


My Opponent Is Invincible, So I'll Put My Unrivaled Cheats to Use

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FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER



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Faced with Tsukijima and his heavenly warrior maiden...

...how will Piggy do battle?!





**“Perfect teamwork!
A perfect game plan!
Is this over before
it has even begun?!”**

**The duo swapped positions frequently,
taking it up a notch as they chained
each giant hammer attack
in a series of explosions.**

Satsuki and Risa go into a fighting frenzy?!

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Chapter 1: Gazing Up at the Evening Sky](#)
4. [Chapter 2: Longing for Strength](#)
5. [Chapter 3: The Condition for Becoming a Top Adventurer](#)
6. [Chapter 4: A Fear and a Request](#)
7. [Chapter 5: Fatal and Unavoidable Attacks](#)
8. [Chapter 6: A Meeting Full of Smiles](#)
9. [Chapter 7: The Inaugural “That Stuff” Collecting Contest](#)
10. [Chapter 8: Victory Is Guaranteed Before We Begin](#)
11. [Chapter 9: Souta Narumi’s Strategy](#)
12. [Chapter 10: Meanwhile, as the Fated Duel Begins](#)
13. [Chapter 11: An as Yet Unseen Power](#)
14. [Chapter 12: A Golden Light](#)
15. [Chapter 13: The Goal That Lies Far Beyond](#)
16. [Chapter 14: Prelude](#)
17. [Chapter 15: This Was All to Be Expected](#)
18. [Chapter 16: An Attack to Penetrate an Absolute Defense](#)
19. [Chapter 17: Takuya Tsukijima’s Logic](#)
20. [Chapter 18: The New Student Council](#)
21. [Chapter 19: A Castle for a Fiend](#)
22. [Chapter 20: The Guardian of the Throne Room](#)
23. [Afterword](#)
24. [Character Affiliation Chart](#)
25. [Bonus Short Story](#)
26. [About J-Novel Club](#)
27. [Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Gazing Up at the Evening Sky

It was that time of day when the first star had just begun to sparkle. I tried to remember its name by observing its placement relative to the other stars and constellations. But I could barely spot any due to the streetlights illuminating the sky.

This was Japan's one and only dungeon town. Every last corner of every building and road was illuminated, providing light for the many adventurers spilling out onto the twilight streets to make merry. It was hard enough to see the brightest stars in a place like this, and I soon gave up on deducing the name of that first one I'd seen.

I kept walking, toting a shopping bag, and thinking about what I would do when I got home, humming a little tune as I went. Then I entered a dark, quiet area outside Adventurers' High.

This place would be bustling with students and staff in the daytime, but there's probably no one except a few security guards around right now, I thought as I glanced inside the dead-silent campus. That was when I saw what I assumed to be a figure moving in the distance.

I squinted to make out what they were doing. In the meager glow of the streetlights, I noticed what seemed to be a female student wearing a tracksuit, swinging a bamboo kendo sword with beautiful form. She must have been paying close attention to every little motion she made, as each swing she performed was identical to the last. I couldn't see the swordswoman's face because she had her back to me, but only one person could fence like that and wore her hair in a side ponytail—Kaoru.

A magic field covered part of the school grounds, offering a person the same physical enhancements as in the dungeon. Training under those conditions would provide a small number of experience points, and Kaoru had recently been coming here to practice when she had the time. Akagi, Pinky, and Tachigi would normally be with her, but I could only see Kaoru today. She would come

here alone to train until dark, likely stemming from her unwavering desire to become stronger than anyone else. But there was more than that...

She's just so gorgeous.

My childhood friend was in the dim spotlight of the streetlights. For a short while, I lost track of time as I stood captivated by the simple beauty of her movement.

In *DEC*, Kaoru had dispatched many a monster and villain with her kenjutsu, the predecessor art of kendo. Looking at her now, I knew that if she kept up this devotion to self-improvement and could overcome the challenges that came her way, she would one day reach the same heights as in the game.

However, doing so would mean that she had truly cut her ties with Piggy. If she spent more and more time with Akagi, the game's protagonist, the childhood bond I shared with her would weaken until it reached the point that we were completely estranged.

The thought of that alone was enough to move the person with whom I was sharing this body to tears, and I felt a tightness in my chest. Given how many years he'd had his heart set on this girl, it was no wonder. Still, when that time came, I could only imagine the happiness it would mean for Kaoru. Many people had high hopes for her, and many loved her, so I resolved to suppress these feelings for her and cheer her on quietly from the sidelines.

Keep it up, Kaoru, I mused as I spun around to leave the school without making a sound.

But there must have been some moss or something underfoot that I hadn't noticed in the darkness as I slipped and fell. I landed flat on my ass, and the jolt of pain was almost enough to make me cry out loud. Yet I focused every fiber of my being into resisting the impulse. There was no way I would let myself get caught spying on Kaoru.

After a few moments of rubbing my butt until the pain faded, I went to pick up the apples that had fallen out of my bag...only to find it was too dark to see them. Despite this, I somehow located them by blindly fumbling around. Just as I reached out to grab the last apple, I noticed someone next to me kindly handing it over.

I was about to thank the person when I thought, *Just who exactly is this, popping up out of nowhere in this deserted place at such a convenient time?* I raised my head to see, and—

“What are you doing here?” asked Kaoru, looking down at me. She narrowed her eyes and was expressionless as if what she really wanted to say was, *What the hell do you think you’re doing?*

Not good. I felt like a stalker who’d been caught in the act. If I didn’t explain myself quickly, I’d wind up just as detested as Piggy in *DEC*.

“O-Oh, nothing. I, uh, just happened to be passing by and thought I saw someone, so I came to take a look. Funny that it’s you, huh?”

“Really?” Kaoru responded flatly. “Well, you have to be careful of all the tree roots sticking out of the ground when you’re walking around here in the dark.”

Kaoru sighed deeply and prepared to leave, slipping her sword into its sheath. I felt bad for bothering her when she had seemed so in the zone.

“I’m sorry if I interrupted you,” I said.

“No, I just hadn’t noticed how dark it had gotten. Come on, let’s go home,” Kaoru consoled me.

I stole a glance at her to read her mood, but she seemed to be indifferent, not angry. Since I didn’t think making any further excuses for my behavior would do much good, I opted to drop my futile resistance and just tag along.

We left the gloomy schoolyard and returned to the bright lights of the main street, walking together. Kaoru wore her sheath on her back and strode along with her usual perfect posture, which belied how she must have been seriously fatigued not only from today’s practice in the morning but also from pushing herself hard every single day. But I guessed it was very much in character for Kaoru not to complain or show the slightest hint of tiredness despite that.

All around us, we could hear the laughter of adventurers enjoying themselves, smell the delightful aromas wafting from restaurants, and see children hand in hand with their mothers as they pleaded with them to buy various items. The street was more or less always like this at this time of day. Piggy had been born and raised in this town, and I could tell from his memories that this was a very

familiar scene to him. So I knew the same had to be true for his old friend Kaoru.

Not me, though, I pondered.

When I first arrived in this world a few months ago, it was nothing more to me than the world of the game. And the same applied to this town, the people I passed by, the school, and the very same Kaoru walking beside me. As a player who had been transported to the world of a game, my initial thoughts revolved around superficial stuff like devising the best strategy to rise to the top here or if I should find a way to return to my old world in case that plan went to crap. In my eyes, it was just an extension of the game I played.

But then Piggy's brain had started making itself known, my busy life with his parents and Kano began, and I saw how hard his childhood friend worked every day. That changed things. Here, there, and everywhere I found discord, innocent and fragile love, and a girl I adored. I realized this world wasn't made up of cold ones and zeroes. It was, without a shadow of a doubt, a living, breathing reality.

Even if only slowly, this realization also brought my view of the world into full color. That shocked me, having done my utmost to avoid other people at all costs in my old world. Piggy, his adoring family, his hardworking childhood friend, and this now familiar scene made me wake up to this fact. My gratitude filled me with a strong desire to keep every one of them safe from harm.

Feeling slightly sentimental, I looked up at the sky to find the star I had spotted before running into Kaoru sparkling even brighter. The stars around it were still almost impossible to see, so I remained none the wiser as to the identity of that first star.

"That's the Evening Star, isn't it?" Kaoru enlightened me.



She had noticed me looking up and followed my gaze to the star. The Evening Star was Venus. Because it was a planet, it moved through the night sky instead of staying in one place, so I had no hope of determining its name from its position in a constellation. I had never realized that Venus shone so bright, though.

Kaoru continued pointing out the other dimly visible stars, naming them as she went, “It’s almost Tanabata, the festival of the stars. That’s the spot where the stars Orihime and Hikoboshi will meet, with the Milky Way flowing between them.” Even as she went on, I was just impressed that she could identify anything despite the light pollution.

She must have an interest in astronomy or something, I thought.

“I’ve always looked at the sky at night. My mom taught me everything I know.”

She informed me that she often sat alone on her garden’s veranda to stargaze. Piggy’s memories confirmed that Kaoru spent a lot of time at home as a child, but he seemed to think that was more due to her frailness than her personality. Now it appeared that Kaoru had only looked to the skies, and her late mother would join her daughter and teach her the names of the stars and the stories that went with them.

The impossibly tender and kind look on Kaoru’s face beside me as she pointed at the stars above us struck me. Maybe she was reliving those very memories while looking up to the heavens.

Kaoru’s mother provided her daughter with the moral support she needed to be the true heroine of *DEC*. I knew that she had been a first-rate adventurer and beautiful, just like Kaoru. But I wondered exactly what kind of person she had been. Try as I might to piece it together from Piggy’s memories, he had only been a little kid then, leaving me only vague recollections to go on. Judging from how Kaoru spoke of her, I could infer that she had been a very proud person. That was all I needed to know.

Your daughter sure could give you a run for your money, though.

This diligent, upstanding girl who had endured relentless sexual harassment

from Piggy had the generosity to open her heart to that same person and the courage to stand toe to toe against even the most fearsome opponents. She would make for an even greater adventurer one day, which was coming soon.

So you just keep on watching your girl from heaven.

Chapter 2: Longing for Strength

“Souta! It’s time for school. You okay up there?” my mother called from downstairs.

I checked the clock to find that it was already time to set off. Kaoru had always arrived early to pick me up, so I never had any reason to keep a close eye on the time. Recently, though, she had been heading to school to train with Akagi and the others first thing in the morning, leaving me to walk by myself. And so I was in my current predicament.

“Well, I guess I couldn’t count on other people to keep me in check forever,” I murmured.

Kaoru had had a different look in her eyes lately, and it was apparent that she was making a concerted effort to grow more powerful. Her single-minded devotion had blown me away the previous night. It gave me pause to reflect on how I had lived my old life, only taking entrance exams for colleges that I thought were a safe bet and never really giving my all at work.

After I started this new life, I concentrated on using my knowledge of the game to get stronger in the most efficient way possible. That was to say, I rejected the beginner’s work ethic or any kind of idealism and put all my focus on the speed at which I could grow. Not that it was bad, but seeing someone strive so hard to improve themselves each day made that not sit quite right with me.

“I wish I could help her, even if only a little,” I thought out loud again.

So far, I had kept my distance from Kaoru to prevent my expulsion and because I believed that leaving her to Akagi would be her quickest route to happiness. Or rather, it was because part of me feared that I would make Kaoru *unhappy* by being close to her. Maybe I had just been running away this whole time.

Yet, after seeing Kaoru last night, a conflicting desire to offer her a helping

hand despite the risks involved was growing ever stronger. I supposed there was no harm in sharing some game knowledge with her and bringing her over to “our side.” That was what my inner Piggy had been urging me to do day after day.

If I were to do that, I would go against her wishes to train hard without cutting any corners, which could affect her development as the *DEC* heroine. Did I have the right to do that? Was I prepared to do that? These questions weighed heavily on my mind.

“Okay, that will do,” I said into the mirror, flattening my bedhead and making sure nothing else looked out of place before picking up my bag.

I had a creeping feeling that there were all kinds of funny goings-on at the school lately, but all I could do was pray for a peaceful day with no trouble.

July was just around the corner, and even in the morning, the temperature and humidity rapidly rose, causing me to break into a sweat just by walking. Maybe I could have shrugged this stifling weather off if I were skinnier, or maybe not. Either way, I lamented the return of my pudgy figure. When I thought that I would have missed a chance to have those lavish, once-in-a-lifetime dishes had I missed the party... No, I think I might have been guaranteed to go down this path and gain weight regardless of what happened.

Still bemoaning the unfairness of this cruel world, I was suddenly outside the school. It was only a five-minute walk from my house, so I couldn’t even use my time commuting to be alone with my thoughts for long.

As I placed my shoes in the tidy shoe rack and took out a pair of hallway slippers, a group of people came crashing down the stairway and flew right past me as if panicking.

Those are...my classmates, I realized.

I wondered where they could be heading in such a hurry when homeroom was just about to start. I paid it no further mind and began walking to the classroom only for more classmates to run past me. This time, however, I could hear what they were saying.

“Is it going down at the Second Swordcraft Club?” one said.

“No, it’s at the Arena. And I doubt they’ll go easy on them just because they’re girls,” another replied.

“Let’s just get a move on!”

Second Swordcraft Club? Arena? Girl? This didn’t sound good at all... But whatever was happening, it was at the Arena. I joined the dash to get there.

Adventurers’ High had four rooms in the Arena. They were all within the magic field and were sturdy enough to withstand a good deal of magic and slashing attacks, making them treasured places for lessons and club practice sessions.

I saw that the fourth room in the Arena, the same one in which Class E had its swordsmanship lessons, had a large crowd thronging outside it that I forced my way into. However, dozens of people were crammed around the narrow entrance, and I couldn’t see what was happening at the front, no matter how I craned my neck. My only option was to read the flow of the crowd and take any chance to push my way forward gradually. A few elbows and punches came my way, but I hardly felt a thing, thanks to the physical enhancements granted me by the magic field.

All right, let’s see what’s going on— Whoa, there!

When I finally poked my head through a gap in the crowd, I saw many members of the Second Swordcraft Club in a sorry state. Some had crashed into the wall, others were lying face down, and the rest were sprawled on the floor. The damage they’d sustained hinted that a single blow had downed each of them. Just what was going on here?

Further back in the Arena, I saw Akagi covered in bruises and his blazer torn, followed by Tachigi, who had his glasses broken and hair tousled. Behind them were Pinky and Kaoru, both unharmed. While Akagi and the others had clearly been attacked, their retaliation couldn’t have caused what I saw.

Even though they were the *Second* Swordcraft Club, they were still a powerful group whose members surpassed level 10. Outside the magic field would be one thing, but their superiority in level would just be too much to deal with inside it.

Next to catch my eye was Tsukijima, positioned in the center of the area with his hands placed lazily in his pockets. He glared at who I assumed to be the club members who were still standing, keeping them in check.

What's he doing here? Wait— He must be responsible for the club members lying on the floor.

“Y-You bastard! Don’t think you’ll get away with this,” one club member stuttered.

“Screw you— Oof!”

“You guys sure talk big for a bunch of losers,” responded Tsukijima to the brawny club member approaching him with a raised fist, calmly countering the punch and sending his opponent crashing into the wall.

Even in the brief exchange I had witnessed, the difference in strength was clear. The club member didn’t even appear to have seen the counterblow coming. Tsukijima’s skillful reading of the big guy’s movements had allowed him to knock him out with one shot. The other club members, perhaps sensing how badly outmatched they were, stayed rooted to the spot.

I was confident that I had more or less worked out the story here, but I saw Risa standing in the front row and decided to ask her to bring me up to speed. Even as I writhed my way through the press of the crowd, eating two or three elbows for my trouble, it was harder to squeeze through with this fat body than I had bargained for.

“Risa, what’s going on?” I whispered.

“You’re late, Souta,” she hissed. “When I got to homeroom, people said that Hayase had been caught up in something and was taken here...”

I learned from Risa that the class had heard the news that the Second Swordcraft Club had first dragged Kaoru and Pinky away, prompting Akagi and Tachigi to chase after them. As my classmates debated what to do, Tsukijima had run off by himself, leaving Risa and the rest no choice but to follow suit.

They arrived to find the same situation as I did. Tsukijima had blown away half of the club members in under a minute and was staring down the other half. Before his arrival, Akagi and Tachigi had been acting as punching bags in a brave

effort to protect the girls, but they needn't have bothered in the end.

Huh. So Tsukijima really has gone on a rampage.

During our players' meeting on the twentieth floor, Risa had predicted that Tsukijima would make a move soon, and now she had been proven right. Given the sudden nature of this incident, Tsukijima might not have planned this.

Nevertheless, dominating the Second Swordcraft Club in this way spelled trouble. Many members were from high-ranking samurai families with strong ties to the nobility. Plus, the orders to attack Class E likely came from the First Swordcraft Club. This incident was definitely cooked up by—

Oh, speak of the devil.

"Out of the way."

"Eek!"

"Ahh!"

Along came a student, arrogantly emanating his Aura. Overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the mana, my classmates screamed and scattered out of the way. The volume of mana suggested he was somewhere in the ballpark of level 13 to level 15. But he was only a first-year student, meaning all this power came from the strength of the group. In his wake came another group of students, all wearing scowls—the First Swordcraft Club.

Their kendo uniform consisted of a white jacket with "First Swordcraft Club" embroidered in golden thread on the shoulders and black hakama. These guys' whole sense of presence was a cut above the Second Swordcraft Club. All of them wielded practice swords made of hard rubber, yet these could inflict serious damage in the hands of such high-level practitioners.

The First Swordcraft Club's membership was comprised exclusively of nobles and people from upper-class samurai families, meaning one had to exercise caution when addressing them. I was a bag of nerves.

"Hey, what's all this about? Tell me exactly what happened here," the first-year student at the head of the pack demanded in a menacing voice.

A nearby classmate blustered his way through a summary of the events. It

was only a matter of time until Tsukijima would face the wrath of the First Swordcraft Club. We found ourselves in the worst-case scenario.

“Risa, surely not even Tsukijima can handle the whole of the First Swordcraft Club?” I whispered.

“Hmm... I reckon he could win, but I don’t think he’d be able to show his true capabilities with all these people watching. Either way, all we can do is watch.”

At this point, there was no way we could settle things peacefully. Risa was right. All we could do was watch.

Did he really have no other option?

I was well aware that Tsukijima had been trying to get Kaoru’s attention. Maybe seeing her be put in harm’s way made him take an impulsive action that he hadn’t planned. Had I been in his shoes, I might have laid out the entirety of the Second Swordcraft Club... But I would have concealed my identity with an item or done it discreetly to avoid causing such a stir.

If Tsukijima had intended to make his move soon anyway, perhaps making a scene like this was within the scope of what he had in mind.

The situation progressed. Yet more club members clad in kendo uniforms arrived from behind the group already here. Among them was a guy who towered over everyone else and a female student whose uniform bore a family crest. They must have been the top brass of the First Swordcraft Club. I even spotted Ashikaga with them—the one who had presumably given the order for the assault on Class E.

His frame looked bigger and bulkier in person than in the photos I’d seen. The first-year students addressed him as vice captain, inferring he was the second strongest member of the club behind their captain, who was said to be one of the Eight Dragons. In other words, he was next year’s leading candidate for club president. Tsukijima had picked a hell of a guy to piss off here.

“What’s going on here? Explain, freshman,” Ashikaga said evenly.

“Yes, vice captain. Those plebs over there just gave the Second Swordcraft Club a thrashing. What would you like us to do?”

“Class E? Defeated the Second Swordcraft Club? Oh, my.”

Upon receiving the report, Ashikaga walked toward Tsukijima. His expression looked more pleased than angry, and his mouth crept into an unmistakable smile. Ashikaga stopped opposite Tsukijima and stared at him intently as if he were taking in every detail from head to toe.

“Was this your doing?” Ashikaga inquired, gesturing at the prostrate members of the Second Swordcraft Club.

“Yeah. What of it?” retorted Tsukijima with a defiant grin.

The rest of Class E looked on anxiously, as they were right to be since what happened next could have ramifications for all of us.

“Might I ask why you did this?”

“Because those chumps were a pain in the ass. Now, I’m going to destroy their puppet master—you, that is—and be done with this crap,” said Tsukijima.

“You, a commoner? Destroy me? Hm. Ah ha ha.”

“Bwa ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha ha!”

What began as a slight chuckle escaping Ashikaga’s lips spread to his clubmates like some infectious disease until the Arena drowned in their cackles. Clearly, they thought that Tsukijima was someone worthy of ridicule. It was natural when one considered that he, a kid from Class E’s marginalized group, had claimed that he would “destroy” the First Swordcraft Club’s number two, regarded as one of the most powerful students in Adventurers’ High.

The mocking laughter and jeering continued, even if Ashikaga’s eyes were serious. He’d been unable to suppress a chuckle but kept his eyes fixed on Tsukijima, watching for any shift in his weight. Tsukijima had beaten several members of the Second Swordcraft Club without sustaining a scratch, proving that he was at least at the level of the weakest First Swordcraft Club members. Ashikaga must have realized that he might not be out of the fight if he was taken off guard, although he would at least take some damage.

Eventually, the laughter subsided into an agonizing silence. The onlookers

gulped as they imagined what might go down between the two, but Kaoru broke the deadlock.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s all my fault! Please forgive me.”

“Stand back, commoner. I’m talking to *him*.”

Kaoru had laid it all on the line by stepping forward to take the blame. This whole thing had started because her classmates had tried to protect her, and now she boldly asked for forgiveness on the grounds that she hadn’t resisted. Yet, Ashikaga wouldn’t even look her in the eye. Members of the First Swordcraft Club took out their frustration by angrily coming forward to remove Kaoru, prompting Tsukijima to advance and crack his knuckles.

“Stand back, Kaoru. I’ll get these guys out of your hair in just a sec.”

“Wait, Tsukijima! Calm down,” Kaoru responded.

As Tsukijima ignored Kaoru’s desperate attempts to mediate, he let mana surge through his body. The tension in the Arena reached its zenith, and everyone let out an audible gasp. With so many curious onlookers in the vicinity, it was impossible to tell how many people might get caught in the cross fire should this escalate to a full-blown clash with the First Swordcraft Club. The same thought had likely compelled Kaoru to try and stop it. But Ashikaga, seemingly uninterested in fighting, held up his right hand to stop his clubmates and appeared to be deep in thought for a short while.

“Wait. Doing battle right now would be pointless. If we are to do this, let us have a suitably large audience to spectate. I shall invite the student council president and the other Eight Dragons so they can see who is worthy of being the next president.”

Ashikaga made grand gestures and spoke exaggeratedly as if he had come up with the best idea of the century. One week from now, they would have a one-on-one duel in the first room of the Arena after classes had ended, in front of an invited audience.

He also declared that the First and Second Swordcraft Clubs would not lay a finger on Class E in the meantime, which I was glad for... But with the Eight Dragons in attendance, I knew this had gotten damn serious.

“Should you put up a good fight, I will allow you entry to the First Swordcraft Club even in defeat. Or would you prefer a financial reward?”

“This’ll be the perfect chance to teach you ignorant pricks a lesson in what *real* strength is. Heh heh heh... You bring the ass and I’ll bring the kickin’, Ashikaga,” remarked Tsukijima.

“I see. Then I look forward to our next meeting.”

Akishaga eyed Tsukijima with disdain in response to such an unexpected answer, then he and the First Swordcraft Club members left without even tending to the downed members of the Second Swordcraft Club. Satsuki went to fetch a Priest in their stead, so we knew they would be in safe hands.

The Priest teacher arrived, retrieved magical items and medical equipment from his bag, then went first to examine the club member slumped against the wall. As I watched him at work, I reflected on the scenes I had just witnessed.

Having a duel is serious business. Could there be a way to prevent it from taking place?

Tsukijima was going up against the Eight Dragons and the First Swordcraft Club, the organizations with the most clout in Adventurers’ High. This was an even deeper hole than if he were opposing Class A. It went without saying that defying the First Swordcraft Club would also make enemies of the Second and Third Swordcraft Clubs, and there was even a risk that their affiliated noble and upper-class families might act. In that eventuality, we in Class E would have our backs against the wall, win or lose. That was what it meant to clash with the Eight Dragons.

There’s been a lot of attention on Kaoru, so she might have to face the brunt of whatever comes our way, I speculated.

It would be futile to point out that it was just Tsukijima being a loose cannon. The fact that a noble was willing to engage in a duel showed how grave the situation was.

Maybe Akagi and his friends could handle someone from, say, Class D, I pondered.

I racked my brains trying to find a way out of this situation, but I couldn’t

come up with a single decent idea—not that there was anything I could do anyway. But I was curious about what Tsukijima was thinking, so I looked his way to find...

Huh? He and Kaoru are talking about something.

I surreptitiously slid closer to see what I could glean from eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Tsukijima, what was that just now? Are you...even stronger than Oomiya?” asked Kaoru.

“I had to keep my real ability secret for a few different reasons. Anyway, Kaoru... I think it’s about time you came along with me so I can give you *true* power too,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

Seeing Tsukijima close in on Kaoru like this got my heart pounding. By “power,” he presumably meant player knowledge. He was going to share that with her, right? I’d done the same with Satsuki, so I’d be a hypocrite if I criticized him. If he was going to be her partner, watching out for her permanently, then I...

“When I blew those guys away, it was all for you,” Tsukijima explained. “I can personally guarantee that I’ll make you a superelite adventurer and keep you safe until you reach that point. Now, don’t you want *power*?”

“I—”

Ah, yes. Kaoru’s dream was to become a top adventurer. Any player who had completed her story knew about her ambition. In the game, achieving this goal meant enduring a miserable school life that swirled with violence and a sweat-and mud-stained struggle in the pursuit of strength. Her mindset in this world was no different. This very morning, she had come to school early to allow herself more time to train. Nobody came close to her when it came to that drive.

Even in the game, the words that made Kaoru fall in love with the protagonist were, “Let’s you and I become top-class adventurers together.”

Having fallen for the player character's might, Kaoru took his hand and accepted his invitation by saying, "You're the one who can make my dreams come true."

I had little doubt that this was precisely why Tsukijima had chosen the words "superelite adventurer" in his bid to win her over.

Kaoru had seen Tsukijima in action as he dominated the Second Swordcraft Club, so she must at least have realized that he wasn't bluffing about his toughness or the potential for her to get tougher if she went along with him. With player knowledge on her side, Kaoru's chances of becoming a top adventurer were extremely high.

Conversely, the sensible and intelligent Kaoru could offer advice to the hotheaded Tsukijima and keep his recklessness in check. If he could win her trust, she would be an exceptional ally in and out of the dungeon. This partnership held significant benefits for both parties.

Tsukijima applied more pressure when he saw Kaoru's hesitation, taking her hand in his. The sight made my heart thump all the louder and faster.

I...can't bear to watch any longer!

I grabbed Kaoru's other hand from behind and pulled her toward me. Surprised, she widened her almond-shaped eyes a touch and gazed at me. She must have wondered why I was butting in like this.

"What do you think you're doing, Piggy? In all seriousness, I will kill you," said Tsukijima, seething.

"Oh, nothing, I just..."

A fire had been lit in Piggy's brain, making my body act of its own accord. My impulsive response had thrown a wet blanket on Tsukijima's bold move, and now his face had twisted in a way I hadn't seen before. He looked ready to lash out at any second.

Acting without considering the consequences was all well and good, but now I had to deal with them. Well, then... How would I wriggle out of this one?

Chapter 3: The Condition for Becoming a Top Adventurer

I pulled Kaoru toward me and stood face-to-face with Tsukijima. The rage in his glaring eyes was intense to the point of looking murderous.

“I’m warning you. Let go of Kaoru right now, you stinking pig.”

Looking closer, I noticed that Tsukijima had amplified his magic and quietly let it circulate in his body. A blow from someone with his physical enhancements plus magic augmentation on top could kill an ordinary person. I was pretty sure I’d be fine, though.

Based on the extent of his anger, I could tell that Tsukijima was serious about what he’d said to Kaoru. He had tried to play it off as a casual conversation, but it was a major gambit as far as he was concerned. Just as he made what was effectively a love confession, the “villain” who had long tormented his beloved went and got in the way. It made sense that he would be pissed off.

It’s not like I’m just gonna lie back and let you take my dear childhood friend from me, buddy.

Had it been the morally upstanding Akagi in his place, the guy who helped the weak and boldly stood up to the powerful and wicked, I would have been willing to push Piggy’s brain aside and stay out of it. I had already pacified Piggy’s urge to see and talk to Kaoru on several occasions, all to let her find happiness.

But it was a different story when I was dealing with Tsukijima. He dismissed the people of this world as insignificant NPCs, had a belligerent attitude that made a lot of enemies, and even had dangerous ideas about using force to bend the people around him into submission. Although he could brush most people aside, it didn’t necessarily pose a problem if it earned him a lot of ill will. That wasn’t the case for Kaoru, however.

One of Tsukijima’s enemies might determine he was unbeatable and shift

their focus to Kaoru, the person closest to him. Would Tsukijima risk his life to defend her? And even if he kept her safe, would that willingness extend to the people near and dear to Kaoru? That didn't seem likely as long as he kept believing that this world was a game inhabited by NPCs. Moreover, that was precisely why trusting him with her was unfeasible.

Then what about me? When I first got here, I had also thought I was in a game world and reasoned that I should just have fun without fear of the consequences because it was just a video game. But that was before I returned home to find my infinitely cheerful and lovable little sister and parents, my dear childhood friend just next door with all of her daily struggles, and in my own body, you, Piggy. Against all expectations, you had troubles to contend with as you vied to stay on the right path. It taught me that the laughter, the sadness, the anger, the joy, and all the people who lived in this world were truly alive.

Maybe I was just lucky to have had this realization. But now that I had this knowledge, I wanted Kaoru's partner to be somebody who would also love the people in her life.

I don't think this can be settled unless I take a punch or two though, I thought resignedly.

Tsukijima's rage didn't seem like it would go away easily. Looking at the amount of mana flowing through his body, his level didn't appear to be significantly higher than mine, so I was confident I could handle a little beating from him. Obviously, it would have been preferable to avoid it.

"If you're still not backing off Kaoru after everything I've said, you're either really dumb or you don't know who you're messing with," said Tsukijima, slowly approaching me as he imbued his fists with power. "Meh, whatever. You must be ready for an ass-whooping too— What are you doing?"

Tsukijima broke off mid-sentence as Kaoru stepped between us. Her long hair fluttered as she spread both arms wide to protect me.

"That's enough violence. If you lay a finger on him, I'll never forgive you."

"Whoa, whoa. Don't tell me you're sticking up for *Piggy*. Just think of all the nasty stuff he's done to you."

The words “nasty stuff” got my own memory working, and scenes of Piggy’s relentless sexual harassment from the times before Adventurer’s High flashed before my eyes. He’d stalked Kaoru, stared at her boobs, declared her to be “my girl,” intimidated any guy who got near her... Oh, man. It was enough to make me want to fall to my knees.

Seeing Kaoru grow more beautiful with each passing day had ignited a strange panic in Piggy. While he strove to win her affections, all his efforts either backfired or were in vain, as he found himself loathed by her. From my vantage point, I don’t know what else he expected.

I glanced at Kaoru, who also seemed to be recalling Piggy’s misdeeds. Her brow was ever so slightly knitted as she turned her gaze to the ground as if disgusted.

What I did was terrible, I apologized internally, imagining myself grovelling on the ground.

But then Kaoru raised her head to face Tsukijima once again. “That was a long time ago. Putting aside how you even knew that, it’s not your business to bring up.”

“Even so, don’t you think it’s best if this dork gets put in his place?” asked Tsukijima.

