work," said my mother.

Then, I remembered what I wanted to ask my mother and spoke up, "Mom, what would you do if you could become an adventurer?"

"Oh, I doubt I could fight monsters at my age," she replied.

It was natural for someone who'd passed their physical peak to believe that changing careers to adventurer would be difficult. But when I told her that the physical enhancements gained in the dungeon had an anti-aging effect, she nearly jumped out of her chair!

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?!" she exclaimed. "I think I'll go on a slime hunt on my way home from work tomorrow!"

"Take me too!" Kano joined in.

I'd read about the anti-aging effect in a magazine for adventurers I'd found at the Adventurers' Guild. In it, Japan's Holy Woman had written, "What's my secret for staying young? Why, the dungeon, of course!" They should direct any doubts they had about that claim to her, not me.

After all, that woman's adventuring career spanned from the prewar period to today. Her age was a mystery—she kept that information secret for privacy.

Anyway, back to the subject at hand.

I explained I knew a good spot for power leveling on the fifth floor that removed struggling fights on the early floors. But I kept my explanation vague enough that I wouldn't give too much away. Combat experience would be necessary if they wanted to fight on the front lines of dungeon expeditions. Power leveling, though, was the easier method if all they needed to do was to get stronger. There'd be enough time to drill them on tactics and dungeon know-how as they progressed to higher levels.

"Wait, bro, you're already on the fifth floor?" asked Kano. She looked at the calendar, counted on her fingers, then tilted her head, puzzled. "How? You've only been raiding for these last two weeks."

"Adventurers' High really is something else," said my mother. "Your dad's never gotten past the fourth floor!"

Of course, he hadn't. Finding a group of ten or so people on the weekend and strolling around the dungeon was no way to level up. Big parties worked amazingly for adventurers at higher levels. But the most efficient way to level up in the early floors was to secure a nice hunting spot and exploit it solo or with a single partner. That required having knowledge of the game.

"I'll take mom when she doesn't have to worry about work. As for you, Kano, I can take you a day later, so Sunday. We can't do it tomorrow because I want to level so we can power level safely."

"Yay!!!" Kano chirped with delight. "But how will I get into the dungeon? I don't have an Adventurers' Pass."

"Yes," my mother agreed. "She's still fourteen. The guild won't give her one."

Most people thought sneaking into the dungeon was impossible. The government had strict restrictions on entry, and the gate wasn't common knowledge. I still found it odd that nobody had discovered and used it to help with expeditions.

"Don't worry," I said. "I know a way around it."

“Yay!!!”

“Are you sure?” asked my mother. “Don’t do anything that will put you in danger.”

After that, my mother went to bed. The television was still broadcasting reports of the successful dungeon expedition.

“I wonder,” said Kano, “will Colors have to fight all the bosses again as they come back up through the dungeon?”

“Floor bosses either stay dead or respawn somewhere else,” I replied, “so you don’t have to fight them if all you’re doing is passing between floors.”

“Oh, okay.”

The orc lord on the fifth floor was originally a floor boss. I took a moment to think about how that boss fight would go. Level 5 Newbies would only stand a chance against an enemy like that by forming a large party... Or by bridge-dropping.

“I can’t wait for Sunday to come,” said Kano. “Night, bro.”

“Goodnight.”

I went upstairs to brush my teeth and went to sleep, but thoughts about the dungeon expedition still had my heart pumping and kept me awake. As I lay on my bed, I reflected on the raid and how the adventurers had put their lives on the line to slay that boss.

Being the first to slay a new floor boss and conquer a new floor had been an event worthy of celebration in the game. In *DEC*, the players who’d fought against the mightiest monsters had been the ones everyone had talked about. Floor bosses were the strongest monsters to appear on any floor, so a party with a handful of players stood no chance against them. Without defeating them, the floors beyond would be unreachable. And so various clans would join forces to defeat the bosses and respawn and try again and again until they’d won and had unlocked the next floor. In the days before I’d arrived in this world, the game’s clans had flooded message boards seeking to recruit members to raid the hundredth floor.



But the raid I'd seen on the television earlier and the raids in the game were completely different. I'd watched adventurers fighting for their lives and those of their trusted comrades. The Colors Clan seemed in their element to the ordinary person. But I knew they'd suffered many failures on their journey, and it was easy to imagine how much pressure they felt, how hard they had to fight against their own fear. They couldn't repeat the raid over and over. In this world, death was final.

I couldn't just plan my dungeon raids like I had in the game. And I'd found that out the hard way when I created the train of orcs in my fight against the orc lord. Still, I'd learned a few things while watching the fight against the lich.

First, there was a lack of Manual Activation of skills. The adventurers had only used Automatic Activation during the fight as there'd been no skill motions or drawing of magic circles. Had they avoided using Manual Activation because the raid was live? Not likely. Colors wouldn't have skimped on anything that would've given them an edge since Manual Activation reduced skill cooldowns and increased skill power. The fight had been too close for that. In that case, either nobody from this world knew about Manual Activation, or the knowledge existed but was kept top secret and revealed to only a select few. The former seemed the most likely.

I'd also learned a few things about jobs, like how none of the healing support roles had a job higher than Priest. Colors had plenty of Priests but not a single adventurer with the advanced Cleric job. Even Sanada was just a Priest. Adventurers at a high enough level to fight against the lich would have more than enough experience points to attain the job.

The clan had also given Warriors shields and made them act as tanks even though they were best suited to dealing damage. Someone with the Knight job, another intermediate job, would've been a better choice. Knights had resistance against physical and magical attacks and possessed valuable skills, so there was no reason to exclude them.

Could no one know how to change jobs to either Cleric or Knight? I hadn't found any information about Clerics. Knights definitely existed in this world because I'd found records of them in some European countries.

Given the risk of dungeon information falling into the wrong hands, the governments undoubtedly treated specific information as top secret and withheld it from the public. For example, I'd found no occurrences of adventurers with the advanced Samurai job in other countries. The Japanese government treated the method of becoming a Samurai as a state secret, revealing it only to promising young adventurers for their loyalty. They must have treated the Knight job the same way, reserving it as a privilege to give to a chosen few. In a way, high-level adventurers were national assets.

The raid had also presented a few questions for me. Why hadn't the Holy Woman participated in the lich fight? The Holy Woman's skill Turn Undead could inflict massive damage on the lich, even with its high magic resistance. Even Tasato's Samurai skills couldn't do as much damage. Moreover, the four chaos soldiers would've gone down faster if they'd had the Area of Effect Sanctuary skill, which healed adventures and hurt undead monsters within a wide radius. Holy Women were also indispensable in fights against floor bosses or other strong enemies because of their Revive skill that brought the dead back to life. Even if one didn't need it, it would be a huge comfort to know it was there.

At least one Holy Woman resided in Japan, so why hadn't the Colors Clan enlisted her help? Perhaps they couldn't? Could the Holy Woman be too divine for even a leading raiding clan like Colors to contact? Or maybe her existence was just a bluff concocted by the government?

I put aside whether a Holy Woman truly existed in Japan since I couldn't verify that. If Pinky played through the correct events, she'd eventually become a Holy Woman, which could be a problem. How would Japan react if that happened? And the rest of the world? Many variables were at play, even if this world followed the stories from the game.

As such, I needed to investigate the effect of discovering new jobs on this world. That included the Hero job the protagonist could get. It would be good to meet and talk with Japan's Holy Woman or a high-level adventurer.

Though, I'd have to level up. Nobody would take a random level 7 Newbie seriously, and they'd slam the door in my face.

All this hard thinking finally wore me out, and I drifted off.

# Chapter 16: Power Leveling

I'd spent the day before making more orc lord trains, which had brought me up to level 8. That also helped me max out Newbie's job level at level 10 and obtain the Plus Three Skill Slots skill.

My skill slot allocation currently looked like this:

- Glutton
- Basic Appraisal
- (Empty)
- (Empty)
- (Empty)

Plus Three Skill Slots did what it said. When I'd played *DEC*, I'd always hated choosing which skills to make room for in the insufficient skill slots. So, Plus Three Skill Slots was essential for me.

Ideally, I would've loved to switch to a new job and begin enjoying myself. But signing up for a new job at the Adventurers' Guild would update my stats in my terminal, letting all my classmates know my current level. I'd have to be patient and wait until I reached a high enough level to enter Granny's Goods on the tenth floor.

My physical enhancements were coming along nicely as well. At level 8, I could run much faster than the first time I'd created a train at level 5, and I could keep my fat, debuff-ridden body well ahead of any chasing monsters. It would be intriguing to time myself in a hundred meter dash. I could even get a gold medal if they held the Olympics inside a magic field.

The increase in my speed was also partially due to the fast progress of my diet. I'd recently realized that my basal metabolism was unusually high, just like

my strange sense of hunger. My required daily calorie intake was extreme, so skipping and skimping on meals burned fat quickly as long as I could stand the craving. I had dropped to just over a hundred kilograms despite the increase in my muscle mass and was keen to see the results of my diet continue.

Dieting and increasing my physical enhancements had caused a dramatic increase to my running speed that showed how screwed I would've been if I'd created an orc lord train when I'd been level 1. When I first arrived in this world, I contemplated going straight to the fifth level. I was glad I hadn't done so because my out-of-shape body and likely fear would've made me easy prey for the orc lord.

Still, I planned to reserve judgment on the Glutton skill until I could get it appraised on the tenth floor. That would tell me how big the HP and vitality buffs were and what the three question marks hid. I wouldn't erase the skill until I knew that, and hunger would be a constant enemy for now.

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"Flask, check! Lunch box, check! Pruning shears, check! And let's not forget the candy! I'm good to go, bro! How do I look?" Kano gave a twirl, showing off her brightly colored anorak and casual denim shorts.



“Fine, I guess,” I replied. The choice of clothes didn’t matter as long as it didn’t restrict movement. Kano could’ve worn a simple tracksuit and been fine. I kept that thought to myself since her mood would’ve worsened if I’d said it aloud. “All right. Let’s get going.”

“Compliments cost nothing, bro,” said Kano, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, how are we getting in?”

Our entryway was the school’s gate room, though Adventurers’ High’s security staff kept vigilant in that area. Even so, I knew of other places we could use to sneak in. We turned off of the main road I used for my morning commute and walked up a narrow path on a hill.

Today, I was going to power level my sister. Although I could wait a little longer for quicker and more efficient ways to level her up, I needed to get my family involved so we could become a party. Solo adventuring wasn’t enough, as there were event items I couldn’t get while monsters were getting difficult to slay. The protagonist might also be stirring up game storylines that could endanger everyone, so I wanted to prepare my family.

“Huh? Can we really get in from here?” asked Kano.

“Yep,” I replied. “We’ll be out of the hills soon, so hang in there.”

We trudged along the steep roads behind the school that were little more than animal trails, as the land here was state-owned and undeveloped. The dungeon had first appeared at the foot of this hill when the government excavated a large portion of it during the school’s construction. I planned to use the extra elevation of the remnants of the original hills to sneak into the school. The overgrown grass of the spring season slowed our progress, but the terrain wasn’t impassable. After a few minutes, we got inside the school grounds.

“God, these tiny bugs are all over me!” whined Kano, spitting out a bug that had gotten into her mouth. “I wish you’d told me we’d be walking through a field so I could’ve brought my bug spray!”

I ignored her, scanned the school grounds, then said, “Okay, nobody’s around. We must get to the back of the school building to enter.”

We accessed the school building through an emergency exit I’d left slightly

ajar the day before, then descended the stairs and headed for the unused classroom on the first basement level.

“Wow!” whispered Kano in delight. “You can tell this is the country’s top school. Everything looks way more expensive than at my middle school. Oh my God, look at this awesome trophy!”

“Just relax, okay! And get a move on!” I said.

Kano yelped as I grabbed her anorak’s hood and pulled her away from the trophy case she’d been gawking at, down the stairs, and into the gloomy gate room. I made sure nobody was inside before we entered.

“What is this place?” asked Kano. “Why’s there a pattern on the wall?”

“I’ll show you,” I replied. “Watch this. I’m gonna channel my magic into the pattern.”

I gathered magic and slowly funneled it into the magic circle to activate the gate. Kano’s eyes widened as she watched.

“We go through this to get to the fifth floor,” I said, keeping my explanation brief so we could move quickly. “Follow me.”

“We can go straight to the fifth floor?” Kano asked. “Ah, wait for me!”

Rushing air passed through the portal, and the scenery morphed into that of the fifth-floor gate room. Soon, my sister emerged through the gate behind me, glancing around nervously.

“Are we inside the dungeon?” she asked. “On the fifth floor?”

“Yep,” I replied. “Stay close to me. We might run into monsters.”

“Gotcha.”

We encountered a goblin soldier on the road, so I faced it head-on and sliced it in two. I’d rented a heavier sword because I was at a higher level now and had no trouble using it.

“Gross!” complained Kano. “Could you make it less gory? Remember that you have a lady with you!”

“Don’t be stupid,” I shot back. “This is the sort of thing you’ll have to get used



to if you wanna raid the dungeon.”

I slew three more monsters before we reached the bridge-dropping point.

Kano’s initial complaints soon became an intense fascination with the dungeon. She zipped from one thing to another, patting the walls and rolling the magic gems around in her hand.

“So, I’ll lead a bunch of monsters here. I need you to cut these two ropes and drop the bridge the second I cross it,” I explained.

“That explains why we need pruning shears,” said Kano. “But the ropes are so thick. Will I be able to cut through?”

She had a point. Would she be able to cut them? The ropes were thick, and she was a delicate level 1 girl in her third year of middle school.

“Let’s go to another bridge and test whether you can cut the ropes there,” I suggested.

“Okay.”

Another bridge thirty meters lower than our current location was the perfect spot for the test. Since there was no paved path to get there, we had to cross huge boulders and uneven terrain. It took Kano a while to traverse it, and I would’ve also had trouble if not for my physical enhancements.

“Okay. Have a go at cutting this,” I said.

“Kay!” Kano said. “Take! This! You...! Ughhh, so tough!” Kano squeezed the shears for five seconds and finally cut through the first rope. We couldn’t wait that long to cut both with a train charging at us.

Maybe I should give her my hatchet to use? But could she handle a hatchet? I gave her one and asked her to try again.

“Jump and slice!” shouted Kano. “Oh, it worked. The move I used just now is actually one of Kotarou’s ultimate attacks and—”

“Good, we can use the hatchet,” I said. “Let’s go back.”

“Hey, I was saying something!”

For safety reasons, I decided I’d cut the first rope while Kano took care of the

other. I tried cutting the rope with the shears to see how hard it was, and it required a lot of strength. Sticking with the hatchet was the best option.

Monsters wouldn't spawn near bridges, so it was safe here as long as you didn't lead them from elsewhere. I told Kano to hide by the bridge and wait for my return. My biggest concern was that she'd wander off, so I emphasized that she had to stay put.

"Okay, I'll be off," I said. "Oh, and just so you know, there's gonna be a ton of orcs chasing me. It might be scary, but you need to stay calm."

"I will. Now I only have to cut one rope," responded Kano.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I said. "Whatever you do, don't leave. Okay, I'll see you soon."

"See you!"

I headed briskly to the orc lord room, checking any traps and slaying any monsters I encountered. When I was about a hundred meters away from my destination, I spotted an orc soldier wandering around the area.

*That's weird,* I thought.

The only orc soldiers on this floor were the ones summoned by the orc lord—they didn't spawn. Someone must have caused the orc lord to do this. Were there people fighting it?

Just then, I saw a downed adventurer! It was a woman huddled against the inside of a cavity in the cave wall as if hiding from the wandering orc soldier. She was sitting perfectly still and trying not to breathe, but her arm looked injured.

The orc soldier would attack if I called out to her, so I'd have to kill it first. I circled to its blind spot to take it by surprise and moved quickly to be as quiet as possible. When I was five steps away from the orc, it heard my footsteps and swung its body to face me. But it reacted too late.

With a one-handed thrust, I plunged my sword into the monster's unprotected neck. The orc made a gurgling noise as it tried to scream, then slumped to the ground. I felt its dead weight dragging my sword down.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

The woman groaned with pain. “Over there... Th-There’s an orc... But I’ve never seen anything like it... My friends are...”

She didn’t get up, instead looking at me. Still, she remained huddled because of the pain in her arm.

I inspected her injury and noticed part of her arm was black and swollen. She’d broken it, but it wasn’t fatal. When she said, “over there,” she probably meant the orc lord room. Why had they taken on the orc lord? Hadn’t they seen the warnings the Adventurers’ Guild posted? There’d be time to figure that out later.

“I’ll go take a look,” I told her. “Can you get somewhere safe?”

“Yeah...” she replied. “Thank you. I’ll be all right. Please, please help my friends.” Although she pleaded, her friends could already be dead. In any case, I needed to hurry.

I jogged stealthily and reached the entrance to the orc lord room. As I poked my head through the entryway, I noticed blood splatters covered the room. While I saw two corpses, there were survivors too. Three adventurers remained standing, surrounded by the orc lord and ten orc soldiers it had summoned. Among the survivors, the one that seemed to be their tank appeared to have his left arm broken. He was entirely on the defensive, doing nothing more than holding up his battered shield. The other two were hiding behind him, cowering in fear and despair. The orcs could’ve killed them but toyed with their prey, enjoying the torment.

*All righty, then. What’s my move?* I thought.

I might be level eight now, but charging into a pack of orcs was still incredibly risky. How could I sleep at night if I didn’t try saving them? I needed to act quickly for their sake and that of my sister. After all, she might grow bored, wander off, and get into trouble if I were gone for too long.

*Here’s the plan, I thought. I’ll kill as many and try to lead the rest away. Otherwise, I’ll run for the hills if it all goes to shit.*

The orc soldiers were so preoccupied with their tormenting that they hadn’t

spotted me. From the looks of the survivors, taking on a lone orc soldier would be too much for them. I decided to take down a couple of the soldiers. I crept over to the nearest orc soldier and stabbed it through the back of its head.

*One down.*

That was when the orc standing next to the first spun around, and I cut it open from the left hip to the right shoulder with a slash of my sword. It screamed in agony as it fell, still alive.

My attacks alerted the orc lord and all its soldiers to my presence. A club fell toward me from the left, so I dodged it and stabbed my attacker's throat. Then, a fountain of blood spurted from the wound when I pulled out my sword.

*That makes two.*

I finished off the orc I'd slashed a second ago, taking my kill count to three.

"Ooh gaaaaaar!!!" roared the orc lord, activating its War Cry skill. Black clouds formed and let loose four more orc soldiers. A red glow surrounded the original orcs, signifying that the War Cry skill had strengthened their attack abilities by two levels.

When the orc lord became enraged by this interruption to its fun, it swung its log-like club toward me. Yet the blow struck a nearby orc soldier who was in the way at a wall. The orc lord's strength was immense.

Two more orc soldiers charged toward the trespasser in their midst and swung their rusty swords down toward me, but I...

Well, I bolted. I didn't want to stick around any longer!

"I'll lead them away!" I shouted to the surviving adventurers. "Run as soon as you see a chance!"

Momentarily, the orcs stood fixed to the spot, stunned that I'd turned tail and fled. I lit the fuse on three firecrackers and threw them at the monsters, who now snapped out of their daze and rushed after me in a frenzy.

"Ooh gaaar!!!" they roared in unison.

"I'm still not ready to take on such a large number at once," I admitted. "But I sure got their attention!"

The orc lord repeatedly activated its War Cry skill as it chased me, increasing the number of orc soldiers on the train. It was more than those on any of my previous attempts.

By this point, fleeing down this route to the rope bridge was second nature, so I focused on guiding the train and ensuring no passengers would get off early. I did this by managing my pace and throwing the occasional firecracker.

I was nearly at the bridge-dropping spot.

“Over here, ooooh my God!!!” yelled Kano.

“Get ready to cut the rope!” I shouted at her.

She had good reason to be frightened. I was trailing over fifty monsters... That was a new record!

The bridge still wobbled, but I knew I could keep it stable by lowering my center of mass and counteracting it with my lower body. That was the safest way to cross. My bridge-dropping technique was leagues better than on my first attempt.

At last, I reached the other side and pulled out the pruning shears, but it wasn't time to cut the rope. “Cut yours when I cut mine,” I instructed. “Wait for it!”

“O-O-Okay!”

The pack of orcs, twenty meters away, was close enough to see the crazed look in their eyes and hear their heavy breathing. The rope bridge swayed tremendously, and a few orcs tumbled over the side while the rest charged forward. All they cared about was taking my life, so I focused on the rear of the train... And the final orc stepped onto the bridge.

“Now, Kano!”

“Jump! And! Slice!!!”

Kano unleashed her so-called ultimate attack on the rope and successfully cut through. The orcs let out a parting scream as they plunged to their doom.

“A nice, big haul,” said Kano, whistling as she gazed down at the pitfall. “I didn't think there'd be so many of... Wait, what's going on? I can't...breathe...”

“It’s a sign you’re about to level up,” I said.

“Ughhh... Huh? Hmm, I feel...so much stronger!” Kano swiveled her arms in circles. She was likely experiencing the invincibility that followed the physical enhancements from a sharp, sudden level increase. Defeating the orc lord and all the other orcs at level 1 was probably worth enough experience points to get to level 3 or 4.

“You haven’t learned the Basic Appraisal skill yet, have you?” I asked.

“Basic Appraisal?” asked Kano. “Ah, now that you mention it, I feel something! Do I need to assign it to a skill slot?”

“Yep,” I replied. “The plan is to keep the Newbie job until you reach job level 10.”

“Gotcha.”

She had Basic Appraisal, which meant bridge-dropping today’s train had bumped her to level 5 and increased her job level to 7.

“Oh, and did something go wrong, bro?” she asked. “You’re covered in blood.”

“Those orcs were attacking another party of adventurers,” I said.

I explained that I had to ditch the plan of provoking the orc lord into chasing me and instead fight some monsters it had already summoned.

“Though, I’m pretty sure they got away safely,” I continued, “but I’m gonna go take another look to make sure.”

“Kay,” replied Kano. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You can come with me, but we’ll need to get the loot first. Otherwise, it’ll disappear.”

I was sure I’d gotten all the orcs from the room to follow me. If the first adventurer I’d come across had called for a rescue party, there was nothing more we could do to help, but I wanted to see for myself.

Before that, we needed to descend eighty meters to the bottom of the valley. My sister proceeded carefully, appearing surprised by her physical

enhancements.

“My body feels super light,” she remarked.

“Don’t get cocky or you’ll trip and fall.”

We arrived at the valley floor, where the monsters’ magic gems were scattered. I could see the bridge dangling from the cliff edge when looking up.

“This is awesome!” exclaimed Kano. “How much is it worth? Ooh, what’s this sparkly coin? Look over there! It’s an item!”

“Calm down,” I said. “Let me have the magic gems. I’ll sell them, and we can buy you some armor.”

“Kay!”

I picked up the item she’d pointed out since it was unique. When I used Basic Appraisal, I discovered it was called “Crest of the Orc Lord.” It was a badge with the image of a pig that provided plus ten percent to damage dealt and minus ten percent to damage received when fighting humanoid monsters. Countless humanoid races showed up at all depths of the dungeon, so items with effects relating to them would be helpful in the long run. This badge was partly why bridge-dropping the orc lord had been so popular in the game.

Unique items were only available in treasure chests or as loot dropped by floor bosses. These items fetched a high price in the game, and players often fought over them.

“Here, this item’s yours. Inspect it with Basic Appraisal,” I said.

“Sure.” Kano paused and spoke up to activate the skill, “Go! Wow, this is powerful, right?”

“Put it on. It’ll keep you safe, so don’t lose it because that badge is rare.”

My sister danced and started singing, “I’m rich, rich, rich!”

I knew I’d need to reiterate that she couldn’t sell it.

Besides the badge, we picked up about fifteen magic gems and three dungeon coins. I calculated the conversion and concluded that single train had netted tens of thousands of yen. A part of me wanted to turn this into my day job, but I

resisted that thought. I had bigger dreams.

“Cool,” I said. “I’m gonna head over to the orc lord room now. You coming?”

“Yep! Beats standing around,” said Kano.

The fastest route to the orc lord room would usually be the one I took to get here, but the bridge was gone. That meant we’d have to take the long way, so we set off once we’d retrieved all the loot and replenished our flasks with water.

Along the way, I knocked the metal weapon of a goblin soldier from its grasp and let my sister experience combat. She put up a valiant effort swinging the hatchet I’d given her but fell short of dealing fatal damage. All the minute cuts she inflicted on the monster covered her in blood and were a gory sight. Yet, she looked back at me teary-eyed.

Seeing she was getting nowhere, I stepped in and chopped the goblin’s head off with a single swing.

“You have two options,” I said. “Either aim for a vital spot like the neck to kill it or go for the arms and legs to incapacitate it.”

Goblin soldiers wore leather armor, so swinging your sword would barely deal damage. They would eventually succumb after enough cuts, but the risk was that other monsters might link\* and you’d have to face them all at once. Monsters could appear randomly in the dungeon, so it was best to finish fights quickly. She’d have to get over her aversion to gore.

\*TIPS: Linking is when nearby monsters join an ongoing fight or call for reinforcements. This situation forces players to fight multiple opponents at once.

We arrived outside the orc lord room in ten minutes using that detour. I looked inside and didn’t see anyone, so it was safe to assume the surviving adventurers had escaped. Someone must have retrieved their friends’ bodies because there were no corpses. The fifth floor had a resident rescue party and a resident body-retrieval party. One of the adventurers had likely called them to



help.

“So this is where the orc lord spawns?” inquired Kano. “And we just have to lure him to the rope bridge?”

I explained the orc lord took an hour to respawn, and the bridge also repaired itself in an hour. If one killed the orc lord using bridge-dropping, they had to look at one or the other to know when to restart the process. I also told her about the need to inspect traps, clearing monster routes, and checking for nearby adventurers. Most importantly, I told her not to try the plan until she’d reached level 7 due to the running speed needed for the chase.

“Oh, and one more thing,” I said. “Anything you learn about the dungeon, you keep secret. Other adventurers might steal the best raiding spots, and bad guys could use it for the wrong reasons. The really bad guys might hunt you down to find out what else you know.”

“Got it,” answered Kano.

“Okay then, let’s bridge-drop a few more times before we go home. Now that I think about it, I meant to ask if you had any starter skills.”

I began as an adventurer with the Glutton skill. Starting with a skill was rare, so I assumed she didn’t have one, but in fact—

“So,” she started, “other than Basic Appraisal, I’ve got this thing called ‘Dual Wielding.’”

After a pause, I said, “You’re kidding me?”

Dual Wielding was a high-level extra skill learned from the Samurai job that increased attack power and critical hit probability when wielding a weapon in each hand. It also increased the number of attacks unleashed by a burst of a weapon skill. When it got combined with the Double Attack skill, it quadrupled the number of attacks, making it harder for enemies to hit you.

You could only get extra skills after maxing out the job level of advanced jobs and completing a particular quest. Having this skill from the get-go was an advantage over going through the regular means. In the game, you’d need to travel to the fortieth floor to complete said quest. A player could request a high-level player to escort them, but in this world, you’d have to find your way

since no one ventured past the thirty-second floor. Even the leader of the Colors Clan, Tasato, a Samurai, didn't have the Dual Wielding skill because he couldn't complete the special quest yet. He'd used a single sword as his main weapon on the broadcast I'd seen, meaning he hadn't reached the pinnacle of the Samurai job.

Practitioners of the Dual Wielding skill had multiple fighting styles to choose from. *DEC's* players had favored two: The first was a brute-force style where players stacked points in their strength stat and carried a two-handed weapon in each hand. Conversely, the other style had players specialize in the agility stat and unleashed rapid combos.

I asked Kano which one she preferred.

"Uhh," she said. "Dunno. I'll try it out when I get a good weapon."

"We can try it out with the hatchet you're using and...these shears, I guess," I said. "How about trying them against a goblin?"

"Using Dual Wielding?" she pondered. "I dunno if it'll work. I'm not sure I can swing this heavy hatchet around with one hand... Oh, scratch that. Turns out I can."

She might be a little middle-school girl, but she was as strong as the average adult male despite only being a level 5 adventurer.

I sent her to fight a goblin soldier like before, and her movements were like nothing I'd ever seen when she struck it. Her fearsome fighting intuition made me doubt whether I had any right to act like a teacher!

We continued power leveling, remembering to squeeze in time for a lunch break, and we called it a day after the third train. Kano was still as lively as ever, experiencing the high of her first-ever dungeon visit. But I didn't want to push her too far; whether she felt it, the day's events had tired her and worn down her nerves.

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Fortunately, the gate room made the journey home relatively quick. Minimizing travel time freed you to be more productive, giving you an edge over everyone else. The office job I had in my old world taught me that.

My terminal displayed 2 p.m. There was plenty of time to get more done, so I decided that we'd go to the armory in the Adventurers' Guild and pick out some armor for Kano.

"Come on in!" said the bearded manager. He wore the same apron when he'd sold me the demon wolf jacket. "Hmm? Ah! You're the kid that bought the demon wolf armor."

"H-Hello," I said.

"How can I help you today?"

"Do you have any light armor for my sister?" I asked. It might be worth requesting a demon wolf chest protector for her if he still had pelts of the material.

"Ah, wait!" interrupted Kano. "It has to be cute!"

"Cute?" I repeated. "If it's frills you want, they are all made of leather, so it'll be extra heavy."

Leather armor used thick pelts to protect against physical attacks, and that increased the weight. Though I tried to talk her down, she made herself look silly by asking the manager whether he had any nice flair skirts. She said that she would stitch some frills with cloth.

I tried to explain to her that frills would get in the way and that no one in their right mind wore a skirt to battle. Apparently, she wanted a cute dress like her favorite anime characters wore.

*Forget cuteness and frills. Start worrying about what you're doing to my wallet!* I thought.

"Leather armor does have a nice, snug fit," the manager pointed out, "but I'll have to lighten the load as it might be too heavy for a level 1 adventurer like yourself—"

"I'm actually level 6!" boasted Kano.

"What?!" exclaimed the manager. His eyes grew wide, and he nearly fell over backward.

Kano had a childish face and was shorter than the average third-year middle

school girl at a hundred and fifty centimeters tall. Clearly, the manager had never seen a girl like that who turned out to be a level 6 adventurer.

“I-In that case,” he said, “you won’t break a sweat wearing five kilograms of armor.”

“Kano, listen here,” I said. “You can have a chest protector and a pair of gloves, but that’s it for today.”

“Ugh! But I want some boots! Some nice, cute boots!”

Eventually, she talked me into buying her a pair of knee-high demon wolf boots to go with her demon wolf chest protector and gloves. She had wiped out my dungeon earnings from today and yesterday.

Kano hummed as we walked home, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

*This is an initial investment. I can make that money back,* I thought.

I rented two weapons for her from the school’s factory and just needed to use my name on the paperwork.

My mind turned to Akagi as his duel with Kariya was fast approaching. Had he leveled up? I sincerely hoped that it would go well because Class E might become depressing. I wondered how he’d fare...

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## **Kaoru Hayase**

I arrived at school five minutes before the start of homeroom, wanting to get in early since today was special. Today, Yuuma would represent Class E in a fight against our foes in Class D.

The events of the club fair the other day were still fresh in my mind. All the other classes had made it clear what they thought of Class E, and my classmates had fallen into despair, seeing their dreams and hopes of a bright future at Adventurers’ High crushed. A few had recovered, while most were despondent, suffocating the classroom with depression and inescapable hopelessness.

That was why Yuuma had to win. We needed to show the school that Class E

had what it took and that we weren't losers to get picked on and laughed at. The class could use this victory to hold their heads high and aim to be better.

Over the last month, we'd raided the dungeon into the dead of night and hunted monsters. We had even practiced dueling at school and discussed our strategy during our breaks. Yuuma and I had done everything, but a seed of doubt and pessimistic thoughts rushed in. Whenever this happened, I remembered our rigorous training and how we'd simulated how the duel would go.

Kariya was no pushover either, as the strong Aura he'd emitted made that clear, and it was obvious he was at a higher level than Yuuma. Even Naoto had heard other first-years boast about Kariya's prowess with his longsword. Based on that, Kariya's fighting technique would be superior to anything Class E had ever experienced.

We'd be stupid to challenge such an opponent with no preparation. Raising Yuuma's level and studying Kariya's fighting style were necessary to pave the path to victory.

Despite my lifelong study of sword fighting, I'd never fought against an opponent who wielded a longsword. But we lived in the age of adventurers, and videos of combat with longswords were all over the internet. So we all got together and studied the videos closely.

Longswords were heavier and had a greater reach, unlike ordinary, one-handed swords. In kendo, the standard practice was to keep your wooden sword pinned on your opponent's chest until you could land a proper strike. This close quarters fighting style wouldn't work against an opponent who could strike down with such a heavy weapon.

At the same time, most longsword attacks were slow and downward slashes that left the attacker vulnerable. Thus, Yuuma needed to focus on counters, initially observing Kariya's attack patterns and habits. He'd have to be on the move to keep out of reach, then switch to the offensive and aggressively attack the enemy's weak spots. Yuuma would also feign vulnerabilities of his own to lure Kariya into traps. The most important area for Yuuma to improve in using this counter-focused style was his speed in moving around and launching

strikes.

Nobody in Class E could wield a longsword well enough to make for good practice, so I'd volunteered and acted as Akagi's sparring partner. Still, I wasn't pleased with my performance. Although I'd gained physical enhancements from leveling up, swinging around a ten kilogram sword required a surprising amount of technique.

Handling such a weapon would alter one's center of mass, making it easy to lose balance. Leveling up had increased my strength but not my body weight. Maintaining a stable center of mass during a fight against a fast opponent was incredibly tricky. Imagine you had no trouble holding a hundred kilogram weapon with one hand, and your body went in the opposite direction of where you swung it.

Great experience, technique, and physical strength were necessary to counteract that phenomenon. Reducing your speed to preserve stability would make you an easy target for counterattacks, and swinging too quickly would allow your body to get thrown around. All in all, I'd learned a lot through sparring with Yuuma.

As such, we fumbled through training sessions and watched recordings of the sessions to analyze my movement patterns and plan how to counter them. Yuuma said that he'd gotten used to fighting against longswords, and I hoped I'd been helpful to him.

Our training didn't cover everything, though. Yuuma still hadn't felt the full force of a longsword because I didn't want to hurt him. The practice blades were dull, and a skilled person could hit the wrong place and still inflict injuries.

Also, we hadn't leveled up as much as we'd hoped. Kariya's level wasn't viewable from the terminal's database; he must have been around level 10 based on the strength of his Aura on the day of the entrance ceremony. He'd probably learned some skills from his Fighter job. Fortunately, we'd changed to basic jobs despite not learning any skills.

His weapon skills were also a concern since he would probably use the sword skill Slash. I didn't know how to use it, so we had to settle with watching videos on repeat and visualizing it.

While there was much to worry about, there were even better reasons to be hopeful. Yuuma had an innate skill called Sword Mastery, which gave him talent in sword fighting, and his intuition in duels was outstanding. We also had a trick to use against Kariya that might guarantee victory if it worked. Seeing Yuuma confident made me think everything would go well, and I had to trust him as his friend.

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For the last few days, I'd been stuck in a cycle of playing a simulation of the fight in my head, becoming anxious only to reassure myself. I missed a lot of sleep, and it was stupid because getting worked up wouldn't change anything. The only thing in my power was having faith in Yuuma and sending him off with a smile so he could go into the battle confident.

I tied my long hair up near the top, checked that my uniform looked neat, and left to pick up Souta, like always. His house was a ten-second walk from mine, so I didn't have to go far.

Once there, I pressed the doorbell beneath the old, yellow sign with black writing that read "Narumi's General Goods." A pleasant, musical chime rang out.

"Good morning. I'm here to pick up Souta," I said.

"Oh, morning, Kaoru," said Mrs. Narumi, cheerful. "Give me a second." She turned back toward the stairs and called out loudly, "Souta! Kaoru's here!"

Souta's younger sister walked through the door. We rarely crossed paths in the morning, but I'd arrived early today.

I smiled brightly at her. "Good morning, Kano."

"Oh, err, hi..." she replied curtly, giving me a brief nod before scurrying away. What a shame since it would've been nice to chat with her. Maybe she was in a hurry, but I did think she didn't like me anymore. It was depressing how she barely looked at me.

Souta came lumbering down the stairs, yawning. Given his carefree look, he must have forgotten what would happen today. Not that it surprised me.

“Okay. Let’s go,” I said.

“Roger,” he responded.

I walked in front as he followed behind, our usual formation. Most days included no conversations, but I wanted to find out something.

“So...” I started. “I saw it.”

“Saw what?” he asked.

The evening before, I’d been staring blankly out of the window and thinking about the duel. Then, I spotted Souta and Kano walking home.

“The black armor,” I said.

“Black armor? Oh! The demon wolf chest protector.”

That was it. The leather armor made from the pelts of demon wolves on the dungeon’s sixth floor was essential for mid-level adventurers. I had a full set to help with my raids. It was weird enough that the guy who struggled with slimes had been wearing one, but it got weirder.

“Why was Kano wearing it?” I asked.

Kano was in her third year of middle school and would take the entrance exam for Adventurers’ High next school year. Why had a girl that couldn’t enter the dungeon been wearing armor designed for dungeon combat? Nobody would bear the weight of demon wolf gauntlets or chest protectors just for a fashion statement, so what was happening?

Souta’s eyes darted nervously, then he turned his head to the side and tried to whistle nonchalantly.

“Stop whistling and answer me. Also, your whistling sucks.”

Souta choked.

“Are you hiding something?” I asked.

“Uhh, the thing is...” he started. He then spat one of his usual evasive explanations. According to him, Kano wanted to get used to wearing armor for next year, and she’d become jealous of him wearing a set. That wasn’t implausible, but it sounded like a horrible excuse.



“Okay, so why did she have a weapon strapped to her waist?”

Souta choked again, but I’d known him long enough to recognize that the sweat drenching him now was out of fear. His expression was the one he’d always worn when keeping secrets, and I knew he hadn’t changed a bit. He was arrogant enough to think he could put up a poker face, which never worked because he was terrible at hiding his emotions.

“Oh, look, it’s Oomiya!” he said. She was walking a little ahead of us. Souta rushed over to her and continued, “Good morning.”

“Oh, Narumi?” said Oomiya. “Umm... Morning.”

*That was to get away from me,* I thought.

Oomiya was universally kind, intelligent, and had talent that landed her a leading position in Class E, in a slightly different way to Yuuma. Yet she spent a lot of time with Souta, which I couldn’t wrap my head around. I initially thought she’d reached out to him out of pity over how our classmates had ostracized him, but that wasn’t it. Was she blind, or had Souta really changed since joining the school?