Absolutely, I noted. From what I saw of Piggy in *DEC*, even I thought he had no hope of redemption... *Heh heh*.

“I can’t stand people who insist on using violence to settle everything,” Kaoru asserted.

“Hah... All right,” stated Tsukijima, sighing. “What a loser, though. Cowering behind a girl like that. You even got any balls, or what?” He threw me a dirty look.

With a piercing stare, Kaoru had made it quite clear just how much she detested violence. Tsukijima realized that tearing me a new one wasn’t worth getting on her bad side, and his shoulders relaxed into a slump. Despite his insult, being protected by a girl didn’t feel like such a bad thing.

“I meant what I said. Think about it, Kaoru.”

Kaoru remained silent.

“I’ve always had my eye on you. Later,” Tsukijima said, departing with a wink.

Although I had mentally prepared to get socked in the face, I felt relieved that he backed off. No matter how much my physical enhancements had boosted my defense and recovery, pain was still pain.

Turning my attention toward Kaoru, still with her back to me, I noticed that her legs were trembling slightly either from fatigue or fear.

“Kaoru. Were you thinking of accepting Tsukijima’s offer back there?” I asked her.

“His offer to give me ‘strength,’ you mean?”

She slowly turned to face me, her eyes cast down. On closer inspection, there were faint bruises on her pretty face. I thought she had escaped the ordeal unscathed, but it appeared she had been struck. All the same, it was likely thanks to Akagi and Tachigi that she escaped with only these minor injuries. Perhaps seeing that had sent Tsukijima into a frenzy.

Kaoru had gone to the effort of coming in early in the morning to do some extra practice, only to have it ruined by some of the many bullies at this school. Life just wasn’t fair.

Such thoughts ran through my head while I waited for Kaoru to continue. But without the slightest hint of uncertainty, she shook her head and gave a decisive answer.

“I had no interest in that at all. Sure, I’m serious about wanting to get stronger, and maybe going along with him would give me that. But I could see violence in his eyes.”

All I could manage to say was, “I see.”

Kaoru didn’t want to be a top adventurer just to be powerful. She also desired to be a bold and virtuous hero who could give everyone hope, just as her late mother had been. I was overjoyed to see the same blood coursing through Kaoru’s veins. Piggy’s brain was filled with relief.

If she was willing to turn down the strength she was desperate for so flatly,

the conditions for winning Kaoru's heart in this world would be pretty darn tough.

"You should get that Priest teacher Satsuki brought to see to your bruises," I suggested.

"You're very calm," Kaoru said, ignoring my comment. "Tsukijima showed extraordinary power, eliminating several members of the Second Swordcraft Club in the blink of an eye. Had he gotten violent with you...I'm not sure you would've been all right."

Since I hadn't seen Tsukijima at work, I didn't know exactly how strong he was. But if he had knocked back those Second Swordcraft Club members so ferociously, like Kaoru said, nobody with a level of five or below, such as I supposedly was, could withstand an attack from him. As far as she was concerned, I literally would have been blown away had she not interfered.

I was sure that this had been her intention when she stepped in despite her fears. But the game never had a scene of Kaoru risking her life to save Piggy, so I was shocked. I also felt bad for letting her worry about me, so I came up with something that might put her mind at ease a little.

"And I really appreciate you saving my butt back there. But Satsuki and Risa have been training me. Despite appearances, I could probably have taken a little beating and been okay."

"By 'training,' I don't suppose you mean power leveling? If so, I'd like to get in on that."

Kaoru looked straight at me as she expressed her desire to join our practice sessions, but a hint in her eyes suggested she was probing for something else. What that something was, I couldn't say.

"I heard you'd been training with Satsuki and the guys. Is that not enough for you?" I responded.

"No, it's not that. I'm just curious to see how you practice and how strong you are, Souta."

So that was it. She wanted to see how strong I was. If I was going to reveal that to Kaoru, I'd have to let her into my inner circle like Satsuki and make sure I

could completely trust her. Then again, forcing that on someone Piggy had harassed before would be too big an ask. Maybe she was suspicious about my true abilities and wasn't interested in seeing my strength.

On the other hand, Tsukijima had thrown us into an unpredictable situation, and there was no telling if Kaoru could be subjected to violence. I wondered if I should help her train more efficiently so she could defend herself if she had to. No, who was I kidding? I just wanted to help her.

Something in Kaoru's expression had changed since we started at Adventurers' High. She kept pushing herself with a sense of grim determination. It was no wonder that my natural response to this was an irresistible desire to support her.

But what kind of training would be best? I guess it would be...

At this point, Kaoru's sole focus had been on sword fighting. Her MP grew faster in *DEC* than one might think, making her well-suited to being a Magic Swordsman. Remembering this, I wanted to teach her how *DEC*-style magic combat worked, but I was getting ahead of myself.

It would be best to teach her through Satsuki. Something bad might happen if I got too close to Kaoru.

"All right. I'll go ask Satsuki now," I offered.

"I hope I can join you. Anyway, I'll go check on Yuma and the others' injuries. So I'll see you later."

"Sure. Later."

Over on the other side of the Arena, I could see Akagi receiving treatment and Tachigi holding his broken glasses with a sullen look on his face. The pair had been brutally attacked without even delivering a single blow, all for the sake of protecting Kaoru and Pinky. I had to hand it to them; I was nothing if not grateful for what they did. It was helpful to confirm that those two guys had the same kindness and courage to look out for their friends as they did in *DEC*.

Take good care of my childhood friend, I silently wished. I'll have to do everything in my power too.

There was no way that Class E could stand up to the Eight Dragons in an all-out war at their current level. Whatever the result of Tsukijima and Ashikaga's duel, we had to minimize the fallout. Once again, I turned my thoughts to how we might achieve that.

After homeroom ended, Satsuki, Risa, and I walked along a tree-lined path within the school grounds. The trees were coming to life again with fresh, green leaves, though one wouldn't know it from our trio's grim expressions as we spoke.

"I'll try telling Tsukijima to rein himself in, but I wouldn't count on it doing much," Risa said.

"Sorry for foisting that onto you," I apologized.

"Heh heh, don't mention it. I'm the best person for the job."

I had just asked Risa to sound Tsukijima out and encourage him to hold back. It was probably too late now to call off his duel with Ashikaga, so the best we could hope for was that he wouldn't reveal his player knowledge in the process. The question was whether he would listen to reason. Unsurprisingly, Risa wasn't optimistic.

Having said that, Tsukijima was no fool. If I considered his merits and demerits, he would surely do the right thing...or so I hoped.

"I'll go check on Akagi and the guys' training. I hope I can teach them magical combat as well as you taught me, Souta. Oh, I'm not sure I'll do a good job," Satsuki fretted.

Even after the morning's events, Akagi still insisted on getting his practice in. That was just how fixated he was on getting better. There was a chance those guys would engage in PVP more frequently, so I wanted them to get to grips with magical combat.

The older students of the Fourth Swordcraft Club had seemingly taught them regular close-quarters combat, although I didn't get the impression that anyone there could show them how to combine it with magic. Heck, I wasn't even sure if anyone in the First Swordcraft Club would be up to that task. In this world, all

magic warriors did was stand at the back of the party so their allies could protect them while they fired off big spells.

With that being the only way they knew how to fight, they would be helpless if they had to engage with a monster at close range and be nothing but a burden in PVP. As such, I aimed to make the guys completely rethink their approach to fighting by giving them a taste of so-called *DEC*-style magical combat before they got overly used to how things were done in this version of the world.

I had already clued Satsuki in on which skill set-ups gave the greatest advantages in what kinds of encounters. I hoped that she could give a lecture on the subject today. She was a considerate and skilled communicator, so I suspected she might do a better job than me.

“Well... I guess I’ll go do my task too,” I said.

“Okay. Go get ’em, champ!” Risa encouraged.

“See you later, Souta!” beamed Satsuki.

Once we confirmed everyone’s responsibilities, we wished each other luck and parted ways with a smile. So, I wasn’t the only one who thought we needed a course correction from the rocky ground we were currently on. That was definitely reassuring.

I headed north from where we were toward a deserted section of the campus. My destination was the area in which the Eight Dragons held their various club activities. They must have wanted to flaunt their prestige and wealth, as the large grounds were filled with flashy buildings. I imagined that the nobility spared no expense to keep up appearances, as their continued existence depended on them. Compared to the run-down apartment the older Class E students rented out for their Fourth Swordcraft Club, the difference was night and day.

A white garden wall to my right seemed to stretch on forever. According to my terminal’s map, this was where the First Swordcraft Club met... But it looked more like a feudal lord’s manor house to me.

The huge gates lay open before me, revealing a grand two-story house and

dojo within. It was outside the magic field, but the Eight Dragons' clubrooms could get permission to have artificial magic fields installed, meaning many doubled as training rooms. This was one of their major privileges.

As I moved forward, the white plaster of the wall soon turned into red bricks. This should have been the place I was looking for. What I could see of the building beyond the walls matched the photo on my terminal, so I was relieved that I'd found the right building.

It was the kind of extravagant Western-style mansion that ordinary folk could only ever dream of owning. The carefully pruned flowering plants scattered around the garden were strangely imposing. Diving headfirst into somewhere I felt so out of place would do my heart no favors, and I felt an urge to turn back and run. But losing my nerve now wouldn't solve anything, forcing me to pluck up some courage.

I braced myself and lumbered to the front door, only to meet the silent gaze of a lone female student with bouncy hair standing there. A golden badge marking her as a member of the nobility was on the breast of her jacket. I minded my manners and made sure to approach her with a bow. With a gentle smile, she stepped out to greet me.

"Welcome, Souta Narumi. Lady Kirara is waiting for you inside."

Chapter 4: A Fear and a Request

We had ascended an old-fashioned but well-polished wooden staircase to the second floor, and I found myself in front of the office of the Thief Development Club president.

“Our guest has arrived,” my guide said from outside.

“Send him in,” came back a voice, easily discernible even through the closed door.

It was Kirara.

“You may enter, Narumi,” said the noble girl with a smile and a slight bow.

“Thank you for showing me here,” I said.

She had been much more hospitable than I had expected, making pleasant small talk with me as we walked from the mansion entrance to where we now stood. Nobles had never treated me nicely—they’d never even looked my way—so I was grateful for that.

I gingerly stepped inside the room, which was a white loft conversion with a modern design. It was a stylish space, with the thick timber of the beams left exposed above. The room wasn’t that big, but it didn’t feel cramped thanks to its high ceiling and large bay window that offered a panoramic view of distant sights.

“Hello...”

“Welcome, Narumi. Please take a seat there.” Kirara gestured to a chair at the head of the table, her emerald hair swaying and a broad smile on her face.

“Thank you.”

There was another person at the table: the student council president, wearing his usual grumpy expression. He probably wanted to talk about the same thing as when he had summoned me, but I decided to start with an apology.



“I’m sorry that my classmates came along with me last time.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Kirara assured me. “We called on you out of the blue instead of making an appointment. They showed some rash judgment, though... Appealing directly to President Sagara like that.”

Sagara chuckled. “They certainly showed promise, though.”

Showed promise, huh?

That much was obvious for Satsuki and Risa. I supposed Tachigi, too, was a hero character in *DEC* with enough latent potential to rival Akagi. He usually played it cool but also had a fiery side that he would never back down from showing when the going got tough. The contrast between these two sides of his made him a firm favorite among the female player base. There was no way his insight could have stretched that far, although I guessed that maybe he had a better eye for people than I suspected.

“Here you are,” Kirara said, filling a small cup with green tea and placing it before me. “The season’s first harvest from our very own plantation. Our club members have commented on how fragrant it is.”

She probably had a leisurely chat in mind, but any interaction with the nobility came with a risk. Or rather, it just wasn’t good for my heart, so I was keen to get to the point.

“Thank you very much. So, you wanted to talk to me about something?” I probed.

“Yes. But first, let’s make sure nobody can eavesdrop on us,” Sagara answered.

A square, gaudy box sat on the low table made of beautifully grained wood. When Sagara placed his hand on it, faint beams of magic radiated. If they were using a magic soundproofing device, I probably wouldn’t like whatever they had to say.

“It’s a simple matter, really,” Sagara began. “Do you have any interest in the student council, Narumi?”

“Huh?” was all I could manage after a brief pause.

“President Sagara would like to nominate you for the student council if you find that agreeable, Narumi,” said Kirara.

Right. The student council president had the authority to nominate council members. Sagara’s term in office was nearly over, but anyone appointed to the council would keep their seat for a year after that point, so that wouldn’t be a problem.

Scratch that. I’d have nothing but problems.

I scrambled to find the right words. The student council? I had no intention whatsoever of joining it. Not to mention that from what I’d heard, all the student council members were nobles with outstanding grades. Did I have my information wrong?

“But I’m a commoner from Class E,” I stated.

“No title is necessary to join the student council. Though it seems many mistakenly believe that since every leader until now has been from a noble family,” Sagara explained.

“We in the Thief Development Club would also give you our endorsement, so don’t worry about that,” Kirara added.

“Huh. Can I ask why you want me?”

I had already made up my mind that I would decline the offer. Even so, I wanted to find out why they wanted me on the student council. I had been trying not to draw attention to myself and just live a quiet school life. What could I have done to get the attention of the student council’s leader? I was pretty sure I’d never shown my true power to Kirara either...

“Do you remember when you stood face-to-face with me outside the workshop? I sensed an unfathomable air of strength in you. It greatly intrigued me to learn that a student who could stand up to someone of my level or possibly even higher was in Class E,” Sagara responded.

The workshop, huh? Right, I’d forgotten about that.

That happened when the guy from the workshop tried to con me out of my mithril ore. But all Sagara and I had done was stand facing each other. I never

got my mana flowing, and certainly not my Aura. If I had caught his eye despite that, Sagara must have been pretty darn shrewd.

When facing down another player before combat, it was possible to get a read on their traits, strengths, skills, and more by observing their posture and how they carried their weight. Only those lacking combat experience had to rely solely on appraisal skills or the amount of mana in someone's Aura to tell how powerful a foe was.

It didn't seem that my strength alone was the reason he wanted to recommend me as a council member.

"Just speaking hypothetically, what would you want me to do once I was a councillor?"

"I want you to be the wedge in the council that will allow for the school revolution I long for," Sagara said.

"School revolution?" I repeated.

"Year after year, the levels of the students at this school keep falling owing to the bias toward the nobles. As your classmate Tachigi pointed out, it's a sorry state of affairs. I became leader of the council because I wanted to change that."

Every word Tachigi had said to Sagara was true, and it bothered him. The old nobility had applied pressure on Adventurers' High, insisting on countless absurd rules that only served to crush the prospects of those such as Class E's many talented students. Consequently, the students with the highest grades who would go on to Adventurers' University were inevitably almost all nobles. After graduating from university, they would never enter the dungeon again or even support those who did, meaning that the system didn't benefit the nation.

The competition with other countries was fierce. Countries frequently conspired to use their spies to disrupt others, and some nations had even gone to ruin when just a few agents instigated rioting. In such a perilous world, Japan would perhaps not just decline if it couldn't produce excellent adventurers but collapse outright.

Out of such a concern, Akizane Sagara had stood to become leader of the

student council to create a level playing field for all students in the school.

Upon getting elected, Sagara found himself in a standoff with the uncooperative clubs that comprised the Eight Dragons. Even the old noble family he belonged to did their utmost to interfere with his plans to save Class E. With an anguished look, he explained how he had been left with no room to maneuver.

An old noble family, eh? In the game, they were enemies of the protagonists, Akagi and Pinky.

Recently, the new nobility that had made their fortunes as adventurers had been brazenly consolidating their power. The old nobility, which could trace their roots back to before the Meiji Period of the late nineteenth century, became frantic to keep Class E down so that no more *nouveau riche* would arise. That was the background to the current situation.

The Sagara family was highly conservative, even by old money standards. Regarding the dangerous ideas of their heir Akizane Sagara, they were apparently considering disinheritance of all things. For a noble, being disinherited meant more than just getting kicked out of the house and becoming a commoner. The sin of wronging the nobility would also result in their thorough banishment from Japanese society, leaving them utterly lost and with no prospects. It sounded pretty bad.

“As a member of the nobility, you must honor your family’s wishes. So it wasn’t possible for you to make the reforms you sought, President Sagara,” Kirara consoled.

“That’s just an excuse. It was down to my own lack of ability,” he refuted. “Yet I want to believe that someone like you, powerful but with no family to tie him down, might blow the wind of change into the place should you join the student council.”

Sagara stressed that being unbound by family or faction made reform possible for me. And even if I wasn’t interested in reform, just setting the precedent of a commoner joining the student council would be a big step forward for Adventurers’ High and a great achievement. But would it really go that smoothly?

“If a commoner like me sat on the student council, I’d surely receive a lot of abuse. The upper classes would be on my case every day, engulfing me in a storm of jealousy.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sagara assured me. “Those who sit on Adventurers’ High’s student council have the authority to penalize students as long as they have a valid reason. Not even the nobility can tell a councillor what to do or cause them harm. That is precisely why such authority would make the perfect shield for Class E.”

Regular council members could suspend students, and the president even had the power to expel them. That was the biggest and scariest factor that made the student council the most powerful of the Eight Dragons.

But I could see where Sagara was coming from. Giving those rights to someone from Class E should act as a solid deterrent to anyone who wanted to take a cheap shot at us. Heck, it could even make the Eight Dragons think twice about messing with us. In that case...

All the more reason I can’t accept.

It wasn’t that I *wanted* to see my classmates live in fear of violence or be on the receiving end of it. I was always wishing for everything to be peaceful at school. But there was something on which I placed much more importance: sticking to the game’s story.

If this world followed the same path as the game’s storyline, Akagi and his friends would get caught up in crazy events that would make everything until now seem like child’s play. There was no question my dear Kaoru’s troubles would grow and grow. Others would harass my classmates to the point of expulsion, leaving many of Class E’s desks empty. And the sight of that would surely break Satsuki’s heart.

But I didn’t mind.

I had already mentally prepared myself for this long ago. Knowing that bad things would happen was no reason to throw away my “game knowledge” of what the future had in store. This benefit of foresight was only one of the reasons for keeping the game’s story on track.

Out of the window, I could see a peaceful scene brimming with the green of newly emerged foliage. In the distance was Adventurers' Square, with its huge buildings and throngs of people coming and going. If *DEC*'s storyline completely collapsed, it would unleash hellfire and brimstone, razing the place to the ground and burying piles upon piles of the dead beneath the smoldering rubble. This cataclysm might spread from one place to the next until the whole of Japan was hell on earth. This was the worst bad ending you could get in the game, and you only saw it if you really messed up.

The only one who could prevent the worst-case scenario was the game's protagonist, who achieved this by making it through the many events and storylines until they united the humans, spirits, and fiends who now adored them. Leveling up and applying our game knowledge wouldn't be enough to stop it. That was the reason Risa and I had been pushing Akagi and Pinky to keep growing and taking measures to stop the game's story from falling apart.

I had no intention of using a seat on the student council to stop any of the violence or purges that took place in the game. Far from it, I was prepared to do what was necessary to ensure they happened if I had to. That was what it would take to protect the game's story, and I was ready for it.

Incidentally, Piggy's and Satsuki's expulsions were only a part of subquest plotlines for Kaoru and Tachigi, respectively, and they didn't affect the main story. Failing or altering them would be no big deal. And even if it did prove to be a problem, it would only make it harder to date those characters and nothing else.

The story I was concerned with was the meat of the game, in which the protagonists followed the sequence of defeating upper-class folk, the Eight Dragons, and enemies in and out of the dungeon. That also included recruiting a minimum number of allies by romancing the various heroes and heroines before arriving at *DEC*'s ending.

Keeping the story intact wasn't my absolute top priority, of course. I'd smash the story to pieces without a second thought if I had to do so to keep my family or Kaoru safe. Their well-being was a higher priority than my own life. But that aside, I politely declined this invitation to become a student councillor. Sagara's concern for his school and country was laudable, though. I couldn't just dismiss

him out of hand.

“I’m sure you’re right that my joining the council would have many benefits for Class E. The thing is, I want to lead a quiet student life out of the spotlight. I’m really sorry, but...”

“Ah. I got the impression from our conversation that you might say that. I have no intention of forcing a burden on you, so I’m quite happy you declined. I just wanted to share what I’ve been feeling with someone,” Sagara said.

He didn’t mind if I didn’t become a councillor. He didn’t mind if I didn’t climb in rank to Class A and advanced to Adventurers’ University. But for the sake of all future Class E students, Sagara abandoned his pride and asked me to become a famous adventurer. Even here, where nobody else could see us, Sagara’s willingness to bow his head to a commoner like me showed the strength of his will and wish. Well, I was set on becoming not just a famous adventurer but the most powerful one in the world, so I was all ready to agree.

Still, I realized that as student council president, Sagara had a lot of problems on his hands. I had assumed beforehand that as a member of a major noble family and with the student council’s massive budget at his disposal, school life must be a breeze for him. Kirara also hailed from old nobility, so to think that she was afraid of Class E coming to ruin and acting to prevent it... I wondered if this had come from her mistress in The Red Ninjettes, Haruka Mikami.

This is one thing they needn’t fret too much over, though.

The next student council president was all but guaranteed to be that rare genius, Kikyou Sera. If things went down as they did in the game, she would implement major reforms, affording Class E more opportunities to progress. This would provoke a great deal of opposition and trouble, but I was quite happy leaving her to bring about change in Adventurers’ High.

We reached a natural break in the conversation, and Kirara stood up to get us some new cups of tea. She opened a fridge with curved sides in the corner of the room to reveal an array of containers, presumably all filled with tea. She asked what kind I would like, but I had no idea about the different types of tea, so I opted to copy Sagara’s order.

Right. Now, how can I bring this up? I pondered.

I hadn't come here to listen to what Sagara had to say but rather to ask for help in minimizing any damage the duel between Tsukijima and Ashikaga might cause. It felt beyond cheeky to ask for a favor right after turning down his request to join the student council, but I'd have to put my embarrassment aside for the greater good.

I couldn't tell him the full extent of the situation. All the same, I had to convince him of the danger and take action. Even if it was an unreasonable request, I had no choice but to make it.

Chapter 5: Fatal and Unavoidable Attacks

“Here you are, President Sagara. And yours, Narumi. Careful, it’s hot,” Kirara said, softly placing a cup in front of me.

The bright afternoon sun illuminated the president’s office of the Thief Development Club through its large bay window. This second cup of tea was much more fragrant than the first, and I supposed it was a fancier variety.

“And I believe there was something you wished to talk to me about, Narumi?” Akizane Sagara asked, changing the subject.

The incumbent school council president’s bespectacled gaze seemed to have softened as he asked this question. My first impression of him had been one of a proud, cranky, and troublesome noble. Now that I’d spoken with him, I realized that he was a likable young man who didn’t discriminate against the lower classes and was taking action out of concern for his school and country.

I couldn’t help but get my hopes up that a guy like that would give me a fair hearing when I requested this favor. Then I said, “That’s right. There was some trouble with the Swordcraft Clubs this morning, and I was hoping to consult with you.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the invitation I received from the First Swordcraft Club, would it? They got in touch to let me know there would be a duel with a Class E student,” Kirara chimed in as she took a seat on the opposite sofa and picked up a cup of steaming hot tea.

So, they had informed all of the Eight Dragons as promised. I recalled Ashikaga’s bold declaration that he would give Tsukijima a thrashing for all to see.

In that case, it was already a done deal. I made it clear that I hoped the two of them could prevent the duel from happening at all, but Kirara just shook her head.

“The First Swordcraft Club has done everything by the book, so our hands are

now tied. Actually, I heard that the opponent agreed to the duel anyway,”

“I’m afraid I can do nothing to stop it either. But since it’s a formal duel, you can rest assured that there will be no loss of life,” Sagara contributed.

The school permitted duels as long as they adhered to Adventurers’ High rules. These rules dictated that duels must not be fatal, a Priest teacher must be on standby, and the Arena was to be used as the venue. Akagi’s fight against Kariya had been an official duel, so these rules applied then too.

While the school apparently allowed duels to give students PVP experience and sharpen their fighting senses, it was dubious whether that was the real outcome of the policy. Duels in the game had been used as an acceptable way of bullying weaker students, and this upcoming duel was a blatant excuse to put Class E in their place.

It was no skin off my nose if Tsukijima went and got himself smacked around. With all that mayhem he caused, he was partly responsible for provoking Ashikaga and the other nobles in the First Swordcraft Club. Plus, it was against the rules to kill your opponent, and there would be a Priest teacher close at hand, so I hoped this would just be a painful lesson for Tsukijima.

But I knew that wasn’t likely. “Ashikaga is going to lose. Badly.”

“What?” Sagara said.

“What do you mean, Narumi? Is Tsukijima’s level really that high?”

Sagara and Kirara’s eyes were wide with astonishment. They hurried to bring up Tsukijima’s data on their wrist terminals, which baffled them even more.

“Takuya Tsukijima, Class E... A level 4 Newbie. You mean to tell us that this information isn’t reliable, Narumi?” Sagara mused.

“Be that as it may, he’d still need to be at an improbably high level even to take on Ashikaga, let alone the whole of the First Swordcraft Club at once,” Kirara reasoned. “Tsukijima would have to be nearly as strong as the leader of a major Assault Clan.”

“I don’t think Tsukijima’s level is too far off Ashikaga’s,” I informed them.

According to the database, Vice Captain Ashikaga of the First Swordcraft Club

was level 21. If Tsukijima were to dispatch Ashikaga handily, he would have to be around level 25. To take on the entirety of the club, he would need to be at least level 30, give or take.

It was hard to imagine that Tsukijima had leveled up that high. Assuming that he had been flying solo by using a summoned creature to go and do his leveling up for him, that would only work until level 20 or so—with or without game knowledge. With a group of people, there were the tantalizing options of worm-fishing or whack-a-mole. But going to those hunting grounds alone could lead to drawn-out battles, increasing the risk of accidents and seriously reducing the efficiency of leveling up. Risa and I knew of no exceptions to this.

Consequently, it was safe to assume that Tsukijima's level was somewhere around 20. But because he was so confident of his victory over Ashikaga and the First Swordcraft Club, I knew there had to be another reason for his confidence.

For instance, he could have had one of the best jobs. All the top jobs came with awesome effects, greatly boosting a player's fighting ability. If I were to use those skills without caring who saw them, I could also wipe the floor with the whole of the First Swordcraft Club. Tsukijima had better than decent odds of coming out on top if he was prepared to unleash his skills from the game.

On the other hand, using elite job skills at only level 20 would overexert his body. Depending on his opponent's response, he would wind up draining all his strength and mana before ultimately losing. Not to mention that if Tsukijima went overboard with player skills in front of everyone, the secret would be out, and his enemies might figure out his weaknesses and annihilate him.

Considering all these factors, Tsukijima was naive if his only strategy was just to spam player skills. If that was his sole strategy, that made things nice and easy for me... But I sensed that he had something more sophisticated in mind. I had a bad feeling about this.

"If a difference in level doesn't guarantee Tsukijima's victory, is it his combat experience? No, it must be a hidden skill, right?" Sagara asked.

"It's hard to imagine Ashikaga suffering a one-sided defeat, hidden skill or not," Kirara said.

Ashikaga's swordsmanship was among the best Adventurers' High had to offer. Kirara reasoned that his candidacy for the Eight Dragons next term wasn't just for show, and with no difference in level, overcoming him would not be easy. Ordinarily, she would be correct.

We players knew of attacks that would be fatal and unavoidable if we didn't know how to deal with them.

Like instadeath magic, for instance. Or time manipulation. Or mind control. If one didn't have the resistance or the items necessary to handle these kinds of skills, it would not only mean an immediate end to the match but also grave danger. Instadeath spells spoke for themselves, but having time come to a standstill would leave one completely defenseless and unaware of any incoming attacks. Being charmed or having one's mind altered would lead to losing control of your body, instantly reducing one's MP to zero.

All high-level players in *DEC* were prepared for these skills, so they weren't so scary. However, not one of them was public knowledge in this world. In all likelihood, there was practically nobody who could even use them, let alone counteract them.

Should Tsukijima use these skills—apart from instadeath, I hoped—he wouldn't be able to keep the true extent of his power hidden even if he wiped out every member of the First Swordcraft Club. Doing so would mark him as a threat to the Eight Dragons, someone to be greatly feared, and they might even submit to him. It went without saying that should that happen, the game's story would fall apart.

I just didn't get why Tsukijima was jeopardizing the story this way. He'd also messed with the previous duel by telling Kariya how to handle Akagi's tactics. Plus, I thought he must not have been afraid of going against the plot. He seemed to think that he would manage to make it through whatever catastrophe or bad ending he might bring about, but I didn't know how we would put everything back together afterward. What was he hoping to gain by discarding this huge advantage of prior knowledge?

Either way, Tsukijima using those skills was merely the worst-case scenario and nothing more. It was highly doubtful that he would take such an inhumane

approach, and neither would the Eight Dragons likely bow down so easily. Far more probable was that Class E would get dragged into a full-blown war with the Eight Dragons...

"I see," Sagara said. "I can tell by the look on your face that Tsukijima has some kind of ace up his sleeve, Narumi."

"Even I don't know what Tsukijima's capable of, so it's only speculation... But I am sure there'll be mayhem. If we can't cancel the duel, we'll need to take additional measures, like limiting the number of spectators or making everyone swear to secrecy about what they see."

"That serious, is it?"

"If one of the Eight Dragons falls...we'll have problems," Kirara fretted.

As unpleasant as it was, they had assumed this duel to be just part of the usual Class E bullying. But now that they were alerted to the risk of the school's whole order being overturned, they turned to one another and thought hard.

The nobility's prestige was founded on their authority and pride, and a commoner laying out one of their own risked putting a crack in that. Even if Sagara and Kirara wanted to foster an environment in which Class E could thrive, I doubted that the abolition of the nobility was anywhere on their agenda. I could understand why someone in their position might feel threatened by this.

What I wanted them to feel threatened by, though, was the leakage of hidden and confidential information. If that got out into the wider world, we ran the risk of all kinds of crazy organizations showing up on our doorstep. Heck, who was to say they wouldn't come gunning for everyone who witnessed the duel? I could do nothing to prevent that stuff, so I would have to count on Sagara instead.

Silence fell briefly as the two appeared to be gathering their thoughts. My minimum goal for this meeting was to get across the point that this duel would cause nothing but trouble, and it seemed I had achieved it.

"Incidentally, might I ask just who this Tsukijima fellow is?" Sagara asked, lifting his gaze from his terminal. He was doubtful that someone like Tsukijima

was just a student and not a dangerous member of some organization.

“He’s not an agent for some organization or foreign country if that’s what you’re worried about. He means no harm to Japan,” I explained.

“That formidable yet not affiliated with anyone else? So he’s something like you, then, Narumi?” Kirara mused.

“Well, I guess you could say that.”

Kirara was sharp. I was glad she didn’t press the issue any further. Although I could hardly say that Tsukijima and I were both players, that would not mean anything to them.

“Understood,” Sagara declared. “It will be tricky, but I’ll take special measures to limit the number of spectators as much as possible. Since Ashikaga invited them personally, I doubt I’ll be able to prevent the Eight Dragons or Sera from attending. But I should be able to keep all other students out.”

Sagara restricting access like this to limit information leaking was a big help. And if anything did get leaked, Sera and the Eight Dragons always had their bodyguards around, so any run-of-the-mill clan couldn’t even lay a finger on them.

“Things being as they are, I’ll do my best to reason with any potential spectators as well,” Kirara offered. “What will you do, Narumi?”

“I’d like you to make an exception and let me watch the fight, please. Because if necessary... I’m planning on stepping in to stop it.”

“You will, eh? Very well, then. I’ll be counting on you.” Sagara accepted.

While I didn’t know how far Tsukijima was planning on going, I had to consider the possibility that I might be required to put an end to it should he really go off the rails and things get messy. Eight Dragons or not, they’d have a hard time dealing with player skills.

I also had to take some preemptive action in case the game’s plot fell apart. If that happened, most of the growth and romance events involving the datable characters that mainly took place within the school would no longer be triggered. With the protagonist unable to prevent them, the catastrophes and

destructive events would only ramp up.

There was very little I could do, so I was keen to push those who could act to complete the top-priority events that they could manage.

I had one week until the duel. It looked like Arthur was triggering an event in an effort to invite *her* out to see him. But I had a favor to ask of her as well. Due to that maid and differing social status, there had always been numerous obstacles. The question of how to break through those obstacles and corner her would be a real headache.

Chapter 6: A Meeting Full of Smiles

Below me lay an array of huge machines packed tightly together and dozens of craftsmen weaving their way between them, metallic screeches and flying sparks following wherever they went.

“What do you make of it, then? Welcome to the beating heart of DUX, the pride of Tenma Enterprises!” Kurosaki boasted, facing me with her rather buxom chest puffed out.

She wore a black dress again today, with a white frilly apron to complete the maid look. Despite appearances, she was the leader of the Tenma family’s fighting black butlers and a topflight adventurer.

“Our company is developing all kinds of new products for adventurers,” explained Tenma. “We mainly push our DUX-brand equipment that’s made right here. Many top clans and adventurers use our products, you know.” The bottom part of her helmet was raised as she daintily held a beautifully patterned teacup to her lips. Her full suit of plate armor was utterly spotless again today, reflecting light in all directions.

I was visiting Tenma Enterprises, the business run by Tenma’s family. After a half-hour drive, I had arrived at a plot of land filled with several factories and office buildings belonging to the company. They boasted tens of thousands of employees and were the largest manufacturer of adventuring goods in the country as well as one of the biggest worldwide.

My family’s business, Narumi’s General Goods, had considered stocking Tenma Enterprises’ DUX brand to attract customers, only to decide against it with a heavy heart since the risk of them not selling was too high when even the cheapest products could cost north of one million yen. The only ones who could afford to line their shelves with DUX items were the premium stores inside the Adventurers’ Guild building and certain major outlets that supplied Assault Clans. They were the kind of dream brand that we hoped to sell if we got big enough one day.

“It looks like you’re using mithril in your production process, though. You can do that outside the magic field?” murmured Kuga beneath her cat-eared hood as she nibbled on a small cake.

“But of course,” Kurosaki replied. “Here at Tenma Enterprises, we have special permission from the government to use an artificial magic field. Our reliability, achievements, and class are of a different grade from any ordinary arms manufacturer!”

Tenma had emailed us an invitation to join her here for tea the day before. There was something I wanted to consult her about anyway, so I RSVP’d in a flash. When I arrived at the meeting place on time, I was surprised to see that Kuga had also received an invitation. Kuga and Tenma had seemed to get on like cat and dog during the Battle of the Classes, but maybe they were on friendly terms.

The reason for Kuga’s question was that mithril was a metal of unique qualities. Within a magic field, it was light enough to float in water; outside of one, it had exactly the same characteristics as silver. Everything about it—including its weight, hardness, and malleability—completely changed depending on its location. It wouldn’t be so bad to work with mithril within a few kilometers of the dungeon, where there was at least a little bit of magic floating around. But to do so where there was absolutely none to speak of could result in gear made with it warping in unexpected ways, hence Kuga’s query.

However, Kurosaki informed us that this was of no concern because the machinery below us was contained within an artificial magic field, which the government had permitted. Artificial magic fields were strictly controlled for national security and stability, but Tenma Enterprises had been granted a license due to its excellent research and manufacturing track record. Heck, the family had even been awarded a barony. This was the only place in Japan that handled dungeon-sourced raw materials on such a large scale.

As it happened, Tenma’s own armor had also been made here. We were told that it had been personally crafted for her out of pure, superlight mithril and with every last drop of Tenma technical expertise. Now I knew why the thing was so darn shiny.

“Are you beginning to comprehend just how magnificent the Tenma family is? And how special my lady is—the heir to the family business who will one day have tens of thousands of loyal people working for *her*?” the maid said, finger-pointing at me with her chest puffed so far out that she looked like she was doing the limbo.

With all of the cutting-edge machinery and highly trained technicians, the firm’s market cap was apparently in the tens of trillions. I got that inheriting all of that was a pretty big deal, but I wasn’t sure why Kurosaki felt the need to point that out to me in particular.

“As for why I invited both of you to this tea party today, Narumi and Kotone... You see...” Tenma trailed off.

“You can do it, mistress!” encouraged Kurosaki, her hands screwed into fists.

Tenma was fidgeting in an effort to get her armor straight. I had only seen her move cheerfully and easily, so this was a fresh sight. I wondered if she was broaching a difficult subject, yet I was so hung up on how she was on first-name terms with Kuga.

“Um, well...” she resumed. “Would you like to...form a party with me?”

“A party?” I repeated. Kuga was silent.

I assumed that Tenma meant she wanted to go hunting as a group. But I couldn’t imagine why since she was free to take her deadly black butlers with her to hunt efficiently at any time.

“It’s just that when I go do some leveling, it’s always so safe. All I have to do is smack the monsters down. But I can’t forget the sense of excitement and achievement I felt when the three of us fought with our backs against the wall. And as part of the fall exams, there’s the Team Battle, where roles are really important, right? So we need to get practicing soon...don’t you think?” Tenma explained her reasoning rapidly.

I had forgotten about the Team Battle in the fall. Like the Battle of the Classes, it wasn’t just a single event. The exam required groups of students to complete various questlike challenges, such as collecting magic gems or defeating monsters.

In the Team Battle, students weren't marked as a whole class but as a team, so one could form a party with people belonging to other classes. Even so, classes had disdain for one another due to factionalism and differences in level, meaning students generally teamed up with their classmates. The Team Battle demanded that students consider whether they should form a party that would make up for their own weaknesses, one in which all members specialized in a particular area, or whether they just wanted strong people of any kind. There was plenty of depth to party-building.

Many people in the top classes were said to have already established parties and were dungeon-diving with them in preparation for the Team Battle. Even in our class, I expected guys like Majima and Akagi would have the Team Battle in mind as they ventured into the dungeon with the same crew of skilled members, simultaneously polishing their fighting technique and teamwork.

Looking at Kuga to gauge her reaction, I saw her nodding in ready acceptance of Tenma's offer. "I'm in. Leveling up by myself is getting tough now, and besides... It sounds like tasty treats might be involved."

"Tonight's main course will be fresh Mediterranean seafood," Kurosaki said. "Will the usual blood orange juice suffice as your drink?"

"That will be...just fine," Kuga replied.

She had apparently been invited here for lavish feasts many a time. Her expression was blank at first glance, but it lit up when she realized that she would be served another fancy dinner. Kuga was practically Kurosaki's spoiled pet at this point.

At the same time, I could tell from the way in which Tenma urged Kuga not to be shy and eat her food that she thought highly of her. Kuga had watched Tenma's back in the clash with the lesser demon, realizing the noble girl was not only strong but also dependable. Perhaps this had formed some kind of bond between the two girls.

Well, Kuga is one of the most powerful heroines.

Though Kuga might initially come across as a feeble loner, she would become the strongest student in the school other than the player character. She could become even more fearsome depending on which events were completed. No

matter her odd personality, I wanted her on my side. Speaking of which, there was another uncompleted event that would see Tenma undergo a transformation, but...

This invitation was a lifesaver.

Arthur had been emailing me almost every day, trying to get me to bring Tenma along to see him, and Kuga was ramping up the pressure to go dungeon-diving with her day by day. Risa and I had agreed to help each other out wherever we could as well. I had made up my mind that I would invite Kuga and Tenma hunting, but how would I ask them?

The girl happily giggling before me, clad in full plate armor, was the only child of a baron who ran a megacorporation. All her butler bodyguards made it impossible for me to approach her at school, and those same butlers also seemed to vet any phone calls or messages I sent to her, meaning I was completely shut out.

If I tried to barge my way through those ironclad defenses, it could mean a full-blown battle against not just the butlers but Kurosaki herself. Her prim and proper appearance belied her crazy fighting skills, so making an enemy of her was not on my to-do list. That was why Tenma inviting me was such a lifesaver.

I answered, "If you'll have me, then it sounds good to me."

"R-Really?!" Tenma gasped. "Thanks, Narumi! I bet the three of us could go anywhere we wanted."

"There will be four of us including me, mistress!" Kurosaki added.

"But we can't practice as a team if you're there, Kurosaki!" Tenma protested.

Kurosaki obviously wanted to lend her support to the party by making it a quartet. But Tenma had her sights set on the exams, insisting that it should only be fellow students with her. Now, a quarrel was breaking out. I wished they could have settled this between themselves before we arrived.

The dispute went on for a short while, with Tenma ultimately getting her way as the mistress. Kurosaki cast a scornful look my way, muttering, "Lay a finger on my lady while I'm not there and you're dead." I heard that among other things, which I chose to ignore. Now that we had agreed to form a party, there

were a few matters I needed to bring up.

“Tenma, Kuga,” I started. “I’ve got something for you. Would you mind if I showed you here?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. Got something, you say? Is that a magic bag? Wow, look how much there is!”

“Is that...some kind of equipment?” Kuga pondered.

I heaved up the drawstring pouch sitting by my feet. It was an improved magic bag, which could not only contain a tremendous amount but also greatly reduced the weight of its contents. Its effects lasted even outside a magic field, but caution was required as leaving it there for too long would make it explode and send everything inside flying.

Tipping the pouch upside down, half-rotten and misshapen armaments fell to the floor and formed a gigantic heap. It must have weighed at least a ton. Kurosaki wrinkled her brow and stepped forward to pick something up.

“This is not any old scrap,” she remarked. “I detect a small amount of magic, so I presume it to be a mithril alloy. I shall inspect this one.”

Kurosaki retrieved a rod-shaped device emblazoned with the words “Tenma Enterprises” from a shelf behind her and brought it to bear on the equipment. The device appeared to function as a magical tool that calculated the mithril content of a material by evaluating its magic, relative density, and reflectivity. Of course, they had stuff like that just lying around here. This was Tenma Enterprises.

“Everything’s exceeded its lifespan as functional gear, yet its mithril content surpasses zero point one percent, so I suppose it can be called a high-quality alloy,” Kurosaki commented. “With this much of it, we ought to be able to craft two or three swords. Where on earth did you get this?”

In an effort to break free from the fiend’s curse, Arthur had been tirelessly searching for more of “that stuff” as a spider. He happened to obtain a large number of mithril alloy armaments during his travels, but since his clothes and armor were made from a higher-grade material than mithril, he did not need them. By way of an apology for his shenanigans in the Battle of the Classes, or

rather as a bid to get closer to Tenma, he asked me to give it to her and Kuga on his behalf.

“My friend wanted you to have this as a way of saying sorry for being a nuisance. Do you remember that fiend with the coiled horns? His name is Arthur,” I said.

“Oh, that half-pint? I remember him. Very interesting,” Kuga said.

“Boy, was he powerful. I couldn’t help but let out a little... Oh, er, nothing.”

I was glad they remembered the goings-on from the twentieth floor well. Since I had also gone pretty wild back there, I supposed that some of the responsibility lay with me.

“And one more thing. He wanted to give you this too,” I told them.

Both tilted their heads in puzzlement as I took a white envelope from my breast pocket and handed it to them.

“What’s this? A letter? An invitation?” Kuga asked.

Their heads tilted even further once they saw what was inside.

“Hmm?” Tenma reacted bemused. “‘Exciting! The Inaugural ‘That Stuff’ Collecting Contest,’ it says. What’s ‘that stuff’?”

“Then at the end it says, ‘The winner will receive an extra special present. There are participation prizes too!’” Kuga read aloud. “Very intriguing...”

I had given them Arthur’s invitation to his “that stuff” collecting contest. The prizes were apparently items that dropped where Arthur lived on the thirty-eighth floor. In this world, no goods from beyond the thirtieth floor were available, even at auction, making them priceless. I didn’t know what prizes he had lined up, but they would surely be extremely precious.

But first and foremost, how the hell did you two decipher that diabolical excuse for handwriting? I wondered.

“If you think I will let such an untrustworthy brute drag my lady down there, you—”

Tenma cut off Kurosaki and happily sprang to her feet. “Sounds fun! I’ll

definitely take part! Will you be joining in, Narumi?"

"You bet. Some of my friends will be there too," I replied.

"M-Mistress!" Kurosaki objected in a low voice, glaring at me. "This could be some awful ruse!" She recoiled in panic at Tenma's announcement.

Only Satsuki, Risa, and I had originally pitched in to help Arthur find his "stuff," but then Arthur grew tired of my failure to invite Tenma and demanded that I ask her and Kuga to come along as well. At that point, he also turned it into a full-blown event with prizes and all.

Making it into an event would make it more appealing to Tenma and, therefore, easier to invite her. Additionally, we could hold future events like this one and speed up our "that stuff" gathering. This tactic would kill two birds with one stone.

"It says here that it's taking place on the fifteenth floor of the dungeon, though," Kuga pointed out. "If it's happening tomorrow, we won't make it there even if we set off now."

"Dang, you're right! Maybe if we ran?" suggested Tenma.

"Mistress, you'll start a train if you do that!" Kurosaki cautioned.

Reaching the fifteenth floor in a day wouldn't be impossible if we put our physical enhancements to use and ran down the main streets. However, we'd wind up with several huge trains of monsters on our tail and be on the front pages of tomorrow's newspapers. Luckily, I had another way of getting us there with no trouble.

"Don't worry about that. I can get us all there on time. Is the square outside the Adventurers' Guild a good place to meet for you guys?"

"You have some special way to travel there, do you? Now I'm curious," Kuga said.

"Kurosaki, please pack my things for tomorrow. One suit of armor should do. Oh, that cute one will be great."

"M-Mistress! Please think this over a little more carefully!"

This cleared the way for the first step toward initiating the romance events

for both girls. As long as I stayed close to Tenma, I could support her through her curse-lifting event. If I became more familiar with Kuga, I might just be able to steer her away from her destructive events.

At present, both had their fair share of hardships that prevented them from attaining their full potential. But if they were freed from these limitations, they might well grow into heroines who could give a player a run for their money. The problem was that no groundwork had been laid for their romance events.

Ordinarily, I would have liked to embark on this a little later once I had cleared enough events and reached a sufficient level. It would require going up against powerful monsters and arms of the state. Without care, many innocent people could get caught in the cross fire. What's more, I would only get one shot at this, unlike in the game. Failure would result in an immediate bad ending, and that wasn't an option. I really wanted to level up by getting through a few more events, making all of this a safer bet.

All the same, I've got to act before the story unravels, I resolved.

Beside me, Kuga was shoveling more little cakes into her mouth, making her cheeks puff out like a chipmunk. On the other side of the table, Tenma laughed merrily as she tried to decide which suit of armor to take. Watching the pair filled me with a greater desire to keep them on course for a happy ending.

Suppressing the unease burning deep in my breast, I smiled and began discussing the plans for tomorrow.

Chapter 7: The Inaugural “That Stuff” Collecting Contest

“Exciting! The Inaugural ‘That Stuff’ Collecting Contest is now underway!” announced Arthur with his chest puffed out from atop an old wooden crate to cheering and applause. “Welcome! Let’s all do our best.” As he greeted Kano, Satsuki, Tenma, and the rest of us, he shook everyone’s hands. Even Risa was gently clapping with a smile on her face, but then...

“Wh-Where are we? What was that spell just now?!” Kurosaki was flustered, still dressed in her maid uniform and sending her long black hair fluttering.

“Well, this isn’t the dungeon’s first floor, that’s for sure,” said the armor-clad Tenma, looking at her surroundings in fascination. “That really was fast.”

“The concentration of magic here is the same as on the fifteenth floor,” Kuga muttered under her cat-eared hood as she stared at the readout on her terminal display.

“The setting sun illuminates the fifteenth floor, giving the whole map a shade of orange. The sky shouldn’t look as if a storm is about to break out like it does here,” Kurosaki commented.

“But my terminal says the amount of magic here is a perfect match for the fifteenth floor. I think we have to assume that’s where we are,” Kuga insisted.

“Hey, look at those monsters in the distance. They’re undead, no? Maybe we really are here after all.” said Tenma.

The three of them had noticed that the layout of the map, the magic density, and the monsters that spawned here were all different from where we had just been. I guessed it just took a little while for it to sink in since they had been zapped here in such an inconceivable way.

To understand just how we got them here, we have to go a little further back in time.

Ten minutes earlier...

“What on earth are you thinking, taking us to such a deserted part of the dungeon’s first floor? D-Don’t tell me you’re planning something devious! Why, you dastardly—”

“Calm down already, Kurosaki,” Tenma interrupted. “It’s only the first floor, so it’s a walk in the park for me, right? Besides, I can’t remember the last time I got to hang out with friends.” She hummed, and Kurosaki fell silent.

Walking behind me were a haughty maid, a cheery girl in a full suit of plate armor, and a quiet girl wearing a hood with cat ears.

We had met in the square outside the Adventurers’ Guild and entered the dungeon together, but not without Kurosaki glaring at me suspiciously and demanding to know where I was leading them. In truth, I had only planned on taking Kuga and Tenma with me. Yet Kurosaki had somehow talked her way into coming, and now the four of us were making our way to the destination.

I guess it was a given that she’d barge her way into our group when someone she didn’t trust yet was taking her mistress somewhere, I thought.

I knew that Tenma was dearer to her than anything. But I was also certain that I’d need Kurosaki’s help in the upcoming events, so I thought it best to show her the benefits of teaming up with me sooner rather than later.

The three of us headed to a lonely corner of the first-floor dungeon. I had explained that we could jump straight to our final destination from there using a special method, but all this achieved was to make Kurosaki even more wary of me for talking nonsense. This was something that would be quicker to demonstrate than describe, anyway.

After we walked for a short while, the many adventurers that had been around us vanished. We could hear neither voices nor footsteps, confirming nobody was nearby. There would be no need to worry about anyone spotting us here.

“All right, we’ll stop here, guys,” I told them. “I’ll make contact now.”

“Your terminal? What are you going to do with that?” asked Kuga. She had been observing my every move, hoping to find some secret information she could divulge to her employers. However, I didn’t have anything special in mind. All I was going to do was make a phone call. I opened up the “A” section of my terminal’s contact list and touched the name I was looking for.

It rang twice before I heard the click of him picking up. “Hello, Arthur? We’ve arrived!”

“You’ve got them with you, right? And you’ve found a decent spot?” Arthur’s face was framed in extreme close-up on my terminal screen as he peered around to make sure Tenma and Kuga were with me.

“It’ll be just fine. Do it now.” I kept it short and sweet, then hung up.

“What were you talking about? It looked like you were talking to that half-pint,” Kuga said.

“I was telling him to create a gate here.”

“Gate? Is that the teleportation spell you were talking about on the way here, Narumi?” Tenma asked.

“Poppycock,” Kurosaki snapped. “If such a thing existed, why would anyone go to the other side of— Aah!”

After the three strained their ears to listen in on my conversation with Arthur, they talked about this, that, and the other. But the conversation stopped dead when they saw the white light forming next to me. It instantly grew to the size of a doorway and then began to sparkle with a bluish-purple glow, bathing the narrow passageways and rock walls in the same hue.

This was Arthur’s gate. Normally, one would have to hammer a magic marker into the desired spot in order to travel there from another location with this kind of space manipulation spell. With his fiend skill, Magic Search, Arthur could sniff me out as his impromptu magic marker and generate a portal here.

When Arthur first showed up during the Battle of the Classes, he said that he had used a lesser demon as a magic marker to reach us. So, we had experimented to see if this method might also work, and work it did! Although Arthur couldn’t come up here unless he was in his arachnid body.

I don't want anyone finding out about the gate room right now. I'm glad we're able to do it this way instead.

We could have used the gate room to get to the fifteenth floor without relying on Arthur, but I hadn't established enough trust with everyone to ensure that they'd keep quiet about it. I intended to depend on Arthur to transport us until the three of us were true friends... Or rather when they felt they could trust me.

"Souta, is this what you were...?" Kuga started before she trailed off.

"Stepping into this light will teleport us straight to the fifteenth floor, but it'll be gone in a minute, so we'd better get going," I explained.

"You expect me to permit my dear mistress just to walk into something so— Mistress?!" Kurosaki said.

"Here goes nothing! Wheee!" Tenma dove straight in, her brilliant armor scattering the purple light in all directions.

Seeing this, Kurosaki jumped in straight after Tenma, her long skirt billowing as she went. Kuga looked at me for a moment as if contemplating something, then followed.

"Well, I hope this goes well," I said.

Satsuki and everyone were already on the other side. I expected that everybody would recognize each other, but this would mark our first time hunting together. I hoped this would be a band of comrades who would work together to solve all kinds of problems.

Praying that everyone would get on, I leaped into the dark-purple glow...

...and found myself where I was now, though my travel companions' shock at learning of teleportation magic was greater than I'd imagined.

The higher an adventurer's level got, the deeper they'd have to delve into the dungeon. Accordingly, the time it took to reach their hunting grounds would also increase. Kurosaki clearly had the highest level here and would only get a few chances a year to do some serious leveling and had gone to great pains to

get where she was today. The same was true of anyone over level 20, such as Tenma or Kuga. All they could do was remain silent as they considered the implications of this spell.

One after another, Arthur, Satsuki, Risa, and Kano approached the dumbfounded trio to greet them.

“Akira, thanks for coming!” Arthur drawled at Tenma. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Satsuki Oomiya, from first-year Class E.”

“I’m Risa, from the same class. Let’s give it our all today! Hi there, Kuga.”

“And I’m Kano! Gee, what shiny armor. Hey, is this stuff pure mithril by any chance?”

“Hello. Wait a minute. That’s a lot of people from Class E besides you, Kotone. Just what is going on with you guys...?”

Tenma’s surprise at how many Class E students were on the fifteenth floor—leaving out the fact that Kano was a middle-schooler—prompted her to stretch out her arms in an exaggerated pose, but her question was met with silence.

Kurosaki, who was watching Tenma’s adorable reaction, glided over to whisper something in my ear.

“Hey, brat. Is that kid with the horns the one who cast the teleportation spell?”

“Yeah. All he did was link our location with his,” I replied.

“Still, that’s incredible. I assume you haven’t told anyone outside of the people here about it?” she said, still in hushed tones.

“My family are the only other ones who know about it.”

Kurosaki went silent for a moment as if in thought. Teleportation would do more than merely make it easier for Tenma to level up. With a high-level heiress, the Tenma Family stood to rise in the ranks of the nobility, which was a major boon for all of them. I wondered if Kurosaki was starting to see the huge benefits of teaming up with me. Though, we weren’t here to level up today, only to do a single event.

It looked like Kano and the guys had finished with their hellos. Arthur then hopped back onto the crate and began addressing his audience in a proud, excited voice.

“Without any further ado, I will now explain the rules. But first, get a good look at this bad boy.”

Arthur twisted his upper body in a dramatic motion to point at a twenty-centimeter-thick, three-meter-long log. This was today’s participation prize.

“A log?” asked Tenma, puzzled. “It’s got a little bit of green stuff on it, but it just looks like a regular old piece of wood. What’s it for, I wonder?”

“That’s no ordinary log, big sis in the armor! You can use it to make gear like...” Kano began talking to Tenma eagerly.

Her smile seemed friendly at first glance, but I didn’t miss the dollar signs in her eyes. When I revealed to her the previous night that the daughter of the Tenma Enterprises boss was invited, Kano had exclaimed, “You mean *that* Tenma Enterprises?! I’m going too! And I’ll absolutely, positively make friends with her!” She was apparently desperate to network with Tenma so that we could sell her family company’s products in our store.

“Huh?!” blurted a bewildered Tenma. “You mean if I make arrows with it, they’ll have a frost enchantment? Could I take a look at it with my magical appraisal tool?”

“Sure thing! Everyone here today gets one as a present,” Arthur said.

“You’re so generous, Arthur!” Risa hummed.

Arthur looked pretty pleased with himself as she heaped praise on him. Behind him, Kurosaki took what looked like some kind of measuring device from her clasp purse and pressed it against the log from every angle imaginable. Kuga also showed interest as she crouched and prodded the thing.

“Mistress, the Basic Appraisal tool is not working. I suspect it’s more likely that the log’s grade is too high rather than the device being faulty.”

“If Basic Appraisal won’t work, it must be loot from a monster of level 30 or higher,” Tenma surmised.

“It’s cold to the touch,” Kuga observed. “We can assume that stuff about frost enchantment to be true.”

“Don’t use up all your astonishment just yet. For the grand prize is...ta-da!” Arthur held aloft a lump of ore about the size of a human head banded with innumerable light blue stripes. I recognized it as the drop item from a boss shortly before reaching the fortieth floor.

Good job getting your hands on that, Arthur.

Kano and the others seemed to know what the grand prize was as well, and they began making bold claims that it would be theirs.

“What...is that?” Kuga asked.

“Something I worked very hard to obtain. Orichalcum ore! Man, was it a bitch to get...”

“Orichalcum ore? That’s from the dungeon, isn’t it?” Tenma mused.

“I have heard of the stuff, mistress. They say it is the national treasure of some distant land...”

Kurosaki explained that in a certain Central Asian adventuring nation, there was a treasure forged from orichalcum known as the Magic-sealing Shield. It reportedly had the power to fully negate any and all spells, making it worth as much as a small country’s entire annual budget.

Just how reliable is that tale, though? I wondered.

Orichalcum had magic-absorbing characteristics and could weaken or nullify most magical attacks. As a *DEC* player, it had been indispensable to me when dealing with magic users. However, it could not absorb special magic spells or magic over a certain level, so it wasn’t as if it made you invincible. It was safe to say that a fair bit of exaggeration had crept into the stories surrounding the Magic-sealing Shield.

“I’ve seen pictures of it before, but it was a fainter blue than the deep aqua of that ore,” Kuga remarked.

“That’s because the shield is made from an orichalcum alloy. There’s not enough of this ore to make pure orichalcum equipment, so whoever wins will

have to make it into an alloy with titanium,” Arthur explained.

“Titanium? That blue metal can be alloyed with titanium?!” Tenma said in disbelief. “Could I ask how that’s done, exactly?”

“Anything for you, Akira!”

Tenma listened attentively to Arthur’s lecture on how to work with the strange metal. Beside her, a composed-looking Kurosaki recorded everything he said on a pad.

Just as mithril could be combined with silver or iron to produce a high performance alloy, so could orichalcum be mixed with titanium while only slightly compromising its magic-absorption and hardness. The process required three thousand-degree heat and a great deal of magic to work it, which meant that the cost of smelting the ore and manufacturing the goods came with an extra zero at the end compared with mithril alloys. But its qualities were well worth the investment. Although...

I never knew something had been made with an orichalcum alloy here before.

In DEC, equipment made with orichalcum alloys was a mainstay of adventurers from level 40 and up, and the difficulty of procuring the ore similarly demanded a high level. The ore’s established existence in this world and sophisticated production methods sparked my interest. I knew that certain countries were more advanced than Japan when it came to dungeon exploration and research, but now I wondered just how far ahead they really were. I decided to look it up sometime if the mood struck.

Arthur finished his rundown of how the alloy was made and cheerfully flew back to his perch on the wooden crate.

“The rules are simple,” he said. “Whichever team picks up the most accursed entrails within the thirty-minute time limit is the winner! Oh, this is what they look like, by the way.”

He held out a clump of viscera in his right hand. The occasional twitching was the finishing touch that gave it a ten out of ten on the gross scale. They were accursed entrails, a quest item with a low drop rate that one could obtain by

defeating the undead that spawned in the area known as the Gathering of the Fallen. Collecting twelve also triggered a boss monster called the Bloody Baron to spawn.

The contest would see us compete in three teams of two. Since this was Tenma and Kuga's first time playing whack-a-mole, Kano and I paired with each of them, respectively. To make up for the level discrepancy, the team of Satsuki and Risa were allowed the use of Boost Hammers.

"I'll be using an item that makes the monsters spawn ten times faster," Arthur continued. "I had my work cut out getting this too, I tell ya. There's gonna be a lot of them, so if in doubt, just get out of the area. Okay, now you all get ten minutes of team talk time!"

Once Arthur finished explaining the rules, he downed a cup of tea daintily handed to him by Kurosaki. He remarked with a broad smile, "Maids are always reserved, graceful beauties, aren't they?" It made sense that he would mistake Kurosaki for the same perfect maid as she was in the game if this was his only experience of her so far. I opted to stay silent so I could enjoy watching this one play out.

Now, it was time for each team to plan their strategy. While I definitely had my eye on that orichalcum ore, the point of this event was for Arthur to become friendly with Tenma and Kuga. The question of how best to make this enjoyable for them was tricky.

"Wow, we could win something that was used to make a national treasure! Isn't that awesome, big sis? We've gotta win this, right? By any means necessary!" Kano said, pressing in close to Tenma as the two stood by my side.

"Any means necessary? Y-You're certainly enthusiastic. I'd also like to win that stuff, so let's give it our best shot!"

The previous night, I had instructed Kano to make sure Tenma felt at home, but her greed-filled eyes suggested that she had forgotten this. Although I was a little concerned, there was no harm at all in Tenma winning the contest, so I could only pray that Kano did a good job of supporting her.

Slightly apart from the rest of us, Risa gestured toward the Gathering of the

Fallen and discreetly spoke with Satsuki. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I could rest assured they'd always read the situation and take appropriate action.

Realizing that I should be strategizing with my teammate, I turned around to look for Kuga and felt a jolt of surprise when I found her right behind me.

What the heck?

"Souta... I need to talk to you about something important. Please listen," she said. Her eyes were moist and she was wringing her hands. A single tear trickled down her glossy, tan skin when she blinked.

With the pretty looks of a *DEC* heroine amplified by adorable mannerisms, she wielded a good deal of destructive power...or so one might think. But I knew that this had to be an act and that she was really up to no good. My sense of caution won out in the end. To prove my point, I saw the corner of a packet of eye drops protruding from her pocket. Realizing that I'd locked on to it, she casually pushed it back in.

Kuga had been doing this kind of thing recently to throw people off-balance when she was after something. This posed little danger since her acting was poor enough to give away the game immediately, though her gradual improvement didn't bode well.

Chapter 8: Victory Is Guaranteed Before We Begin

“Souta... I need to talk to you about something important. Please listen,” pleaded the usually curt and not-at-all charming Kuga, now with the look of a tragic heroine.

I’d already busted her act, and I even had an idea of what she was going to say.

“You want to get your hands on that orichalcum ore, don’t you?”

“Yes. But I want it *desperately*. If you can win it for me...I’ll give you a *kiss*...”

I was speechless. A kiss? Any *DEC* player would be ecstatic at the prospect of being rewarded with a kiss from a heroine, but her face had reverted to its serious expression when she uttered that all-important word: *kiss*. Surely she should have delivered that line with just a tinge of embarrassment?

Her Honey Trap skill was still a little rough around the edges, but there were signs it was getting better. At this rate, there was no telling if Castle Souta Narumi might not fall and reveal all of its secrets, so I wanted to nip this in the bud and convince Kuga that her seductive ways were wasted on me.