*He might have,* I thought. For one, he’d lost a lot of weight since the term had started. That feat was monumental for a lazy lump of meat that devoured meals by the plateful.

But his evasiveness and tendency to run away were the same old Souta.

## Chapter 17: The Kariya Duel

We got to school a little early, and I understood why the moment we entered the classroom. My classmates flocked around Akagi's desk, giving words of encouragement.

Akagi smiled and thanked each person. He was resilient, showed no signs of nervousness, and had no trouble participating in conversation despite it being the day of his duel.

When Kaoru stepped through the entrance, she slid into the crowd and cheered Akagi on. I knew she'd been working with him this past month, joining him on raids late into the night. Though her nerves must've been tearing her up inside, she didn't let it show, remaining cheerful and supportive. She truly deserved to be a heroine.

The intimacy both shared didn't sting Piggy's mind as much as before, but it was still tough to watch. Love wasn't easy to forget, and Piggy's mind was the proof.

A thin weapon in a cloth cover stood on Akagi's weapon rack. Despite not seeing it, I was sure that was the weapon he'd use in the fight. He wouldn't use the strategy from the game, would he? It would likely work against this world's Kariya, but...

*If that weapon's what I think it is, does he have knowledge from the game?* I thought. As I pondered the possibility, the classroom door burst open.

"What's up, Class E losers," sneered Kariya with a condescending look. His cronies piled into the room alongside him. "Remind me, which of you is the idiot that thought he could pick a fight with me?"

Clearly, nobody had ever taught him the phrase "Pride comes before the fall."

Akagi remained undaunted and eagerly asked, "Where's it gonna be?"

"Hmm?" said Kariya. "Oh, you're the one. I reserved the fourth room of the Arena after school. Don't wimp out."

“Ah!” one of Kariya’s cronies called out. “I remember this kid’s name. It’s Akagi. Kariya, pound this loser so the rest know what’s what.”

How could they act like this against fellow students at a time when we should all have been working together toward doing well in this school? They might have been strong, but I didn’t know people could stoop this low. Class E was weak, but they only had a month to raid the dungeon! It was like an older colleague bullying a new hire.

“The rest of the Class E losers better come to watch,” said Kariya. “I’ll show you your place in this world.” He emitted his Aura, and the atmosphere in the classroom grew harsh.

It seemed like he was level 11, the same as in the game. But I couldn’t know for sure because his information wasn’t available in the school’s database. I *could* use Basic Appraisal, but I wasn’t going to. People could tell when you used it on them, so one couldn’t use it on a whim.

My classmates cowered in Kariya’s powerful Aura, a few lowering their heads. Even though I was level 8 and not as intimidated as before, it pissed me off that he threw it around so often.

*Level 7 or 8 is the threshold to have a chance against Kariya, I thought.*

I checked my terminal, and Akagi’s displayed level was only 5. He might have been concealing his real level, but assuming he wasn’t, only the best players would’ve had a winning shot against Kariya in that position. Class D could force us to do menial jobs if he lost, so I hoped he’d win.

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Class D’s mockery continued at lunchtime.

“Do those Class E losers really think they can stand up to us?” one student jeered.

“Right?” another added. “They don’t have a hope in Hell of beating Kariya. Who do they think they are?”

“Maybe we should help knock them down a peg?” a girl suggested.

“Ha ha ha!” another laughed. “Maybe we should.”

The Class D students in the cafeteria spoke loudly to make sure Class E would hear their insults.

One of my classmates, a girl who wanted to be a Fighter, was shaking with stifled rage. Oomiya and Nitta talked with her to take her mind off of the bullies and calm her down.

After Kariya's visit in the morning, the class had a discussion and decided to ignore Class D's taunts throughout the day. But not everybody in Class E possessed enough self-restraint.

"Shut the hell up!" yelled Majima. He was of samurai ancestry, which made him proud and hardworking, so Class D's cruel arrogance had struck a nerve. "Isn't your class the worst-ranked of the middle school bunch?!"

While Class D was the lowest class of internal students, their power was much greater than the external students of Class E.

"Hey," said a Class D student. "What's this guy's problem? We ought to beat him senseless here and now."

"Maybe we should," said another. "I'd enjoy my meal a lot more if we didn't have to sit next to Class E."

"He's got a big mouth for a Newbie."

The other Class E students frantically apologized to Class D and tried to calm Majima. Winning a fight now wasn't possible, so we needed patience.

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"For God's sake!" whined Majima.

"We need to get stronger soon, or they'll never leave us alone," someone said.

Majima had been one of the students pushing for Class E to get stronger, so this must've been humiliating. Class E had a powerful student, but she wouldn't reveal herself anytime soon. I wasn't about to draw attention to myself over a few taunts either—I had to keep my game knowledge a secret.

But why were they so aggressive toward our class? Kariya and his cronies didn't act alone; their class was out to get us. It made no sense. If they aimed

for the top, why would they care about what happened to the people below them? It felt like there was a purpose behind their actions.

I thought back to the Kariya duel in the game.

The main story occurred through the eyes of one of the protagonists, Akagi or Pinky, and any character who didn't play a role in the story was largely left out. Kariya was just a mid-stage boss of the game's opening scenes, and he barely appeared after his defeat.

At least, that's what I thought. Honestly, I'd only skimmed the conversations in the opening scenes of adventure mode and hadn't bothered to memorize the life story of some mid-stage boss who had his ass kicked right away. If I'd known I would be in this situation, I might have taken more time to read the text.

Either way, they must have had a reason to antagonize Class E so much, and I wanted to investigate once the duel was over and things had calmed down.

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After the school day ended, tension hung over the classroom. Just as Murai announced the end of homeroom, Kariya and his cronies entered the room.

"Hey, Akagi!" yelled Kariya, bellowing. "And the rest of you losers! Get your asses down to room four in the Arena."

Murai watched this quiet, declaring his impartiality, and exited the classroom. Perhaps he saw this as an educational experience for us.

Saying nothing, Akagi picked up the cloth bag that contained his weapon and left the classroom with his head high and his pace steady. His unwavering confidence in such an awful situation gave Class E hope.

"Good luck, Akagi!"

"We'll be watching!"

"You show those punks in Class D!"

The class followed in one large group and headed for the Arena, telling each other everything would be okay. I understood why they wanted to be optimistic, but I didn't have high hopes about the outcome.

After a minute, I stood up to go to room four of the Arena and watch the show.

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The Arena was within the magic field, and the school had designed it to withstand the battles of physically enhanced students. It had four rooms, the first being the largest and the fourth the smallest, although still spacious enough for dozens of students to train. Many of the usual features of standard magical training grounds were present, including the ability to cast a protective shield using magic gems.

It was odd that Kariya had reserved the fourth room since plenty of clubs practiced here. So why had they given up their space for a mere duel between the lower classes? When I thought back to the game, I remembered a student in Class B who called the shots with anything concerning Kariya.

“Well done for not chickening out, Akagi,” said Kariya.

“Run from you? Never.” responded Akagi.

The two students stood facing each other in the center of the Arena room. Kariya, who stood taller, glared down at his foe. Even though Akagi was not short, he looked it when compared to the hundred-and-ninety-centimeter mass of muscles that was Kariya.

“Kariya, give Class E what’s coming to them!” a Class D student cheered.

“Put them back in their place!” another yelled.

I wished they would shut up. But I’d always assumed that Kariya was a bully who intimidated everyone else into submission with his high-handed scare tactics yet seemed popular in Class D. Maybe he was like Gian, soft on the inside.

Akagi candidly watched Kariya, unfazed by Class D’s taunts. He appeared confident enough, but was he a high enough level?

My experience raiding the dungeon in this world had taught me that reaching Kariya’s level in a month would be tough, so taking him down with no tricks wasn’t viable. A *DEC* player would know Kariya’s fighting style inside and how to

combat it, but Akagi didn't have that advantage. Had he come up with a plan?

The duelists finally turned away from each other and returned to their sides to suit up with armor.

Kariya undressed from his school uniform to put his armor on, revealing his muscular body—and it was hard to believe he was a kid fresh into high school. The bulging muscles around his neck and shoulders proved this wasn't merely the result of physical enhancements. He must have put in lots of weight training to get to that point.

He had equipped leather armor with metal plates affixed at every possible place. Its weight would easily surpass twenty kilograms, which didn't present a challenge to mobility for a level 10 adventurer inside a small training ground.

The weapon he pulled out was a particular two-handed longsword called a Zweihänder that could weigh over ten kilograms and was about a meter and a half long. Accounting for the length of his arm and step size, Kariya would have a three-meter reach with the sword. Akagi needed to be careful when judging Kariya's attack radius.

As for Akagi, he was wearing black demon wolf leather light armor, which was a popular choice due to it being well-made, lightweight, and cheap. The armor had metal reinforcement in the lower chest area to protect vital organs. He pulled his weapon from its cover, and it was—

*Yep, he went for the Static Sword. So, he must be trying to use the strategy from the game after all, I thought.*

He pulled out a sword that was thin and sharp—a backsword. Backswords had straight, single-edged blades and looked similar to rapiers but broader. Although Akagi had dulled the cutting edge, the tip would still be sharp and deal moderate damage when thrust by someone with physical enhancements.

But the Static Sword was not ordinary as it was a magic weapon. A hit from it would lower the opponent's agility stat and have a random chance to impair them with a paralysis status effect. Weapons like this that turned up in the game's early stages wouldn't work against high-level adventurers. Kariya was still vulnerable at level 11. The Static Sword was an item the protagonist received as a reward for completing one of the game's subquests.

Kariya's most common attack in the game had been the Slash sword skill, which used a sweeping arc, and the key to beating him was countering that attack. Exploiting the vulnerability induced by that attack was difficult if there was a gap between your levels, so it had become standard practice to use a weapon that reduced his agility and paralyzed him. The agility stat influenced movement speed and the time required to perform regular attack motions and activate skills.

It would be easier to land a counter on Kariya's Slash attack if you hit him with the Static Sword and reduce his agility. The fight would become manageable if it paralyzed him.

However...

*You need to go through many convoluted steps to kick off the subquest to obtain the sword, I thought. Did somebody tip Akagi off about it?*

Knowing about the sword and intentionally triggering the subquest to use it in the duel against Kariya was simple. But not being aware meant it wouldn't fall into your hands. Plus, the whole strategy of defeating Kariya with that sword was a shortcut in the game. Most players fought him head-on, learned how hard the fight was at a low level, figured out how to level up efficiently in the time limit, and eventually defeated him fair and square. The Static Sword method didn't require much leveling up, and you wouldn't devise the plan unless you knew what the fight was like.

Of course, I couldn't rule out the possibility that Akagi had gotten his hands on the sword by chance. He would have known, through his analysis, that Kariya used a longsword vulnerable to counters. Akagi could decide on a strategy using the Static Sword to reduce Kariya's agility and make counters easier.

Akagi seeking the sword would imply the presence of another *DEC* player feeding him information. Or was I overthinking things?

Both students had donned their armor, readied their weapons, and were once again squaring off in the center of the room. Duels in Adventurers' High always worked under safety rules where duelists could surrender, passing out would forfeit the match, and killing was not allowed. Because this was an official duel, a student council member was present to observe, and a Priest on the teaching



staff would attend in case of injuries.

As I looked at the stands, I noticed not all of the audience was from Classes D and E. My own classmates were watching with bated breath.

“Hmph. Are you ready?” asked Kariya, brandishing his Zweihänder. He was half-crouching, lowering his center of mass to prepare for a horizontal sweep. It seemed he was planning to use Slash right away.

“Ready whenever,” replied Akagi.

The contrast between them was almost comical since Akagi had a thin, light sword while Kariya used a huge one. Even if Akagi’s sword was magical, he had to avoid clashing blades. He could forget about exploiting Slash’s vulnerability; his priority had to be landing a hit on Kariya to reduce his agility.

“Then here...we go!” declared Kariya.

Against all odds, Kariya used a regular horizontal swipe instead of the Slash skill for his first attack. Despite his earlier arrogant attitude toward Akagi, it appeared he was being cautious. Afterward, he used an impressive technique of keeping Akagi in check with simple jabs and maintaining a constant distance.

*This isn’t looking good for Akagi, I thought. There has to be a huge level gap. Akagi couldn’t have reached level 10 from the looks of things. He must be around five or six.*

Though Kariya’s attacks only restricted movement, Akagi couldn’t afford to get hit by that longsword since he was clearly struggling to fend the attacks off. Akagi fought with a single goal: to land a hit. He leaped out of the path of the longsword, always poised to counter Kariya’s Slash skill. But Kariya succeeded in keeping his foe at a favorable distance, and Akagi couldn’t get close enough.

Akagi attempted to retreat and come at Kariya from another angle, but his enemy responded by stepping forward together with a long-reach thrust. Besides, Kariya drew Akagi closer, masterfully maintaining him at the best distance.

In the game, Kariya underestimated the player and frequently used large, sweeping attacks that were easy to counter. I’d felt certain that Slash would be almost the only kind of attack he’d use. But it wasn’t happening. Why not? Did

he know about the Static Sword?!

“What’s the...matter...Kariya?” asked Akagi, panting. “Are little jabs all you’ve got? Don’t tell me you’re scared.”

“What about you?” shot back Kariya. “Are you ever gonna make a move? You’ll run out of steam otherwise.”

“Ask...and you shall...receive!”

Akagi’s attempt to taunt Kariya into using Slash failed. So, he used a thrusting skill he’d been saving for the right moment to break the deadlock called Double Sting. He used Automatic Activation to wield it.

Double Sting was a Thief skill that comprised two consecutive weapon thrusts. The data in the terminals showed Akagi had recently obtained the Thief job and still had a job level of 1. Kariya couldn’t have expected him to use a skill that became available at a job level of 5.

Kariya almost immediately jumped back several steps in shock at this development. But Akagi grazed him with his blade in that brief window of time.

“Now you won’t be so fast... Aaaah!!!”

“Ha ha! Won’t I?” answered Kariya.

The thrill of landing a hit caused Akagi to drop his guard for a moment, which Kariya seized, sending Akagi flying with a counter of his own. Somehow, Kariya hadn’t become paralyzed or had his agility drop.

Akagi’s face became a contorted mess of surprise and despair. If Kariya’s agility was unchanged, then Akagi’s entire strategy had gone out the window. The enemy had come prepared with a countermeasure for Static Sword. But that meant...

The Arena erupted into a blend of cheers and shrieks.

Kariya attacked mercilessly and with no pause. He had already broken one of Akagi’s arms and would soon leave him unable to stay on his feet. No longer was this a duel; it was torture.

Class D was cheering like this was a baseball match.

“That’s our Kariya!”

“Go on, Kariya!”

“I thought there had to be a bite to back up his bark, but I guess it was just a bluff?”

“Well, duh, he’s a Class E loser!”

In contrast, Class E was in despair. A few of the girls covered their faces and sobbed. I saw Oomiya stand up to break up the fight, but Nitta held her back. Kaoru had her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. Would she make a move?

“No more...” said Akagi, moaning. “Stop it...”

“You’re giving me orders now?!” shouted Kariya. “Where’s your ‘please,’ eh?!”

Akagi screamed as Kariya swung his sword into his side. He must have broken a few ribs, even with the metal pad reinforcing his armor.

I felt bile rise in my throat and got up from my seat to stop Kariya, but just then—

“Just stop! Stop hurting him!”

Pinky, Sakurako Sanjou, jumped in to stop the fight, as she was a part of Akagi’s party and had trained with them over the last month. It would be unthinkable for her to sit and watch as this cruelty carried on, but standing up to Kariya was risky.

“Say what?” retorted Kariya. “So now *you* think you can boss me around too? You have a death wish.”

While she endured a lot, Kariya’s animosity frightened her and made her tremble. However, she stood between them, stretching her arms to shield Akagi.

Kariya pointed his sword at her.

Sensing danger, Kaoru, Tachigi, and other classmates stood up and headed toward them.

“Listen up, Class E losers!” roared Kariya. “Don’t you get it yet?” He emitted

his murderous Aura at the class, just as he'd done when he introduced himself on the first day.

The students who'd gotten up to help Sanjou stopped running as they were rightfully scared. Kariya was at a higher level than them.

"At this school, you're the lowest of the low," he continued. "A few of you might rise to Class D before you graduate, but that's the best you can hope for. This little lesson has taught you which of us is stronger, is better, and who you should obey. Or do I need to spell it out for you?"

Nobody said a word. Akagi had raised his level and had grown stronger than anyone else in Class E. He'd demonstrated extraordinary technique in wielding his sword and dodging Kariya's longsword. But that had been too little to overcome the hurdle of facing a level 11, and Kariya had beaten the stuffing out of him. This gruesome spectacle had shattered Class E's will to resist.

"On that note, you can start obeying me now," said Kariya. "The upper classes want people to do all the boring jobs, and they've asked for my help. So, none of you will join the club started by Class E. If you do, I'll put you in the hospital myself. Got it?"

With that, Kariya left the Arena.

"I knew Class E wouldn't be worth shit," said a Class D student.

"Yep," another agreed. "They talked big but didn't impress."

"Hey, losers!" a third mocked. "Get your mops ready now. We're gonna work you till you drop!"

Those in Class E had no reply to the mocking taunts as they witnessed how much weaker our class was. The truth, which the students had to accept, was that they weren't even fit to be Class D's rivals. It was a refutation of everything about Class E.

At least I knew why Kariya had reserved the Arena's fourth room with no effort. The clubs the upper classes joined wanted drudges to do the menial work for them, and they wouldn't find any if we joined the club the second-year Class E students had created. Hence, they set their lapdog Kariya and the first-year Class D to frighten us into submission. I'd discovered another mastermind

pulled Kariya's strings besides the head of Class B—the upper year classes were meddling too.

The whole thing was frustrating, seeing that the student council and teachers might be turning a blind eye. I'd suspected as much while playing the game, but experiencing it firsthand was dreadful. If they had always been planning to go to these extremes, why bother accepting external students in the first place? Why fill the heads of fresh-faced kids with dreams at the entrance ceremony to crush them here?

Regardless, I didn't want to take any revenge, get promoted to a higher class, or be interested in reforming this school. I wasn't all that close to my classmates. Besides, this wasn't arbitrary bullying since Akagi *had* accepted Kariya's challenge. And Kariya's actions were excessive, but Akagi should've known what he was signing up for. There was no need to let our feelings rule the day. If they wanted one or two people to mop their floors, let them have them.

I had a greater problem: who had told Kariya how to fight against the Static Sword strategy?

I also wanted to know who'd taught Akagi about the Static Sword strategy, even if his party had devised the plan. If a *DEC* player was involved, they didn't act maliciously and could be dealt with later.

The only explanation for why Akagi's attack hadn't affected Kariya was that he had equipped items with resistance to lighting and paralysis. Otherwise, Kariya's attack speed would've plummeted the moment Akagi's sword scratched him and made him stop moving.

Kariya had fought differently than he might have in the game, keeping Akagi at bay and observing instead of madly attacking. In the duel, he only used Slash once. There was a high probability that a player had tipped him off.

This player was a threat and had it in for Akagi. Did he want to monopolize all the game's secrets? Or was he pissed off that Akagi had teamed up with Pinky and Kaoru? Or did he just enjoy the thrill of it? In the worst case, he might kill other players.