“Obviously, I’ll give it my all. If we win, we split the prize fifty-fifty. Oh, and rather than a kiss, I’d rather you just see me as an ally and have a little faith in me.”

“Okay. Got it. Any ideas on how we’re going to win this thing, then?”

“Maybe.”

And so we got straight to planning our tactics.

The three teams comprised me and Kuga, Kano with Tenma, and Risa with Satsuki. Risa and Satsuki knew that today was all about winning over Tenma and Kuga, so I felt safe to presume they would hold back and let somebody else take the ore.

At the very least, there was a tacit understanding that player skills were off-limits, even if things got feisty. It would be hard for them to overcome the level gap between us with Boost Hammers alone. In that sense, it was safe for me to rule Risa and Satsuki out as rivals for the ore.

It's the other two that will be the issue, I predicted.

A short distance away, I could hear Kano calling Tenma “big sis” and chattering away to her tirelessly. Initially, I didn’t mind whether it was Tenma or Kuga who took the win, only to now lean toward letting Kuga have it.

“Whichever team collects the most accursed entrails by defeating undead will win the contest, but a simplistic strategy of just trying to kill as many as possible is no good. The reason being—”

Kuga cut me off before I had a chance to explain and stated, “That half-pint said he would use something called a ‘monster respawner’ to make the monsters appear ten times faster. Is that true?”

“Yeah. You can bet that the event venue will be total chaos. This is why I think using a hit-and-run approach will be more effective instead of tackling them head-on.”

A monster respawner was an advanced item that was particularly bothersome to obtain. Even Arthur had only managed to get one in the nick of time. It was no wonder that Kuga had never heard of it or the boss that it came from.

Despite being such a precious item, all it was supposed to do was double spawn rates. However, using it in places with certain topographical features, like the Gathering of the Fallen, would cause it to glitch out in some way and multiply the spawn rate by more than ten times.

Naturally, this was much too frantic a pace for a leisurely activity like whack-a-mole, and the number of enemies was too great to fight them fair and square. This made the “train strategy” of killing them while on the run so effective.

“The decoy gets a train going behind them while the attacker picks them off from behind,” I explained. “We both have speed-boosting skills, so it’s the ideal plan, right?”

“I see,” Kuga said after a brief pause. “Accelerator’s effects last for five

minutes, and the cooldown* period is also five minutes. So we take turns being the decoy every time Accelerator runs out, right?”

*TIPS: Cooldown is the amount of time it takes for a skill to be cast again.

With Accelerator in our tool kits, battling under these conditions was no sweat for me or Kuga. Still, it would be tough for someone who could not increase their speed like Tenma, let alone Risa and Satsuki. Kano was the sole competitor who might be able to keep up with us, but she’d be no match for us on her lonesome.

“Which means our victory in this event is guaranteed before we begin,” I declared.

“Right. In that case, I’ll get to thinking about what I’ll make from that ore now.”

Kuga’s eyes were fixed on the grand prize: the orichalcum ore with its shining seams of azure. I wondered just how many orichalcum alloy items one could fashion from a piece of ore of that size.

Arthur had a whole heap of high-strength healing potions at the ready so he could rush to anyone’s aid should they need it. The event was safe, and participating was enough to net you a prize, meaning I should have just enjoyed myself... Yet the best thing would be to win that prize and Kuga’s favor in the process.

What equipment would we make? What kind of design would we give it? We set our imaginations running and kept our smiles hidden from everybody else.

Kaboom! Risa brought her Boost Hammer down in a huge swing, obliterating the skeleton knight and his shield. A shock wave radiated from the point of impact, carrying gravel with it. There was now a two-meter-wide crater where the undead had once been.

Right behind her, Satsuki was also swinging her hammer rapidly, forming

several similar craters. With a groaning battle cry, the undead swarmed to attack the duo. But Risa and Satsuki's fantastic coordination thinned their ranks before they knew what had hit them.

"It's total annihilation! No one can come close to Risa and Satsuki's sheer ferocity!" Arthur said into a microphone.

"Er, what exactly is a Boost Hammer, anyway?" asked Kurosaki, Arthur's partner on the commentary team. "There seems to be a discrepancy between the speed of the upswing and the power of the downswing."

"If you charge it with magic as you swing, it creates an explosion that accelerates your attack. A certain fiend happens to..."

The announcers sat together beneath a simple marquee. I wasn't sure who the commentary was for since the only other people here were the participants, but the mysteries began even before that. How could Arthur be on the fifteenth floor in his fiend form? It was unclear if his discharging of magic in his arachnid form had enabled this. Yet something special about this DLC area had allowed him to be here in person.

But more to the point...

"With all that going on," I said to Kuga, "we can't aggro the monsters. If we try to get close, we'll only get hurt in the blasts ourselves. Let's get away from this for a minute and rethink our strategy."

"Agreed. Those weapons sure exceeded expectations."

We had tried to get a train going, but the undead that spawned around us were swiftly eliminated before we had a chance to do so. Even then, approaching the monsters to steal their aggro would accomplish nothing except getting cut to pieces by the shock waves. I couldn't believe that Risa and Satsuki had shut down our plan from the outset. Not bad at all.

The sparkling light that had shone down on the Gathering of the Fallen when Arthur used the monster respawner signified the start of the event.

His item's effect became immediately apparent as dozens of undead hands shot out of the earth. In no time at all, it looked like a scene from some movie

about a zombie apocalypse, just as I expected. Even now, they continued to heave themselves out of the broken ground until they numbered more than one hundred.

They may have been low-level monsters, but getting close to a horde that large was no small feat. Suppressing a snicker of satisfaction, Risa used her previously cast speed buff and charged toward the monsters by herself.

Once Risa was amid the undead, she frenziedly swung her hammer around and sent about ten flying. I could do nothing but be astounded by her guts and combat technique.

I knew that even Risa couldn't keep this up for more than a few minutes, but just as that thought entered my mind, Satsuki went behind her to provide cover. Standing back-to-back, they entered a frantic melee with the countless undead who wielded various swords and blunt weapons.

Satsuki usually favored a medium-range style, employing a shortsword and staff. Yet she skillfully swung the unwieldy, oversized Boost Hammer to and fro, batting her enemies away. She was doing more than just swinging it around wildly. Instead, she factored the weapon's speed-boosting effects and shock waves into the equation, taking care of any threat that came from Risa's blind side.

"I did not expect such a heavy weapon to be a good fit for the girl with the pigtails. She looked too light for it...but what tremendous skill she's showing!" exclaimed Kurosaki.

"Her weapon's doing its best to swing her around, but she knows how to work those legs and hips to keep her balance. This girl knows what she's doing, so maybe this is the right weapon for her," Arthur contributed.

Despite Kurosaki's praise and Arthur's conclusion that this weapon suited Satsuki, I saw evidence that Risa had been instructing her in the use of a Boost Hammer. Back in the days of the game, Risa had trained her clubmates and established a strange kind of army. Surely she wasn't considering making Satsuki into a Black Knight, right?

Very close by, Tenma and Kano tried to find their way into the mayhem, although the shock waves and flying gravel stirred up by the Boost Hammers

made them think twice.

“The rules said we can’t attack each other, but they didn’t say anything about obstructing, did they?” Risa said with a smug smile.

“Sorry, guys, but that orichalcum ore is ours!” Satsuki added.

Risa’s logic still slightly bent the rules. Despite her apology, Satsuki was showing some real confidence. The duo swapped positions frequently, taking it up a notch as they chained each giant hammer attack in a series of explosions.

“Perfect teamwork! A perfect game plan! Is this over before it has even begun?!” Arthur commentated.

“It appears those shock waves have the effect of slowing down the undead. If they can sustain this until the end of the allotted time, those girls will surely be victorious.”

Just as Kurosaki pointed out, though the undead were advancing from all sides, the shock waves and accompanying blasts of gravel were reducing their pace. This gave them more than enough time to see the monsters off.

Not only did this ruin our plan, their astonishing strategy also allowed them to dispatch their opponents despite being surrounded by so many. I had never used Boost Hammers that much in *DEC*, so I was unaware of their potential for such feats. What irked me was how readily Risa and Satsuki had abandoned a hospitable approach to Tenma and Kuga, which should have been the entire point.

Still, it’s complete mayhem in there. They can’t keep this up for that long... Can they?

Risa continued to do away with the swarms of incoming undead with fearsome speed and accuracy. Satsuki’s ability to keep up with this high-level combat also surprised me, but I noted that some of the undead were actually activating weapon skills that threw her off-balance, leading to a few close calls. While Risa had the experience of countless such scrappy battles, I suspected that fighting with such a heavy load was a steep learning curve for Satsuki.

As I mulled the situation over, I struck down an undead that crawled out of the ground in front of me. But a figure under a cat-eared hood drifting silently

over interrupted my train of thought.

“Souta. What would happen if, say, they had a few more undead to deal with?” she asked like a little devil on my shoulder, her face deadly serious.

I had been hoping to pick off a few undead just to eat into Risa and Satsuki’s share of the harvest, if only a little. We couldn’t even approach them the way things were, hence Kuga’s suggestion that we send some more their way to throw them off their game.

Satsuki looked a little unsteady on her feet from what I could see, although Risa moved around to cover her astonishingly well as the two kept up their valiant effort. We were already past the halfway point of regulation time, and it was more than plausible that the two of them would keep running down the clock until the end. As such, Kuga argued that standing here with our thumbs up our asses was as good as giving them the orichalcum ore.

She pointed out the action and elaborated, “See all those accursed entrails lying around their feet? If we can get them to move a little further along, they’ll be ours for the taking. It’s not against the rules. It’s what we ought to do.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Directly attacking or stealing items from other competitors is foul, but setting undead on them so you can pick items off the floor isn’t.”

Risa was too busy slaughtering the waves of undead coming her way to collect any of the several accursed entrails they’d dropped. Now, Kuga really wanted to bend the rules in a way that would allow us to take them for ourselves without being at fault.

On the other hand, winning the orichalcum ore would score me huge points with Kuga, who was exceedingly difficult to win over. Additionally, it might be the foothold I needed to get her events going. I was confident that Risa and Satsuki would see this was all for the greater good, so I made no delay in running around to aggro the undead spawning nearby.

Too many of the undead, and I would put Satsuki in danger. Too few, and the monsters would be batted right away. I decided that around ten of them would suit our needs perfectly.

All righty, then. Time to pay Risa and Satsuki a little visit.

Chapter 9: Souta Narumi's Strategy

"Gawrrrh! Roarrgh!"

"Whoa! We've got a live one!" I exclaimed.

I dodged the axe leveled at me by the corpse warrior, who I thought was ridiculously fast for a zombie. Then, I pressed on to the rendezvous point with several skeleton knights still on my tail even after I'd kicked their heads clean off. I spotted Kuga running toward me from the opposite direction, with several pursuers trailing behind her.

"Hmmm? Mav and Kotone are picking up a bunch of undead as they run! Is this what I think it is? How sneaky! But how effective!" Arthur's voice rang out.

"Of course that boy would cook up such an underhanded scheme. I cannot help but pity the poor girl he has forced into being his accomplice. But this all started when..."

Leaning into the microphone, the maid detailed how I, a terrible villain, had been sweet-talking her pure and innocent mistress as part of a plot to make Tenma Enterprises my own. Knowing it was all BS, I ignored her.

When Risa, who was still in the middle of nimbly battering the undead, saw Kuga and me bringing even more her way, she raised her pretty eyebrows in surprise.

"H-Hey! You can't do that!" she protested.

"Risa, I think we'd better leave it here. This might be too many for me," said Satsuki.

The burden on Satsuki sharply increased with the ten and change undead we'd brought. Risa being Risa covered for her to a certain extent with some ferocious swings of her hammer, but Kuga and I could always bring more undead to the party. Realizing this, Risa immediately began a retreat and brought up the rear.

Decisive as usual, I thought. *Sorry, guys.*

This was all in the name of making the event a success. Or rather, all to get some orichalcum ore.

After Risa and Satsuki withdrew, taking masses of undead with them, approximately one hundred clumps of viscera that were accursed entrails lay on the ground. If we could pick up all of these, it would significantly boost our chances of winning. Just as Kuga and I stepped forward triumphantly to collect our spoils, another pair sprinted toward us at a tremendous pace—Tenma and Kuga.

“Yeah, right!” I screamed. “We need to speed up, Kuga. Accelerator!”

“They won’t outpace us,” she replied. “Accelerator!”

We buffed our speed and cut down the corpse warriors that spawned near us as we went. I felt a wind wrap around my legs that boosted my movement, and with every step, I got faster and faster.

We’re getting there first, suckers!

“Big sis! Now!” Kano yelled.

“Here goes! Let the ground crumble before my might! Earth Splitter!!!” Tenma jumped into the air, brandishing her gigantic axe high before smashing it straight into the ground.

Not good.

No sooner did I have that thought than the ground in front of her broke into chunks that scattered everywhere.

“Wha...? Wh-Whoa!!!” I let out. Kuga and I were going too fast to stop in time, and I went clattering right into a block-shaped clump of dirt.

“Unlucky. It’ll take more than that to stop me.”

Meanwhile, Kuga used her catlike balance to spin in the air and quickly regain her posture. She then launched herself off the head of a corpse warrior writhing its way to the surface in front of her and resumed her sprint.

I saw that Kano was running toward her from the opposite direction.



“I am the black wind, faster than any—”

“You think you can outrun me?” Kuga said over Kano. “Huh?!”

“—and faster still! Behold, a true Hero’s skill: Shadow Step!”

Kuga showed that she was confident she would win in a one-on-one race, but the tables turned when Kano used her advanced skill, Shadow Step. Then thick black magic enveloped Kano’s legs, and she charged past Kuga in an explosion of speed.

“And there it iiis!” came Arthur’s amplified voice. “Shadow Step, the classic cheat skill! Could this spell trouble for Kotone, who’s yet to learn it for herself?”

“Wh-What absurd speed! How is she generating such acceleration?” Kurosaki said in disbelief.

Unlike Accelerator, which only increased one’s movement speed, Shadow Step also gave a major buff to agility. Every parameter influenced by agility—like acceleration, rotation speed, and evasion—also got a big boost. The skill was so broken that many veteran *DEC* players had it in a skill slot, regardless of their job.

Plenty of undead had already spawned in the area where the accursed entrails lay, and they swarmed their new target as soon as they recognized the threat. Kano was a dark whirlwind, ignoring the monsters as she wove around them.

Damn, she’s picked up ten accursed entrails just in that last split second! I swore.

Kuga stood still, dumbfounded by Kano’s unexpected and overwhelming speed advantage. It wasn’t over yet, though. If I gave up now, I could kiss goodbye to my orichalcum equipment and Kuga’s affection.

“We’re still in this, Kuga!” I hollered, brushing off the dirt and rushing to join my teammate. “If we both get to picking them up, we can—”

“I’m here too!”

Tenma was also running over with a lumbering gait, swatting away the undead with her huge axe.

“Hey, those are ours!” I heard Satsuki and Risa say in the distance before they also rushed back to the same spot. With a horde of undead surrounding us, the scramble to pick up the items was about to begin.

“And now it’s time for the winners to receive their prize. Come on up, you two!” beamed Arthur, holding the orichalcum ore high above his head.

“Yup, yup, yup!” chirped a dust-covered Kano as she stepped forward. She had clearly been eagerly anticipating this moment.

“Will I really be able to craft such a dream alloy? I can’t wait to try it out as soon as we get back. You wrote it all down, right, Kurosaki?” asked Tenma.

“Of course, mistress.” Kurosaki broke off from polishing Tenma’s armor to hand her a notepad. Tenma eyed it nervously.

Yes, it was those two who came out on top. It turned out that those accursed entrails Kano picked up in a flash made the difference. Or maybe our fate was sealed when Kano and Risa read our strategy like a book. And I was so sure we’d win...

“Hey, Souta! If it wasn’t for you, that would’ve been ours!”

“Yeah, you’re gonna have to make up for this, you hear?”

The vengeful Satsuki and Risa sandwiched me, prodding at my cheeks from both sides. I felt bad for spoiling their game plan as part of my bid to win. If only I had at least managed to net some points with Kuga by doing so...

I glanced sideways at the girl in the cat-eared hoodie, which was also dusty. The moment our eyes met, she grumpily looked the other way. If I was going to cheer these girls up, I would have to chat secretly with Arthur.

At least Kano and Tenma are happy, I consoled myself. Every cloud and all that.

The two winners giggled as they discussed what they would make with their prize. Kano would head straight to the Tenma Enterprises factory with Tenma after this to see the ore smelted and turned into the items of their choice. I was really pleased that she had achieved her goal of establishing a relationship with

Tenma. Despite Tenma's approachability, she was still nobility. I'd have to instill in my sister the importance of being careful not to offend others.

Well, guess it's time to go home now that the event's over, I thought, shoving my gear into my magic bag.

Kurosaki, who had now finished polishing Tenma's armor to within an inch of its life, peered into a leather bag crammed with accursed entrails. One of them caught her eye, which she picked up and examined from all angles. The maid wearing a headband jerked her head from side to side over and over.

"Master Arthur, might I inquire as to what this is?" she asked.

"Is it some kind of delicacy, perhaps? I'd love to see how it tastes," said Tenma, drooling and wondering if the offal matter might taste as good as it looked to her.

"You can't eat that, Akira," warned Arthur, making his arms into a cross shape. "It'll make you ill. Tell you what, though, I think it's time for the grand finale. It's kinda dangerous, so stay right there."

The day's efforts had brought in over two hundred accursed entrails. Arthur slung the bag containing the haul over his shoulder and used Fly to soar into the air and above the faint outline of a pattern, into which he emptied the bag. The pattern glowed with a vermilion light as the clumps of flesh splattered to the floor, enveloping the Gathering of the Fallen in a dark red mist of magic. This was the ritual for summoning multiple Bloody Barons at once.

The small lumps of meat wriggled until they amassed into twenty huge lumps. This meant that there would be twenty Bloody Barons, all at the same time. Countless Bloody Knights wielding a plethora of weapons emerged from the ground to protect their nascent masters.

There's way more than I could handle—

Before I could finish that thought, I noticed the still-airborne Arthur surveying the scene below with a satisfied smile. He nodded once, and his index fingers ignited with a blue glow as he traced the shape of a human-sized magic circle with them. An unbroken stream of high-density magic poured into the magic circle before the air itself creaked and swirled darkly, leaving a huge hole in the

sky through which a beam of light shone.

Eyes wide with astonishment, Kurosaki hurried to get in front of Tenma to shield her. But the curious Tenma and Kano only poked their heads around the bodyguard maid to see what was happening.

“That looks kind of like the Giant Devil’s berserk skill. Is it the same magic?” Kuga asked me, intrigued by Arthur’s magic circle. I wasn’t sure how long she had been standing next to me.

“If anything, I’d say it’s a more advanced magic,” I answered.

Arthur was preparing to unleash a highly destructive spell with a broad area of effect. He’d used this one all the time in the game. I didn’t expect it to have the same oomph behind it since he was now at a much lower level, but it would be more powerful than the lesser demon’s berserk skill.

One Bloody Baron after another came into being in the Gathering of the Fallen, each glaring at the fiend flying above and howling a battle cry of pure hate.

With a final flourish, Arthur completed his magic circle and held both arms aloft.

“Time for the showstopper! You guys are about to collect some air miles. Meteor Strike!!!” He dropped his hands as he bellowed the name of the spell in his shrill, prepubescent voice.

Countless balls of bluish-white light flew out of the sky-high magic circle, showering the whole Gathering of the Fallen. Almighty rumbles echoed as the projectiles hit the ground, engulfing the upturned earth in a torrent of light. There was no conceivable way the twenty or so Bloody Barons could survive this.

Talk about a fireworks display.

Everyone was giddy after Arthur’s demonstration of magic that was top-tier, even in *DEC*. Tenma and Kano grabbed Kuga by the hand, inviting her to go see what loot the monsters had dropped. Satsuki suggested that she and I join them, but I was feeling a little tired, so I decided to give this one a pass.

Looks like they're all going to get along famously, I noted. That's reassuring.

I saw that even Kurosaki and Arthur had joined in the lively conversation and breathed a sigh of relief. Tenma and Kuga had unique backgrounds, so I worried that they might not gel with Kano and the other guys. Looking at the scene before me, I considered this event a success for now, apart from losing the respect of every woman in my life.

I stretched my stiff muscles and turned my thoughts to tomorrow's duel between Tsukijima and Ashikaga from the First Swordcraft Club.

Honestly, I had no idea how it would go or how far Tsukijima would be willing to go. All the same, I felt that I'd done all I reasonably could to prepare for it. I had gotten everything I wanted, and in that sense, today's gathering was very worthwhile.

Along the way, Kano and Arthur ran around collecting the dropped items. Even though I was too far away to see the dollar signs in their eyes, I knew they were there. Things were sure to get lively at Adventurers' High once those two started there, but I hoped that I could at least have a quiet life on campus until then.

Chapter 10: Meanwhile, as the Fated Duel Begins

“Narumi, is it? Enter,” came Akizane Sagara’s voice from within the student council president’s office almost as soon as I had knocked.

“Thank you.”

Once granted permission, I opened the hefty wooden door with the usual trepidation I felt coming to this place. I never liked being in places where people liked to rub their power and influence in your face. Letting this discomfort show betrayed a weakness for others to exploit, so I should have learned to hide it. But that wasn’t something I’d managed to do in my former world, so it would likely prove impossible here as well.

It’s tough being a wimp, I mused as I looked into the room to find a stern-faced Sagara sitting not far from me with his arms crossed and Kirara standing with her index finger on her chin, deep in thought. I hurried to give them a quick bow.

“Narumi,” said Kirara. “Only twenty minutes to go. Are you all set?”

“Room one of the Arena will serve as the venue,” Sagara said before I could answer. “I’ve given notice that all but those concerned are to stay away.”

The duel between Tsukijima and the First Swordcraft Club’s Ashikaga was imminent. To minimize the amount of secret information that might leak, I had the number of spectators significantly limited and the date moved to a nonschool day when few students would be on campus. Plus, it would take place within the secure walls of the first room of the Arena. Sagara had gone the extra mile by forbidding regular students from coming anywhere in that vicinity.

I opened my magic bag and grabbed a black face guard that would cover my mouth and nose, a long-sleeved jet-black robe, and a small bottle. Then, I told Kirara that I could be ready at a moment’s notice.

“I’ll be wearing these in the Arena.”

“I detect a trace of magic in that mask and robe,” Kirara said.

“Magic items, eh? Might I ask what effects they possess?” queried Sagara.

On Risa and the others’ advice, I had made some major alterations to the face guard and robe disguise. They were originally just a worn-out mask and a dirty old cloak but were now unrecognizable even though their effects remained the same.

“The face guard blocks appraisal, and the robe suppresses my presence. And this medicine temporarily removes body fat, so I thought it would make the perfect disguise for a husky guy like me.”

Kirara gasped when she heard what my face guard and robe could do. Surely a clandestine clan like The Red Ninjettes must have a few of those items in their arsenal. What was she so amazed for?

As for the other item, the vial of medicine, Tenma Enterprises had it shipped in from overseas for Tenma. She would take some whenever she couldn’t get out of attending a ball or some other noble get-together. I knew this tidbit from the game, so I convinced her to send me a little.

I regretted having upset Tenma the way I did when I brought up the medicine. But she literally jumped with joy when I told her that in exchange for some of the stuff, I could teach her in detail about the smelting, working, and characteristics of orichalcum. So, it was all good in the end. She told me that Arthur’s information had prepared her for the lengthy and costly process of fashioning armor with the orichalcum.

Still, I should have been much more careful about using my game knowledge to infringe on someone’s private life. The medicine was apparently very rare, costing way more than I’d imagined, so I should have at least looked up the price before casually asking her to share some with me. I was keen to show my gratitude to Tenma again for her generosity.

At any rate, the duel was about to begin, so it was time for me to get drinking. The medicine in question was a yellow liquid. I took a sip and found it slightly sweet with a viscous consistency.

It took effect almost immediately. Before the liquid even reached my

stomach, I felt its warmth spread from my throat to my entire being as my body shrank at a comically fast rate. My arms and belly, once plump with fat, now had visible sinew and veins on the surface, and I could even feel the sharpness of my jawline. I had deliberately worn one of my tighter pants, but now they were baggy.

“You look like a different person... Although, I guess this is how you looked when I picked you up from your house,” Kirara corrected herself. “But you still look like a different person from just now.”

“And if I add the face guard and robe to the mix, I’ll look a little something like this.”

“Incredible,” Sagara remarked. “I have to stare just to make my eyes focus on you. There’s something very bizarre about this.”

It was a two-factor disguise. Even if my mask and robe got damaged and my face was exposed, the medicine should still keep my identity a secret. This way, not even Tsukijima would realize that I was Piggy. Though I felt a little self-conscious at how the two of them eyed me all over as if I were some exotic beast, I was pleased with this confirmation of how effective my getup was.

“It’s starting very soon now. We’d better get going,” Kirara said.

“Right. We’re counting on you, Narumi.”

The three of us nodded and stepped out into the hallway, silently walking through it. Without a single cloud, the sky outside the window couldn’t be less of a match for my state of mind. The vast blueness appeared to stretch on forever.

No point getting myself worked up, I soothed myself.

I expected that Tsukijima was well aware of the problems caused by ruining the game’s story, so maybe things wouldn’t be as bad as I had thought. And if it did come to blows between us, I had come up with a few ways that I could come out on top. Worrying over this wasn’t going to make things any better, so I let the tension melt from my shoulders and decided to take it easy.

Adventurers' High's Arena contained four rooms. The first room of the Arena prioritized durability and privacy so advanced adventurers could duel in it without issue.

For example, every last inch of the walls, floor, and ceiling was covered with highly pure mithril alloy tiles, enabling them to withstand a direct hit from a weapon skill. The room was completely windowless and protected by several layers of soundproof and shockproof magic to prevent the leakage of any valuable data on skills, combat abilities, or personal information.

The cost of building and maintaining such a facility was nothing to be scoffed at. Since the training of new adventurers was in the interest of national security, a tremendous amount of taxpayers' money was granted to the project, which was completed relatively quickly. For a student at Adventurers' High, using the first room of the Arena afforded a certain kind of status.

As we arrived at the building's entrance, we found a female student dressed in a kendo uniform standing with her arms crossed formidably. This was a gatekeeper in every sense of the word. Her sleeve had the words "First Swordcraft Club" embroidered in golden thread, and I spotted a small yet prominent family crest on her lapel. She gave a slight smile and bowed when she saw us.

"President Sagara and Mistress Kusunoki, it is an honor. I shall serve as referee for today's proceedings, but might I ask who your friend in the mask is?" She turned a sharp eye on me after pleasantly greeting the other two. I could tell from her posture and the slight amount of magic emanating from her that she was pretty powerful. With my mask already on and robe well over my head, my face and presence were barely noticeable. It was no wonder she was wary.

"I invited him, especially as my bodyguard. I can vouch for his credentials."

"If you say so, President Sagara. Please, go right in," said the student, smiling at me with a bow as Sagara's introduction eased her suspicions. Her letting me right in despite looking like this went to show just how trusted Sagara was. I didn't need any further encouragement to head into the Arena.

Seriously, though? The referee is also from the First Swordcraft Club?

The referee was the person responsible for ensuring that a duel was conducted according to the rules and acting as the sole arbitrator of deciding the winner and loser. Maybe they needed someone of equal or greater ability than Ashikaga if they had to referee him, but finding such a person from within the school would only leave the Eight Dragons or their top members. From their point of view, the main goal of this duel was to punish another student, so there was no need for another powerful member of the Eight Dragons to get so involved.

I could only assume that this was the reason for this girl of similar strength to and the same club as Ashikaga would serve as referee, but this also came with a danger of her officiating being biased toward the First Swordcraft Club. I would have to be ready to step in just in case it looked like they might cause Tsukijima to lose.

Regardless, it didn't seem likely that a player who was more than familiar with the strength of the Eight Dragons would be defeated. Tsukijima would even be doing me a favor if he lost by minimizing the stir this would all cause. Maybe I had been fretting for nothing.

Inside the Arena, I involuntarily narrowed my eyes at the dazzling white light that bounced off the white paint of the mithril alloy tiles coating the floor and walls. As I glanced around, I thought the place was cold and sterile, like some kind of laboratory.

Sagara and Kirara were making their way up to the spectators' area one level up. I followed suit and found that several of those invited to watch had already taken their seats.

"Hey, Sagara. This duel even going to be worth watching, or what?" asked a muscle-bound guy, who stroked his beard as he threw a dubious look in our direction.

This was Sakon Tachibana, the captain of the First Swordcraft Club. He had already retired as club leader by the time he appeared in the game's story. Though one would expect him to be as haughty as most other nobility, he was a fickle character who actually trained the protagonist and sometimes helped

them out.

“I was going to ask the same thing. What’s this Takuya Tsukijima fellow like?” asked the girl sitting comfortably beside Tachibana, whose red hair, tied up on one side, spilled gently down onto her robe.

She was Otoha Isshiki, the captain of the First Magic Club. Her gentle features tempted one to let their guard down, but she would stand in the player’s way along different routes of the game’s story, requiring caution. Isshiki enjoyed a good scrap, and if one ever went up against the nobility, they would find her on the front line, spoiling for a fight. I would have to make sure she did *not* find out who I was.

Sagara took a seat near the pair. He sat straight, crossed his arms, and answered in a surprisingly resonant yet moderate voice.

“I’m only here to see that this is done by the book. I couldn’t tell you any detailed information.”

Tachibana tutted. “He’s one of your favorite little freshmen, isn’t he? So I guess we shouldn’t expect anything from him. I’ve been putting Ashikaga through intense training ever since he was in junior high. No way a Class E student who’s wet behind the ears will ever beat him.”

“Yes, but didn’t he declare that he would defeat Master Ashikaga? I wish I’d been told sooner that it was someone so fascinating.”

The conversation between the Eight Dragons was interrupted by Kikyou Sera, the next student council president—or at least the one expected to be president. Her violet eyes and long silver hair glistened in the white light, the picture of a goddess’s sublime beauty.

She said she had received an invitation a few days prior, but it contained no details at all. Sera, therefore, concluded that it would merely be about making an example of a Class E student. But when she had emailed Ashikaga last night to decline the invitation, he informed her in his reply that his opponent had bragged about defeating him and that Sera might be interested in seeing Tsukijima. The excitement had then apparently kept her up all night, and presently, Sera pouted as she lamented that she could have looked into Tsukijima’s future if only she’d known about him before.

You should've shared that info with Sera sooner! I mentally jeered at Ashikaga as a guy with shaggy hair butted in from the side.

"I looked him up, but there was nothing interesting at all. I thought there must be something to this since they invited all the Eight Dragons. Anyway, who's the mystery man next to Kusunoki? His presence is weirdly faint," he said, fixing me with a viperish glare.

This guy wasn't ringing any bells. His arms and legs were unusually long, and he must have been pushing two meters tall. With that and his distinctive voice, I doubted that he was a game character I'd forgotten about.

Eight Dragon members, like Sagara and Tachibana, who were currently in their third year, were interchangeable before taking center stage, and some didn't make it into *DEC's* story. That was likely the case for this guy. But how would I answer? I could hardly tell him who I was.

As I racked my brains to come up with some cool name for myself or an organization I belonged to, Kirara gracefully flicked a black fan and answered for me.

"This is a guest of President Sagara's. He is here to help out should the duel take an unexpected turn."

"That's right," Sagara concurred. "So I can't disclose his identity."

"You mean he'll handle anything that even we can't? If he wasn't backed by the Sagara Family, I'd love to challenge him to a duel right now," spat the shaggy-haired guy.

How I wished he'd stop scowling at me like that. Tachibana was one thing, but all this venom from the other Eight Dragons and the people around them was becoming too much. I supposed that the stronger one got, the harder it became to find someone to go all out with.

Kirara gestured for me to sit next to her, but as a commoner, I hesitated to take a seat reserved for the Eight Dragons. I opted to remain standing instead.

The clock showed there was less than a minute to go until the duel. Everyone seemed too busy with their own thoughts to talk to one another, and the Arena

was dead silent. Only five of the Eight Dragons were here, and I doubted that any more would show up.

Just before it was time for it all to begin, I heard a rattling of metal from the direction of the entrance. Ashikaga, the vice captain of the First Swordcraft Club, walked in with his helmet under one arm and fully clad in metal armor. He advanced straight to the center of the Arena and bowed as he greeted the audience.

“Thank you all for coming out here today. I hope you’ll enjoy the show until the very end.”

Large shoulder plates granted him protection from his upper arms all the way to his neck. Ashikaga wore mail beneath his armor, and a huge, ornate sword that looked sharp as hell hung from his waist. He had come more heavily armed than I expected, clearly anticipating a serious clash here, despite his opponent being a Class E student.

Tachibana, who had been wary of this earlier, exasperated, “Ashikaga. I’m sure this Tsukijima guy knows a thing or two. But who says he’s even going to show?”

“Captain Tachibana. I share your concern, but— Oh, this must be him now.”

In the middle of Ashikaga’s reply, a door audibly crashed open. Everyone turned to the source of the sound and narrowed their eyes.

Tsukijima strolled in, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his school uniform. His eyes didn’t have their usual languid look but burned with a fire that complemented his self-assured grin. He looked as if he had been waiting for this moment all his life.

But even more attention-grabbing were the people walking alongside him.

To his right was Risa, a female student with shoulder-length hair and large glasses. She had informed me beforehand that Tsukijima had invited her along as a fellow player, and she had accepted the offer to gather some information. As such, Risa’s presence was to be expected. I could only assume that her tight smile was due to feeling awkward walking through the middle of this place.

On Tsukijima’s left side was a long-haired young man with a sword on his hip,

Kouki Suou. He was from a high-ranking noble family and the head of Class B. A man of extraordinary talent and abilities, he was a boss character that players would have to overcome. Or rather he was supposed to be, but had he now taken Tsukijima under his wing?

I knew that Tsukijima had exchanged information with Suou in the run-up to Akagi and Kariya's duel. Risa had told me they always met discreetly in a private room to avoid being spotted, though judging from how they marched together, they no longer needed to conceal their association.

The problem was with the person at the back of the group, though.

Damn it. I can't believe she accepted his invitation.

Kaoru was there, her long side ponytail swishing with each step. I had anticipated that Tsukijima might ask her too, but this duel was to take place in front of numerous nobles. She must've known the dangers of diving headfirst into such a situation. Why, oh why, did she agree to this?

This also meant that my face guard would have to stay on since Kaoru knew what I looked like when skinny. I had to play this one carefully.

After Ashikaga suspiciously eyed the outsiders following Tsukijima, he acted as if they weren't there, clapping and offering his opponent a welcoming handshake.

"I applaud you for not fleeing. I presume this means you're ready to take what's coming to you."

Tsukijima snickered and said, "I couldn't give a damn about you. But I'll take this opportunity to teach you a lesson in fear. Kouki, Risa, Kaoru, this is my moment. See for yourselves just what you stand to gain by joining me."

He had ignored Ashikaga's attempt at intimidation, instead turning his back on him to implore those with him to see what he was capable of. He likely wanted to establish the same camaraderie with them that Satsuki and I shared. Dungeon-diving solo was only viable until around level 20, so forming a party was essential if one wanted to get serious about raiding. I deduced that the three people who made up his entourage were his candidates for such a party. He'd certainly picked the cream of the crop in terms of ability and character,

but I wasn't sure what to make of his choices. I had all kinds of complicated feelings about this.

"We'll do just that, Takuya. Now, Risa and Kaoru, how about we take a seat up there?"

"Okay. Let's go, Hayase. You can save your answer until after the duel, can't you?"

"Y-Yes. That's right."

After a brief exchange, the three of them took seats slightly removed from the Eight Dragons. Tachibana's quiet yet penetrating voice halted the group as he stood up like he had something to ask them. Turning to its source, I saw Sera standing on shaky feet, her eyes glowing red.

"I can't see. I can't see a thing. But why?"

"Huh?" said a confused Tachibana.

She was using her unique skill, Clairvoyance. This was supposed to reveal a person's future and potential to her, but what did she mean by saying that she couldn't see?

"Is your future yet to be decided? Is my power not enough? This has never happened to me before. Could it be that you...are my dear hero?"

Sera pressed both hands against her chest, staring at Tsukijima with an almost delirious expression. I assumed the "dear hero" she spoke of was related to the unique job known as "Hero" that only Akagi and Pinky, the game's main characters, could obtain.

I was aware of Sera's backstory, in which she longed to fulfill a prophecy told to her when she was a little girl by her great-grandmother, the Holy Woman. According to said prophecy, Sera was destined to travel the world with her dear hero, defeating the wicked. When playing through the story as Akagi, Sera would be drawn to you and start calling you her "dear hero." So why was she doing that to Tsukijima now? It wasn't a job any of us former players could ever get here...

Standing in the center of the area with his confident smile, Tsukijima

answered, "Sera, eh? You can join the gang too if you like. You sit back and see exactly what I'm made of with those eyes of yours."

Sera was silent for a heartbeat, then responded, "Yes, my dear hero."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she trembled. I wished she'd hold her horses, though. What would become of Sera's arc if this happened? But more importantly, if we players could assume the Hero job, I wanted to put my name down first.

The duel that would determine the future of Adventurers' High was just about ready to go down. Meanwhile, a little piece of my heart was ready to break.

Chapter 11: An as Yet Unseen Power

The girl who had been at the entrance now stood in the middle of the Arena and raised her voice, “I will now go over the rules of the duel. First, this will be an honest fight. Apply your techniques and use this as a learning experience. Second, there is to be no killing. Anyone who breaks this rule will receive the maximum penalty possible. Third—”

The rules were as follows:

Fight clean.

No killing.

Surrendering is permitted.

Being deemed unable to continue will result in a loss.

This was the standard rule set, so there was nothing particularly noteworthy. Even the well-connected Ashikaga would end up getting expelled if he broke the no-kill rule, so the risk of someone dying here was next to nothing. Plus, it was encouraging to know that there was a Priest teacher waiting in the wings who could easily heal a severed arm or two.

“We will now begin. Are both duelists ready?”

“Wait,” Ashikaga said, stopping the referee. “Are you going to fight dressed like that?”

Ashikaga scowled at Tsukijima. Though it was time to fight, Tsukijima was still just in a school uniform, unlike Ashikaga’s plate armor that covered everything but his face. And it weren’t as if Ashikaga was wielding some blunt piece-of-junk sword either. The cutting edge of the katana at his waist was deadly enough to lay waste to monsters by the bucketload.

Even Tsukijima’s physical enhancements would do nothing to dull the pain his

opponent inflicted, which would also hinder his movement. Although he could rely on the Priest to heal him if he got cut, he might pass out from the agony of those injuries. This wasn't like *DEC*, where one could have complete freedom of movement until their HP ran out. Thus, armor should be essential, and yet...

"Huh? I don't need no armor. This is all I need," Tsukijima said, taking out a small, thirty-centimeter-long metal wand.

I knew there was a good chance that he would use summoning, so the wand was no surprise. This also explained his lack of metal armor, as it could interfere with magic.

But this only raised a new question. Everyone in the audience frowned at this sight, as if it were common knowledge that magic users weren't suited to dueling.

"Fighting with magic in a one-on-one duel, and in such a tight space? Dear, oh, dear. I don't think the fellow's in his right mind," said the tall, shaggy-haired guy—Tsukasa Hourai, president of the Weapons Club—as he shook his head in disappointment.

"What a letdown. I'm out of here," Tachibana said, rising out of his seat.

The first room of the Arena was the largest of all four, though it could hardly be considered a spacious venue for those of level 20 or higher to do battle. Any duel in here would inevitably turn into a close-quarters fight. The most a magic fighter could hope to pull off here was chuck some weak fireballs since the incantation required to cast them was so brief, or so Tachibana and Hourai believed.

Before leaving, Tachibana took a sidelong glance at Sagara and Kusunoki. Their lack of movement seemed to give him pause for thought, and he next called out to Kaoru's group.

"Hey, freshmen. And you of all people, Suou! I thought you were going to join us. What are you hanging around with that loser for? You know something I don't?"

"I don't know a thing, Master Tachibana. That's why I came here: to find out. The one thing I can say for sure is that Takuya is no ordinary person," said Suou.

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Behind Suou, Kaoru looked to be considering something she *did* know. Tsukijima had likely given her a glimpse of his “power.” Though Tachibana was irritated by Suou’s vague answer, he returned to his seat and slumped back down.

“I still don’t get how a magic fighter can beat a swordsman. What do you reckon, Magic Club?”

“There are ways to best even a swordsman,” began Isshiki, captain of the First Magic Club, as she stared unblinkingly at Tsukijima. “But I think it will be difficult to achieve without both a deep understanding of magic and much experience in dueling.”

“Right. My expectations just get lower and lower,” said Hourai, groaning.

When he heard that dealing with a swordsman would require knowledge and experience, his hopes grew even fainter that a Class E student who had only been going into the dungeon for three months would put up a good fight.

Even if this were two players dueling, there’s no doubt that a space of this size would give a swordsman the upper hand. All the same...

The room was around thirty square meters in area. Despite a swordsman’s limited range, they could unleash their attacks and skills at a moment’s notice. It went without saying that a magic fighter’s weak defense and slower attacks would put them at a disadvantage. But Ashikaga wasn’t a player, and there were plenty of ways he could be handled.

I looked down to see Ashikaga’s face red with naked rage. He was completely unaware of all of this.

“I was a fool to expect anything of you,” he spat. “I shall pay the Eight Dragons back for my error with your blood.”

Ashikaga must have felt humiliated, but perhaps that was all part of Tsukijima’s strategy.

“It is time. Begin!” The referee swung her arm down to signal the start of the duel.

The heavily armored Ashikaga stooped down into a sword-drawing stance and instantly slashed out in the same movement as he unsheathed his blade! Only it wasn't Tsukijima he cut, but the magic projectile known as Fire Arrow that he'd launched the moment the fight began.

Tsukijima ran in a circle and let loose one projectile after another while using his left hand to draw and instantly activate magic circles with Manual Activation. I recognized this as Fast Cast, a skill Wizards could learn that reduced incantation and cooldown time.

The skill was visibly speeding up the rate at which Tsukijima fired off his projectiles. Thus far, it had been straight out of the magic fighter's playbook: keeping one's distance from the opponent while getting a feel for their strengths and habits and watching for a chance to land the fatal blow. Players used this strategy all the time in *DEC*.

But Ashikaga showed why he was vice captain of the First Swordcraft Club. He negated Tsukijima's attempt at suppressing fire by either dodging or cutting down every Fire Arrow.

"Nothing but cheap tricks. Won't you show me something more interesting? This won't keep our guests entertained."

"Heh, heh. Oh, I can show you a little something, all right," Tsukijima boasted, stopping in his tracks and cracking his neck.

He pointed his hand to the floor and let out a surge of magic. A three-meter-wide, ring-shaped magic circle sprang into existence, emitting cinnabar light.

That magic circle! It's...

"Crimson flames of fury, heed my word and come forth! Ignis!!!"

It began as a vertical burst of flames from the ground, which seemed to twist into a recognizable shape. Before I knew it, it had coalesced into a one-and-a-half-meter-tall lizard standing on two legs. The thing had bulging muscles, breathed sparks of fire from its mouth, and repeatedly slammed its thick tail into the ground as if agitated.



Ignis was a creature that those with the high-level job “Summoner” could learn to invoke. Tsukijima using Auto Activation to do this indicated he was going for a summoning skill build. The sudden appearance of the summoned creature caused the spectators’ eyes to widen.

“What? A monster?!”

“It appears he summoned that with magic. So, he *is* some agent for a foreign country?”

Tachibana, mistakenly believing that Ignis was a regular monster, reached for the sword he had left propped up next to him. But Isshiki corrected him, having noticed the flow of magic. I wondered what reason she had for suspecting him to be a foreign agent, though.

“He’s no agent,” Hourai blurted. “I did some digging, and Takuya Tsukijima was born and raised in Japan. I even found records from the orphanage he grew up in, so there’s no question that he’s a regular citizen.”

“Then explain to me how he knows a skill like that. He’s got to be around level 20,” Tachibana insisted.

An orphan, huh? So that’s how it works, I thought.

A player like me, who assumed someone else’s body, also inherited that person’s past, while those like Tsukijima or Risa kept their body from their previous world. It sounded like their appearance in this world came about by making them orphans with no relatives. The fact that they had a fake background was pretty interesting in itself.

A debate looked all set to rage over what skill Tsukijima had used and whether a Class E student being such a high level meant he was an agent or not. However, the situation below us brought a halt to the conversation.

Ashikaga leaped over to Tsukijima and slid his sword back into its scabbard to charge up another drawing attack, but Ignis had other ideas. The lizard swung its thick tail with an almighty swoosh. Yet Ashikaga got out of the way in the nick of time, only to be bent over and sent flying several meters by a thumping roundhouse kick from Tsukijima, who had moved to his other side.

“Ugh...a kick?!”

“Why so surprised? Magic fighters can use physical enhancements too.”

Several factors had prevented Ashikaga from evading the kick: the monster coming to Tsukijima’s defense, Ashikaga’s assumption that a magic fighter wouldn’t fight at close range, and mostly, that he was now outnumbered two to one.

A one-on-one duel might favor a swordsman, but two against one was a different story. If a magic user could summon a creature with high defense, they would have the chance to use high-level magic that required long incantations to cast. And if they had the close-quarters combat skills to complement their magic like Tsukijima did, new tactics such as pincer and combination attacks also became available.

The battle moved at a dizzying speed. Ignis breathed a well-aimed column of fire at a still-recovering Ashikaga, turning the pure white light of the Arena orange. Ashikaga instantly rolled out of the way, but Tsukijima was ready for him again, this time with magic projectiles that struck their target with a crash.

While two or three of them must have connected, Ashikaga demonstrated that his mail and plate armor wasn’t just for show by immediately rising to his feet and bringing his guard back up.

“Agh! Why, you...! How contemptible you are to rely on a monster to help you!”

“You’re a funny guy,” said Tsukijima, chuckling. “I’m only trying to fight at your level here, man.”

Ashikaga, shaken by how different this duel was from the one he had imagined, accused his opponent of cowardice. But fighting in coordination with their creature was fundamental for a summoning fighter’s strategy.

What did Tsukijima mean by fighting at Ashikaga’s level? He could smash Ashikaga with a player skill at any minute if he wanted to, but he had yet to show us any such techniques. Was he worried about information being leaked? If that was the case, why even accept this duel in the first place? Maybe he was conscious of one particular person in this room.

“Be gone, monsteeeeer!”

An irritated Ashikaga had apparently decided first to take out the summoned creature that was proving to be an obstacle and charged at Ignis with a swing of his katana. Tsukijima, naturally, wouldn't just stand and watch this unfold. He went around Ashikaga's blind spot and fired a barrage of missiles from his wand.

Noticing that Tsukijima was on the move, Ashikaga came to a sudden stop to dodge his attack, but Ignis was now right behind him. The creature blindsided Ashikaga with a punch, causing him to lose his balance badly and pitch forward.

“Ignis!”

“Gwarrgh!”

Ignis responded to its master's voice with an earth-shattering roar, simultaneously amplifying its magic. Its fat tail grew even bigger instantly, becoming a whip of blazing light that ripped through the mithril alloy tiles as it struck the floor. This was Ignis's most powerful fire-type skill, Flame Tail.

Ashikaga bent down and crossed his forearms in an effort to withstand the attack but was still hurled into the wall with a noise that sounded like someone getting hit by a car. Plate armor or not, it was impossible to avoid taking significant damage when defending like that. It was all over, then.

The First Swordcraft Club held their breath in silence. In contrast to them, the other Eight Dragons and Suou were all leaning forward with their eyes lit up at their very first sight of what a summoning fighter could do. Being able to summon a monster to do one's bidding meant a magic fighter could fight alone, no matter the situation. Perhaps that could even be the best option for PVP. Such were the things the latter group discussed, but the reality wasn't all that simple.

The shortest incantations required to summon creatures took a few seconds, and the longest more than ten. Buying enough time to do that when one's opponent was a swordsman was tremendously difficult.

If only Ashikaga hadn't given Tsukijima an opening to summon his creature,

he might have stood a chance to win. Even after Ignis was summoned, Ashikaga could have kept his cool if he already had experience in fighting multiple opponents at once. He must not have trained for this on his previous hunting trips or club practice sessions. The fact that he wasn't accustomed to dueling a summoning fighter was plain to see.

Tsukijima rolled his head around to crack his neck, then gazed at the unconscious Ashikaga and said in a bored tone, "Even punier than I thought. I guess this is all the natives here have to offer. Well, that's the price you pay for messing with me."

"Y-You're disqualified! Do you have no shame for using a monster to fight for you?" the referee cried.

The members of the First Swordcraft Club in the audience joined in with their own furious jeers. This kind of reaction to Ashikaga's defeat wasn't surprising. If anything, this was all going as expected.

I looked at Kirara to see if I should do anything and noticed that she was speaking with Sagara in hushed tones.

"President Sagara, I think we should let this play out to gather further information."

"You make a good point. What do you say, Narumi?"

"I'm sure that he's only shown us a fraction of what he's capable of," I said, matching their whispers. "If the First Swordcraft Club takes him on, he'll likely use some of his real power... But if we're going to stop him, the sooner the better."

One could expect a player like Tsukijima to have some fearsome player skills up his sleeve, but he hadn't displayed a single one. He would have no choice but to use some of those skills in the event of the First Swordcraft Club coming down on him. If that happened, it would be possible for me to deduce what job and fighting style he'd had as a player based on what skills he used and how he fought.

Watching Tsukijima in action would be informative, but he was still a player,

unlike anything that anyone in this world could imagine.

The mere sight of a creature that only those with top-class jobs could summon would endanger everyone in this room. I didn't get the impression that Tsukijima would do that, but as long as I didn't know what he was thinking, I couldn't predict what harm he might do. The safest bet was for the student council president to use his authority to put an end to this sooner rather than later. If he *could* put an end to this, that is.

"You mean to say that wasn't even the full extent of his power?" Sagara whispered. "It doesn't seem that Tsukijima will be stopped, but I'll see what I can do."

The First Swordcraft Club members, looking down at Tsukijima with murder in their eyes, emitted their Auras and drew their swords. Ignis responded by stepping in front of its master to protect him, and let out a roar. If someone didn't intervene, things would get ugly. Then Sagara spoke in a commanding voice.

"Enough. As student council president, I hereby assume the role of referee for this duel. Tsukijima, you are the victor. That was a magnificent display."

"B-But President Sagara! This hooligan has defiled the Arena by bringing a monster to it and insulted us nobles by..."

The entirety of the First Swordcraft Club lashed out at Sagara's declaration of Tsukijima as the winner and subsequent praise for him. None of them put their swords away and insisted that they would never accept Sagara's ruling or that Ashikaga lost. But quite frankly, the First Swordcraft Club didn't matter. What mattered was whether Tsukijima felt like calling it a day.

"Would you guys shut the hell up? Now that I'm done with him, it's your turn, you high-and-mighty rubbernecks. You'd best get ready, 'cause I'm not letting anyone in here get away."

Now, Tsukijima was picking a fight with the Eight Dragons of all people. A furious Tachibana, Isshiki, and the others seemed poised to leap down to face him. However, they simply glared back at him menacingly. This levelheaded response provided me with a little relief. If this turned into a full-on brawl, there wouldn't be anything I could do.

Though it's definitely heading in the bad direction I feared it might.

Tsukijima was evidently set on battling the Eight Dragons, although I was unsure what he hoped to gain by upending the entire school's order.

The Eight Dragons were so formidable not because of their power as individuals or as a faction but because they were all heirs and heiresses to noble families with enough political clout. If they so wished, they could have Japan's very best armed groups and assassin organizations mobilized. Going against them would undoubtedly provoke the involvement of others.

Even if one could keep these forces at bay temporarily, Japan's nobility system ensured that anyone who opposed the noble families would have anything but a quiet life. That was precisely why even someone like me with crazy cheats, thanks to their game knowledge, did their best not to draw attention to themselves. Did Tsukijima have something to show why he didn't care about any of those consequences?

We had already strayed pretty far from the game's story, but there was still hope as long as the Eight Dragons continued to exist. If I was going to save Tenma and Kuga, protect all these people from impending disasters, and ensure that Kaoru achieved her dream of becoming a top-class adventurer, I couldn't let Tsukijima go on wrecking everything as he pleased.

But just as I got myself worked up, I spotted Sera in the corner of my eye. Her flushed cheeks and ecstatic expression drained all my motivation.

Oh, man...

"Don't go yet, Narumi," Sagara whispered. "I'll coax his true power out of him, and I want you to be there to deal with it."

"P-President Sagara!" Kirara hissed. "In that case, let me—"

"You're the insurance policy in case Narumi and I fail to stop him," Sagara interrupted. "If that happens, make contact outside the Arena and take command."

As he said this, Sagara handed Kirara his sparkling gold presidential badge, then slipped on a pair of leather gloves. He was hurrying to get ready for combat. I admired that he had the guts to put himself on the line just so I could

learn more about Tsukijima.

“Understood, president. But if things get too dangerous, I *will* be getting involved.”

“Right. I’m counting on you, Kirara.”

Now draped in a white robe, Sagara slightly nodded before jumping from the stands. Upon landing, he glared angrily over the top of his glasses at Tsukijima and the First Swordcraft Club.

“If you refuse to follow my instructions, I will show no mercy.”

The First Swordcraft Club blanched at the sight of the student council president in combat mode. Sagara had a reputation for being foolish and incompetent in the game, but he seemed sharp-minded at the very least. Brave too. What about the all-important question of his strength, however?

I was going to stand back and watch how this played out.

Chapter 12: A Golden Light

Student Council President Sagara landed on the Arena floor and glared at the members of the First Swordcraft Club and Tsukijima.

“Whoa, whoa. What’s a small fry like you going to do? You got someone waiting in the wings, or what?” asked Tsukijima as his eyes darted.

Sagara’s reputation among *DEC* players was low because he was either an incompetent president who hid behind his political power or someone whose purpose was to make the incoming president, Kikyou Sera, appear better by comparison. So it was no wonder that Tsukijima would assume that for such a person to step forward like this, he likely had a subordinate hidden somewhere, ready to attack.

At first glance, Sagara looked like the stereotypically sour noble who looked down on ordinary folk. But Kirara’s evaluation of him couldn’t have been more glowing. From what people like Satsuki and Tachigi told me, he was considered a once-in-a-lifetime genius and the strongest student at Adventurers’ High, among other accolades. Based on my interactions with him, he was an honest and fair young man. This was one instance in which information from the game proved unreliable.

The Eight Dragons had varying reactions to this unexpected turn of events.

“The president is taking him on personally, eh? That first-year is tougher than I thought, so this ought to be fun,” Hourai murmured, licking his lips.

“He’s highly proficient in both magic and melee combat and can even cast some unknown spell to summon a magical beast... I’m not sure any of the leaders of the Eight Dragons would be a match for him,” Isshiki said with a blank face, eyes fixed on Tsukijima as she considered his potential. She seemed different from the softly smiling, gentle girl she had been up until the duel began.

Meanwhile, I expected that Tachibana would be fuming to see Ashikaga, the

student he had trained, so soundly defeated. Instead, he looked to be enjoying himself.

“I’m shocked that Ashikaga had absolutely no way of dealing with the freshman, but this is Sagara we’re talking about. I’ve gone head-to-head with him before, and let me tell you, he’s a different breed. This won’t even be a contest.”

“I beg to differ. If he is the dear hero my great-grandmother prophesized, he will defeat anyone who faces him, including President Sagara,” Sera said, her hands clasped close to her lips as if praying.

“Hmm? The Holy Woman’s prophecy?”

Sera had backed up her argument with a claim of a prophecy by the Holy Woman. In Japan, people treasured her prophecies as an absolute vision of the future that surpassed even Sera’s Clairvoyance. Tachibana could not just dismiss this.

All the same, Sera was likely mistaken to think that Tsukijima was her “dear hero.” If he really were the hero, she would have seen the same heroic battles and exploits that she foresaw Akagi would have in the game.

Even if, for the sake of argument, Tsukijima was the hero, losing was still on the table. But it would be a mistake to get on Sera’s bad side by pointing that out right now.

What I was more interested in was the other group of people. Suou, Risa, and Kaoru sat opposite us and were clearly engaged in a discussion, which caught my attention. I was very curious to know what it was about.

I expected that Tsukijima had shown those three *something* before they arrived here today. But what? Furthermore, Suou was animatedly talking to Kaoru in the seat beside him and was acting a little too familiar with her. It had been bugging Piggy’s brain for a while now. This was no time to get distracted, as down in the Arena, Tsukijima and Sagara looked ready to get it at any second.

“I have the right to expel all of you should you give me reason enough. You are aware of that, aren’t you?” Sagara warned.

Technically, the right he spoke of was nothing more than the ability to make a direct appeal to the school management for the expulsion of a specific student. Just having this question deliberated could significantly impact a student's future. His right was a large part of what made the student council president the most influential member of the Eight Dragons.

Upon hearing the word "expelled," the First Swordcraft Club, who had been hurling abuse at Tsukijima and emitting their Auras, fell silent. I already knew that the expulsion card would work well on the nobles, for whom honor and reputation was everything. But Tsukijima didn't seem to care one iota as his smile only broadened. So, that one wouldn't persuade him.

"What a loser you are to have to count on political clout over real power. I'm still not letting anyone outta here, though. If you wanna use that right of yours, you'll have to beat me first. Ignis!"

"Grrrr..."

Once Ignis heard its master's voice, it opened its slit of a mouth to reveal lashing flames within and stepped forward with an almost sneering growl. When it slammed its bulky tail hard into the ground, several First Swordcraft Club members flinched a step back and hurriedly put their hands to their swords.

Ignis looked as tough as any floor boss with its sharp fangs, rippling muscles, and leering reptile eyes combined with the skill that had just felled Ashikaga. Even I doubted there was that much of a gap between it and the First Swordcraft Club members, taken as a single unit. On the other hand, Tsukijima's coordination with Ignis brought out its best attributes. When I noticed how the two of them worked together, I had no doubt that Tsukijima had specialized in fighting with summoned creatures back in *DEC*.

Seeing that Tsukijima had no intention of backing down, Sagara exhaled and turned to face him resolutely.

"You won't withdraw? Then I will purge you myself. First Swordcraft Club, stay out of this."

"You sure you want to try this on your own?" Tsukijima scoffed.

“Grrr...oorrrgh!”

Tsukijima must have thought that his summoned creature would be enough for such a supposedly incompetent coward, as he kept his left hand in his pocket while he signaled with his right for Ignis to advance. On his command, Ignis flew forward like a bullet with a giant fist held, ready to strike. But then...

“Graargh?”

Wham!

Sagara also flew forward at an even more astonishing rate of acceleration. The distance between the two closed in an instant, and Ignis didn’t have time to react before Sagara thrust his palm into the beast’s flank with a sound that shook the air.

Ignis bounced straight back in the direction it came from, but Sagara accelerated once more to catch up to the creature and grab it by the head, which he smashed into the mithril alloy floor. It must have been a hell of an impact, since the tremors could be felt from twenty meters away in the stands.

From the look of things, it had also been a fatal blow, as Ignis lay still for a moment while its magic dispersed before vanishing into thin air.

Tsukijima, naturally taken aback by this, opened his eyes wide. I felt like I was going to pee myself since this was nothing short of amazing. In the blink of an eye, Sagara had dispatched Ignis, which had even higher endurance than adventurers of the same level. That was no ordinary technique.

“You little... What was that?”

“Precisely what it looked like. Unlike Ashikaga, I won’t give you the time to summon any more friends,” said Sagara, gently brushing the dirt off his sleeves.

He then took a big step forward with his left leg and took up a proper fighting stance for the first time. His robe and wand had led me to believe this would be a magical shoot-out, but this latest move suggested a hand-to-hand style. And what on earth was that attack he’d just done?

“When I kicked the ground and thrust my palm out, I released magic from specific parts of my body to massively increase my power. It’s a secret

technique passed down to only the firstborn Sagara child, making it unique.”

“It’s too dangerous for anyone else to try,” Kirara explained to me. “Even if you grasp the general principle behind it, attempting it without a full understanding will only get you hurt. I’m told that there are a few people in China who use a similar technique, but the Sagaras are the only ones in Japan.”

I had assumed that Sagara had only modified a preexisting combat skill, although Kirara said it was a type of magic manipulation that generated a huge amount of recoil through a focused release of energy. Hourai added that this dangerous move also put a huge strain on the body, and failing to control the flow of magic could render one’s limbs useless. This implied Sagara had been subjected to inhumane and life-threatening training since he was a small child.

Numerous skills in *DEC* coated one’s body or weapon in magic to bolster one’s attacks, but Sagara’s precise manipulation of magic didn’t just improve his attack but also his defense and movement. Tsukijima may well have been in for a loss if he didn’t quickly bust out a player skill.

“I guess game knowledge can mislead you too, huh. Ashikaga wasn’t even a warm-up, but you look like you might do the job,” Tsukijima said, smiling arrogantly.

He placed his wand back on his waist and sank into a defensive posture. As he did so, faint blue magic enshrouded his whole body.

This was Chakra, something Monks could learn. It was a buff skill that sealed its user’s body behind a magic barrier, increasing attack and defense. I assumed Tsukijima had filled his skill slots with melee-related skills as well as summoning ones.

The audience stirred in reaction to Tsukijima challenging Sagara to hand-to-hand combat despite the impressive technique the latter had just shown. There was derision in the voices of the First Swordcraft Club, but the other Eight Dragons seemed to be nothing but impressed.

Both glared at each other from their fighting stances, and the silence made it feel like time had stopped. The tension in the air hung heavily, and then...

Sagara had broken the deadlock. With the same burst of speed he used to

topple Ignis, he snapped out a karate-style straight punch. Tsukijima responded by sidestepping and launching a barrage of back fist strikes. The combatants exchanged a few punches and kicks, each blow accompanied by the low boom of magic colliding with magic.

This wasn't just going to be a martial arts fight, however. When the distance between the pair opened up briefly, magic projectiles began flying in both directions. Tsukijima and Sagara slipped away from their trajectories and seamlessly resumed the melee combat.

"You've got to be kidding me. You mean this guy can go toe to toe with Sagara's magic combat? That explains why Ashikaga was no match for him," praised Tachibana, leaning forward to see the spectacle unfolding below.

"Yes, there's a similar flow to their magic. Could that freshman have developed his own magical style of martial art?" Isshiki strained her eyes as she noted the similarity of Tsukijima's technique to Sagara's.

"Maybe it's some new skill we've never seen before. But Sagara's got the power advantage."

Hourai was right. This wasn't magic manipulation but a Monk skill. However, Monk was a hidden job that wasn't known to the general public. With no such information available, the similar flow of magic made it impossible to distinguish from Sagara's technique.