They were probably a Class E student, though I wasn't sure. I could ask Kariya

directly, but he wouldn't give me the time of day.

*I messed up, I thought. I should have thought about how I could fend off other players. I didn't imagine another player might be a threat.*

To sum up, it was likely that the players who advised Kariya and Akagi were different people.

How many players were out there? There was me, Kariya's tipper, and Akagi's tipper, which made three. Were they like me, playing as existing characters? Were they students never featured in *DEC's* story? I couldn't conclude that Akagi, Pinky, or my classmates were players. As such, I needed to level up faster to protect myself.

Just then, the Priest teacher had examined Akagi's injuries and stated that he had some fractures but nothing that a magical operation couldn't fix, and there'd be no lasting damage. He had Akagi carried off to the infirmary to get an X-ray to be safe. All injuries sustained on school property and managed by Priests were free, which was good to know.

Akagi could've fared worse, but that showed that Kariya had held himself back to an extent.

I got to my feet and looked at Akagi's stretcher in the distance as my classmates gathered around it. Class E had two options: improve to stand shoulder to shoulder with the higher classes or accept their weakness and submit themselves to the strong. I wouldn't influence their decision.

Unfortunately, I wasn't passionate enough to care and was too busy to help.

## Chapter 18: Groveling

With the Arena business over, I retrieved my bag from the classroom and headed home. Most of my classmates were still sulking at the Arena grounds. I hoped they'd manage to pull themselves together and keep going because there was much worse in store for us.

As I passed through the school gate, brooding over the miserable state of my class, a voice called out to me.

"Huh! It's you!"

The voice belonged to a casually dressed young man sporting a cast on his arm. I wondered who he was.

"You're the adventurer that saved me the other day," he remarked. "I wanted to thank you."

The man, who introduced himself as Kiku, was the adventurer I'd found getting attacked inside the orc lord room while I was power leveling with my sister. He was injured but had made it out, which was what mattered.

Kiku explained that he wanted to express his gratitude after he'd escaped, but he didn't know who I was. He had been waiting by the school entrance, gambling on the hope that an adventurer of my age and strength would have to be a student at Adventurers' High.

"Thank you!" said Kiku, bowing his head low while tears welled in his eyes. "Two of my friends didn't make it, but you guaranteed me and three others did. Thank you so much!"

Losing his two companions must've been tough to endure.

"Don't mention it," I replied. "How's your arm?"

He was probably the tank with the beaten-up shield. The countless blows dealt by the orcs had broken his arm, which he now wore inside a plaster cast. Because he wasn't a student here, accessing medical care from a Priest would

cost a lot of money. Most people preferred to save on expenses and let their fractures heal naturally.

“This? It’s nothing,” he said with a forced smile. “My companions will be right as rain soon enough, nothing permanent.” Faking cheerfulness was all that kept him from breaking down.

While he was here, I wanted to know something. During our conversation, I casually asked why they’d gone to the orc lord room despite the danger. He told me someone had tricked them.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We were told there was a treasure chest in the room. But had no idea it was the orc lord room,” he said.

When Kiku went to his party’s meeting spot on the fifth floor, he saw one of his companions getting hit on by another party that wouldn’t take no for an answer. He had intervened and calmed things down. A member of the other party then told Kiku about a treasure chest as a way of apologizing. Kiku and his party accepted the gesture, going to the location provided without checking their map, not knowing it was the orc lord room.

Though the Adventurers’ Guild posted warnings about the orc lord, few adventurers had seen the monster, and his party hadn’t recognized it.

A member of Kiku’s party went down instantly. They gave one of their party members time to escape and get help, but orc soldiers blocked the passageway and locked the rest inside.

Treasure chests didn’t even appear on the fifth floor. Sending Kiku’s party to the orc lord room under the guise of an apology gave this the stink of an intentional act of evil on behalf of the flirting party.

Suddenly, Kiku gasped and said, “It was them!”

I turned to follow his line of sight, finding a group of Class D students walking our way. Among them was one of Kariya’s cronies.

“H-Hey!” shouted Kiku. “Some trick you played yesterday! Two of my friends are dead because of you!!!”



“Hmm?” one hummed. “Ah, it’s the guy from that party of losers. So, did you enjoy the orc lord?”

“Y-You bastard!” responded Kiku, growling and enraged by the student’s callousness. He took a jab at the student, who dodged effortlessly and punched back, sending Kiku sprawling on the floor. We were still inside the magic field, so the difference between their physical enhancements was on display.

“That’ll teach your girl not to turn down strong guys like us.”

*Holy shit, I thought. These students sent this party to the orc lord room because they were salty about getting rejected? These are people’s lives they’re throwing away!*

The Class D students laughed with one another as they walked away.

“Ain’t no treasure chests on the fifth floor, dumbass,” said a student mockingly.

“What more can you expect from an average Joe?” scoffed another, shrugging his shoulders. “Ignorance kills.”

“And he’s buddies with a Class E kid?” one of them asked. “Losers have to stick together, right?”

Kiku crumpled to his knees and sobbed, releasing his sense of loss.

Did kids sell their souls when they enrolled at this school? Their disdainful attitude toward Class E was one thing, but to scorn ordinary people and have no qualms about MPKing\* them over a stupid argument was unforgivable. They laughed among themselves with no remorse for the lives they’d taken away, and I knew they’d gone too far. What future awaited a country that let assholes like them roam free?

\*TIPS: MPK is short for Monster Player Kill and refers to intentionally luring monsters or otherwise provoking an encounter with monsters to cause the death of another player.

“Come on, Mr. Kiku. You’ll get dirty,” I said, helping Kiku stand up and pat the dirt away.

“Thanks,” said Kiku as he sniveled.

When Kariya had beaten up Akagi, I felt little desire to retaliate against Class D. Part of me accepted that this was how they managed things here. But Kiku’s story had lit a flickering flame inside me, one that was enough that I’d get a little payback if I ever had the chance.

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll make them pay for what they did one day. Go home for today,” I said.

“By yourself?” asked Kiku, still sniveling. “No, they’re too strong... And I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

Taking them down now would end badly, and I understood Kiku’s doubts about my ability based on my obesity. But I had a simple solution: train hard and get in shape. I just had to level up, change jobs, and learn new skills.

“I’m gonna train to get a lot stronger. And just so you know, I’m no pushover,” I said.

Kiku’s lips trembled as he expressed his gratitude. “Thank you... Thank you so much...”

I could tell he was a good person. After all, he’d come all the way to find a kid whose name he didn’t even know to say thanks.

The laughter and delighted voices of the class D students continued echoing. Two people had died, and all those assholes could do was joke about it. I wanted to teach them a lesson about right and wrong as a person, not an adventurer. Weakness was not a sin, strength was no virtue, so the strong had no right to treat the weak like their playthings.

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To punish Kariya and the rest of Class D, I had to reach level 10 and visit Granny’s Goods to change jobs. Remembering that Kariya had a backer in Class B, it’d be better to get a couple more levels in.

I wanted to speed up my leveling, but things had slowed down recently. At

level 8, bridge-dropping once an hour wasn't efficient, so I started skipping dungeon raids some days to exercise to accompany my diet.

There was only one thing to do about it.

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"So, bro, where are we going today?" asked Kano. She'd equipped her demon wolf armor and performed a well-timed shadowboxing routine. Beneath her demon wolf leather jacket and gloves was a white blouse with a culotte, and she wore knee-high demon wolf boots. "Don't I look just like a veteran adventurer?"

Not quite. In *DEC*, veteran adventurers of the Assault Clans found near the ninetieth floor dressed in full sets of artifact-class dark god armor, dragon king armor, and others. I would've loved to get my hands on a single piece, but I was too low-level to use them properly and would find them heavy, so I'd have to live without them.

"First, we're gonna go to the fifth floor and get you to level 7, then climb down to the seventh floor and raise you up to level 9. Finally, we'll tackle the tenth floor."

"The tenth floor?!" said Kano, gasping. "We can go that far down?"

Apparently, the tenth floor was deeper than most ordinary adventurers ever traveled.

Raiders needed a level within the double digits and fighting strength exceeding that of regular people from their physical enhancements. If you could make it to this floor, clan scouts would take notice of you.

"We can. But first, I've got two knives for you. I thought you'd have an easier time wielding two small weapons at once," I said.

"Oh my god. Thank you so much!" exclaimed Kano, beaming as she took the knives. She began elegantly slashing through the air.

"Right, let's be off to the gate room."

"Kay!"

I remembered how Kiku groveled at my feet, with regret that would eat away

at him for the rest of his life. Who was to say I wouldn't suffer the same fate? Plenty of people had power go to their heads, like those Class D students, in the dungeon and at school. You could preach to them about morality and righteousness, but they'd carry on polluting the world with evil. I'd need more power to stand up against them and keep my family safe or do anything in this world.

If I took things slowly and felt content with my game knowledge, I might fall prey to cruel adventurers and could not save myself. Other players were out there, and I didn't know who they were or when they might turn hostile, so I'd need to be quick about my strategy.

*Let's ramp things up a notch*, I thought. I had to do it for my sake, and the adorable girl humming an out-of-tune melody behind me.

## Chapter 19: A Brother's Dignity

"Yes! I leveled up!" chirped Kano with delight, spinning in circles as she experienced the sensation of invincibility that came with raising her level. "I've got to be level 7 now, right?"

After three bridge-drops, Kano reached our target of level 7, and we could put the fifth floor behind us. We could have continued this until she'd reached level 8, but it was more efficient for two people to level up at the next place I had in mind.

While climbing down the ravine to gather our loot, I explained my plan, "Wargs start showing up from the sixth floor and down. They're demon wolves, the monsters from which our armor's pelts are from."

"Wolves?" repeated Kano. "Awesome. Gotta be easier than fighting orcs."

"Well, I wouldn't say that. They're pretty big and fast too," I replied.

Demon wolves had plenty of stamina and a keen sense of smell, which let them detect one from great distances. Avoiding situations that could lead you to getting surrounded was vital to surviving against them. Once surrounded, escape wasn't an option. Fortunately, that was less likely to happen since the sixth floor's map had few open spaces.

Adventurers loved hunting demon wolves because they occasionally dropped demon wolf pelts and magic gems. These fetched a nice price in shops and the guild due to their firmness and fire resistant properties. General wisdom said that if you were good enough to hunt demon wolves, you were good enough to make a living as an adventurer.

We would skip the sixth floor and head to the seventh instead. There were level 7 demon wolves, one level higher than on the sixth floor. On rare occasions, a level 8 demon wolf leader would spawn. However, we would need to dispatch this monster as quickly as possible due to its Howl skill, which attracted nearby demon wolves to its location.

The seventh floor was also home to orc tamers, orcs that rode demon wolves and could control the beasts. These foes were challenging as you had to contend with the wolf bites and sword swings of the mounted orc. Orc tamers also raised the group fighting strength of the demon wolves they controlled. If an orc had a pack of wolves under its control, it became a higher priority than a demon wolf leader.

Moreover, there was poor visibility due to how it was a heavily forested area with tree coverage that increased the risk of getting surrounded. If you only wanted to gather pelts, raiding the sixth floor was a sensible choice. I did have a good reason to take us to the seventh floor, though.

“For now, let’s go to the seventh floor and test out fighting a demon wolf,” I said.

“I hope we get lots of pelts. Then I can use them to get armor for my legs,” responded Kano.

We wouldn’t need to gather pelts to do that. Our profits from the magic gems and other loot would be more than enough to buy more armor.

“So, we’re only going to test fighting the wolves,” I explained. “There’s somewhere else I want us to go...a hidden area.”

“There’s a hidden area?” asked Kano.

“Yep. Could be that we’ll be the first ones to find it.”

Kano’s eyes lit up as she asked, “Will there be treasure?!” She started singing her “I’m rich!” song again. I wished she would stop that since it was embarrassing.

By the time we finished talking, we’d picked up all of the loot and crossed several rope bridges to return to the fifth floor’s main street. We’d need to pass through the sixth floor first.

The main street connecting the floors was as busy as ever. Most adventurers traveling to the sixth floor and deeper were after demon wolf pelts, all wearing the same distinctive black armor.

“Everyone’s wearing demon wolf armor like me!” pointed out Kano. “I love it!

It's like I fit in with these awesome adventurers, even though this is my second-ever raid."

"Yeah, well we did boost your level in one big move."

Getting the orc lord all to ourselves was a big help. Otherwise, we would've gotten stuck on the fifth floor for longer.

Had the other *DEC* players not wanted to use the bridge-dropping trick? They could already be raiding deeper or hadn't reached the fifth floor yet. In any case, I hadn't run into anyone that I suspected of being a player while we were there.

After thirty minutes of walking, we reached the square with the stairs leading to the sixth floor. Like on the fifth floor, many adventurers passed through to use the food stands, shops, and stalls to trade magic gems and loot items. The only difference was the proportion of veteran parties. Although the fifth floor had an overwhelming majority of combat-role adventurers, it was common to see supporting adventurers with healing abilities and long-range fighters who used bows or magic on this floor. Everybody here looked like they knew what they were doing.

"Look!" exclaimed Kano. "That place sells takoyaki! And over there! It's a cafeteria!"

"Remember, we're not staying on the sixth floor," I reminded her. "But... I suppose we could grab a bite before we go. What do you want?"

I realized Kano hadn't seen the markets on the floors yet, as we'd used the gate room to enter and leave. She was probably the only adventurer around that had never gone through the entrance portal.

After we bought the takoyaki Kano had requested from a stall, we took a bathroom break and went to the seventh floor.

"I wonder how they pump the sewage out," said Kano.

"They don't need to," I answered. "Everything left in the dungeon disappears after twelve hours. If you ever need to go, there's nothing wrong with doing your business out in the open."

“I will *not* do that!” she huffed defiantly despite bringing the topic up. “I’m a lady!”

Communication devices and other facilities in the break area would usually disappear. But a magic item built from the cores of low-ranking golems prevented the vanishing effect. Before this invention, only basic facilities had existed within the dungeon. I had learned this from a dungeon field guide I’d read through in the Adventurers’ Guild’s library, and remembering it kept my mind occupied as we advanced.

Many adventurers seeking to collect demon wolf pelts hunted on the sixth floor, meaning the main street was less busy than the prior floors. The crowd was sparse enough that we could probably run along the street.

“We’ll jog the rest of the way to save time,” I said.

“What?” complained Kano. “But I’ve just finished eating! Ugh...”

Reluctantly, Kano increased her pace to match mine. We weren’t the only party running, so we didn’t stick out too much. The light jog still felt great since our physical enhancements allowed us to reach a high enough speed without exerting ourselves.

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“Phew, we made it to the seventh floor!” cheered Kano. “Wait, I swore there were more shops than this on the sixth floor.”

There weren’t as many amenities here, but the resting area still had several benches and food stands. The prices were more than double what they were in the outside world. A can of soda cost about three hundred yen here. Surprisingly, the empty cans in the trash bins showed people bought them.

*I’m not paying for that*, I thought as I passed through the square. *Wait, can I exploit this?*

“Hold on!” called out Kano. “Let’s take a break! I wanna take a look at what that shop is selling!”

“There could be treasure in the hidden area,” I reminded her.

“Ah?!” blurted Kano. “W-Well, if you put it like that!”



Before we embarked toward the hidden area, I made a mental note in the little sister manual I kept: “The promise of treasure gets Kano to do what she’s told.”

Giant conifer forests obstructed visibility on the seventh floor. The trees weren’t suitable for lumber, as they’d vanish once cut down. The ceiling was staggeringly high up and had pale light, which I wondered if the trees used for photosynthesis. Probably not because they were objects, not real trees.

We encountered our first demon wolf a few minutes after splitting off from the main street leading to the eighth floor. The monster was two meters long, including the tail, and had long, dark-gray fur covering its sturdy body. I could feel the intellect behind its gaze.

“I doubt we’ll get a backstab on this one. It’ll hear our footsteps or smell us before we get close,” I said.

“Here it comes!” shouted Kano.

The demon wolf was alone but didn’t attack first, making me think it was being cautious. After a few seconds of growling, it suddenly darted toward us, more so at Kano. It lunged into the air just a couple meters away, its jaw wide open to ensnare Kano’s throat.

Kano effortlessly dodged and dug a knife into the monster’s side as it passed, tearing open a huge gash. The demon wolf whined and tried escaping but couldn’t get up. I immediately closed in and killed it, and it left behind a magic gem.

“I guess I can handle lone demon wolves. It wasn’t too fast for me, and I noticed everything it was doing,” said Kano.

“Looks like raising your level in one go hasn’t come with any problems,” I remarked.

Physical enhancements advanced at the same rate for all adventurers, even if that adventurer was a middle school girl. Yet Kano’s physical strength, high power output, and dynamic visual acuity surpassed the average adult. I’d worried whether she’d react properly in an actual fight, but that concern wasn’t necessary. She appeared in control of her body despite the sudden, extreme

changes to her strength and didn't get nervous or scared during fights. Rather, she enjoyed this and even played with her knives, slicing at an imaginary enemy.

*She might enjoy fighting a bit too much*, I thought as a bead of sweat rolled down my neck. *The imaginary enemy she's slashing... That's, uh, not me, right?*

We picked up the wolf's magic gem and resumed traveling to the southeast part of the map. Then, we headed to an area added in the latest DLC, *Dungeon Explorer Chronicle: Golem Heartbeats*. If it existed in this world, it could shape the future of dungeon raids. I excitedly began explaining golems to Kano, broadening her knowledge of the dungeon and my game information when we weren't fighting monsters.

"Golems?" asked Kano.

"Yep. If you get the Machinist job, you can make and control your golems," I replied.

"No way!"

The devs had teased players with little reveals about Machinists before the release of *Golem Heartbeats*. Many players counted the days until the release date, excited to board their giant golems. But they blasted the DLC with negative reviews because golems were fragile and useless.

But the biggest issue was that golems had lopsided combat potential. Golems could only make physical attacks, severely limiting their scope because many monsters could reduce or entirely negate physical damage. Plus, they moved slowly. You could board and ride one around, but running was preferable because you wouldn't get tired in the game.

Finally, Machinists could use a skill called Golem Castle to construct a building within enemy territory. Players inside these structures regained their HP and MP three times faster than normal and would also recover from all status effects. After an hour inside the structure, players also received a temporary five percent bonus to their strength and intelligence stats.

I'd never needed Golem Castle in the game since I always drank potions, so building a castle for getting some HP and MP back or setting up camp inside

enemy territory was unnecessary. The castles had electricity, plumbing, refrigerators, baths, and toilets that were just decorative in the game.

But hold that thought! The castle's value had done a one-eighty and now soared to the skies. With the castle, I could stay overnight in the dungeon and even live here! I wanted to get my hands on the Golem Castle skill more than anything!

I explained all this to my sister and told her we would investigate whether it would be possible.

"Whaaat..." she said, gasping. "Okay, we *have* to get that skill!"

"See?" I said. "That's why we're going to check if we can get the Machinist job. As a bonus, the hidden area is a great spot to level up quickly if it exists."

Alongside new areas and jobs, *Golem Heartbeats* introduced several types of golems as new monsters.

Golems drew energy from their core, a ten-centimeter crystal figurine, and destroying the core would kill the golem. Those on deeper levels guarded their cores behind manasteel shielding while the golems on the seventh floor had exposed cores. Fighting monsters with such vulnerability made leveling up a breeze. Downed golems dropped their cores as loot when they died, which could be sold in dungeon stores or used as a catalyst by Machinists to summon their own golems.

While *Golem Heartbeats* had introduced several new map areas, the seventh floor was the earliest we would encounter one. I hadn't yet been able to check if this world featured the DLC content.

"There's a pitfall up ahead," I explained. "If there's a tunnel at the bottom of the hole, it should lead us to the hidden area."

"Ooh," hummed Kano.

We climbed a small hill in the forest, checked the ground near the top, and found the pitfall. The hole was five meters deep, which made it hard to discern if there was a tunnel without climbing in.

"I've brought some rope with me," I said, pulling some climbing rope from my

rucksack. "I'll fix it to that tree." Then, I successfully tied it to a nearby tree and tugged at it to ensure it wouldn't loosen.

"Can I be the one to take a look?" asked Kano.

"Sure. If there's a tunnel, let me know," I replied.

"Will do!"

Without hesitation, Kano rappelled down the pitfall like a soldier to check for the tunnel.

*I suppose we can explore this area for a bit if it's not there,* I thought.

"Let's see... It's here!" shouted Kano up at me. "I found the tunnel, bro!"

"Great, I'm coming down!"

As I held the rope, I heard the distinct distant howl of a demon wolf leader. Other adventurers were probably fighting one, but I ignored it for now.

I tried to rappel down as Kano had but had difficulty because of my weight, having my feet slip with about two meters left to go and landed on my ass. Thankfully, Kano was so focused on the tunnel that she probably hadn't seen it. My dignity as her brother was intact...for the next second, anyway.

"Jeez, you're such a klutz, bro. You have to be more careful," she said.

Yep, she'd seen it.

We progressed through the tunnel at the bottom of the pitfall. Stone walls soon replaced the rough rock walls, showing that the tunnel wasn't a natural formation.

It was pitch black, so I switched on my flashlight.

A cool breeze blew farther down the tunnel, so it had to lead somewhere. The once-cramped tunnel transitioned to a five-meter tall corridor in a matter of minutes. Coffins lined the corridor's walls, like catacombs.

The corridor weaved and curved at every opportunity, playing havoc with my sense of direction. At times like this, I appreciated my terminal's map function.

It was getting colder too, so I pulled up my hood. As I walked carefully to keep my footsteps quiet, I heard a rattling noise about a dozen meters ahead. Kano

slowed her breathing and poked around the corner to sneakily check for any threats.

“There’s a monster, and it’s all bones,” she whispered.

“A skeleton, gotcha,” I whispered back. “I’ll handle it.”

As expected, skeletons were undead monsters resembling humans. They showed up a lot past the eleventh floor, where undead monsters became more common. The *Golem Heartbeats* DLC had introduced a weaker version of skeletons on the seventh floor.

Their skeletal makeup made them a poor target for stabbing knife attacks, so it was better if I got rid of it with my large sword. It hadn’t noticed us yet. I crept toward the skeleton, intending to slay it with my first attack without giving it a chance to fight back.

Even though I was behind it, the skeleton immediately noticed my presence, then turned and launched toward me. Perhaps it had an ability that let it detect enemies within a large radius.

The distance between us closed in a flash. Fearing that we’d take each other out, I cut my attack short to parry its diagonal slash with my sword and use the momentum to strike back. But the skeleton’s blow was powerful, and its force sent pain shooting down my arm.

“Argh...! Take this!”

I dislodged some of its ribs with a kick, so I swung my sword down on its skull with all my strength when it lost its balance. The skull shattered. Some of the skeleton’s bones continued to writhe and rattle for a time, but they soon stopped as the monster turned into a magic gem. Full-force toe kicks with steel-toe boots are no laughing matter.

“Phew. It was faster than I thought,” I said, sighing. “More powerful too... I think it has to be a level 8 monster.”

“It’s super speedy for a bunch of bones,” remarked Kano.

With only bones to carry around, the skeleton moved incredibly fast and somehow packed power into its attacks. The kinetic energy I felt when parrying

its attack had been far stronger than I'd expected. Skeletons could force their limbs to move beyond an ordinary person's range of motion, making it difficult to predict their attack patterns.

They also possessed a magical skill to detect enemies within a wide radius, so it hadn't been easy to surprise them in the game's early stages, where there had been no skills to deactivate magic. While *DEC*'s skeletons were formidable monsters, the strength of a real one surprised me when fighting it. That didn't feel like I'd been fighting a level 8 monster.

I had wanted to hunt some skeletons while looking for golems, but now I thought I'd stick to the latter. Risking a fight with multiple skeletons would become grueling. So, I decided not to take on such a number of undead monsters with detection skills until I got a magic-blocking skill or a weapon with stat boosts against the undead.

We proceeded farther down the path, going slowly and checking the way ahead with the flashlight. Although flashlights were good for moving in the dark because you could point wherever you wanted, bringing a lamp that illuminated all directions would be helpful during combat.

Still, we followed the zigzagging corridor of the catacombs, fighting a few skeletons until we found a set of stairs leading up. I ascended carefully and quietly to check for monsters and saw that the stairs led to what looked like a chapel.

The chapel was dilapidated as part of the ceiling had collapsed, several pillars had broken, and wreckage covered the floor. Vines smothered the walls. Above an altar inside the building, there was a glass showcase. I wondered if it contained a religious relic... There were two small adjoining rooms and no monsters.

"Time for a break," I declared. We'd been walking long enough to deserve one, yet we needed to stay alert for any noises. "Roll out the mat."

"On it."

As Kano prepared the mat, I pulled a flask and snacks from my rucksack. When I opened the bag of chips, most of them had crumbled from when the skeleton attacked me. Next time, I'd bring snacks that weren't so fragile. I

chugged my sports drink in one gulp and sighed heavily.

We'd reached an area from the *Golem Heartbeats* DLC. Therefore, this world featured the latest content in the game before my reincarnation. Because the level cap was 90, I would have to train as an all-rounder instead of focusing on either physical or magical attacks.

*I'd better hurry and start getting the quest items and unique items\* too, I thought.*

\*TIPS: Unique items are those that only one copy can exist in the game world at a time. Quests that reward players with unique items only trigger once, so players rush to be the first to complete them.

Quest items usually had powerful abilities, like the Static Sword that Akagi had picked up. I'd tried to set off the Static Sword questline to get one, but it hadn't worked. This example showed that it was first come, first serve for unique items, so I'd have to contend with the other players to acquire them.

*I'm glad I learned about the DLC, but it's given me a lot to think about.*

I watched my sister wandering the chapel, which filled her with wonder as she inspected the walls and the altar while munching on a candy bar. Suddenly, she waved at me to go with her because she had found something on one of the vine-covered walls.

"Hey, this weird squiggly thing is a gate, right?" she said.

I cut the vines down and gazed at the pattern. It was definitely the magic circle for a gate, and I said, "You're right."

Gates were on floors that were a multiple of five and occasionally on floors where special quests or events happened. That probably explained why there was one here.

When *Golem Heartbeats* came out, I'd already been at a high level and explored the new areas in the depths past the sixtieth floor. As such, I wasn't too familiar with the seventh floor's hidden area. We were lucky to have found

it since the journey had taken two hours!

“I guess we should try registering our magic at this gate,” I said. “Actually, I’ll register mine. Keep yours set to the fifth floor, or we won’t be able to return.”

“Sounds good,” answered Kano. “That way, we can power level mom too.”

Once I repacked my rucksack and registered my magic at the gate, we left the chapel to explore the rest of the hidden area.

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Upon leaving the chapel, we entered a ruinous area of sparse, dilapidated stone buildings. Green vines and trees smothered every surface as said buildings looked close to collapsing.

The sky was gloomy but bright enough for us to walk around unimpeded.

“So, will there be golems here?” asked Kano.

“They should be inside a building up ahead,” I replied. “But we need to be alert for other monsters that might jump out.”

As far as I could remember, only skeletons would spawn in this area that appeared as ruins on the map. I didn’t think any ghosts or wraiths would pop out, but I’d be ready to run if needed. Kano and I had no magical attacks, as the ghosts and wraiths were impervious to physical damage.

“Will I be able to use magic one day?” she asked.

“You will once you get a new job,” I replied. “Although, you can also inflict damage with enchanted weapons... Ah! Skeleton incoming. Shall we take it down together?”

“We’ll get him from both sides!”

The skeleton had a sword and shield, charging once it spotted us. I blocked its first attack while Kano slipped behind it and stabbed at the elbow of its shield-bearing arm with a backhand grip with her knife.

“The joints pop out easily,” remarked Kano.

“Well done,” I said.

The skeleton’s forearm and shield clattered to the floor when dislodged from



the elbow joint. Now off-balance, the skeleton registered my sister as a major threat. It swiveled around and swung its sword at her, leaving its back vulnerable. Then, I destroyed the skeleton's upper body with a horizontal slash.

"The bones are still rattling around," I commented.

My sister approached the monster. "Away you go!" she said, kicking the skeleton's skull like a soccer ball. The monster stopped moving and turned into a magic gem.

"Umm, Kano, my sweet sister... You're way too good at combat... What gives?"

"You think so? Might be all the period dramas I watch."

That made sense. Watching sword fights in period dramas translated to better discipline... Wait, it didn't! It might apply to experts who train and study daily. Had Kano been practicing in secret? I remembered her mentioning attending a combat school.

I knew she liked to be active, but it still surprised me. How could this cute, energetic girl be related to a lazy, ugly guy like Piggy?

We traveled south through the ruins and fought more skeletons until we found a large wall atop a slight hill. The walls were about ten meters tall but carried on for over a hundred meters. At the base of the hill, we glimpsed the buildings beyond the wall, the fortress I'd been looking for.

From the bits of story I knew of, this land had fallen into ruin after something happened to the lord that ruled here, a golem researcher.

I'd need to find a quest item inside the fortress if I wanted to become a Machinist. Unfortunately, I had no experience of this from the game as I hadn't expressed an interest in that job.

*What's it like inside?* I wondered.

"That's massive!" marveled Kano. "What is it, a fort? A castle?"

"It's a fortress," I told her. "The golems spawn inside. Here's our plan..."

The monster that spawned inside the fortress was a Wood Golem, which had a monster level of 9 and was like a mid-boss. It respawned five minutes after it

died, making it a great monster to hunt for experience points if you could secure a spot for yourself.

Even if we kept attacking it to immobilize it, it had a staggering amount of HP despite being made of relatively soft wood. But that method would take ages and be exhausting. It would go quicker if we could use fire attacks, but we had no magic skills.

“The golem’s core?” asked Kano as I explained my plan.

“That’s right. The great thing about golems is that they go down if you break their core.”

Each golem had a crystal core on its back. If we could extract the core intact, we’d receive the Wood Golem’s Core quest item necessary to become a Machinist. That would be tough, so I explained to Kano that destroying it was our best option.

Golems moved around slowly and could spin at lightning speed. And this made fighting golems solo extremely difficult because you couldn’t get behind them. When you were with another person, they could backstab the monster to turn a formidable enemy into a pushover.

“Can we sell the core if we get one?” asked Kano.

“On the tenth floor, yeah. Don’t worry about that. We can return to extract a core when we’ve leveled up more.”

Kano had a bad habit of getting distracted by money... That said, my wallet was feeling empty too. I decided our first goal would be to look for treasure.

“Let’s search for a treasure chest before going against the golem,” I suggested. “It should still be inside if we’re the first ones here.”

“Ooh!” chirped Kano. “What’s inside the chest?”

“We’ll see, won’t we?”

Kano began singing her “I’m Rich” song again as we climbed the path toward the fortress.

A gigantic door barred the entrance to the fortress. The door was already open, so we passed straight through. Inside was an open-air garden with a

golem in the center. We headed for the fortress's manor without getting too close to the golem.

Flat stones formed the walls of the fortress, and the building looked in okay condition. Part of the wall had collapsed, and a few holes had rotted away in the wooden floor. The building was well-ventilated, so it didn't smell musty.

The glassless windows were small and only let a trace of light in, so we had to tread carefully when venturing into the building.

"Could there be a trap in the chest?" asked Kano.

"Nope," I replied. "Rigged treasure chests don't show up until the eleventh floor, and it should be safe to open it. Just be careful not to make any loud noises."

"Gotcha."

I remembered that there would be skeletons inside the manor and wanted to get the drop on them if possible. We continued through the corridor, exploring the small adjoining rooms, when Kano stopped.

"Look, over there," she whispered. "Two skeletons."

"We'll get the first with a surprise attack and finish the second normally," I whispered back.

These monsters patrolled a predetermined route. The skeleton's magic detection couldn't penetrate walls, so we planned to wait behind a corner and launch our attack. After we figured out their patrol route, we hid as agreed and waited until we heard their rattling draw near.

"Take this!" I yelled, crushing the skull of the first skeleton that carried a sword and a shield.

The second skeleton raised its hatchet and charged at us after hearing the noise.

"Here comes the other one!" shouted Kano.

We jumped out from where we were to attack. The skeleton attacked my sister, so I circled behind it and slashed. But the damn thing blocked my blow with its hatchet. Had it predicted my move?

When Kano noticed the skeleton targeted me, she immediately went on the offensive.

“V Slash!”

Kano slashed with her two knives down to a central point, forming the letter V, while screaming what sounded like the name of an attack from a tokusatsu television show.

The skeleton’s rib cage shattered as its ribs clunked to the ground, which was an oddly satisfying sound. With the skeleton thrown off-balance, the two of us struck at it relentlessly until it turned into a magic gem.

At the end of the corridor was an extravagant door—that had seen better days—most likely leading to the room of the fortress’s lord.

“This should be the fortress lord’s room. There might be a monster inside,” I said.

“The treasure will be here if there’s any, right?” asked Kano.

She had a point in taking note of this. I quietly pushed the door open slightly and looked through the crack to see inside. Unlike the neglected rooms we’d encountered, I could see an expensive red carpet and furniture here. A skeleton was sitting on a luxurious armchair in the back of the room.

“That’s...a rare monster. It doesn’t look like a human skeleton,” I whispered.

The skeletons we’d encountered had been that of humans with no armor and level 8. This skeleton wore metal armor from head to toe and had a straight horn protruding from its forehead. It wasn’t like any fiend or demon that I recognized from *DEC*. What the hell was it? The monster probably had a higher level than eight, and I didn’t want to risk fighting it.

“Bro! Look, by its feet!” whispered Kano.

A metal treasure chest with embossed symbols stood by the monster’s feet.

Players often found treasure chests in the game’s dungeon and uncovered armor, raw materials, magic items, and dungeon coins. Sometimes, you could get rare items found only within treasure chests, so players had to compete for them.

Treasure chests followed a few simple patterns: They disappeared and reappeared in another location a fixed amount of time after opening one. Also, treasure chests had a rarity\* score, and going deeper into the dungeon increased said rarity. Thirdly, some treasure chests needed a key to unlock them, and others contained traps.

\*TIPS: The material treasure chests are made from indicates their rarity. From least to greatest, the rarities are wood, copper, silver, gold, mithril, orichalcum, and adamantite. Most treasure chests on the first twenty floors consist of wood.

Only wooden treasure chests appeared in the early section of the dungeon, and these never required keys. The treasure chests in the middle section were more dangerous to open, as they could explode when you tried to open them or transform into mimics just as strong as some floor bosses. In the dungeon's depths, traps inside chests could kill you instantly. The worst ones caused a massive explosion that could wipe out everyone nearby. You'd need keys and special skills to unlock them, so only a few players could loot their contents.

Back to our present predicament.

Treasure chests wouldn't usually spawn on the seventh floor, but I knew of new DLC areas that contained a few. I looked back at the sleeping skeleton sitting behind the treasure chest.

*Something's not right*, I thought.

This area should only spawn wooden treasure chests. However, the one in the room was constructed from shiny metal with a relief embossed on it.

The skeleton was also strange, seeing that the ones we faced had worn no armor and carried a weapon and a shield. This one, though, wore a helmet and full-body chain mail decorated with elaborate accessories. Another aspect distinguishing it from other skeletons was that it had a horn, and its horn was black. It was probably a named monster\*. Besides its horn, its appearance was like the chaos soldiers we'd seen on the televised raid.

\*TIPS: Named monsters can only exist an instance at a time in the game world. These monsters are usually as strong as bosses, and they each have their own name.

It was perfectly still and must have been resting, so I couldn't gauge its strength. I would've liked to know its name, at least. But if I used Basic Appraisal, it might notice me and attack. I didn't want that because it might use weapon skills, which would be dangerous against my sister because she had no knowledge from the game.

"That thing looks to be stronger than level 9," I whispered. "We should leave it alone and go back to fight the golem and level up instead."

"But!" blurted Kano. She was like a horse with a carrot dangled in front of its nose. "But what if the treasure goes away?"

"Treasure chests won't disappear until someone opens them," I explained.

The only problem was that other adventurers might get the treasure first. But I doubted anyone else would jump into the pitfall and search hidden tunnels. If anyone else opened the chest, it would still reappear. The treasure wasn't worth risking our lives over.

I needed to be extremely careful when combating monsters I didn't recognize from the game. That went double for named monsters, which might be floor bosses.

"Ugh," whined Kano, still whispering. "We're gonna come back to get it, right?"

"When we've leveled up enough," I shot back. "For now, be patient."

Kano reluctantly accepted my argument, and we returned to the garden to fight the golem. She kept peering back longingly at the room, but our safety came first to guarantee we could try again another day.

On the way, I glanced out of one of the small windows in the corridor and spotted the Wood Golem in the garden. Although a few patches of weeds had

sprouted, the garden still looked pretty. But this wasn't the handiwork of a gardener; the area would naturally maintain this state. The golem was two and a half meters tall, with thick arms and legs, and it might have weighed around a ton. It trudged through the garden, dragging its feet across the ground.

We observed the golem through a pair of binoculars that Kano had brought.

"I can see a stone sticking out of its back," remarked Kano. "That's the core, right?"

It was easy to underestimate golems due to their slow movement speed, though their greatest asset was their power.

"Yep," I replied. "If it attacks you, dodge. Don't block the blow because it packs a heavy punch."

"I'll be fine!" insisted Kano. "You worry too much. Let's get this over with and level up!"

Even if you tried to sneak up behind one, golems were a type of monster that could detect\* life-forms in all directions, so it would discover you the moment you got close enough. Surprise attacks were off the table.

\*TIPS: Some monsters can detect life-forms in all directions, although they can't perceive entities like the undead that aren't technically alive. Most monsters can only detect entities in their line of sight.

"I'll go in and distract it, then you get the core," I said.

"I just have to pluck the core from its back, right?"

"No, we'll extract a core later when we're stronger," I reminded Kano. "Keep an eye on its movements and destroy the core when you have an opening."

Her responses didn't fill me with confidence, but it was time to implement our plan.

I readied my weapon and advanced until there were thirty meters between me and the golem. It spun around, and I heard the low rumbling of a motor

running. From the sound, I half-expected it to sprout a set of wheels.

“Come at me, big guy!” I shouted.

Wood Golems were level 9 monsters much slower than skeletons, until they got close. When it attacked, its punch had a greater reach than I’d expected and was fast.

“Whoa! That’s a fast punch!” I yelled.

My stomach churned with each punch the golem threw at me because there was a thunderous crack in the air. This attack pattern was why it was vital that I not let my guard down for even a second.

“I’ll be taking this!” declared Kano. “Ughhhh, come out!”