All the same, the three nobles agreed that Tsukijima's ability to keep up with Sagara was remarkable. They lauded Tsukijima's ability to match the strength of Sagara, the so-called genius who had long reigned as the strongest student at Adventurers' High and represented the power of the Eight Dragons. But from my perspective, it wasn't Tsukijima who was incredible for matching Sagara blow for blow.

Sagara's incredible for matching Tsukijima.

In *DEC*, Tsukijima had slain hordes of deadly monsters and experienced who knows how many thousands of PVP battles. He was among the top players. If not, how else would he have made it through that horrendous event and arrived in this world?

Whether it be Risa or Arthur, any of us here were undoubtedly *DEC*'s very top fighters. And I included myself in those ranks, of course.

What of Tsukijima, then? As far as I could see, he had exceptional fighting skills and remained unaffected by standard tactics. He executed every offensive and defensive move precisely, unmistakably identifying him as a martial arts fighter in *DEC*, and a good one at that. Sagara deserved praise for being more than a match for such a player.

Some in the audience trembled in fear, while others' eyes sparkled with excitement at this battle that far surpassed any duel between ordinary students. However, we all stared in amazement, unable to tear our eyes away.

"Try this on for size! Qigong Fist!!!"

"Hnnngh!"

In an explosion of magic, Tsukijima activated a skill with a twisting motion of his right arm. Sagara answered with another straight punch that had his whole body weight behind it, and their fists collided. All this magic crashing together caused an earsplitting roar that was followed up by a delayed, spiraling shock wave.

"Ugh..."

Tsukijima's broken posture suggested that Sagara had come out of this exchange on top. Without a moment's delay, he uncoiled a round kick. Although Tsukijima blocked it, he withdrew a long way back to prevent the brawl from continuing.

Sagara didn't insist on chasing his opponent down, instead fixing him with an icy stare and charging his magic.

During the initial exchange of strategic moves, Sagara measured the amount of magic Tsukijima was using to instantly calculate the strength of his attack, then adjusted his own output of magic to ensure he would overpower him. The thought of what kind of life Sagara must have led to have such swift decision-making and insight scared me.

Tsukijima breathed hard, saying, "I thought you Eight Dragons would be pushovers, but I guess things ain't that easy."

“My dear hero! Let me see your arm!” a now dismayed Sera cried, leaping down from the spectators’ area.

She rushed over to try to treat Tsukijima’s injured arm, but he raised a hand to stop her.

“Stay back. This is nothing,” Tsukijima said before addressing Sagara. “It’d be a blast to keep fighting you like this, but I’ve got other stuff on my agenda. Time to move on to the main event.”

“What did you say?”

Tsukijima raised his swollen and bloody arm above his head. Before our very eyes, it reverted to its original state, and a golden light illuminated the space around him. A healing skill? No, this light was something different from what had healed his arm. I was searching my memories in an effort to remember what this skill was when Sagara suddenly dropped to one knee with his face twisted in pain.

Poison? No, there was no sign of any such skill effects. This was caused by that light.

“What the...? My body is trembling,” said a pallid Tachibana, noticing that his hands had begun to shake spontaneously.

“Ugh...the magic’s being...sucked out of me. This is an area of effect attack,” said Kirara beside me as she put her hands to her chest. Even her breathing was becoming labored.

Just looking at the golden light without direct exposure to it was seemingly enough to cause psychological harm, yet Kaoru and the others sitting across the way appeared unaffected. Either Tsukijima could direct the area of effect, or he had given the three of them some kind of item to counteract the spell. But I didn’t know what skill the light was, so I couldn’t be sure.

Could this be a unique skill? I wondered.

If Kirara was correct, the reduction in MP was a symptom of Terror, a skill that instilled fear in its victims. But if it was Terror, it should have been a dark red magic that diffused in a radiating pattern.

I wasn't an expert on every single skill so I couldn't say this for sure. There was a strong chance that the light wasn't a skill a player could obtain but a unique skill like Sera's Clairvoyance. This would also explain my lack of recognition.

In any case, one could not defend against mental attacks unless one had an item to negate them or was of an exceptionally high level. They were also a menace since every kind put you in a fatally vulnerable state once they took effect. Even Terror instantly made one cower in fear and lose all will to fight, as if under the influence of a vastly superior Aura. Once that happened, defeat was inevitable.

"Now it's time to dominate all of you," Tsukijima said. "I'll rip out every last bit of defiance from you and make you nice and obedient."

"Gah... Arrrgh!"

With his face now pale and drenched in a cold sweat, Sagara mustered up all his willpower to shoot another straight punch, but it lacked its previous power and snap. After easily evading it, Tsukijima countered with a body blow and followed up with a combination that sent Sagara flying. His magic manipulation had gone wrong.

Despite Sagara's broken glasses and swollen face, he rose again out of sheer willpower. Realistically, his chances of winning now were as good as zero. An indefensible mental attack was deadlier than anything else. There was no coming back for Sagara. Nevertheless, his sacrifice had revealed a great deal, and he had more than fulfilled his role. This brought home just how much Sagara wished to protect his beloved school.

"Kusunoki, time for me to step up," I whispered.

"W-Wait...doesn't that light affect you?" asked Kirara.

"Mind attacks don't work on me. And any physical damage will heal with time, so don't worry."

The mind attack was relatively mild and recoverable, which was a small relief. Still, the exposure to that light at close range appeared harmful. Sagara must

have felt like he was facing off against a god right now—or a devil.

“Still, it’s terrifying to think that he was keeping all this power hidden,” Kirara murmured.

“He’s only scratching the surface,” I replied. “I reckon that there’s something behind that light that’s at the root of his power.”

“Behind the light?”

Kirara’s face stiffened when she learned we’d only seen a glimpse of Tsukijima’s potential. I had deduced that the healing of his arm and the golden light came from the same source of power. Maybe Kaoru and the others had seen whatever *that* was.

All right, let’s roll. Hopefully this strategy pays off... Huh?

Just as I was going over my plan again and about to drop into the Arena floor, I spotted someone else jumping down from the other side.

“That’s enough, Tsukijima. You mustn’t use that power.”

A female student stepped in front of Sagara, who now didn’t even try to wipe away the blood trickling down a face that looked ready for death. The smug smile Tsukijima wore was replaced by a frown.

“What are you doing?” he said.

The girl was slender, and her vibrantly colored hair was tied in a ponytail on one side. Oh, no. What was she thinking?

Chapter 13: The Goal That Lies Far Beyond

Kaoru Hayase

“Kaoru, come with me.”

The boy with pierced ears and dyed hair was staring straight at me. It was my classmate, Takuya Tsukijima. The words “come with me” had been his favorite phrase for about a month. At first, I thought he was just inviting me to join his party, but now it seemed that wasn’t all there was to it—he wanted to date me as well.

I had no intention of having a boyfriend, though. The issue wasn’t so much a lack of interest as it was a lack of free time. I was dungeon-diving as if my life depended on it. When I returned home, I was absolutely exhausted and still had to study late into the night. If I wanted to be promoted to the next class, I couldn’t afford to neglect my academic performance. In addition to that, I had been attending morning practice sessions with Yuuma and the guys. I was operating at my limits, physically and mentally. There was simply no space for romance.

I spent my days frantically worried that I might never get strong and remain a nobody forever. But then all I could do was grit my teeth and keep pushing forward.

That was when it happened.

As usual, I had arrived at school early to practice my fencing skills with Yuuma, Sakurako, and the guys when some members of the Second Swordcraft Club picked a fight with us. This was nothing out of the ordinary in itself, but Tsukijima intervened by defeating every last member of the Second Swordcraft Club. Though they didn’t belong to the top club, these were still skilled swordsmen above level 10, and Tsukijima gave them a one-sided thrashing.

Tsukijima never took our classes seriously and always seemed to wander

aimlessly around town, so I had assumed he hadn't done any leveling up. But the strength he showed surpassed Yuuma's and even Oomiya's, who I'd thought was by far the toughest in our class.

The vice captain of the First Swordcraft Club came running, then as events unfolded, a duel was arranged between him and Tsukijima. I suspected this had been part of the scheme all along and that this was the same person who had ordered the Second Swordcraft Club's attack. Even so, I still felt responsible and regretted that Tsukijima had landed himself in a duel by helping me.

I called out to Tsukijima after school. Defeating the Second Swordcraft Club was one thing, but the First Swordcraft Club was one of the Eight Dragons—an entirely different dimension of power. I wanted to ask Tsukijima if we should apologize or promise obedience to avoid the duel. The sooner this was settled, the better. When I presented this to him, his response surprised me.

“The First Swordcraft Club? No sweat.”

No sweat? He must not have realized just how dangerous the First Swordcraft Club was. Maybe he hadn't even heard of the Eight Dragons.

“You're dealing with one of the Eight Dragons, a major faction,” I informed him. “And the club's members are all celebrated fencers, some of them over level 20. So—”

“I didn't accept the duel so I could whoop Ashikaga. My goal is something far beyond that.”

“What do you mean?”

Tsukijima told me that his goal lay far beyond this duel, and this was just a stepping stone to achieve it. When he spoke about this, his eyes didn't have their usual languor but were instead sparkling with ambition.

He might have something dangerous in mind, I thought.

“You should come to the duel, Kaoru. Then I'll tell you about my true power and goal. Plus, there's some people I want you to meet.”

“Your true power and...goal? I don't understand what you're talking about.”

“I’m not ready yet, is all. Save the date, though, ya hear?”

He patted me on the shoulder and turned to leave before we’d even had the chance to properly talk. I was utterly baffled by his words, but one thing was clear: he had no intention of avoiding this duel.

In that case, I would have to accompany him on that day and apologize on his behalf. As the cause of this whole mess, perhaps offering my sincere apologies would minimize any violence done to Tsukijima. Still, we were dealing with a group of nobles. I needed to mentally prepare myself for them to press this issue hard.

The dreadful day felt like it would never arrive, and when it finally did, it felt all too soon. Weighed down by my emotions, I walked with heavy steps into school.

It’s too quiet, though. There’s nobody around.

The area I was walking through was relatively quiet, but there should have been at least a few other students walking around at this time of day. Bemused by the eerie stillness, I kept walking. A little further along, I saw a boy I recognized with his hands placed lazily in his pockets.

“You came, Kaoru.”

“Good morning, Tsukijima.”

It was nearly time for the duel, and he only wore his school uniform with no armor. I was also in my uniform to lend my apology some gravity, but... That aside, I was more intrigued by the young man and woman by his side.

“Is this her? A sophisticated and beautiful young lady, as I’d expect from someone chosen by you, Takuya,” said the boy with a smile, his long hair fluttering in the breeze.

He was Kouki Suou, one of the most powerful students in Adventurers’ High’s first year and the leader of Class B. He was well-known in his year for being a frequent contender for valedictorian. But what was he doing here?

Then there was the girl.

“Hello, Hayase,” beamed Risa Nitta.

She was Class E’s top student, with grades in each of the five subjects better than even Naoto. Her combat skills also bore comparison with Oomiya’s, and she boasted her own style of sword fighting. This girl ticked all the boxes.

Up until the Battle of the Classes ended, there had been nothing distinctive about her outside of her studies, likely because she was concealing her talents. But now she was leagues ahead of the rest of us, and it felt wrong to call her a Class E student. Such was my estimation of her.

“Are the four of us going to dive together, then? I can’t wait,” said Suou.

“Hold your horses,” Nitta replied. “We need to see if Hayase wants to participate.”

“You’re right. Pardon me.”

I was clueless about what they meant and only knew that these three weren’t your average students. And so I turned toward Tsukijima in the hope of receiving an explanation.

“These guys are members of my party. Obviously, that includes you,” he told me.

“I don’t think I’ll be of any use to you.”

“That’s why I said I could make you strong if you joined me. But it’s fair enough that you need more than just words to believe me. So I thought I’d show you instead.”

Make me strong? He had said the same thing after the trouble with the Second Swordcraft Club, but I felt more wary than curious about what he might show me.

“Everything ready, Kouki?”

“I’ve already activated the repellent, Takuya. You’re going to manifest it now?”

“Heh, of course *you* can afford stuff like that!” Nitta hummed.

I had noticed the absence of people earlier due to a magic item they had used

to keep others away. These items came in handy when one didn't want any unwanted eyes on a clandestine meeting, but their cost of millions of yen per use made them unaffordable for ordinary people. Nitta was poking fun at Suou for throwing away his wealth by using one so casually.

Taking this as a compliment, Suou gave a cheerful wink.

"Get ready," he advised. "This will blow you away."

It sounded like Suou alone was already privy to Tsukijima's power.

I prepared myself for him to produce any manner of magic item, but all Tsukijima did was raise his right arm and mutter something. We were outside the magic field here, so surely there was no way he could use a...

"Get a good look, Kaoru. This is...the power of the gods."

All of a sudden, it got darker—or should I say brighter? The sky had become overcast without me noticing, and a round magic circle appeared about ten meters in the air, bordered with gold and emitting an intense light. It formed a complex pattern that moved with bewildering speed. The magic was so dense and unusual that I couldn't even manage a gasp of surprise.

"World-ruling power of my own! Descend, Valkyria Skuld!!!"

Vast magic clouds filled the circle, and a golden light shone down. At first I saw armored feet, then legs and a whole body. I beheld a woman of inhuman beauty.

Is...is that an angel?

Her hair was a glistening gold, and her heavy armor was intricately detailed. Two beams of light fluttered on her back like wings. Although she wore a mask over her eyes and nose that concealed her expression, it did nothing to hide her utter sublimity. I could only imagine this must have been what it felt like being in the presence of an angel.

As she gently lowered herself to the ground, the twin beams of light on her back converged into one. She then knelt before Tsukijima and bowed her head. The light enveloped the outline of her body, imbuing me with a sense of strength.

“Apparently, it’s a skill that enhances the abilities of the summoner’s allies,” Suou explained. “Magnificent, isn’t it? Makes you feel full of vitality.”

“Skuld, the most powerful of the Valkyria series,” Nitta added. “The spectacles just keep coming, eh?”

Thrilled by this new power emanating from him, Suou looked excitedly at the palms of his hands as he spoke. He claimed this effect had vastly improved his hunting efficiency and that he had pulled off some unbelievable attacks. He emphasized the unnerving detail that anyone hostile exposed to this light would instead have their minds broken by a sense of dread and awe.

Meanwhile, the words Nitta had said in gleeful surprise suggested that this same skill had summoned this warrior angel.

To think that magic like this exists... And such an incredible spell at that.

The being looked human but was clearly something else. While I didn’t have an especially strong sense for magic, I could feel an alarmingly dense concentration of it swirling within me. The other three were having a casual conversation in the presence of this sublime entity. Pathetically, I felt like my trembling knees would give way at any moment.

Using magic outside a magic field and an unknown skill called summoning magic deviated greatly from my understanding of how the dungeon worked and what was considered common knowledge. But I needed to ask something else at that moment. Holding my legs rigid and making sure my voice didn’t crack, I presented it to Tsukijima.

“Why are you only showing us this skill now?”

“Ah, that’s ’cause I had an impairment that prevented me from using some skills. I finally cut it loose a few days ago, though,” Tsukijima answered. “Skuld here’s invincible. Everyone on the planet could team up against her and not have a hope in hell of winning.”

“The absolute defense skill,” Suou contributed.

She was an invincible being that no one on earth could defeat...and had an “absolute defense skill.” Wondering what that could be, I gazed in fascination at Skuld. But for her part, she merely stood with graceful poise and looked straight

ahead. As though completely uninterested in me, she neither turned to face me nor uttered a single word.

“I tried hitting Skuld with one of my skills as a test,” Suou continued. “But the likes of me couldn’t even leave a scratch on her, let alone do any damage. I doubt the Mad Lich King, the most powerful floor boss, could penetrate her defense with his immense magic.”

“Skuld’s defense is top class among all in summoning magic. She can completely negate most attacks,” said Nitta.

Just a minute ago, I had been anxious about convincing Tsukijima to ask the First Swordcraft Club for forgiveness and whether forgiveness would even be granted. But the revelation of this extraordinary power turned everything on its head.

Skuld had heavy armor imbued with a frightful amount of magic, buffs, curses, and an absolute defense skill. So, there was likely more to her. Standing in her presence, it was easy to imagine Tsukijima using her to thrash the whole First Swordcraft Club for no reason in particular. But this was like taking a gun to a schoolyard fight. I needed to ask him what he intended to use this much power for.

“But what do you hope to achieve with such fearsome summoning magic, Tsukijima? This is clearly much more than you need for the duel.”

In response to my question, Tsukijima clenched his fist, threw a punch, and held the pose. I never expected the words that came from his mouth.

“I don’t need to wait for Skuld to grow to take the First Swordcraft Club out. These fists are more than enough for that. I’m after someone else.”

“Someone else?”

“Much like Takuya and Risa, it seems there is someone else who possesses the power of the gods, Kaoru,” Suou answered in Tsukijima’s place.

So, this strange ability to summon Skuld was “the power of the gods”? And as hard as it was to believe, they claimed that Nitta had that same potential within her. Since starting at Adventurers’ High, Tsukijima had been under the impression that only two such people were at the school. Yet several things had

happened that could only be explained by the existence of others.

“I asked Risa about it, and just as I thought, she’d been teaming up with them,” said Tsukijima. “Thing is, she’s bound by some kind of contract that won’t let her talk about it. This duel is to lure them out so I can give them a good whooping. So it’s just bait, really.”

“And they’re sure to take it,” Nitta followed up. “They won’t stand to see the order of Adventurers’ High be overthrown. Which is no wonder, I guess.”

Tsukijima chuckled. “I bet. I reckon they’ll be more or less ready for the mental attack, but I’ve already factored that in. Once Skuld and I beat them senseless and take away whatever item they use to deal with it, their mind will be like putty in our hands. Then it’s game over, baby.”

He reasoned that defeating the First Swordcraft Club and, if necessary, the Eight Dragons would force the person in question to show themselves. If this person cared about safeguarding the hierarchy maintained by the Eight Dragons, did that mean they were a noble?

I also learned from Tsukijima that he had been wanting to challenge this figure for a while, although his inability to identify them prevented him from approaching them casually. But now Tsukijima claimed to have surpassed this figure in every area and was ready to counter whatever they could throw at him. His boast that he would beat this person into total submission revealed both his confidence and ambition.

“Once I’m through with them, you know what to do, Risa.”

“Right. We make a contract so that we don’t betray each other. This person’s strong, but they’re so well-behaved it’s boring. I want a partner who’s willing to make the most of this and run wild a little.”

In contrast to Tsukijima’s burning ambition, a cold darkness in Nitta’s eyes startled me. And now talk of a magical contract...?

“There you have it, Kaoru,” Tsukijima addressed me. “Watch the fight and decide if you’ll join us. Risa and Kouki, once it’s over, we’ll get down to taking control of Adventurers’ High. We’ll bring all Eight Dragons to their knees.”

“I wonder what stupid faces they’ll pull as they rush to face you without

knowing the extent of your power, Takuya. We'll make public examples of them," said Suou.

"I really can't wait," responded Nitta, chuckling.

The duel was due to begin very shortly. Even now, the Arena must have been full of people, each with their own expectations for the day's events.

What do I do? I need to get all of my thoughts straight...

The strength I'd seen was far beyond anything I could have imagined. Tsukijima's reason for accepting the duel was one I could never have considered. With my head fully occupied by the effort to make sense of everything, all I could do was just stand there.

Chapter 14: Prelude

Kaoru Hayase

We were running short on time, so we headed to the Arena at a brisk pace. I braced for it to be full of spectators, but upon arriving, I found the place dead silent, with no more than ten people sitting in the stands.

Nevertheless, their exceptional appearances lent them all a strong presence. I suspected that these were the various leaders of the Eight Dragons. They weren't even emitting their Auras, but just feeling their eyes on me was enough to make me nervous, and I dared not return their gaze.

While I felt like a deer in the headlights, Suou, utterly unperturbed by the stares, walked with a relaxed smile and spoke up.

"Now, Risa and Kaoru, how about we take a seat up there?"

"Okay. Let's go, Hayase. You can save your answer until after the duel, can't you?"

"Y-Yes. That's right."

I really wanted to get out of this place as fast as possible. But that wasn't an option. I took a deep breath to regain my composure, straightened my posture, and followed Suou.

Tsukijima said that he would give me "strength" if I joined the party he led. He tried to tempt me with claims he would show me power leveling that made use of confidential information, which would instantly send my level rocketing and provide me with several potent skills. Sitting beside me were Suou, a force beyond level 20, and Nitta, who wielded the same "power of the gods" as Tsukijima. I knew that Tsukijima's attempts to tempt me were neither lies nor idle boasts.

It was indeed true that I devoted each day to wishing for strength. I wanted it so badly that I cried out in my sleep. I wanted it so badly I could taste it. The only problem was that Tsukijima's definition of strength differed greatly from

mine. The strength I longed for was more than just being a competent fighter.

A strong adventurer must be a guiding light of hope for the weak. Physical strength must be paired with a noble mind. The use of great might must always be an act of love.

These were the ideals and last testament of my late mother, a first-rate adventurer in her own right. And they were my convictions too. My wish to become an adventurer and my struggles to keep my head above water at school stemmed from my desire to reach those heights.

But Skuld's golden light was a far cry from this.

Suou, Nitta, and I had exposed ourselves to the light's cursing effects to see what they were like. The moment the light touched me, the excess of fear dimmed my vision, and I sank to the floor. It had felt like an impossibly long and painful experience, but I couldn't stop myself from trembling when I learned afterward that it had only lasted a few seconds.

The experience taught me that the sole purpose of this skill was to dominate a victim to their very core and bend them to one's will. This skill bore no resemblance to the strength that I sought. What was Tsukijima seeking to achieve by misusing Skuld's power in this way? What was the next step after ruling Adventurers' High with fear?

The question of what the other two were thinking also played on my mind. Suou was seemingly head over heels with Tsukijima's knowledge and power. I understood why Suou might team up with him to bolster his power. Nitta's reasons weren't so obvious, though, so I decided to ask her directly.

"Nitta. If you have the power of the gods for yourself, why team up with— Actually, let me rephrase that. Can I ask you why you've switched allegiances from the person Tsukijima is targeting today?"

I'd heard that Tsukijima's target possessed this same power of the gods, and Nitta could vouch for their strength. And yet they didn't take center stage... Or I hadn't noticed them, at least. This implied they didn't throw their weight around like Tsukijima, preferring to stay in the shadows and act with caution.

Nitta was sharp-minded, always conscious of her surroundings, and seemed

the type to act with discretion. So why would she join forces with Tsukijima, who wanted to rule the school with an iron fist? Surely, this target would be a better fit for her in terms of both mindset and behavior. Her supposed reason was that she wanted to run wild like Tsukijima, but that sounded completely forced.

I looked Nitta in the eye as I asked her for the truth. A mischievous smile accompanied her answer.

“Well, it’s not like I’ve switched allegiances yet, right? If I had to say, I guess I’ll side with whoever wins. Oh, but don’t tell Tsukijima I said that, okay?”

“Risa,” said Suou, chuckling. “That’s effectively the same as saying you’ll side with Takuya. I don’t think there’s any need to keep that from him.”

Risa giggled. “Losing to someone like that would be a disgrace... A good fight would be more interesting, but I think it’s going to be difficult.”

My question hadn’t really been answered, but Risa used her knowledge of both parties’ abilities to predict an overwhelming victory for Tsukijima. Was she truly just siding with whoever was more powerful?

I suppose I’ll have to watch this unfold and step in if it’s needed to stop anything bad from happening... But then...

Could someone as powerless as me really stop anything? How could I talk anyone out of doing something dreadful? Would I be brave enough to try? Just as I was sinking in an ocean of such thoughts with no answers, the duel began at last.

With a new summoning spell called Ignis, Tsukijima achieved a one-sided victory over the vice captain of the First Swordcraft Club. This was someone whose swordsmanship and level were unmatched by those of us in Class E. He could even be considered the right-hand man of one of the Eight Dragons.

I couldn’t stay surprised for long, though. A spectacular hand-to-hand fight unfolded on the Arena floor between Tsukijima and the student council president, who was reputed as the strongest in all of Adventurers’ High.

Both flew back and forth at dizzying speeds as they took turns to go on the

offensive and then the defensive, their immense magic and energy clashing. Every attack ripped through the air, and low rumbles could be felt even in our seats.

This was no fight between Adventurers' High students. It had long since gone past that point. They were both showing enough talent to easily qualify for any of the top Assault Clans.

"The president's strong, huh," remarked Nitta. "His control of magic and martial arts skills are both first-rate."

"President Sagara is the leader of the Eight Dragons and a legendary figure in the school. I believe Tsukijima will have a hard time if he tries to best him head-on in a physical confrontation. But then—"

"With Skuld on his side he'll be just fine," Nitta finished Suou's sentence with a giggle.

Suou was right. From what I could see, Tsukijima was at a disadvantage. I had put this down to the student council president's superior STR stat, although Nitta said it was due to his magic control and fighting technique. This was just how high-level the battle down there was.

The combatants unleashed a volley of magic projectiles, then weaved their way past them to go head-to-head again. However, the time had come to disrupt the balance.

"Try this on for size! Qigong Fist!!!"

"Hnnngh!"

Tsukijima and the president put all they had into two explosions of magic that shredded through the air and caused the entire Arena to wobble slightly. In the aftermath, Tsukijima staggered backward. Upon closer inspection, his wrist had been bent at an impossible angle.

His face twisted in pain for just a moment as the blood dripped from his wrist, then changed to an expression that suggested he had a lot more fight left in him. My two companions were also unflustered, remaining composed as they continued their conversation. Again, this was because they had seen proof that defeat was impossible.

This proof—namely, Skuld—had been sent to wait deep within the dungeon by Tsukijima for this battle. This was done so he could use spatial magic to bring her light and the effects that came with it into the Arena. The reason for this roundabout method was apparently to get around a restriction that made it impossible to summon more than one entity at a time.

Tsukijima raised his blood-drenched arm, and out of nowhere, a golden light began to shine down, healing his wounds in an instant. Not only that, but I also felt every one of my stats rise just as they had done before, giving me a sense of being all-powerful as I felt strength well up from deep within me.

For those opposing Tsukijima, however, the light was a fear-inducing curse. Being directly under it would expose one to insurmountable dread that destroyed all will to resist in the blink of an eye. The student council president's consciousness would soon waver, immobilizing him. Or that was what I expected to happen.

He looked ready to collapse at first, then resisted the attack on his psyche with gritted teeth and even managed to get a punch off. Tsukijima easily countered this, but having experienced what the student council president was going through myself, it was impressive that he could even move in that light, let alone attack. His mental fortitude was astounding.

"I thought he'd crumble immediately, but that's President Sagara for you. Tenacious as anything. His MND stat must be high. Still, this one's just a matter of time now," assessed Suou.

"Trying to resist the light will only leave a deeper scar on his mind. Maybe the Eight Dragons' top guy being reduced to this will make for a nice symbol of our domination of the entire school?" Nitta said with a snicker.

Although the fight was still ongoing, it had become a one-sided affair. The president's attacks were only half as fast as before, perhaps even slower. Meanwhile, Tsukijima was enjoying the buffing effects of the light and could now send the president hurtling into the walls with only a flick of his wrist. There was now a clear gap between their output of magic, which had been equal until now.

The student council president remained undeterred and continued to launch

attack after attack, but he was sent reeling by a counterstrike each time. His glasses were now bent, his face bloodied, and his clothes in tatters. And yet the sharp glimmer in his eyes had not dulled in the slightest. I wondered just what kind of training and determination were needed to endure that distressing light and keep rising.

Nevertheless, Skuld's tremendous power would mercilessly crush any who defied her. Despite the president's strong will, his subjugation was inevitable.

And that's one thing I won't let happen!

No longer able to stand idly by, I leaped into the fray.

"That's enough, Tsukijima. You mustn't use that power."

"What are you doing?"

Tsukijima's eyes were full of rage as they fell on me. I was trying to wreck a plan he'd spent much time formulating, so it was no wonder he was angry.

I had no intention of opposing Tsukijima. Even if I were to fight him, someone like me couldn't even hope to graze him, so it would be no contest at all. But if I could appease him, maybe I could get through to him, even if only a little.

"You're strong. Stronger than any other, I'm sure. But great strength must not be misused. So I'd like you to reconsider your plans for...domination, and become a brilliant adventurer instead. How about we aim for that goal together?"

My mother had been an adventurer who served as a beacon of hope for many. Kotarou Tasato of Colors, Japan's greatest Assault Clan, was a prime example of such a person today.

A mighty adventurer could bring hope to the masses, and Tsukijima qualified as one. If only he'd use the invincibility granted to him by Skuld for good, I knew he could be an adventurer like that. So I forced a smile and extended my arm, but...

"I can't believe you're spewing crap like this when I've just shown you the ultimate power that can rule the whole world. I never realized you were such a

dumb chick.”

I thought I had come up with the best possible suggestion for Tsukijima, so I was hurt badly when he rejected it as “crap.” Putting that aside, what did he mean by “rule the whole world”? I looked into his eyes to ascertain his true feelings and saw they had changed from a look of fury to one of joy.

“Kaoru... If you refuse to come under my wing, I guess I’ll just have to dominate you like everyone else. I’ll let you taste the pain for even longer this time so you learn to get those silly ideas out of your head.”

At a subtle raise of Tsukijima’s arm, the gentle golden light gradually dimmed, eventually transforming into a foreboding black and red. A chilly sensation of terror crept up from the depths of my chest, and my range of vision narrowed from all sides as my consciousness grew faint.

I tried desperately to keep my heart from shattering, but I could feel the cracks spreading and spreading, growing ever deeper. There was nothing I could do to withstand this.

Ah...how weak...I am...

When faced with the same light, the student council president had shown the conviction to stand up time after time. But in just a brief moment, I could not see or hear a thing. If I was in such a mess, my wish to become a top adventurer like my mother was just a fool’s dream. Maybe I should just give up and—

You can still achieve it.

As my consciousness faded, I could have sworn I heard an old, familiar voice. Slowly opening my tightly shut eyes, I spotted the slender figure of a man in a robe.

A mask and the hood of his robe obscured his face, adding to his faint presence. Something about him reminded me of the girl who had come to our aid during the Battle of the Classes, though. This must be the person Tsukijima was targeting. His appearance gave me a clue as to who it might be. I wanted to ask them more about it, but this was hardly the time.



“R-Run. You can’t...beat him,” I managed to say. *This duel was all part of a plan to lure you out.*

Behind Tsukijima was Skuld, who would be impossible to defeat with her many unmatched skills. Furthermore, defeating this “target” would completely subjugate his mind, turning him into a slave to Tsukijima.

Should that happen, I didn’t think anybody would be able to stop Tsukijima. I couldn’t let this person lose.

“I ain’t letting you run,” Tsukijima said after a chuckle. “I bet even a player like you didn’t know you could use this skill.”

Tsukijima casually raised his index finger, and a deafening screech rang out. My vision flickered in and out. Judging from the vast expanse of magic swelling overhead, Skuld had just activated some kind of skill.

The masked man surveyed the space above him, then turned his attention back to Tsukijima and cracked his neck side to side as if totally unfazed.

“I’ve got this space locked down,” Tsukijima told him. “Now, I’ll give you a choice. You can either sign a magical contract swearing loyalty to me right here, or I’ll beat your ass into submission.”

The figure was silent.

With a cocky grin, Tsukijima discharged a powerful surge of magic in a bid to intimidate his masked rival, who responded in kind by enveloping himself in his own high-density magic. The atmosphere grew heavy.

Oh, no...they’re going to fight. I need to do something to stop them. Anything...

I forced my trembling, powerless body to stand and was just about to scream at the figure to run again when I felt someone tug at my arm from behind. The council president.

“It’s...all right,” he said, panting. “He absolutely won’t lose. Let’s stand back so we don’t get in his way.”

I was going to argue that he was only saying that because he didn’t know about Skuld. Then I saw in the president’s face, under the disheveled hair and

dripping blood, that he didn't have the faintest trace of doubt that the masked figure would be victorious.

"Well? Come on, then. Answer me," demanded Tsukijima.

A great presence was about to descend on us. An excess of magic flowed all around, and the air vibrated slightly. Tsukijima was calling forth Skuld from the dungeon.

Meanwhile, an enormous magic circle materialized at the masked man's feet, from which a mountain of weapons emerged that must have towered ten meters high. Their sheen suggested that they were made of mithril alloy. As if they had a mind of their own, the weapons converged until they eventually took a gigantic humanoid shape that let out an almighty bellow.

"It's...punishment time!!!"

Chapter 15: This Was All to Be Expected

“Punishment time? Heh, heh, good one. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Tsukijima didn’t hesitate to provoke me with a blast of his Aura, and he shone his blackish-red light on me to inflict status ailments.

To my rear lay the crumpled figure of my childhood friend, her face stained with tears. Her brave effort to talk sense into Tsukijima had fallen on deaf ears. After he rejected her appeal for him to become the perfect adventurer, she started beating herself up for being too weak to even face him.

Kaoru was wrong, though.

She had shown amazing mental resilience by leaping into this lion’s den of an Arena, prepared to pay with her life as she tried to stop this, even if she was trembling as she did so. If anything, she should be commended for her courage. She lived up to her *DEC* counterpart’s toughness in every single way.

That was precisely why it tugged at my heart so deeply to see her so broken, weeping as she put all the blame on herself. It hurt so much I wanted to scream out loud. Piggy’s brain yelled at me to beat the “villain” standing in front of me to a pulp. With the anger of two people, I was both thinking and seeing red.

Calm down, I thought. You need to cool off.

Even if this battle got heated on the surface, I would have to remain icy cold on the inside and keep my wits about me. That strategy had increased my win ratio and brought me to the top. Analyzing my opponent’s behavior objectively would also improve my chances of beating him to a pulp.

It turned out that Kaoru hadn’t accompanied Tsukijima to the Arena because she’d joined him but because she wanted to stop him from going on a rampage. He had likely revealed his plans to her just before the duel.

There was no world in which the stoic, upstanding Kaoru would get on board with a scheme to subjugate the school through violence. If Tsukijima had a thing

for Kaoru, why didn't he know something so obvious? He must have thought she'd bow down to him in awe of his show of strength. And now she had turned down his invitation. If he believed he could solve his problems by making everyone yield to him with that obnoxious light... Well, he really did need some serious punishment.

Aside from that, I had plenty of questions about Tsukijima's behavior. Letting this world follow the same path as the game's story was a huge advantage for us players since we could anticipate future events. Not only could we predict the events and their timing, but we could also use our knowledge of the economic and political landscape as a tool. So why would he go ahead and choose to ruin that?

His contrivance of this duel was questionable too. Why did he insist on forcing another player to fight him? The players who had made it to this world were no run-of-the-mill noobs from *DEC*. We were the very best of the best. Going against anyone like that came with serious risks. This remained true even if he had done his research and reckoned he could beat me.

But I doubted that Tsukijima knew any detailed information about me. So far, he hadn't even figured out that Piggy was also a player. While he thought he was taking a clash with a fellow player too lightly, I couldn't deny that he might have a reason to take that risk. And if there was a reason, what was it?

Ideally, I'd have liked to have all those questions answered before we began. But...

It's time to do this!

A white cloud of mist formed overhead, from which a blinding light descended—along with something else. There was no magic circle, so I could tell this was spatial transportation and not summoning magic. Whatever this was, he must have summoned it in advance and kept it on standby elsewhere.

Then, a blonde woman with wings of light billowing from her back and clad in robust-looking silver armor emerged into view. She wore an eye mask that concealed her eyes and nose but not the hostility in a glare that pierced me. There was no halo over her head, though, so she was no angel.

That's a Valkyria. Skuld, I think.

I had already anticipated that Tsukijima was a summoning fighter. Heck, I had even predicted that he was sending a humanoid summoned creature into the dungeon to do his leveling up for him. So it wasn't much of a shock when a Valkyria, one of the top-tier summoned creatures, showed up.

Each summoned creature in the Valkyria series had a different specialty, such as attack, support, defense, and so on. The only one that was this heavily armored was the defense type, Valkyria Skuld.

Her extra skill was Ruthless Defense. This cheat of a skill negated all damage from attacks weaker than a certain point. However, it was useless against the extreme firepower of something like a floor boss. Back in *DEC*, Skuld mainly served as a tank for sorcerers rather than being used solely for this extra skill.

But judging from the smug look Tsukijima was giving me, Ruthless Defense was his trump card. He seemed to think he could nullify any attack I threw at him. Well, we'd find out.

I was riding on the shoulders of a five-meter-tall golem. It was made from all the mithril alloy equipment I picked up at the Gathering of the Fallen, so I should have called him a mithril alloy golem.

Fitted in its back was the core I had crafted from the magic gem the twentieth-floor boss dropped, which glimmered away nicely. This was its weak point, so I had instructed for it to be covered with metal.

"I see. A Machinist's Handmade Golem, eh? And the gems fueling it sure are kicking out a lot of magic," Tsukijima said with an astonished look. "But don't tell me you seriously think a low-level golem like that can contain me and Skuld."

"I do. And?" I fired back.

Cued by Tsukijima's brag, Skuld produced a smirk and mocking laugh. Her condescending attitude surprised me, but then I remembered Arthur's happy-go-lucky Arachne. I deduced that summoned creatures took on their masters' personalities.

"In that case, Skuld, we'll have to crush this false confidence of his."

Skuld drew a circle in the air with her hands, sending magic scattering in a

blaze of light. It had multiple effects on Tsukijima, who was now enveloped in a bluish-white glow. This was a buff skill that significantly increased defense and magic resistance. A major difference from *DEC* was that summoned creatures seemingly knew how to act according to their masters' wishes without even receiving direct orders.

And so I found myself facing a Summoner with a blatantly belligerent smile and his creature with her cool and cocky grin. I could also sense their eagerness to spill my blood, and the battle was just about ready to start. But before that, I decided that it was at least worth trying to ask.

"Let me ask you something. Why are you trying to ruin the game's story?"

"Huh?" Tsukijima drawled in reply. "I lured you out. Isn't that enough?"

If the Eight Dragons' governing system collapsed, it would disrupt most school events. That would leave no route for the "protagonist" to follow and grow, making it extremely difficult to respond to any of the upcoming calamities. That came with the possibility of many deaths. I believed it was our responsibility as players to prevent that, but...

"Next question, then," I continued. "Why are you luring other players out to fight you? What's your aim?"

"Would you shut the hell up already?! I'll tell you if you beat me. Not that there's any future where that happens. Hah!"

With a shout, Tsukijima shot a lightning-fast magic projectile at me, but I didn't even budge. The golem beneath me lifted its hand to guard the missile, generating a sound that was half metallic clang and half explosion.

"Let's put you through your paces to see how strong ya are. Come on, Skuld," said Tsukijima, eyes gleaming and blue fighting spirit ablaze.

He slowly stepped forward, to which Skuld responded with a peculiar, almost whisper of a voice.

"Yes...master."

She took a faintly glowing one-handed sword in one hand and followed her

master, hovering behind him. Her eye mask had seemingly raised itself to leave the clear blues of her pupils exposed, but I felt evil in those eyes that suggested she could control the minds of any who gazed into them.



I had hoped to get an idea of how easy I should go on Tsukijima before we fought, but I was now so furious that I didn't have to think twice about firing back. Kaoru and Sagara had also gotten themselves out of the way, so I knew I could let loose.

While tracing the magic circle for Shadow Step with my left hand, I reached into a pocket—which I'd previously converted into a magic bag—with my right hand and drew a sword. This was the falchion known as Sword of Volgemurt, which I'd picked up by defeating its former owner a while back. I was fond of it because it was a touch more robust than pure mithril, meaning it wouldn't scratch even if you handled it roughly.

This was gearing up to be an aerial battle, so rather than dual wielding I opted to keep my left hand free to let loose magic projectiles. Three-dimensional battles like this easily opened up distance, so an item that improved my jumping would also aid my mobility.

I tightly gripped the sword, gave it a single test swing, and gave my golem a kick on the shoulder as if spurring a horse. Skuld instantly responded by positioning her sword horizontally in a defensive stance. Hoping to overpower her, I charged forward and swung my own weapon down.

We exchanged several clashes, each accompanied by the high-pitched clang of metal striking metal. Tsukijima then circled to trap me between himself and Skuld, preparing to unleash a magic-charged punch. My back was totally exposed, so it was only natural that he'd target it.

"Ha! You're wide open— What?!"

At my signal, the golem, already in the middle of an arcing jump, brought a colossal arm swinging down to where Tsukijima stood and sent the floor tiles flying everywhere—or fragments of them. Tsukijima made a cross shape with his arms in front of him and got out of the way in the nick of time. He brushed the fragments off and began to hover upward with Fly, his face filled with rage as his hands ignited with magic.

"I'll send that low-level golem straight to the scrap pile!"

"Oooorgh!!!" screeched my golem.

Tsukijima unleashed a barrage of magic projectiles from high above, which resembled a meteor shower. The golem simply absorbed the bombardment as it sank into a deep crouch before jumping once more and reaching out to grab Tsukijima up in the air...but failing to secure a firm grip. The mithril alloy would shatter if it took too many hits from the magic projectiles, so I couldn't keep up this fighting style for too long. But it was worth it since it temporarily kept me from being in a two-against-one situation.

In front of me was the Valkyria, her fluttering hair a brilliant gold above the silver of her heavy armor. Those blue eyes of hers were judging me. I assumed a stance to get a good look at what move she would make. But with the ultra-heavyweight golem leaping around nearby and the booms of the magic projectiles, the ground was very unpleasant.

The supposedly sturdy first room of the Arena was now swaying violently, as cracks appeared everywhere and parts of the structure came crumbling down. Could it handle all this?

"I can't afford to drag this one out," I told Skuld. "I'm going to put a stop to this one real quick."

"You babble, human. I need not my master's power to slaughter the likes of you," she responded in a whisper that would be hard to gauge the distance if I couldn't see her.

Skuld must have had contempt for my inferior amount of magic, and being provoked by such a person made her face warp with rage. She was genuinely intent on killing me now. She added two more wings of the light to the pair she already had, then floated gently up before suddenly soaring high. This was an invitation to a midair battle.

I calmly followed her movements with my eyes while rapidly drawing another magic circle. I was going to teach her that she could sprout as many new wings as she wanted. In this enclosed space, I was several times faster.

"Up I go, then! Become the wild wind! Aerial!!!" I yelled.

I bolted up the innumerable platforms that my skill had just created in the air. Skuld, who had flown right up to the ceiling, now spiraled toward me with her sword of light held straight down. When she fixed her aim on me, her body

sparked as if from a surge of electricity. She converted her magic and potential energy into speed and was closing in on me fast. It appeared she wanted to finish this in one shot.

If we collided in this manner, whoever was on the ascent, not the descent, would be badly disadvantaged. Given the challenge of maneuvering midair, it would be hard enough to dodge someone moving at that velocity, let alone mount a counterattack—if it weren't for my platforms.

I used Shadow Step to accelerate at full throttle and zigzagged my way up freely, at a frenzied pace.

My movement of left, right, up, and down at a vertigo-inducing rate placed a heavy burden on my legs, but the pain was only momentary. Skuld still approached at incredible speed, and the gap between us closed in an instant. Just before we came within attacking range of each other, we both let out bursts of magic and moved into our skill motions.

“I shall smite the enemies of the divine! Know the wrath of the gods! Rising Assault!!!”

Rising Assault was a thunder-type sword skill. Its hitbox included the sword and the electricity sparking from the user's body, so the area of attack was much broader than it appeared and packed some serious firepower. It made no sense for me to take that head-on.

I made a skill motion while positioning myself just outside of Skuld's attack range, then twisted around and activated the skill as I passed by her side.

“Wha...?” she gasped, her eyes widening.

“Screw you! Blade of Agares!!!”

Skuld had expected a face-to-face exchange of skills, but I mercilessly pounded my own into her side.

With this unforeseen and explosively powerful sword attack added to her kinetic energy, Skuld lost control and went careening into the Arena wall. The impact generated a huge boom, and meters-long fissures formed. I had already used Aerial to get myself to where I predicted she would crash, and I was just about to follow up with another skill when...

“I don’t think so!”

I sensed magic approaching me from behind and twisted my upper body to evade a magic projectile. Looking down, I saw my golem half-wrecked and collapsing to the floor. It must have taken a heck of a lot of missiles to be in that state after such a short period.

“Gu...ugh...” it groaned.

“I’ve taken out that heap of junk. Ya know, you’re every bit as tough as Risa made you out to be. But that was to be expected. All right, Skuld. Time to break *that* out,” Tsukijima said.

“Yes, master...”

Skuld’s armor was badly dented, and fresh blood trickled from wounds on her arms and brow. But when Skuld bathed in the golden light behind Tsukijima, everything was restored before my very eyes—armor and all. She moved her arms to confirm that all the damage was gone, her eyes brimming with murder and rage.

I had hoped to finish Skuld off with a single skill, but she lived up to her role as the defense specialist Valkyria. Her healing abilities made her a tougher nut to crack than expected.

By her side, Tsukijima retrieved a sharp-edged and yellow crystalline object.

That’s...a skill upriser, I realized.

This item would further strengthen Skuld’s extra skill, Ruthless Defense. It seemed the tactic was to render me even more powerless. A valuable item like that should have been extremely difficult to obtain at Tsukijima’s level. However, it only made sense that he thought it wouldn’t be too precious to use it in a PVP encounter like this.

Creasing the edge of his lips into a grin, Tsukijima thrust out the hand in which he held the crystal and poured magic into it. This prompted Skuld to stretch her arms out wide and look to the heavens as she let the vast swathes of magic flow through her.

So, it was finally time.

“In this mighty display of justice, the wicked shall face merciless annihilation... Ruthless Defense!!!”

The ceiling lit up with gold, and countless specks of what looked like angel’s feathers fluttered down. Valkyria Skuld had activated her extra skill. At the same time, the magic that filled the whole Arena identified me as an enemy, badly restricting my internal circulation of magic and physical movement. This powerful obstruction skill lived up to expectations.



“Based on how you were moving earlier, you can’t be any higher than level 25. That’s about the limit for any of us players at the moment. But that’s way lower than what you need to overcome Skuld’s Ruthless Defense. So, what are you gonna do?”

Any hostile action I made against Tsukijima would be negated in here. That didn’t just apply to my skills but to any sword, unarmed, or golem-based attacks. All of those were completely meaningless now. If level 25 wasn’t enough to overcome that skill, someone below that, like me, would be well and truly helpless.

“And with that, folks, it’s purging time,” Tsukijima continued. “I’ll bend you so thoroughly to my will that you’ll never defy me again. You ready?”

Skuld declared, “I shall pay you back twofold, human. Once I have made you taste the utmost limits of pain, you shall grovel on the floor like the wretch you are and wish for death.”

I didn’t mind that the master and servant were closing in on me with the same sadistic sparkle in their eyes. Still, I wished they would understand the situation. This fight wasn’t about who would establish dominance over the other. It was kill or be killed, literally. At least, that’s what I was prepared for when I jumped down here. So any threats aimed at making me suffer or breaking my will would be useless.

Regardless, I had anticipated that Tsukijima would summon a Valkyria that used Ruthless Defense and that he would buff it with a skill upriser. Anticipating these things didn’t stop them being a pain in the ass, but I had come prepared all the same. In other words...

Everything you’ve shown me, I already saw coming. Nothing you’ve done has exceeded my expectations, Tsukijima.

What I needed to think about now wasn’t how to beat Tsukijima but what to do with him once I did.

I had thought that if he had a serious reason to duel, I would spare Tsukijima’s life and simply leave him this defeat as a punishment. But I couldn’t rule out the possibility that he might continue to trivialize the game’s story and maintain his

destructive behavior with no consideration for his surroundings, thereby harming people whose lives mattered more than my own.

Then it's time to put a stop to this once and—

Before I could finish the thought, my mind froze due to an icy cold sensation. A dark magic that had been suppressed until now began growing within me.

“Huh? Still feel up to resisting, do ya? Or do you just not understand the effects of this skill?” Tsukijima asked, puzzled by how I had remained unshaken by his trump card.

In contrast, Skuld quickly grew cautious and retook her stance with her sword pointed at me. “Master, I must advise that we prioritize killing this one over subduing.”

But before I decided what to do with Tsukijima, what would I do about this annoying defensive barrier? This power allowed him to ruin the game's story and entertain silly plans of taking over the school. I would crush his confidence and ambition with an overwhelming show of strength and make him pay the price for underestimating a fellow player.

Now, I'll show you the ace up my sleeve.

Chapter 16: An Attack to Penetrate an Absolute Defense

Satsuki Oomiya

Thick, dark clouds spiraled, and occasionally a chilling wind blew with a sound like a feeble scream. With its oppressive atmosphere and gloomy, sprawling wilderness stretching for miles, the place was teeming with powerful undead. All this wouldn't make anyone bat an eyelid if they were told it was hell. We were in the hinterlands of the dungeon's fifteenth floor, the hunting grounds known as the Gathering of the Fallen.

Lively voices rang out that were totally at odds with such a landscape.

"Go, go, go, bro! Stick it to 'em!!!"

"What are you playing at, Mav? Blow him away!"

A three-meter-square mat was spread over the sandy soil, upon which sat Kano, Arthur, and I huddled close together as we stared into a tiny, ten-inch monitor that had been placed on the ground. The screen showed two figures staring each other down in miniature: Souta and a crookedly smiling Takuya Tsukijima.

Risa's small wrist terminal was transmitting the footage, so it wasn't all that easy to make out what was happening.

Despite Kano and Arthur's energetic arm movements and loud cheers that had begun a few moments earlier, this was hardly a safe place for us. It was a matter of time that all this enthusiasm would alert the undead to the presence of us living beings.

"Groo...ooorgh..."

With a bare-to-the-bone hand, the thing dragged a large sword along as it set its sights on us and broke into a run. But no sooner had it done so than Arthur blasted it to bits with a single magic projectile without so much as looking up.

He did this every time it happened, and now there were several magic gems left abandoned on the ground around us. I decided that I'd pick them up later so as not to waste them.

How could I describe the battle between Tsukijima and Souta? I had been imagining something involving crossed swords and a magic projectile shoot-out, but what I witnessed was so removed that it was in a whole other realm.

There were glistening, bizarre psychic attacks from above, with iron giants and warrior maidens summoned. The super high-speed airborne clash, as well. It was just one surprise after another, ranging from the skills used to the strategies and swordplay. I wondered if Risa had also experienced this kind of combat, then grew curious about what the two people with me were thinking.

"That golem Souta brought into the fight was straight out of a *tokusatsu* anime, but you didn't seem taken back at all, Kano. Does that mean—?"

"You bet! Me and bro both got the Machinist job so now we can make golems! Hey, hey, watch this. Handmade Golem!"

Kano's face was full of glee as she took out a magic gem and charged it with a little bit of magic, causing a mini golem about fifty centimeters in height to rise from the sand. But due to its dry sand makeup or insufficient imbued magic, it fell apart as soon as it tried to move.

Apparently, there was an advanced job called "Machinist," and the wrecked golem on the screen had been produced by the same skill.

From what I knew, advanced jobs could only be obtained if one was highly well-suited to them and couldn't hold multiple types of jobs at once. And yet here was Kano, waltzing from one advanced job to another. According to her, as long as one's stats and level were high enough, it was possible to change jobs at will. If that was true, it would also open up even more options for skill slots...

The real surprise was the Machinist job. As one gained more experience with it, one could attain a skill that allowed for building a base within the dungeon. Kano had her heart set on using that to make her very own villa at a nice spot. Who knew there was a skill like that?

Today would be the perfect opportunity to rethink everything we thought we

knew about the dungeon. As I somehow managed to calm the confused thoughts racing around my head, Arthur pointed at the monitor and exclaimed that the fight had entered a new phase.

Upon looking at the screen, I noticed that the problematic technique known as Ruthless Defense was about to be activated. A pale light illuminated the interior of the Arena, and a blackish-red mist wrapped itself around Souta as sparkling, featherlike objects floated. I realized this must have been the ace up Tsukijima's sleeve. Staring unblinkingly at this skill, Kano dropped her head to one side.

"So, that's Ruthless Defense?" she said. "Huh...humph. It doesn't look as strong as I thought, but I guess that's your cue, Arthur!"

"All righty, then, time for me to go kick some butt! Kano, Satsuki. Make sure you catch every last bit of my awesomeness!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Arthur hummed as he walked a few paces over the sand before hovering ten meters into the air and stopping in place. He stirred up so much magic that the air around him warped. The ground shook, and even the undead in the distance stopped what they were doing and lowered their posture as a precaution.

Arthur was getting ready to cast Meteor Strike—the same outrageous spell with which he had seen off the dozens of Bloody Barons.

The plan was for Arthur to open up a gate directly above Souta on Risa's signal, through which he would send the huge magic attack crashing down. This would allow the dungeon-bound Arthur to affect the outside world.

The monitor showed Tsukijima brimming with confidence. There must not have been a single doubt in his mind about Ruthless Defense's strength or victory over Souta. He had no idea about the big guns waiting in the wings for him.

Tsukijima's fundamentally misunderstood Souta's tenacity and resolve, I thought.

Souta never intended to engage in a fair, one-on-one fight. His dungeon knowledge and fighting sense were both exceptionally keen, so I was sure he

would still win in an honest duel. Instead, he had anticipated every pattern of attack that his opponent might use, calculated an unfathomable number of ways to beat him, enlisted the help of others as much as he could, and prepared so thoroughly that losing was an impossibility before he challenged Tsukijima.

As such, I didn't think there was the slightest chance of Souta losing. Because Kano knew this, she could relax while watching her beloved big brother fight.

Even then, there were concerns.

The first was that Arthur was aiming his spell into the Arena. The first room of the Arena's sturdiness was the pride of Japan, but there was simply no way it could withstand that kind of magic. The magic would undoubtedly render it useless. All I could do right now was try not to think of the aftermath.

Another concern was the possibility of Tsukijima dying. Risa argued strongly about the importance of finding out why he had planned this duel and putting him on the right track, so it had already been decided that we wouldn't allow him to die. However, breaking through Ruthless Defense without killing Tsukijima would demand extreme precision.

Would Souta really be able to control Arthur's spell on the other side of the gate, as it was supposedly set up?

As I put my hands together to pray for everything to go well, I saw Risa's hand appear large on the screen and point twice at Tsukijima. It was go time.

"There's Risa's signal!" I exclaimed.

"Go! Pound 'em good!" added Kano.

A huge, man-sized, intricate magic circle was already to Arthur's left, where he floated in midair, sparking with an abundance of magic. This could be activated at any time. Arthur nodded once in response to my voice, then thrust his open right hand in front of him to create a shining purple gate that I knew would lead to the Arena where Souta and everyone else were.

"Okay, I'll perform a party trick for you! I hope you can handle it, Mav!!! Meteor Strike!!!"

The unbelievably dense magic was released as a dazzling beam of light before

being swallowed up by the gate.

At the same time, Arthur's spell instantly replaced the pale light of Skuld's Ruthless defense that had previously filled the monitor's screen.

Kaoru Hayase

The incredible battle that followed left me dumbfounded when I returned to the audience with the student council president. I couldn't comprehend what was going on at all. And I wasn't the only one; the people sitting next to me seemed to feel the same way.

"The heck is this? Monster wars?! Who are these people? Come on, tell me everything you know!"

As I recalled, this muscular man sporting a small goatee was the captain of the First Swordcraft Club. He wore a curious expression that seemed angry and maybe even happy as he yelled his questions at Suou.

Judging from the appearance of the tall guy sitting next to him, he was no regular person either. I guessed he was another one of the Eight Dragons.

"One hidden skill after another... Truly fascinating. I suppose when the combatants can fly, the strategies adopted change. And that masked fellow's an expert with a sword in his own right. I'd also love to hear an explanation," said the tall student.

These two had come running over to demand information once Tsukijima's clash against the masked figure began.

A short distance away also sat the captain of the First Magic Club, who wore her long red hair tied up at the back. Her gaze was set dispassionately on the Arena below, but something told me she was straining her ears toward us.

This fight was out of the ordinary, even by the standards of the Eight Dragons. I had watched many videos of the Assault Clans on the front lines of the dungeon, but their tactics were even more conventional than this. It was said that other nations were far more advanced than Japan when it came to dungeon raiding. Could it be that both the masked man and Tsukijima were

foreign adventurers? But even more than that...

How...beautiful.

The man's sword was what really deserved my attention. There was a terrible logic and freedom to it, a sharpness I had never seen before, and such beauty. He was too fast for me to keep up with all of his movements and only used the sword briefly. But the lines the man traced with it, how freely he moved, and his lightning-fast adaptations surpassed my aspirations. This was a true master. Seeing this display of swordcraft up close filled me with wonder, and my heart maintained its violent throbbing from earlier. How happy would I be if I knew how to fight like that?

If Suou knew anything about him, I wanted to hear it too. I listened for Suou's response to the two Dragons, which came in a calm, quiet voice.

"I don't know who that man in the mask is either, and I must admit that I'm a little surprised by the number of strange skills he's used. But as I explained earlier, Takuya has a trump card, which means my confidence in his victory is not shaken. After his defeat, we shall have all the time in the world to question the mystery man about who he is."

"That's true enough, but is that the ace up his sleeve you were talking about?" asked the First Swordcraft Club captain.

The masked man and Tsukijima had been facing each other off and seemingly talking about something for a while when Skuld spread her arms and spoke up to the heavens in a clear voice. Immediately after, a spine-tingling amount of magic rapidly spread outward.

"In this mighty display of justice, the wicked shall face merciless annihilation... Ruthless Defense!!!"

A gentle glow enveloped the entire Arena. Many snow-white, featherlike objects appeared out of nowhere, and I experienced a sensation akin to relief. Other people's magic was usually unpleasant or oppressive, so it was abnormal for me to feel comfortable wrapped up in such a high concentration.

Meanwhile, a black mist shrouded the masked man. I had a very bad feeling about what I saw. This was a defensive skill, but maybe it also came with cursing

effects, just like the golden light. If that were the case, it could mean something scary was happening to him right now, like mind alteration.

I stole a glance at the student council president standing close by and noticed the severe gaze that I expected.

Before this fight began, he had said that the masked man “absolutely won’t lose.” From what I had seen, I certainly had no criticisms of his talent. In fact, I wouldn’t have doubted anyone if they told me he was a member of one of the world’s foremost Assault Clans. But what could he hope to do against this abnormal power that negated every possible attack?

Should it come to it, I’ll have to step in.

I would need several times more courage than the last time I intervened. And so I clenched my hands into tight fists before they could shake and reprimanded myself for being so faint of heart, then I looked at the masked man. Even after he was cursed, he didn’t seem bothered at all.

One would have thought that someone as capable as him would know just how deadly Skuld’s skill was. Could he have exhausted all possible moves and given up?

While these panicked thoughts raced through my head, the masked man slowly raised an arm and pointed straight up. I followed the direction of his finger until my eyes reached a space just below the ceiling, where a small purple ball of light was emitting a bewitching shade of purple. Almost instantly, it grew in size to one meter.



What effects did this thing have? I heard the captain of the First Magic Club gasping nearby. If she knew what this was, I wished she'd share it with the rest of us. Then the masked man spoke.

"Tsukijima. What is it you want? I tried to ask what you were after, but that doesn't matter right now. First, I'll crush your confidence and correct your misconceptions."

"What are you babbling... Wait...is that a gate?"

"It is, master!" said a flustered Skuld. "I shall get you out of harm's way at once. Protection!!!"

The expanded ball of purple light had remained unchanged for a few heartbeats. Just as I thought the conversation was continuing, Skuld stepped in front of Tsukijima and created some kind of barrier.

Immediately afterward, there was a flash of light nearby so intense that it seemed as if the sun itself had found its way into the Arena.

"Chew on this! Meteor Strike!!!"

With an earsplitting sound like a thunderclap, the light crashed to the ground in a flash. I only got a brief glimpse of the heavy-duty mithril-alloy tiles being ripped from the floor.

More lights came crashing down one after another like waves on an angry sea. The overwhelming energy and deafening explosions numbed my senses, and I felt that I would lose consciousness before I had time to work out what was even happening.

"Hayase, this way!"

I was curling myself into a ball out of shock and fear when someone tugged at my hand. As confused as I was, the place they led me to was somewhat more shielded from the booms and blasts, so I could finally open my eyes and see the situation.

"What's...going on? That's... Ah!"

In front of me was the First Magic Club captain, her hair blowing violently as

she stood with both arms against a barrier several meters across as if to prop it up. This barrier was keeping this spot safe. I saw Nitta gripping my right hand and realized she had brought me here.

Suou, the remaining Eight Dragons, and the members of the First Swordcraft Club then slid in behind her to take refuge as well.

“I used a magical item I brought to measure the energy gauge, and it said level 38. Would somebody mind telling me what’s going on here?!”

“What did you say, Hourai?! This is insane!”

“Keep it up, Mistress Isshiki! You’re the only one who can cast a barrier!”

“U-Ugh...” groaned the First Magic Club captain. “Yes, Kusunoki... But it won’t be able to stand this much force for long!”

None of the Eight Dragons had a good grasp of the situation, which was only natural. It was impossible to see anything in the intense light that filled the Arena, not to mention all the explosions and shock waves going off. What had once been tiles and other parts of the building now flung into the barrier at full force, keeping us pinned. All I could do was make myself as small as possible and wait for this to end.

How much time had passed?

In stark contrast to before, silence now prevailed. The confusion and panic made it feel like a long time, but for all I knew, it could have been less than a minute.

I poked my head around the mountain of rubble in front of the barrier to examine our surroundings, but I couldn’t see a thing due to the clouds of dust. A breeze must have blown, however, as the view began to clear.

The first thing my eyes encountered was what remained of the Arena.

Almost every wall and seating area had been destroyed, apart from the side where we had taken refuge. Even the roof had been blown off to show a blue sky. The building hadn’t been designed with such an absurd attack in mind, so I could understand how the Arena could be half torn down, as sturdy as it was.

But more importantly...

Is Tsukijima...still alive?

The place he was likely at was still too clouded with dust to see clearly. Despite the destruction of the foundations and the mithril alloy flooring, I could make out enormous craters here and there. In that case...

Holding their breaths, the Eight Dragons and Suou surveyed the scene of utter carnage as the final cloud of dust cleared. Skuld, now a tiny grain of light, gradually turned to nothing.

And Tsukijima was...there! He was doubled over on the floor in his burned clothes, coughing up a great deal of blood. With his left arm severed at the shoulder, he was all but dead.

It was astounding enough that there was even anything left of his body after being on the receiving end of an attack like that, but to survive as well... Skuld's power was truly extraordinary. The attack may have been toned down just enough to be nonfatal, but that was hard to imagine.

But Tsukijima would certainly perish if left untreated. Just as I was about to dash off to find a Priest teacher, I saw that the masked man now stood behind Tsukijima, brandishing his sword over his head.

"You're going to have to die after all, Tsukijima."