She had climbed onto the golem, planted her feet on its back, and was unsuccessfully trying to pry the core free and getting swung around by the golem. Yet, the core stayed in place.

“Smack it with your weapon!” I yelled. “And... Whoa, that was close! Hit it where it attaches to the golem! Wait, no, just break the damn thing!”

“But!” protested Kano. “That’s such a waste!”

My heart shrank every time I dodged one of the golem’s thunderous punches. I was drenched in cold sweat and wished Kano would hurry. For the next minute, I continued dodging the punches and sweating profusely.

Kano struck the golem’s core with the back of her knife over and over, until it finally snapped. The golem crumpled to the ground and turned into a magic gem.

Golems here had short respawn timers, so we needed to get away quickly to take a break. Otherwise, we’d have to face it again.

“I almost died!” I said, panting. “You took too long trying to extract the core!”

“But look!” said Kano cheerfully, staring down at the golem core she was cradling in her hands. “How much do you think we’ll get for it?”

Despite my orders, the promise of treasure had been too alluring for my sister. I told her I would allow her thirty seconds to extract the core in our next



fight. If that didn't work, she had to destroy it.

"Boo!" she complained.

"Don't 'boo' me!" I spat. "Tell you what, once you turn level 8, *you* can be the decoy."

"If you say so, ha ha."

Her frivolous attitude made me want to smack her on the head, but upsetting her would slow down the raid.

While we were talking, a black cloud formed on the ground. Golems were quest monsters, so the black clouds they spawned from emerged differently to other monsters.

We took a ten-minute break since dodging the first golem's rapid punches had worn me out. Kano had figured out how to remove the core, so she managed to extract the second golem's core and defeated it in thirty seconds. And we could run away quickly if we needed to do so.

"We should've brought a hatchet with us," said Kano. "Knives are great for cutting, but it's hard using the right amount of force to break things."

Her knives hadn't worked well against the skeletons either. Kano was quite strong now, and it might be a good idea to give her a heavier weapon to try Dual Wielding.

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We slew five more Wood Golems between our long breaks, and Kano reached level 8. These golems were worth more experience points than usual because they were quest monsters. She had received bonus experience points since they were at a higher level than her, meaning leveling up didn't take long.

"Yay!" Kano cheered. "Should we take it in turns now?"

"Kano," I said, panting even more. "Your...brother's...tired. Let's go...home."

"Ugh!" fussed Kano. "Okay. But we're coming back tomorrow!"

Golems were a great choice of enemy to hunt as there was a surefire way to kill them when you had a friend to help. It was common knowledge in *DEC* that

golems were an easy way to level up, which also applied to this world.

Still, it surprised me how quickly Kano was adapting to the dungeon. At this pace, we could reach level fifteen in two months. I could accomplish my diet by leveling up in the dungeon like this and keeping my meals small, making me keen to keep up the good work.

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After regular lessons had ended for the day, Murai conducted homeroom and blandly recited school updates. He likely knew there were problems in Class E but walked out of the classroom door without mentioning them, pretending not to have noticed.

At the end of homeroom, some Class D students entered the room to pick up a few of my classmates to do work for their club activities. They didn't bother with me, though. Apparently, I was too much of a loser who was inept for menial tasks. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry about that. After all, I planned to hunt more golems with my sister and appreciated that they wouldn't put me to work.

"Hey, Akagi!" called out a Class D student. "Don't just sit there. You're gonna come and do some work for us!"

"S-Sure," replied Akagi as the student grabbed his collar and dragged him out of the room.

This treatment was clearly bullying, but the teachers didn't care. More than a few Class E students recoiled at the sight of these Class D students, fearing making eye contact as their will to resist had broken. Kariya had trounced Akagi, the supposedly strongest student in Class E, in a one-sided fight. All this had cast a dark shadow on Class E now that they understood how much of an advantage three extra years of experience in the dungeon was.

I could not say anything to fix that mood. The only course of action available to me would be to find and beat down the student pulling Kariya's strings, because Kariya himself was no more than a puppet. Class B's ringleader was the one who called the shots.

Regardless, Akagi's eyes still burned with passion as they dragged him away.

He probably wanted to keep raiding the dungeon until he was strong enough to get payback. But he'd be all right since he had Sanjou, Kaoru, and Tachigi by his side.

A couple of Class D students stayed behind in the classroom after Akagi had left, acting like they owned the place.

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

The others just showered him with praise.

"From Colors?! No way!"

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

"That's so cool!"

*Oh, so his name's Manaka?* I thought. He was the one who had punched Kiku by the school gate. I was glad I knew his name, as I'd been planning to learn it.

Manaka continued to boast loudly about his brother, so I listened attentively. It appeared his brother had joined a party that belonged to a clan under the Colors' umbrella, and several big names in the adventuring scene were joining.

Colors was an Assault Clan whose popularity had risen after their televised victory against the lich. Soleil was a subsidiary clan of another clan of Colors, making it two steps removed from the main clan. Anyway, Soleil had many graduates of Adventurers' High and other accomplished adventurers among their ranks. They were more distinguished than the average run-of-the-mill clan... Or so Manaka explained, gesturing animatedly.

Adventurers had to join a subsidiary clan and get stronger since they couldn't join frontline Assault Clans directly. They could then rise to a higher-ranked clan if they made a name for themselves. You had to pass through multiple levels of subsidiary clans on the way. In exceptional cases, you could transfer from one top-ranked clan to another. But this only happened rarely because Assault Clans liked to keep their raiding strategies a secret.

"Tasato and the others in Colors were awesome to watch in that raid," another Class D student commented.

“I probably watched the recording a hundred times,” added a third. “You gotta love Samurai. They have the most powerful job.”

“I heard the government only lets people become Samurai if they create a clan that does well enough to get national recognition.”

Colors certainly displayed plenty of spirit in their lich fight. I still shivered when I remembered watching them charge in, putting everything on the line. But I understood the allure of idolizing top adventurers.

Most students at Adventurers’ High aspired to graduate from Adventurers’ University and land a job in the government or could fall back on a regular university. If a student who had flunked the entrance exam to Adventurers’ University received offers from a famous clan, they would take it. Even being part of a subsidiary clan would be enough to excite people based on the parent clan’s name. As proof, the Class E students listened intently to the Class D kids’ conversation.

As for me, I’d already attended university in my world and wasn’t interested in going to Adventurers’ University. I’d probably stop further education and go straight to adventuring because I liked thinking about finding trustworthy friends to form a clan once I got stronger. Seeing this wasn’t the game, I didn’t know how far down the dungeon I could make it but imagined I’d have a trick or two for taking down floor bosses.

I headed to Class D’s classroom to carry out basic chores for them, like cleaning up or throwing out the trash. While there, I drew up plans on how to form my clan. I got the tasks done quickly and left.

Next, I headed to the factories. I wanted to rent a few new weapons to make the golem fights easier.

They made most weapons of regular steel while others were resistant, stainless steel. Other weapons were softer titanium and hard to manufacture, which led to few in stock and little variety. Dungeon materials were equally difficult to use in manufacturing, but they resulted in sharper and more durable weapons. These qualities made factories not see the point in making stainless steel or titanium weapons.

But weapons created from dungeon materials like magic metals or the claws

or fangs of strong monsters sold for millions of yen. This price hike applied even at cheaper venues like online shopping, auctions, and the Adventurers' Guild shops. They were too expensive to rent out, so the factory almost exclusively stocked steel weapons.

Steel weapons would work fine for the monsters on the first ten floors of the dungeon, but Kano and I would reach the tenth floor soon. I'd need to either buy a better weapon or collect the materials to make one. I knew I couldn't skimp on weapons and armor when my life depended on them. As a broke high schooler, I needed a way to raise funds.

I had a few ideas, yet I had to lay the groundwork to reach that point.

## Chapter 20: The Men from Soleil

When I got home, I found my sister ready for our raid. She tapped one foot on the floor, annoyed that I'd taken so long. Moreover, she had been so excited for today's raid that she'd barely slept the night before and paced up and down the house, waiting for me to return.

She bothered me until I went to my room to change, then we returned to the school. After checking that no one else was at the back of the school, we entered the building, descended to the first basement level, and used the gate in the empty classroom. Upon doing so, we teleported to the chapel on the dungeon's seventh floor we'd registered the previous day.

"That's weird," said Kano, pointing to a corner of the dilapidated room. "Has someone else been here?"

I glanced at where she'd pointed and saw the burnt remnants of firewood. That hadn't been there before, meaning somebody had visited this room and must have spent the night here.

To get to the chapel, you needed to climb into a pitfall in an obscure area of the seventh floor, follow the tunnel at the bottom, and navigate through the catacombs. How strange. No adventurer would assume there'd be a tunnel inside a pitfall.

Perhaps they'd arrived through the gate? But they wouldn't need to camp if they could use the gates, as they'd use them to leave the same way they entered.

I considered another player like me might have come, but the same objection applied. Vines used to hide the gate, and I cut them to make the prominent magic circle easier to spot. No player would miss the portion of the gate's magic circle that remained visible, even if the vines grew back quickly.

Through deduction, an expeditionary adventurer had stumbled upon the chapel, or an adventurer had fallen into the tunnel while escaping trouble.

Sifting through my thoughts, I recalled hearing the howls of a demon wolf on our first journey here. Perhaps that wolf had chased someone into the pitfall.

The only other possibility—a slim one—was that a select few adventurers knew about this area.

Whatever the case, it made no difference to me. Golems would spawn in multiple spots in this area, so there'd be enough to defeat so long as only a few people went through here. I put the other adventurers out of my mind and psyched myself for the golem fights.

During our long walk through the deserted landscape to the fortress, we encountered three men sitting by the side of the road. They must've been the adventurers who had made the campfire inside the chapel.

One of them noticed me and loudly called out, "Hey!"

He started walking over. I positioned myself so Kano hid behind me so they didn't realize she was a middle schooler.

"Hey, guys," the man said again. "Do you have anything we can cook? We're starving."

The adventurer that had come over wore a military jacket over a lightweight chest protector and was likely a Thief. But the other two wore full-body sets of demon wolf leather armor that included shoulder pads, chest protectors, gloves, gauntlets, and greaves over their clothes. They also had swords fastened to their belts and were probably Fighters. All three of them sported a badge with the image of the sun on their chest, signifying that they belonged to the same clan.

As I spoke to them, I learned they'd accidentally created a train of demon wolves on the seventh floor. They jumped into a nearby hole in the ground to escape, found the tunnel, and wound up here. So the demon wolf howl I'd heard the other day had been these guys, after all.

The journey back to the outside world would take half a day if they didn't use the gate, which would be rough on an empty stomach. I shared half of our snacks with them.

These greedy adventurers weren't satisfied with my generosity, however.

“Don’t be stingy,” one said. “Give us the rest!” He took the other half of my snacks with no hint of reservation.

The three gobbled down my snacks, fighting over the last crumbs. When I said there was none left, they let us go. I’d been afraid they’d ask who we were and what this place was, but they didn’t. Even if they had, I could’ve told them we got lost.

I felt scammed by the experience and shrugged it off to resume our journey to the garden in the fortress. Though, I cheered up when I reminded myself we’d be ready to change jobs soon.

“I was really looking forward to those snacks!” exclaimed Kano, groaning. “And was it just me, or did they stink?”

“Yeah. They’ve probably been dungeon-side for a few days.”

The three men had grown stubble and looked like they’d worn the same clothes for several days. For people who didn’t know about the gates, it was typical to go on weeklong raids. Baths weren’t much of an option for the Assault Clans that raided for several months. The best anyone could do was wipe their body. Adventurers were just people going on journeys, and the role required an open mind regarding rough living.

Although Kano and I could access the gates, we might need to stay overnight to defeat powerful enemies or traverse the mazelike geography of the depths. Hence, I wanted to get the Machinist job and the Golem Castle skill as soon as possible.

Upon reaching the garden, we laid a mat on the ground out of the golem’s range for its detection skill. Then, we placed our bags down and prepared calmly.

Kano drew the two daggers I’d rented for her, then began swinging and slashing to get a feel for them. While the daggers were rather large for hacking, they were much heavier than the knives she’d used. Fortunately, my concern that Kano would have trouble using them was unwarranted since she had mastered an unfamiliar weapon in the blink of an eye. The Dual Wielding skill gave her a power boost when she had a weapon in each hand, but that feat still reeked of a cheat to me. Did the skill bump her fighting intuition as well? I was



supposed to be her older brother. How could I save face?

I picked up my hatchet as we set to look for golems until a voice called out.

“Hey! Do you guys know about that weird skeleton deep inside the fortress?”

It was the three snack thieves again. Just when I’d gotten myself pumped up...

“Yeah, that skeleton looks tougher than the rest,” another continued. “See, there’s three of us and two of you. Let’s form a party and take it down together.”

“Hold your horses, Reo. How about we introduce ourselves first?”

The skeleton they referred to was probably guarding the treasure chest in the lord’s room of the fortress. I didn’t know its true strength because I hadn’t used Basic Appraisal, but the monster seemed powerful even in its resting state.

Judging by the adventurers’ armor, they were probably around level 10. They might be at a higher level than me, but they weren’t the ideal team after nearly experiencing death. I also wasn’t thrilled about working with people who had stolen my snacks. Plus, I didn’t recognize that monster from the game and had no clue how strong it was. I preferred leaving the battle until I’d leveled up more and obtained better armor.

I noticed Kano furrowed her brow when glancing at them. She wasn’t eager to join them either.

Seeing our reluctance, the bearded adventurer proudly introduced the party. “We belong to the Soleil Clan, a part of the Colors group.”

*Soleil, you say? I thought. That’s the second time I’ve heard that name today.*

The man dressed as a Thief introduced himself as Masaru Manaka. Hearing that, I remembered that the Manaka in Class D bragged about Soleil earlier in the day. This Manaka was probably his brother, and that was the last straw for any chance of me joining them.

“I’m sorry to say that we’ll have to pass,” I said.

“Say that again?” bellowed Manaka threateningly, immediately growing hostile.

The other two behind him started glaring at us.

They had to make things difficult, didn't they? I wasn't sure whether we'd have to fight the adventurers and chose to use Basic Appraisal to be safe.

Name: Masaru Manaka

Job: Thief

Strength: Slightly Stronger

Available skills: 3

Name: Reo Akihisa

Job: Fighter

Strength: Equal Strength

Available skills: 2

Name: Kazuya Ichiwatari

Job: Fighter

Strength: Equal Strength

Available skills: 2

This was the first time I used Basic Appraisal on another person and discovered it displayed text sequences as an image in my mind. The information faded when my concentration drifted, so I'd need to practice using it properly.

All three had switched from the beginner Newbie job to a basic job. Basic Appraisal would only measure\* strength relative to mine, telling me if they were stronger, weaker, or of equal strength to myself.

\*TIPS: Basic Appraisal records strength according to the below relative scale.

Pathetically weak: Five or more levels lower.

Much, much weaker: Four levels lower.

Much weaker: Three levels lower.

Weaker: Two levels lower.

Slightly weaker: One level below.

Equal strength: The same level or one level above.

Slightly stronger: Two levels above.

Stronger: Three levels above.

Much stronger: Four levels above.

Much, much stronger: Five levels above.

Unbelievably stronger: Six or more levels above.

I was level 8, so the older Manaka would probably be level 10. Akihisa and Ichiwatari were around level 8 or 9.

Based on their available skills, they likely had Basic Appraisal and one or two skills they had picked from their basic jobs. I doubted they'd persisted as Newbies long enough to get Plus Three Skill Slots.

What was my next move? My "secret weapon" could make short work of all three, but that could bite me in the ass later.

"This bastard just used Basic Appraisal on us!" one shouted. "Do you really want to pick a fight with Colors? Do you wanna die that much?"

It annoyed me that these low-level nobodies from a sub-clan of a sub-clan were throwing their parent clan's name around. Instead of picking a fight, I politely declined their offer to team up.

"We're only level 8 and would just get in your way," I explained.

My protest fell on deaf ears, though. They argued, and I argued back. Kano intervened just as I tried calming myself down by imagining knocking them all flat on their backs.

"Bro, let's go along with them for now, or we'll be here all day," she said.

"That's what I like to hear!" an adventurer quipped.

I heaved a sigh. This team was persistent, and I had to acknowledge that. If it went south, we could always run away. I had no confidence in their ability to plan dungeon raids. They were out of food and hours away from civilization, so it was reckless to go treasure hunting.

The turn of events had aggravated me but cheered the three adventurers up. They began boasting about their exploits.

“Guess what?” one of them asked. “The Golden Orchid Clan wants us to join up! They’re a direct subsidiary clan to Colors!”

“Yep,” another confirmed. “Soleil has been good to us, but I’m sure they’ll let us go. They know we’re itching to join the actual Colors Clan.”

“I still can’t believe we’re gonna be in the Golden Orchid Clan,” said the third, laughing.

*I bet they asked you to join them to do the dishes, not wanting you to fight for them, I thought. There’s no way the actual Colors Clan would tarnish their reputation by letting in scum like you.*

“Bro, stop grinding your teeth. They’ll hear you,” whispered Kano.

“I’ll try,” I responded.

We headed to the fortress and went inside. All the while, I clenched my fists.

The skeletons inside the corridors were already defeated. The group huddled to discuss our strategy once we arrived outside the lord’s room.

“Here’s the plan,” declared an adventurer. “We all go in and beat the shit out of it.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” another chimed.

*Put them back please?* I thought.

The group had no tank, long-distance roles, or information on the skeleton lord, leaving us with few options. Surrounding the monster and attacking from all sides to prevent it from singling anyone out wasn’t a bad plan.

“I’ll check it out with Basic Appraisal first,” suggested Ichiwatari. He explained that he’d peek through the crack in the door, appraise the skeleton, and give us

the all-clear to proceed if the monster was manageable.

Nobody said what we'd do if the appraisal didn't have good results, but there was probably nothing to worry about. Even if it were level 9 or 10, there were five people here, so between us we could handle it. A chance of the skeleton being a floor boss existed, but I couldn't recall ever encountering one in DLC-exclusive areas. Even if it were a floor boss, its level wouldn't be higher than twelve on the seventh floor. We'd be more than capable of escaping, if nothing else.

I wanted to ask Ichiwatari what the appraisal said, but he was still staring through the crack. Yet he stood perfectly still.

I was unhappy with him keeping us in suspense about the results. Basic Appraisal gave monsters a bit of aggro and worked like a taunt skill, meaning that the fight had begun as soon as he had cast it.

Manaka also seemed unnerved by Ichiwatari's silence and asked, "What's wrong, Kazuya?"

Ichiwatari began breathing heavily. "We're screwed, run—"

"Guooohhh!!!"

The door to the lord's room exploded, sending Ichiwatari flying, and the skeleton walked out menacingly.

## Chapter 21: Unbelievable Strength

I immediately activated Basic Appraisal to understand what was happening.

Name: Volgemurt (Unique Boss)

Race: Skeleton Noble (Shadow Walker)

Strength: Unbelievably Stronger

Available skills: 4

So he was Volgemurt, a unique boss... Hang on, whoa! Unbelievably stronger?! So he was at least six levels higher than me, nearly level 14?!

His job, listed in parentheses beside his race, appeared as Shadow Walker. That was horrible news since certain powerful monsters could attain jobs like ordinary adventurers. I didn't have an issue with that—no, what scared me was that Shadow Walker was an advanced job. Adventurers and monsters alike had to reach level 20 before getting such a role.

The realization dawned on me that this skeleton was at least level 20.

“What the hell's a Shadow Walker?!” screamed one of the three adventurers.

“More like, what's a monster like this doing on the seventh floor?!” another bellowed. “We're screwed!”

Volgemurt released a low, rumbling growl followed by a thick, black, and festering cloud of Aura burst forth—its power made me dizzy. I'd expected no worse than a floor boss, but this monster was on an entirely different level. We needed to get away and fast.

I shot a glance back at Ichiwatari. A curved blade—probably a falchion—had pierced his body, and dark red blood spilled from his mouth. The lack of movement showed he'd received an instant death blow.

“Kano, we're leaving!” I yelled.

“O-Okay,” she whimpered as we started to run until she suddenly screamed. “Aaaaaah!!!!”

That bastard Manaka had cut Kano’s leg!

“Don’t think bad of us, but that thing will catch up to us if we just run!” yelled Manaka.

“Think of it this way: what good would it do if we all die here?” asked Akihisa. “She’s a necessary sacrifice. See ya!”

Manaka and Akihisa sped away, and the heavily armored skeleton turned the red, flickering lights in its eye sockets toward Kano and me.

“You run, bro!” pleaded Kano, even as blood seeped from the wound in her leg.

*Don’t look at me like that, Kano, I thought. All I ever knew was solitude until you taught me how comforting having a family could feel. I’ll always be grateful for that and won’t leave you here, even if it kills me. No need to fret, Piggy. I’ll keep your dear sister safe. You are me, and I am you, so have a little faith in me!*

When Volgemurt saw I wouldn’t flee, he approached me slowly. No, the calmness of its gait was the manifestation of its supreme confidence it could catch me if I tried to run. It activated the Shadowstep movement skill unique to the Shadow Walker job, and afterimages flickered by its feet.

I stepped in front of Kano to protect her. And I’d make those bastards wish they were dead for what they did to Kano’s leg later, but for now...

“Hey, numbskull,” I said. “You won’t be acting so confident when I’m through with you.”

DEC functioned on the leveling system, where defeating monsters rewarded players with experience points, and players would level up once they had amassed a certain amount. A single level would only increase your stats by one or two points, though it wouldn’t look impressive on your profile. But because your HP, mana, strength, intelligence, reaction time, vision, and everything else increased simultaneously, a bump gave you an advantage in your fighting ability. That was why leveling up impacted your gameplay more than improving your playing style.

So what could you do to defeat a higher-level monster?

A combination of luck, combat knowledge, and gameplay ability could overcome a difference of one to three levels against an opponent with the same tools and skills as yourself. Your chances would greatly improve if you knew your opponent's job and how to respond to their skills, how to exploit the vulnerabilities in their attack patterns, and if you could effectively chain your skills and use feints.

The difference in your stats would be difficult to ignore and make it challenging to repel their attacks. Kariya had boasted a five-level advantage over Akagi during their fight, indicating how the fight would go. Regardless, the right equipment and gameplay experience would give one a chance.

Battling an enemy ten levels higher would show a drastic difference, though. In the game, some clans chose players with the same skills and equipment to test how much level difference affected fighting ability. They found that you would need to gather ten equal-strength players to fight against such an opponent, which didn't apply to my situation. In reality, this enemy would have access to better equipment and more skills. While defeating an enemy like this one-on-one would be extremely difficult, carefully picking your equipment and planning every step of the fight might give you a shot and be a miracle if you won.

What about a twenty level difference? Based on what I mentioned, it might seem reasonable to expect that you could fight on equal footing with a hundred players. But experiments had shown that even a thousand players together couldn't defeat an enemy twenty levels higher. Your attacks wouldn't land, and the opponent could instakill multiple players. The fight would be entirely one-sided. Conclusion: there was a zero percent chance of defeating an enemy twenty levels higher.

So, how could I defeat the enemy I was currently facing? I was level 8 and was still a Newbie, meaning I had no job buffs\*. The only skills I knew were Glutton and Basic Appraisal, neither of which aided my combat ability. The Glutton skill actually harmed it by reducing my strength by thirty percent and halving my agility.



\*TIPS: Jobs often provide benefits, sometimes toward your stats. The Newbie job has no job buffs, however.

Volgemurt was at least level 20, and his Shadow Walker job increased his movement speed and his reaction time. His falchion and armor glowed strangely, so they probably had buffs. He had also activated Shadowstep, an overpowered skill that lasted five minutes. The skill increased his speed and agility by fifty percent and created afterimages that made it difficult to see what he was doing, increasing his evasion chance by thirty percent. With this skill, Volgemurt could sprint a hundred meters in under five seconds.

I only had a standard steel hatchet with no buffs or benefits that I'd rented from the school. Would it deal any damage if I hit Volgemurt? Would I even be able to land a hit? And if I got hit by Volgemurt, my demon wolf armor wouldn't protect me because he would slice me in two. My defense stats were no match for his offensive ones.

My sister was behind me, unable to move due to her injured leg. I'd stopped the bleeding and cast Minor Restoration, but it would be impossible to escape to the gate while carrying her. I had no choice but to dig in and fight it out.

I did have a secret weapon. Kano and I would die unless I did something, even if this wreaked havoc on my body. Just then, I took three bottles of "Small Potion of Mana" from my rucksack and placed them in the pouches on my waist. I'd brought them along in case I got in danger.

"Guoh..."

This enemy was unusual since most skeletons would blindly charge into a fight when they spotted an enemy. Volgemurt hadn't attacked me yet. He'd only walked toward us and stopped ten meters away to judge me. Only the thinnest tatters of skin remained around his bones, though I could tell that he was smiling. The intelligence and sadism he presented appeared in all the unique bosses.

The malevolent Aura it oozed in all directions was unlike anything I'd experienced from other monsters. The pressure prickled in my mind as I felt strangled. He made the orc lord seem like an infant.

“Bro, run... You can’t win...” uttered Kano.

*What a noble girl, I thought. She doesn’t want me to stay behind because of her injury, and it’s tearing her up. But don’t worry, Kano.*

I took a moment to recover.

“You seem to be giving me time to get ready, and I’m more than happy to oblige,” I said. *I’ll show you just what cheats a former player can perform.*

## Chapter 22: My Long-Held Dream

I knew about a few cheats in this world.

The first was game knowledge. Anyone who'd completed a playthrough of *DEC* knew a reasonable amount about the dungeon, items, weapons, skills, the school, and the other students. Overall, they could tell the future because they considered possible game events that hadn't occurred yet. Game knowledge was the most robust cheat available here.

Another cheat besides that existed. The fact that I'd activated the Void Slice skill available to the Weaponmaster job was proof former game players could use the skills from their most recent game characters. Afterward, I'd experimented with various skills. My initial hypothesis had been that I could only use Weaponmaster skills until I discovered that I could activate any skill that my last character had known. Since I'd taken on that role and saved many useful skills from other jobs in my skill slots, I'd tested to realize they all worked. Although I was only a Newbie and had two skills in my skill slots, I had access to plenty of powerful skills.

A few catches endured, though. For some skills, my low stats and cheap weapons wouldn't be enough. As an example, Void Slice had failed to kill a mere slime because my strength stat had been too low. Offensive skills often fell prey to this flaw.

Passive skills would also be permanently active, and these had too many drawbacks to be practical. I was aware of some passive skills like Seeing Eye, which increased my vision to the max, and Eye of Judgment, which revealed the qualities of items, the strength of opponents, and their registered skills. Because I didn't have these in my skill slots, there wouldn't be a way to activate them using Manual Activation or any other way that I knew of from the game.

However, some skills I'd known would be helpful despite my current stats.

"Let's get this started," I said.

I drew a complex magic circle in the air with rapid movements of my hands to manually activate a skill. The circle initially shone with a pure white light, but the color became a dark red as the symbol pulsed.

“Dark lord of the underworld, lend me your power... Satanachia’s Stem Cells!!!”

I activated Satanachia’s Stem Cells, a healing skill I’d picked up from the expert job Demon Lord. In exchange for ninety-nine percent of my maximum mana, this would increase my HP regeneration\*.

\*TIPS: Regeneration is a term used to refer to the continuous application of healing magic over a fixed period.

Seeing it was a regeneration skill from an expert job, the healing effects were immense. The skill would regrow my arm in less than a minute if I lost one, but it wouldn’t heal me if I sustained enough damage at once to kill me. Due to the mana consumption and healing effects, gamers had called it a must-have for tanks.

The moment I activated the skill, a burning pain crawled over every bit of skin on my body, and I could feel the neurons in my brain rearranging. I immediately chugged the first of the Small Potions of Mana and drew my next magic circle.

“I’m not done yet!” I said, then chanted. “I am the gale that courses through the darkness! Shadowstep!!!”

The dark lines that formed the geometric patterns inscribed in the magic circle began to suck in the nearby light once the skill activated, darkening the room. Afterimages flickered by my feet.

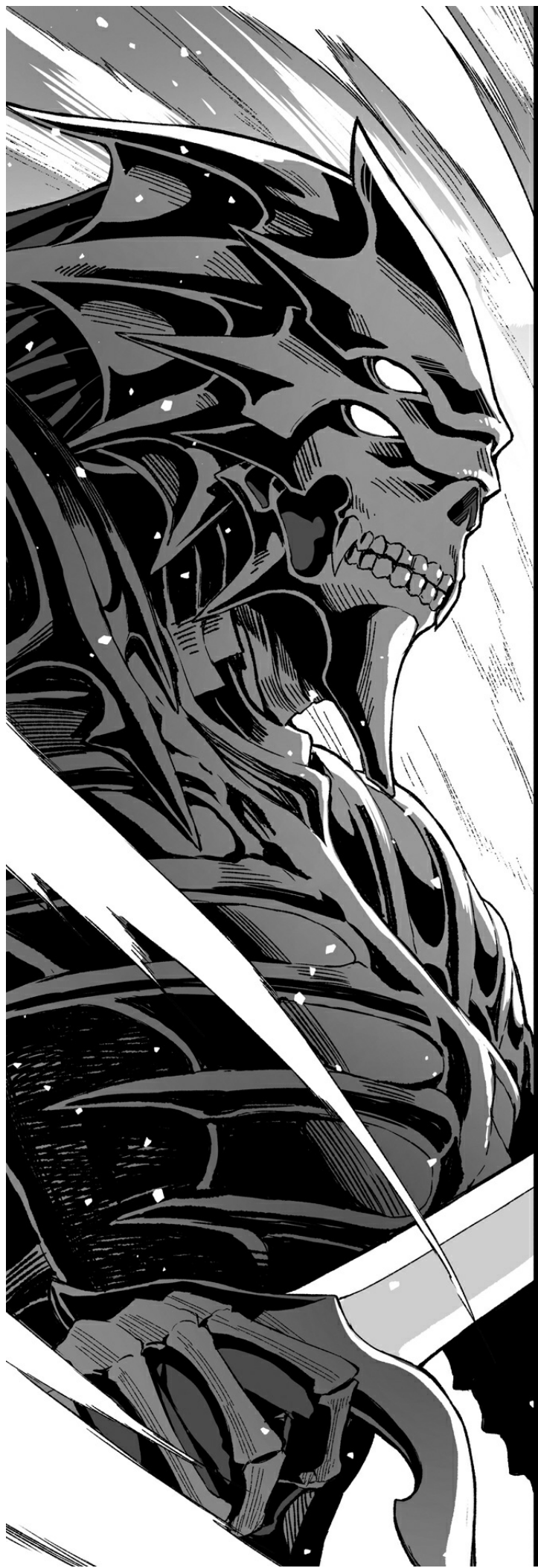
Shadowstep was a skill Volgemurt also used. Although it only belonged to an advanced job, hardcore gamers favored the agility boosts, movement speed, and evasion chance that it provided. I was no exception, as I’d learned it to fight against other players. The agility boost was percentage-based rather than additive, but my agility wouldn’t increase much since my stats were low.

I prepared for a final skill I hadn't tested because of the risks involved. Yet I downed the next Small Potion of Mana because I would play every card in my hand. I rapidly drew another magic circle with multiple complex figures composed on top of each other, drawings of a disorderly pile of weapons.

"Your Majesty...or was it Hades? Hades, lend me your power! Overdrive!"

Overdrive was the signature extra skill of the expert job Weaponmaster. For the next five minutes, my attack power and hit chance with every close-combat weapon and martial art would skyrocket. My weapon proficiency, reaction time, and vision would all increase massively. The buff to my stats was multiplicative and additive, meaning I'd reap huge bonuses even with my low stats.

When I activated the skill, my bones cracked and fractured as they healed themselves due to the effect of Satanachia's Stem Cells. The pain was like blades slicing through me, like arms twisting and bending me. My mind struggled to think because of the agony, but I gritted my teeth and focused on the monster in front of me. Veins burst on my forehead as blood ran down my face, painting a red filter over my vision.



*Gah... This is worse than I thought...*

The energy was rapidly draining from every part of my body. Although I'd tested Satanachia's Stem Cells and Shadowstep, the strain Overdrive put on me was more severe than either of those. I probably would've spewed blood and instantly died if I tried to use it without a regeneration skill active.

*Ha ha, the fight's not even begun, and I'm already half-dead.*

Kano watched what was happening to me. Her mouth was hanging open, her face distorted with sadness.

"B-Bro... That skill... Are you okay...?"

"Don't...worry," I said, panting. "You're gonna...get to see your big brother be a hero."

Despite bursting several blood vessels and bleeding a bit, this combination of buffs from the best jobs in the game provided me with a far greater amount of power than what I could muster normally.

There might be consequences for my body after this, but I couldn't care less. I wasn't going to second-guess myself. I needed to defeat the monster facing us, or there'd be no tomorrow for me and Kano.

I swung my weapon to get a feel for it, gripping the hatchet too tightly while bending its handle. But I needed to loosen my grip or I might break my weapon. I stepped forward, noticing how the stone floor cracked under my feet as portions of it pulverized.

Volgemurt retreated a few paces back, seemingly shocked and wary of me. What sort of undead monster behaved like that?

"Oh, don't be like that," I chided. "You saw me getting ready, and it's all for you. So let's have some fun."

We paused for a few seconds, observing one another. As we marched forth, both of us activated Shadowstep and instantly shrank the distance between us.

"Guoh... Guoooooooooh!!!" the monster roared.

His falchion and my hatchet clashed, and the huge kinetic energy of our

weapons converted to sound. While kinetic energy was usually proportional to mass and speed, it was also a function of magic and aura inside a magic field. As such, the power of our attacks was greater than it appeared.

*I've got just as much power as him, I thought. The clashing of our weapons makes it obvious. But...*

That single clash of our weapons had sent a shock wave throughout my body like I'd swung and hit a heavy metal ball that traveled hundreds of kilometers an hour with all my strength. Satanachia's Stem Cells healed my bones and muscles but couldn't help with the mental fatigue. It wouldn't last long, and my body would implode when the effects wore off. I needed to finish the fight quickly.

"Aaaaaah!!!" I yelled.

"Guoooooh!!!" Volgemurt roared back.

Our weapons rushed through the air when we clashed blows at close range, stirring up the air and ringing out with a clang. Every blow was an uncompromising fatal strike that would lead to a pitiful death if it landed. The battle was a contest of strength far beyond the realm of possibility for ordinary humans.

The slightest grazes tore gashes in my skin as each blow I caught with my weapon chipped away at my HP, which regenerated. Our surroundings crumbled, and my steel hatchet gradually lost its shape.

My weapon wouldn't last as long as I'd hoped. Steel wasn't strong enough to endure the amount of power Volgemurt exerted.

"Kano!" I cried out. "Throw me your daggers!"

"Catch, bro!" responded Kano, sliding both daggers along the floor toward me before I'd finished making my request. She must've seen that the hatchet was ready to break.

Volgemurt took full advantage of the opening that I presented when I tried to pick up the daggers, and he activated a skill.

"Slice Edge."



He'd used a sword skill that required a dagger or a one-handed sword to activate. His downward slash abruptly changed trajectory and moved horizontally. I'd seen this skill many times in the game and knew that the blade would always move to the right, so dodging was simple.

I twisted my upper body to evade the slash and stepped back while picking up the daggers. Next, I drank the last of the small mana potions and could no longer restore my mana.

The fight had lasted for less than twenty seconds. Yet the ground beneath us had become a mess of rubble from the high-speed Shadowstep movement, and deep scratches covered the walls. The red tint on my vision grew worse. More capillaries had succumbed to the burden of the strengthening skills and ruptured. The blood that trickled down blew off my face and was scattered into the wind by the powerful Aura I exuded. I felt searing pain that told me I was overworking my muscles. Perhaps I was shaving off years of my life in exchange for the power I was wielding and could turn into a husk and die.

As I observed the monster, I knew he wanted Kano's life and mine. A filthy black Aura shrouded the monster and made it seem like the embodiment of death.

*I used to dream of getting to experience a fight like this,* I thought.

The life I had in my previous world wasn't an unhappy one. I had a job that, even if I could have been better at it, satisfied me. I'd taken on my first subordinate, and I wanted to do well.

And yet, I had dreamed of being in a world I loved standing in a fight to the death against a ruthless monster.

*Now, that dream has come true.*

Despite the severity of the situation, a smile formed on my lips. *Dungeon Explorer Chronicle* had infected me with a maddened passion long ago. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to savor the feeling. A few more minutes, and I'd either live or die.

My Aura burst forth once more, dyed red by my blood. Volgemurt fortified his black Aura in response, and we slowly advanced toward each other.

*Let's finish this.*

## Chapter 23: An Eerie Hero

The monster's sword swung down with more power than a skeletal arm should be able to summon. I evaded the attack by the skin of my teeth and spun around as the blade passed me, striking with all my force to smack into his weapon.

Volgemurt swiveled his torso to dodge, a feat of flexibility that twisted his joints beyond their normal range, and he struck my blind spot.

I dodged a series of thundering strikes that followed, each powerful enough to shatter boulders, using all my mental capacity to determine how to land a lethal strike.

Every time I moved my arms, my blood spilled out and evaporated, my bones screeched, my entrails wailed. Every tendon in my body had torn and healed repeatedly, recombining imperfectly. I'd forced my level 8 body to endure damaging high speeds and power that shattered walls with my hatchet, and this had consequences. My body wasn't strong enough to handle this forced performance increase from the buff skills.

And why? All to fight Volgemurt without dying. Still, my chances kept getting slimmer and slimmer. Though we seemed evenly matched, my opponent was an undead monster who wouldn't get tired. I was already breathing heavily and feeling the drag of my reckless performance increase. Even worse, my buff skills would run out soon.

Regrettably, Volgemurt was more experienced in combat than I'd hoped. I had increased my speed and power to match him, but he'd seen through almost all of my bluffs and used Shadowstep to attack my blind spots. Defeating him in a matter of minutes seemed almost impossible.

In that case... I did have one more trick up my sleeve, although the strain on my body would increase.

I took a half step away from him and launched a flurry of attacks. At this

distance, I focused on dodging his attacks since his longer falchion held an advantage over my shorter daggers. As I remained vigilant against attacks I couldn't block one-handed, I drew a magic circle with my left hand, darted into his blind spot, and then launched another flurry of attacks.

In the game, you could pause the input of an attack and pick it up again as long as less than a second had passed. I'd tested that the same held true in this world.

Volgemurt saw how I began forming the outlines of a magic circle and activated the one-handed sword skill Savage Stripe to interfere with my casting. The instant before he activated his skill, he lowered his center of mass, turned his blade horizontally, and swept it from left to right. It was possible to predict the path of his Savage Stripe attack if you knew the reach of his weapon. I had anticipated he knew this skill because of his job as a Shadow Walker and his having four available skills.

*I've seen that attack a million times before!*

With the boost from Savage Stripe, the tip of his falchion went faster than the speed of sound. Despite being too quick to see, I knew where it was going.

When I got close to Volgemurt again and caught his skilled-up weapon with both hands on my dagger, sparks erupted from the blades. Luckily, I'd stopped his momentum. Rather than jumping or crouching to evade Savage Stripe, I blocked the attack to not be at a disadvantage.

Amid a terrifying frenzy of clashing weapons, Volgemurt and I switched places with each other so much that I felt dizzy. Nonetheless, I used the opportunity to draw more of my magic circle and noticed it emitted a pale green light.

"Here goes nothing!" I shouted. "Rage like a tempest! Aerial!!!"

Aerial was a skill that belonged to the advanced job of Sword Dancer and allowed the user to create footholds in any place in the air they liked. This function kept the fight open regardless of the environment and expanded the variety of tactics. However, I'd run out of mana within thirty seconds due to the skill's excessive consumption per second. I could now incorporate a vertical component to launch strikes in my fighting style. Close-combat fights using Aerial against other players had been my party trick in *DEC*.

I aimed at Volgemurt with my dagger from all directions, mixing genuine attacks with bluffs. It was impossible to remember which direction was up, given dizzying changes of direction and viewpoint. While this confused me, it wasn't a problem because I could create footholds anywhere. The most important thing to remember was to target the enemy's weak points and keep them on their toes.

Repeatedly changing directions in midair, though, put an immense strain on my legs. My feet would give out before I ran out of mana.

*Gah... This is tough... But I've finally landed a hit!*

A first successful swipe from behind left Volgemurt vulnerable, and he fell prey to further attacks that caused him to stumble. Sparks flew as my blade struck his armor, accompanied by a cacophony of clanging metal. The bones beneath his armor were themselves as strong as iron, and my steel dagger gradually lost its shape.

*Let's end this, here and now!!!*

I put all my strength into each blow while ensuring each slash formed the next step in a pattern, the manual motions required to activate a skill. Soon, my weapon became a twisted lump of steel, unrecognizable as a dagger, but that didn't matter.

"Bro..." Kano called out. "Beat him!!!"

"This ends now!" I screamed. "Blade of Agares!!!"

To answer my yell, Volgemurt explosively projected Aura from his entire body and chanted a skill name of his own, "Air Break."

The tremendous energy we both released collided and created a massive shock wave.

### **Kano Narumi**

For as long as I could remember, my brother had always looked out for me. He'd been there when I'd collapsed at school, and the kids in the neighborhood had picked on me because I got lost in the mountains. I couldn't protect myself and would not be able to stay by his side as he grew up unless that changed.

That was why I'd worked so hard to get stronger, so we could one day walk the path ahead together. I stopped being a picky eater, started drinking plenty of milk, and tried harder at school.

One day, bro had announced that he would take the entrance exam for Adventurers' High. He probably wanted to follow *her*, that woman.

Adventurers' High was a superelite school. Its academic results were impeccable; it accepted fewer than one percent of applicants, and many graduates became famous adventurers. And somehow, bro had passed. I felt conflicted. Part of me had wanted to cheer him on and be proud of his accomplishment. Another part worried I could no longer reach him.

There was only one solution: I needed to get into Adventurers' High too. I would prove I could pass the exam and catch up to him. From that day on, I studied and trained like crazy, forcing myself through a lot. I'd spent plenty of time researching the dungeon and Colors, the top clan. That even led me to attend a martial arts school.

As I studied, the image my father had planted in my mind of what it meant to be an adventurer expanded and filled out. I realized that I'd only seen a tiny fraction of the world. Day by day, I fell more in love with the idea of becoming an adventurer, inspiring me to study and train even harder.

Shortly after bro had entered Adventurers' High, he explained that he'd head to the dungeon immediately. I asked him to take me along, expecting him to refuse. To my surprise, he'd accepted. I couldn't wait! After hearing that, I ate larger meals, ran even more, and got my body in good shape. At least, I hoped I was strong enough not to get in his way.

For all the terrifying dangers I'd heard about the dungeon, my first trip had gone smoothly. It had almost been disappointing, to be honest. In no time at all, I'd reached level 7 by using a method that bro had called "power leveling." And I was unbelievably strong, just like famous adventurers I'd seen. I might have even daydreamed about becoming stronger than bro...

Whether at home or school, the dungeon had been the only thing on my mind. Bro had bought me new armor, and I couldn't wait for our next raid—a golem hunt.

But then he showed up, the monster that filled me with despair. He was fear incarnate. The sight of him made me feel like my heart got strangled and crushed as the black Aura that emanated from his body gave him the appearance of a demon. My instincts screamed a single thing: this wasn't an enemy we could beat.

For the first time in my life, I was sure I was going to die. That frightened me, but what scared me more was the thought of losing my brother. It would all be my fault. If only that guy hadn't cut my leg... If only I'd never suggested partying up with those three... Regrets rushed at me like a tsunami, dragging me under.

I'd told him to run. Yes, my voice had trembled from fear. Still, I'd managed to say it.

*Ah, it looks like I'm going to die*, I thought. It crushed me to give up on life, but there was no other way.

Or so I'd thought.

What happened instead? Before my eyes, bro chanted a strange spell and suddenly changed. He was like an eerie hero now. Even though his body shrank, his muscles and veins began to swell and bulge. His blood mixed with his Aura to form a dark red glow around his body, pushing it past its limits. I'd never seen magic like that before in any book or picture.

He told me not to worry, yet he clearly wasn't okay.

Bro glared at the monster for a few seconds as the monster did the same, then the fight began. Blood, noise, and shock waves exploded in every direction while the fortress's corridor became a pile of rubble.

The monster's strength was on an entirely different level. He was perhaps just as strong or more so than the lich I'd seen on TV, the strongest ever recorded. Yet bro fought with all his might, surpassing what was expected.

They battled at extremely close range, moving around so much that it was dizzying. I couldn't register what was happening because they moved so quickly. Even so, I somehow knew that the fight was more complex than a simple exchange of blows. The fighters calculated changes in their line of sight or stance, every step taken, and every movement of their weapons to deceive

their opponent or get the upper hand.

I'd learned the basics of combat at the martial arts school because I wanted to get stronger. My studies included reading tons of books, watching plenty of television, and collecting research on the magic and tactics used by adventurers on the front lines... But nothing could compare to the sight happening right before my eyes. The battle was high-level, logical close-range tactics mixed with a ferocious desire to risk your life to demolish your opponent. None of the videos I'd seen of the top clans came close. In every possible way, the fight surpassed even the best my wild imagination had to offer.

Barely a minute had passed since the fight had begun, but huge holes gaped in the walls and the ceiling. Dust clouds made it difficult to see, and the uneven floor had no stable surface to stand. Still, the fight continued as the ground trembled.

In the middle of one flurry of attacks, the monster unleashed a weapon skill that seemed powerful enough to slice through space itself. I feared the monster would push back bro until he cast a new spell that sped him up. He began leaping in every direction like a bouncy ball, the sound of an explosion roaring each time he changed course.

Bro had finally landed his first hit on the monster, indicated by the metal clang. From there, he landed a succession of clean hits. He then jumped up, kicked off against a spot in the air, spun his body around, and struck a peculiar pose. With that, his blood-colored Aura exploded, and he dove toward the monster.

While sparks rained on him, the monster swelled his own black Aura and faced up at bro. Was he about to use a weapon skill as a counter?!

"Bro!" I cried out. I couldn't help it; this final clash would decide the fight. "Beat him!!!"

The next blow would decide the winner.

"This ends here!" screamed bro. "Blade of Agares!!!"

"Air Break," the monster chanted.

The two weapon skills clashed with a fantastic flash of light and thunderclap.



And the resulting blast spewed molten dust into the air, so I couldn't see who had won.

Slowly, the light faded to reveal a deep, wide gash running through the remnants of the stone floor. That was where bro's weapon skill had hit. I looked inside the gash just in time to see the monster, torn to pieces, transform into a magic gem. It was larger and more beautiful than any gem I'd seen before.

I looked around for bro, and I suddenly felt dizzy while my chest tightened.

"Oof..." I said, moaning. "I...guess I still get to level up even though I didn't do anything."

The sense of omnipotence was greater than what I'd felt when I'd leveled up multiple times at once on the fifth floor. I also received the Plus Three Skill Slots skill.

I found bro sitting down. Gone was his usual plump self, replaced by a smaller figure as he'd wasted away. How could that be? His left arm was missing from above the elbow, yet a healing skill appeared to be in effect. Bone grew back from the stump with a hissing sound followed by muscles and tendons gradually knitting together above it. What skill could that be? No skill I knew could cause such extraordinary regeneration. The healing was working faster than it had done during the fight as well, maybe because he'd leveled up.

"Bro, are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm...fine," he said, wheezing. "But...my legs...aren't working great... It might be better for us to go up to the tenth floor...rather than go straight home... Phew, I'm out of mana, so I'm just gonna..."

At that point, bro's body slumped onto the ground. His eyes closed, and his breathing calmed. I had so many questions for him, but I figured he deserved to rest.

"Thank you, bro," I whispered, taking in his sleeping face. The sight of this eerie yet magnificent hero was unknown to all but me.



# Afterword

Hello, I'm Akito Narusawa. Thank you for picking up this book.

This story is about a man who travels to the world of a game and becomes Souta Narumi, one of the game's villains. The settings are a school and a dungeon. Being a villain, he will move back and forth between the game's storyline and the world. He'll go on to face struggles with his life on the line to make something of his own. I hope you've enjoyed it.

It's been a little over a year since I uploaded the first installment of this story on the web. My only goal then was to enjoy writing the story and hear feedback from readers who enjoyed the work. I never anticipated that it would be published someday.

However, I was surprised by how many readers bookmarked my work and when HJ Novels reached out to discuss publication, which led to this first volume.

I'm overjoyed, grateful, and bewildered, all at the same time.

And so, I'd like to take this chance to record a few acknowledgments.

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the many readers who cheered this unknown author on with their reviews; to T, my editor, who trimmed the word count and fixed plot holes and contradictions, guiding me through my first experience of publication; to KeG, who gladly accepted my many unreasonable demands and furnished the book with beautiful, detailed illustrations; to the reviewers, who provided comprehensible feedback; to the designers who gave us the epic, polished front page; and finally, to everyone that assisted with the printing. Every one of them was essential in crafting the book you see before you.

I'd like to end this section with an announcement. A manga adaptation of this series is currently underway! We will reveal the specifics at a later date, so please stay tuned!

Also, I intend to expand on the world in the second volume of this series, which is scheduled for release this winter. Souta Narumi's adventure is far from over! I look forward to meeting you all again sometime soon.

August 2022, Akito Narusawa

# Bonus Short Story

## My Sister, the Slime Ring, and a Flea Market

“Bro! Come on!” shouted Kano impatiently from the landing.

Today, a flea market would occur in the square outside the Adventurers’ Guild. Participants were usually required to have permission to open a stall and sell goods there. But everyone was allowed to do so this time and advertise adventurers’ goods, unwanted items, or whatever they fancied. Kano and I would head down for bargain hunting.

I descended the creaking stairs and found my sister by the doorway, dressed for maneuverability with an aqua blue blouse and white short pants. She was swinging a large rucksack around and stomping.

“If we don’t get a move on, there’ll be nothing good left!” she complained.

Kano had shown more interest in adventuring equipment since we’d begun raiding the dungeon. I often caught her browsing through adventuring magazines she’d bought herself. Although... When I asked her what she wanted, she said she just wanted a cute outfit and didn’t care about functionality.

“Don’t buy something just because you like it,” I told her. “It’s got to be practical.”

“I know that. You’ve got nothing to worry about!” she replied.

I was about to reiterate myself to guarantee she got it until she pushed me through the doorway, eager to get going. Something told me she planned to ignore my advice... Anyway, off to the market!

\*\*\*

We arrived a few minutes after the market’s opening time of 10 a.m. and looked around. A large crowd of people bustled through the square. It was easy to spot adventurers inspecting the goods and talking seriously with vendors. Besides adventuring goods, stalls with food, secondhand electrical appliances,

old books, and many other things were present. I was sure I'd enjoy checking out the stalls.

"What should we look at first?" I asked.

"Let's start here and go around in a circle," suggested Kano. She didn't intend to let even a single stall escape her notice. The space for the flea market wasn't too large, so we'd be able to take our time and see everything.

Various items were on sale, and I'd even found a creepy vase that would *sometimes* duplicate coins placed inside. Another stall had a knife whose blade *occasionally* became sharper inside the dungeon. Then, there was a potion that *might* restore your HP. The vendors claimed these were magic items, but I had my doubts. Adventurers on the hunt for great weapons and magic items were most likely in for a letdown. Yet walking around the stalls just to look at the items was a nice change of pace.

While we were walking around looking at the dodgy items, I overheard someone speaking.

"There's a pawnshop over there," said the person. "Apparently, they'll appraise your items for free and give good money for what you've got."

I found it interesting that somebody would run a pawnshop stall at a flea market, though we had nothing to sell. So there was no point checking it out... Or so I thought. Kano had brought along the slime ring I'd given her, and she wanted to know its worth.

"The ring's a magic item, right?" asked Kano. "And you said before that you don't know its value."

"All it does is increase your vitality by two, and there's a high drop rate. It's not rare at all," I said.

Merged slimes dropped these slime rings as loot on the first floor of the dungeon. Anyone could go out and get one if they wanted, but the price lists at the Adventurers' Guild didn't include them, so I didn't know their value.

"But if it *is* worth a lot, do you mind if I sell one?"

"I don't. As long as you split the money with me," I responded. The appraisal

was free, and I was interested in seeing what happened.

We stood in line at the pawnshop for a little over ten minutes.

“Next customer, please,” a voice called out.

We went through the entrance curtain and the cardboard structure, finding a desk and chairs inside. A skinny middle-aged man with a short mustache sat on the far side of the desk. Atop it was a crystal ball that reminded me of fortune tellers.

“Are you here for an appraisal or to sell something?” the man asked.

Kano pulled into a chair beside the desk and whipped out a handkerchief with a red ring inside from her pocket, then said, “Could you appraise this ring for us?!”

The man briefly displayed annoyance when he saw the plain, cheap copper ring but quickly masked it with a smile.

“It’s a magic item,” explained Kano. “Look, it changes size when I put it on my finger. See?”

“A magic item?” repeated the man. “Hmm, so it is. You can find our pricing on the guild’s price list.”

“It’s not there for some reason. That’s why I wanted to check how much you’d pay for it.”

“Not on there?” muttered the man, looking at the ring through the crystal ball.

Was the crystal ball a magic item? We were inside a magic field, so such things were usable here.

“Its effects are unimpressive,” he said after gazing at the faint light emitted by the crystal ball for a few seconds. “You won’t get much for it. But since you’ve come all the way here, I’ll take it off your hands for three hundred yen.”

“Three hundred yen...?” echoed Kano, tilting her head.

I had expected little, but that was lower than I’d hoped. It made sense that they’d be worth next to nothing in *DEC* because adventurers had farmed

merged slimes, allowing for the abundance of slime rings in the market. This world, though, lacked references to slime rings, making three hundred yen suspiciously low, even if the only buff was a plus two increase to vitality.

“Three hundred yen is very generous, you understand?” declared the man confidently. “You won’t find a better price elsewhere. A regular pawnshop wouldn’t even give you ten yen for it. I’d go out of business doing this for everyone!”

Selling the ring for three hundred yen wouldn’t inconvenience us. We could always go find another one if we wanted.

I glanced over at Kano. She was pinching her chin with her hand, deep in thought.

“Say, mister...” she started. “You’re registered with the Adventurers’ Guild as an appraiser, right?”

“Sorry?” said the man, caught off guard. “Oh. Yes, I am.”

Kano continued, “My mom told me the Adventurers’ Guild rewards people who deliver magic items that aren’t on their price lists.”

The Adventurers’ Guild gathered plenty of information about the dungeon and would pay for newly discovered magic items or skill effects. Although the exact amount depended on the rarity of the information, our mother had told us that tens of thousands of yen was the minimum. Her part-time job at the guild clued her into these sorts of things.

“So, I want to understand how exactly that is worth just three-hundred yen,” pressed on Kano.

“The thing is...” said the man.

Kano had a menacing grin and pointed at the wearable terminal on her arm I’d bought for her the other day. “Everything you’re saying is getting recorded, so don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

That was the first time I knew Kano had been recording the conversation. Had she known it would turn out like this? Her instincts were justified, though. From the nervous flickering of the man’s eyes, he’d wanted to swindle a pair of



clueless kids out of their money.

“I can offer fifty thousand—” the man started.

“Mister!” interrupted Kano, slamming her fists on the desk and thrusting her body toward the man. She then switched her tone to a gentle one, smiling sweetly and somehow being more intimidating. “If the Society of Appraisers finds out about this, they might revoke your license... Is that what you want?”

If a person registered with the Society of Appraisers had conned a customer into selling their items for less than their worth, they would be fined and potentially expelled from the organization.

The man winced and stuttered, “F-Five hundred thousand yen... Will that do...?”

“Hmm, let me think,” said Kano, humming indecisively. “Well, I suppose that’ll work.”

I was freaking out. Half a million yen?! She’d practically blackmailed him, but I couldn’t believe we were getting such a fortune for a measly slime ring. Kano always seemed like the type of person who bumbled through life without thinking but clearly had a sharp mind. Recording everything on her terminal was devious. Despite staring at her in terror and awe, I looked excitedly at the cash in front of me. I reached out my hand toward the money, but—

“Think of how much we can buy with this!” chirped Kano happily, quickly pocketing the money.

\*\*\*

When we arrived home, our mother greeted us while she wore the apron with the official logo of Narumi’s General Goods. She gasped with surprise at the sight of me carrying a tall stack of boxes and bags, then said, “You’ve...had quite the shopping spree.”

“Mom, can you find space on the store’s shelves for this and— One second. This? I want us to sell them,” said Kano.

“What are they? Magic items?” asked our mother.

Kano handed our mother some of the dodgy “magic items” she’d bought at

the flea market. Basic Appraisal had shown that they didn't have any special effects, yet Kano was sure she could sell them at a higher price. Half of the proceeds from selling the slime ring had gone to regular equipment, and Kano had "invested" the other half in these items.

"Ooh, what should I buy next when these have sold?" mused Kano. She wanted to reinvest her profits, grow the shop, and eventually become the owner of a giant megastore. She counted her chickens before they'd hatched but seemed to be having a great time.

*Hopefully I'll bring something back to sell in the store. I could contribute to the family finances soon, I thought.*

I needed lots of money for my tuition and more if Kano got into Adventurers' High next year. Helping with this affair could do as I thought. I had a plan, but my level wasn't yet high enough to enact it. Supposing I continued leveling up at this pace and did not rush, then...

At that point, I realized I was hungry and decided to grab some food.

Kano and my mother giggled when they heard my stomach rumbling. It was just another quiet day in the Narumi household.



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Finding Avalon: The Quest of a Chaosbringer Volume 1

by Akito Narusawa

Translated by Tom Harris Edited by Mario Mendez

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