Tsukijima could only pant in response. I could feel the murderous intent in the masked man's magic. As I saw him bring the sword down toward the defenseless Tsukijima's neck, I was going to call out for him to stop until a female student stopped the blade with a giant sword of her own. There must have been considerable force behind the collision, as dust spread out in all directions along with the loud clang of metal on metal.

Nitta. And she had been by my side just a moment before.

She said, "It's over already. I want to hear what Tsukijima has to say for himself about why he did this."

Chapter 17: Takuya Tsukijima's Logic

Down one arm and spewing blood by the bucketload, Tsukijima lay on the ground. Blood had splattered on his uniform, which was now singed in places. A girl with long, silver hair had rushed over to throw herself on him—Kikyou Sera. Unbothered by the blood and dirt now staining her uniform, she held him tight.

“My dear hero, don’t be afraid! My eyes shall save you! Holy Heal!”

Sera turned the Priest away, insisting that she would treat Tsukijima herself. She showed no hesitation in activating Holy Heal in front of others, a hidden skill that only the Holy Woman and those close to her knew. In *DEC*, the player could learn this highly potent healing skill by becoming friendly with Sera.

Its effects were immediate, and Tsukijima’s body fixed itself before our eyes when the skill was cast. A pure-white bone sprouted from where his arm had been cut off at the shoulder. Within a few seconds, bright red muscular tissue and blood vessels formed around it before being swiftly wrapped in skin. The whole process couldn’t have lasted more than ten seconds. Where there had been a pained grimace just a few moments before, Tsukijima’s face had softened, and the red was back in his cheeks as if the lost blood had been replenished.

In my old world, Tsukijima would have been lucky if a whole team of surgeons could keep him alive with the best tools at their disposal. But magic could instantly put his body back together without causing side effects. It wasn’t difficult to imagine the insane demand for magical healing in this world or the immense power and authority it had garnered.

Tsukijima moaned softly.

“Oh, thank goodness...” Sera said with tears in her eyes.

Looking relieved, she used her skill on Tsukijima again to make sure he was all right, then suddenly turned to me with daggers in her eyes.

“I won’t let you lay a single finger on my dear hero. If you insist on doing any further harm to him, you shall have me to answer to.”

Her voice had a slight tremor, but she was still brave enough to say she’d fight me. It seemed she was a little trepidatious after just seeing the duel, though I already knew she had the strength to speak this way.

This was Kikyō Sera we were talking about. She was the next Holy Woman, capable of performing close-combat, magical-combat, and support roles at a high level. Her overall fighting ability was unparalleled among the students of Adventurers’ High. Yet Sera’s permanent equipment, the national treasure, secured her spot as the mightiest on campus.

Even if Sera was not hit directly, she had been so close to where Arthur’s Meteor Strike had just landed and wasn’t even scratched by the debris. She quickly hid “it” away from my prying eyes, but I already knew about it and what it could do. Which was precisely why...

I could have been in trouble if Sera and Tsukijima had teamed up against me.

Although I had taken every precaution before this duel, things would have gone very differently had Sera fought too. On top of that, I had always had a thing for Sera as a heroine since my *DEC* days, so I didn’t even want to contemplate attacking her. Just for her to look at me this way was enough to tug at my heartstrings.

Either way, this was no time to worry about her. A stir was brewing up outside over the wrecked Arena, and the potion that had given me this figure wouldn’t last much longer. I wanted to be alone with Tsukijima so I could talk to him, but doing so would only have the opposite effect than intended and make Sera more wary of me.

I made a pleading face to Kirara, and she quickly got straight to doing what I hoped she would.

“On behalf of the student council president, I, Kirara Kusunoki, forbid any further fighting. The masked gentleman will also obey this command. I believe he wishes to speak with Master Tsukijima, so I request that those not concerned leave—”

“But this is my dear hero! So I most certainly am concerned!” Sera retorted.

“What do you mean by your ‘dear hero’?”

The fact that someone had asked what her “dear hero” was made Sera so agitated that she began explaining it all at a frenzied pace. Kirara skillfully took this opportunity to try to lure her away by reasoning that it sounded like a long story, so they should step to one side for a moment. Not easily fooled, Sera tightened her grip on Tsukijima while glaring at me.

Kirara had no choice but to swear on her family’s honor that she wouldn’t let me harm Tsukijima, ultimately persuading Sera to leave. Honor just had to be that big of a deal to the nobility. It sure came in handy.

Meanwhile, the student council president was ensuring that the students who witnessed the duel would keep quiet about it and was giving explanations to the security guards and school staff who had come running over. I could only leave all those responsibilities for him, but I wouldn’t be able to avoid facing some questions if I stuck around. Tsukijima had seemingly come to now, so it would be best if I went somewhere else as fast as possible.

Tsukijima stared at the sky for a while, then slowly sat up. When he saw his blood-soaked and tattered uniform, his shoulders slumped as he let out a big sigh.

“Ah...so I lost, huh?”

“You sure did. Got your ass handed to you,” Risa informed him. “We need to talk to you, so let’s get out of here quick. They’re getting pretty restless over there.”

“You can tell us every last detail,” I added.

Tsukijima sighed again. “Guess my hands are tied. Take me wherever.”

Risa took out a cloak that would suppress her presence and put it on before urging Tsukijima to move, though it seemed that he didn’t have his own. I would just have to lend him my spare, then.

“Somewhere around here should do. Seriously, though... What a mess you

made of the place,” Risa turned around to taunt him.

Draped in her cloak, she had surreptitiously led our group away from the Arena to a deserted area.

We had come slightly uphill to get here, so we had a good view of the half-ruined state of the Arena’s first room. The roof and parts of the wall had been blown off, making it as well-ventilated as the Colosseum in Rome. I could only say that Tsukijima’s summoning of Skuld had sealed the place’s fate.

If only it was a different kind of Valkyria, I wouldn’t have had to use Arthur’s power...

I had shown up today ready to face a whole host of different fighting styles, mainly focusing on summoning but also magic, hand-to-hand combat, and sword fighting. The worst-case scenario had been that Tsukijima would break out Skuld’s Ruthless Defense, which was the most difficult thing for me to have dealt with alone.

Since I had enlisted Arthur’s help in advance just in case it came to this, I now owed him one big time. The thought of what he might ask for in return made me wince.

Tsukijima came with us nicely and quietly. I had a million things I wanted to ask him about his actions, but Risa’s behavior had raised some concerns.

Even before the duel, she had been insistent that we spare Tsukijima. When I tried to finish him off, she went so far as to unlock part of her “power” in order to stop me.

As Risa said, it was true enough that there was a certain significance in learning something that only Tsukijima might be privy to and using it to inform our future policies. But when one took his temperament and behavior up until this point into consideration, letting him live was a very risky idea. Indeed, my cold and calculating side was ringing the alarm bells.

If Tsukijima knew how the game’s story went, he must also have known that derailing it would lead to countless people suffering and dying. When playing a video game, the deaths of even a million people would feel like nothing more than just a bit of spice to heighten the stakes. But if this were to happen in

reality, this city—this country—would transform into a never-ending hellspace of screams and misery, and we'd have to see it with our own eyes. If we lived that long, that was.

Tsukijima still looked down on the people of this world as NPCs. If he didn't care if they died, and if that attitude harmed the people dear to me... Well, I wouldn't have to think twice.

I glanced at the bespectacled girl who was smiling coolly while knowing the possibility of a showdown. I couldn't get a read on what she was thinking from her expression. That was something else I'd only find out by asking.

"Tsukijima," I addressed him first. "Like I asked during our duel, why did you target a player?"

He furrowed his brow and pouted at the bluntness of the question. When he picked up on my undisguised readiness to kill, he let out a reluctant sigh and started talking.

"Where do I begin? Well...I kinda thought that if you're a player, then you'd also have a unique player skill."

Unique player skill? Oh, like the Glutton skill that I couldn't delete from my skill slots however much I wanted to. Risa had a crazy skill of her own, and so did Arthur. It was safe to assume every player had one, then.

But why were we given them? I hadn't given this question much thought, but Tsukijima said this was the whole reason he went after a player. I didn't really see why challenging me to a fight was the solution he came to, but I decided to hear him out.

"From your reaction, I'd say I was right," said Tsukijima, chuckling. "I've got one too, of course. A big, fat handicap."

His eyes were vacant as he said this, and he tapped his temple with his forefinger. He explained that he felt apathetic and that his thinking capacity had diminished since coming to this world as if everything had turned gray.

It all came down to this weird unique skill. Leveling up wouldn't let him get rid of it. He claimed the only way he could resist the skill's effects was to let himself loose and think about things he wanted in order to make his desire grow.

“And one of the things you wanted was to take over Adventurers’ High?” I asked him.

“No, that’s another story. But to get back on topic, even when I’ve worked up a lot of willpower, it’s still tough to counteract the skill. So, I used Skuld’s ability to analyze it so that I might get rid of it. I tell ya, a lot of stuff came to light.”

Skuld had an ability that was similar to Appraisal and was highly knowledgeable about the dungeon. Although the skill greatly reduced her talents on the battlefield, Skuld reportedly made for an excellent advisor. And what Tsukijima informed me was that unique player skills couldn’t be erased but could actually be upgraded.

That much I already knew, though. I had looked up Glutton with an appraisal wand before, but deliberately upgrading a debuff that ate away at my mind was ridiculous, so naturally I had rejected that option.

I had also recently learned Flexible Aura from Risa, a skill that suppressed the effects of status ailments, removing a major daily obstacle. Even though some old hunger remained, my next goal was to level up further and learn a more powerful spell to counteract it better.

“Flexible Aura, huh? It’s been a lifesaver ever since Risa taught me that too. Thanks to her, now I can just about find the energy to do stuff. But do you realize what upgrading your skill means?” Tsukijima asked.

What it meant? I was willing to upgrade my unique skill as long as I could control my mental burden with Flexible Aura and my willpower. But if I took just one step over the line, I could expect my every thought to be consumed with food. Was there some reason that made upgrading worth that risk?

That was when Risa, who had been listening quietly until that point, grinned and said something preposterous.

“You know what happens if we upgrade our skills? Believe it or not, we can make any wish come true.”

“What?”

Why should training up our skills make our wishes come true? And just what kind of wishes would that extend to? Actually, first things first, how did she

even know this? While Skuld had an analytical ability, I didn't think it was all that different from Appraisal. I asked Tsukijima, and he told me that they found this out by improving Skuld's analysis with a skill upriser.

Back in *DEC*, the Appraisal advanced skill and items existed, so wasting a valuable skill upriser on an intermediate or basic skill would have been unthinkable. However, I could definitely see the worth in them doing so if they were so eager to find out more about the unique skills.

"If I keep leveling up, sooner or later, I'll get my hands on an advanced Appraisal item and learn all the secrets of the unique skills. But before I did that, I wanted to bring all players under my control," Tsukijima said.

"I'm not seeing how you're getting from A to B there," I said after a pause.

"It's like this," Risa answered for him. "Tsukijima didn't want players to go killing each other in hopes of upgrading their skills."

To upgrade a unique player skill, one had to kill another player. This was apparently spelled out for them in no uncertain terms when they analyzed the skill. When I looked up Glutton, it indicated that an upgrade was already available, which could only mean that I had killed a player.

The only person I could think of was that bony bastard, Volgemurt. I was a little shaken to have it confirmed that he had been a player, but Kano would have died if I hadn't killed him. Thinking of it that way freed me from any shred of regret. I wanted to go and say a prayer for his soul to move on peacefully, though.

"Did it say how big these wishes could be exactly?" I probed. "This doesn't sound like a reason for players to fight each other."

Tsukijima responded, "It only said that wishes would be granted. But we're talking about the headcase who made this world. It's probably fair to assume that anything's on the table."

Anything was on the table, huh? What about becoming this world's gods? Given our strength, we could easily achieve that on our own. We were pretty much like gods in our *DEC* days. Even if we didn't go that far, reaching level 50 or so would mean none of this world's armies or adventurers were worthy of

our fear. We could enhance and modify our thinking power and mental capacity or even manipulate the flow of time.

Fighting dangerous players to make a wish to become a god come true didn't seem worth the risk. What if we wished to return to our original world? We had been brought here, so sending us back should also be possible. That might motivate a player to kill, but such a wish had no value for people like Arthur and me, who had no intention of going back.

In that case, what about a more elaborate wish concerning the old world, such as bringing people there back from the dead or rewriting the original world's history? But with no guarantee that wishes like that could come true, they didn't offer much incentive to kill. Or rather, players weren't so dumb as to start casually killing each other just because they were told they could have any wish granted.

Tsukijima may claim that he wanted to control players to stop them from killing one another. As one of the people he tried to control, all I saw was someone out to kill other players so that he could upgrade his own skill.

"I know full well you've got no reason to trust me," he said, "but I don't give a crap about any damn wishes. Now that I'm in this world, I'll get what I want with my own two hands. That's why I can't stand the way they've dangled this carrot in front of us to try and make us murder each other. This guy's probably enjoying the show from way up high somewhere, and it makes me sick."

Tsukijima spat in disgust. He was right; whoever designed this system in which players had skills like ours and the prospective reward of having any wish granted clearly wanted us to be at each other's throats. But this was a different question from the one of whether I trusted Tsukijima.

Noticing that my attitude wasn't softening, Risa came to his defense as she briefly laughed softly. "Tsukijima and I were going to make a nonaggression pact that would prevent us from interfering with each other's activities and objectives so long as they don't directly go against our interests. So I think we can trust him for now."

"I'm dropping out of the leveling-up race," Tsukijima added. "I don't think I can beat you, so I'm gonna keep to myself from here on in."

Tsukijima had sent the untiring and unkillable Skuld into the dungeon to rack up easy experience points for him, acquiring an advanced job before any other player. He had expected to be able to bend any player who came his way to his will.

He would have strayed from the game's story by ruling over Adventurers' High. If he had mobilized all the nobles and players now under his sway, he could easily handle any threat, even without Akagi or Pinky. Such was Tsukijima's judgment before he acted, which unbelievably led to his defeat.

Sending Skuld into the dungeon to hunt on his behalf would only get less and less efficient now, so he had no choice but to pull out of the leveling-up race. That being the case, any hopes he had of defeating me were gone. With his shoulders slumped, Tsukijima stated that he would do nothing to draw attention to himself from now on.

"Well, that's all there is to tell you. If you've got any other questions, fire away. But..."

"No, that will do for now," I declined. "But let me warn you. If you do anything else to ruin the game's story...I'll show no mercy."

"Right, and I'll keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't try to pull anything funny," Risa chimed in. "If anything happens, I'll act as the mediator."

I had learned Tsukijima's reasons for contriving this duel, as well as his unique skill and secrets. While I still couldn't understand many of his actions, such as trying to take over the school, I had gotten a handle on its underlying logic. I worried about how much longer my transformation potion would last, so I decided I had heard all I needed right now.

However, the recent chaos erased any hope of restoring the story to its original state. I hoped to enlist President Sagara's help to correct its course, even if only a little. But with only a tiny part of his term still to go, it was hard not to feel like I was in a real fix.

I assumed that much of my game knowledge was already useless and that some events would no longer occur. Another review of the game's events would be needed to decide which ones to prioritize. Every thought I had made me feel more frantic.

“If I’m no longer needed, I’ll be on my way home. I’ll leave the four players who aren’t here up to you. Later.” Tsukijima, with his hands stuffed into his pockets and a slightly slouched posture, departed with an air of sadness.

Hang on a sec. What does he mean by the four players who aren’t here?

Chapter 18: The New Student Council

We were in the gate room on the twentieth floor of the dungeon. The floor was paved with stones packed tight against each other, which had previously made the place give off a cold, dark impression. Lights, a bed, furniture, and a television were now fitted everywhere, so it felt very homely. The same prepubescent voice still bounced off the walls, though.

“Oh, yeah, gotta have that! Ah, delicious!”

Arthur kept shoveling the selection of sweets on the table into his mouth despite his cheeks being crammed. These were apparently his favorites back in our old world; he shook his curly horns all around in delight.

He held out his glass to me without saying a word, and I filled it with cola. He downed it in a second, then held the glass out again and motioned with his chin for me to refill it. I had been down here acting as Arthur’s assistant for a few days to work off my debt for the duel... But now I wondered if it wasn’t time for a peasant’s revolt.

Beside Arthur was Risa, resting a grinning face on her hand as she occasionally munched on the odd potato chip. She seemed to be enjoying the spectacle of Arthur’s indulgence.

“So, seven players in all, huh? Let’s see, who do we know about so far? There’s me, Mav, Risa...” Arthur counted on his fingers.

“Tsukijima and good old Volgemurty,” Risa finished for him.

“Hey, what’s with the pet name?” I objected.

Tsukijima theorized that there were seven players. Between them, Arthur and Risa had just listed five.

If there really were seven, that would mean there were two people we didn’t know about. But before that, I had to tell Risa that using pet names for Volgemurt was unnecessary when “bony bastard” more than sufficed.

“But why does Tsukijima think there are seven? Could it be that he already knows everyone?” I pondered.

“He said he deduced it from the unique skills he and I have,” Risa explained.

All the players who had entered this world had had certain unique skills forced upon them. While these skills buffed some stats, they were a real nuisance as they greatly reduced important stats and came with powerful debuffs that ate away at our mental states. Worse, there was no way to erase them. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to call it a curse.

In my case, I was afflicted with a skill called Glutton that put me in a permanent state of hunger. When I first arrived in this world, it had sapped all my willpower and left me severely obese. I remembered being unable even to move about properly and having a hard time just climbing the stairs, let alone going dungeon diving.

Similarly, Risa had a unique skill called Libido, while Arthur had Jealousy. Although I couldn’t see any common thread between these skill names, I made the connection when I arranged their upgraded versions in a row: Gluttony, Lust, and Envy. I realized these were the seven deadly sins.

Working backward from the knowledge that the seven deadly sins served as the basis for the unique skills, we could deduce that there were an equal number of skills, implying the presence of seven players.

Which raised a new question.

“So, that leaves...uh?”

Risa came to my rescue. “The four unique skills other than our own are Pride, Greed, Wrath, and Sloth. Sloth belongs to Tsukijima, so there are three skills with unknown owners, right?”

In other words, it was as follows:

Souta Narumi Glutton → Gluttony

Risa Nitta Libido → Lust

Arthur Jealousy → Envy

Takuya Tsukijima ??? → Sloth

Volgemurt ??? → ???

Unknown ??? → ???

Unknown ??? → ???

Unknown skills: Pride, Greed, Wrath

Which one seemed to fit the bill for Volgemurt? With how aggressive he had been straight off the bat, Wrath sounded about right to me. But without a way to confirm, we were still in the dark.

Next to me, Arthur was counting on his fingers to get it into his head which player was which. Then, as if he had just realized something, he asked a new question.

“Hey, hey. Risa, if you haven’t taught these guys Flexible Aura, they must be out of their minds right now ’cause they can’t suppress their unique skills. Right? Though I have a resistance to mental attacks, so I was able to more or less keep myself together.”

Players’ unique skills wore down their owners relentlessly. Assuming that Risa hadn’t taught any other players to use Flexible Aura to alleviate these status conditions, it would be difficult for them to sustain their mental health. Arthur’s reasoning, therefore, was that anyone who seemed a little crazy at school might be a player.

“Hmmm... No students spring to mind in particular. What do you think, Souta?”

“I’m not sure I’ve noticed anyone strange other than Tsukijima. There’s also the possibility that they were sent to the dungeon like Arthur and Volgemurt.”

Comparing this world’s Class E with that of *DEC*, I couldn’t think of anyone who’d acted weirdly apart from Tsukijima. Even if players were in other classes, I expected I would have heard something if their unique skills had driven them to do something rash. So, by process of elimination, that only left the dungeon. But then...

“In that case, we’ll run into them sooner or later if we keep dungeon diving.

Pretty scary, huh?” Risa brooded.

Since I needed to level up to get through the upcoming events of the game’s story, I had to descend to even lower levels of the dungeon. If I encountered a player in a poor mental state down there, it would mean a fight on the spot.

Then there was the reward of having one’s wishes granted, as Tsukijima had mentioned. From that, I couldn’t rule out that even someone of sound mind could be out for blood.

Damn it. If it wasn’t for these stupid skills, I’d be able to happily sing this world’s praises in peace...

As I was feeling sorry for myself and mulling these problems over, Risa poured me a delightfully fragrant tea from a flask. It was just the thing to make my mind off it. I immediately picked up my cup, enjoying the distraction, when Risa looked at the screen of her wrist terminal and pulled another inscrutable face.

“What is it? Another problem?” I asked.

“No, nothing like... Actually, maybe it is a problem of sorts. There’s been some goings-on in the aftermath of the duel. You haven’t had a notification?”

I checked my own terminal to confirm that I did have one. It looked like it had been sent from the student council to all students. Arthur leaned over to see what the fuss was over.

“Apparently, Sera is now the only candidate to be the next student council president. She’s already appointed Kouki Suou as vice president and Tsukijima as a special advisor.”

Ashikaga, the rival candidate, had withdrawn, and the Eight Dragons hadn’t endorsed anyone else, effectively confirming Sera as the next president. In the game, she didn’t exercise her appointive powers until after summer break was over. Scratch that—the real thing was *who* she had appointed.

“Why is Tsukijima... Actually, Sera’s probably forced this on him, hasn’t she?” I pondered.

“What’s with this?” said a similarly bemused Risa. “I thought Suou and Kikyou got on like cat and dog. Weren’t they at each other’s throats in the game?”

Sera had been calling Tsukijima her “dear hero” since the duel and was so all over him that it astonished everyone. She had even been spotted turning up at the male students’ dormitory where he lived, helping him with various tasks as if she had made herself his wife or something. Every time I heard stuff like this, my jealousy gauge skyrocketed.

As for Suou, he made no attempt to distance himself from Tsukijima despite losing, instead actively cooperating with Sera and her starstruck ways. Arthur wondered what had happened to the bad blood they had shared since middle school. Still, it probably seemed petty to them compared to the knowledge and power that Tsukijima had to offer.

But how would this trio run the student council? Even though I had made Tsukijima promise not to cause any more disturbances, I felt nothing but uneasy about this.

“It also sounds like there’s tension between the First Magic Club and the Holy Woman organization. It could be trouble if we leave things to play out,” Risa warned.

Some of the factions that comprised the Eight Dragons had been waiting outside the male students’ dormitory in an attempt to contact Tsukijima. In response, Sera had enlisted some shrine maidens who belonged to her family’s Holy Woman organization. As such, it was reportedly a touch-and-go situation.

“The First Magic Club, huh? That’s Otoha Isshiki’s group,” Arthur recalled, knitting his brow in concern. “She was still friendly with Kikyou at this point in *DEC*, but I guess she’s already shown her true colors.”

“I guess she’s more interested in Tsukijima than Sera, right?” Risa added.

Club leader Isshiki could easily pass for a heroine with her diminutive frame, sweet looks, and ever-present meek smile. Truthfully, this troublesome character had a terrible personality and was extremely driven, not to mention her fervent belief in aristocratic supremacy. In the game’s story, she was one of the main culprits who kept Class E down, and there was a violent clash with her when Akagi or Pinky defeated a higher class.

If things went as they did in the game’s story, Isshiki would only collide with Sera later on once she sided with Akagi. At this point in the school year, Isshiki

should have been quietly supporting Sera's election campaign and establishing a close relationship with her. It was too soon for there to be this discord between them. Then again, it was no wonder that witnessing the duel would cause her interest to shift to Tsukijima.

"If it's only Tsukijima trying to blow himself up, that's fine and dandy. But that can't be all, right?" Arthur stated. "There must be some scary folks pulling the strings behind Isshiki and Kikyuu, and the story will really get screwed up when they show themselves, won't it?"

"That's another tricky one," Risa concurred.

"But all they can likely do for now is stay in the shadows behind Sera," I said.

Apparently, Tsukijima had sought to dominate the Eight Dragons by making them fear his strength to avert such situations, but we defeated him before he had a chance to do so. This meant that the Eight Dragons were still beyond his control, and it wouldn't be surprising if certain factions, such as the First Magic Club, decided to take harsh measures.

To make matters worse, if the people behind the Eight Dragons emerged from the shadows, the school events would be skipped over, effectively missing out the middle part of the story. In that eventuality, Akagi and friends would be powerless to do anything since not even half a year would have passed since they started school. We would have to handle it all.

Perhaps Tsukijima being a student councillor would alter things. Since members had the authority to penalize other students, it wouldn't be a simple matter for even nobles to mess with him. This might have been Sera's thinking when bringing him into the council.

If it keeps Isshiki and the others quiet, that settles that...

Nope, that wasn't happening. If Suou and Tsukijima were sitting on it, I couldn't help but worry about the student council. I also couldn't predict how Sera would act with those two by her side. The biggest question was whether her administration would seek to rescue Class E as it did in the game. If only Risa could keep a close eye on them all...

Wait a sec. "Can I just check if you were invited to join the student council,

Risa?" I asked.

"I was, but I declined the offer. I'd already been completely exposed as being on your side, Souta, so I don't think they would've spoken about anything important in front of me anymore. Besides, I'd like to avoid being too close to Sera."

"You mean with how she turns into the final boss?" Arthur surmised. "Plus, Suou's a boss, so you'd feel pretty darn uncomfortable around them even if you were on the council."

Depending on the choices one made when playing *DEC* as a female character, Sera could end up as the game's final boss. Going against her would also invoke the enmity of the Holy Woman organization, making daily life difficult. Like Risa said, it would be prudent to keep our distance from her just in case.

"And by the way, the student council offered Hayase a seat too, as it happens. Or rather, Tsukijima did. But it sounds like she turned him down. Obviously, she would after the cold way he treated her," Risa said.

"For sure," I agreed. "But Kaoru's got no interest in the student council, anyway. I expect she's fully focused on herself right now."

Kaoru had been caught up in the duel and paid a price for it. My heart had ached at the sight of her weeping and lamenting that she had been too weak to stop Tsukijima. But I also saw glimpses of the same strength she showed in *DEC*.

She could become a *bona fide* heroine if she and Akagi pushed each other to reach new heights, just like in the game. Or she should be able to at least, but now the game's story was looking iffy. Even the Eight Dragons recognized the authority of the student council. To have all these councillors plucked from Class E posed a serious risk that the events involving conflict with the upper classes and Eight Dragons may no longer occur.

Without rivals to up my game, I couldn't develop my strength as I'd hoped. Accordingly, it wasn't an option to give up on letting people like Akagi or Kaoru continue to grow. Some shoring up was in order to avoid the bleak future that awaited us.

"About this shoring up," Risa began. "Hayase has asked several times who the

person in the mask was. She wants him to teach her how to fence.”

“How to fence? Surely it makes more sense for you to teach her, Risa,” I reasoned.

“I think your fighting style would be pretty tough for her to learn, Kaoru or not. Ooh, but I could teach her how to fight with magic...” Arthur drawled.

Kaoru’s style of swordsmanship in *DEC* was a traditional kind of Japanese fencing, descended from kendo. Refined throughout countless battles, it was as beautiful as it was effective and the object of many people’s admiration. It didn’t really seem like my place to butt in and mess with that when all I’d done was pick things up by engaging in PVP over and over.

I believed that Risa, a practitioner of Western-style fencing who was well-versed in Japanese swordsmanship, was a far better fit for the job as she could bring out Kaoru’s full potential. Risa looked up as if considering the issue, then spoke of how Kaoru had seemed to her.

“The thing is, it was almost as if she were after something more pressing than just learning fencing. This is just a feeling, but it was like—”

“Oh, are they here?”

Midway through Risa’s sentence, the gate pattern emitted a purple light, bathing the room. Arthur immediately rose to his feet, betraying how he had been waiting for the arrival of these two people.

“And...we’re back! We’ve got loads of rice and veggies.”

“I’ll put the rice cooker and stove right here. You get plenty of meat?”

Kano carried a bag in both hands and cheerfully hopped in, her pigtails bouncing. Satsuki followed, then placed several boxes on the table.

“Only so much that we’ll never get through it all, Satsuki,” said Arthur, chest puffed out with pride and pointing at the heap of meat on the kitchen table.

“Wow, no way! Is this all Mamu meat on the bone?!” gasped Kano as her eyes lit up.

“You bet,” Arthur boasted. “I’ve never had it myself, actually. I wonder if lizard really tastes that good.”

It was all Mamu meat that Risa, Arthur, and I had run around farming before we came here. Mamu were ferocious, man-eating lizards about two to three meters in length. The meat they rarely dropped was delicious and popular enough that one hundred grams fetched prices in the tens of thousands of yen. There weren't that many Mamu, and their tendency to flee when things didn't go their way made them very hard to kill. The three of us happened to know a hunting ground where great herds gathered. We set a trap, surrounded them, and easily bagged ourselves a massive haul.

This was what we were all here for, a *yakiniku* party. Despite the many issues we had just discussed, we had to get together to recognize the difficult thing we had achieved in stopping Tsukijima's rampage so that we had the confidence and hope to keep going. We didn't see anything wrong in unwinding for a day, so we made these informal plans for a get-together.

"All right, I'll make the gate, so follow me. I'll escort you, cuties. Mav, you grab all the meat and stuff," Arthur ordered.

"Right," I said after a pause.

This fiend sure had a way with people.

The original plan was to throw the party in the gate room, but we abandoned this due to its dinginess, cramped space, and lack of any smoke outlet. The shrine hall above us, while bright and spacious, came with the chance of other adventurers walking in on us and bringing potential trouble. Though there were other places in which Arthur could stay in his humanoid form, such as floor fifteen, the idea of having a cookout at an execution site wasn't all that appealing. In which case...

"Okay, Gate," Arthur hummed. "Man, it's been ages since I've been home."

He flipped his wrists up and released some magic, and then a great purple-colored light popped up. As long as we had Arthur and his spell, we could travel anywhere in a flash, no matter how far. This could easily give one a false sense of security, but we would have to remind ourselves that we couldn't reach the destination on our abilities alone.

"Th-This leads to...the thirty-eighth floor, right? If there's even one monster there..."

“No monsters,” assured Arthur. “Oh, but it is kinda chilly, so be careful not to catch a cold, okay?”

Satsuki was hesitant about suddenly traveling somewhere much deeper than the current Japanese record. The vicinity of Arthur’s home was a special area free from monsters spawning, which seemed relatively safe. However, it was also built in a place where snow fell year round, so the temperature was going to be considerably lower than our present location. That should have been fine since we had warned everyone to bring a coat beforehand.

Kano quickly took out a jacket, pulled her arms through it, and hopped from foot to foot as she prepared to leap through the gate. Risa beat her to it, though.

“Shotgun the first ride. Hup!”

“Then I’m second!”

The fearless Risa was the first through the gate, and a sparkling-eyed Kano followed with rice and vegetables under her arms. Satsuki had obviously accepted her fate, and I was amused with how she went in one foot at a time.

Eagerly anticipating the delicacy we would receive, I jumped into the purple light with high spirits.

Chapter 19: A Castle for a Fiend

A vast expanse of pure white met me on the other side of the gate.

Snow was pouring down from a leaden sky, and no vegetation was growing as far as the eye could see. From the way the air bit at my nose, I could tell the temperature was a little south of zero degrees Celsius.

“It’s f-freezing! And this thick magic... So, this is the thirty-eighth floor, huh?” said Kano.

“A total snowscape... So places like this really do exist!” Satsuki exclaimed.

They huddled to battle the cold and eagerly surveyed the scene. Unlike the sweltering savanna maps of the twenty-first to thirtieth floors, floors thirty-one through forty were all frozen tundras. Arthur’s home was also in this territory, built on the peak of a freezing-cold mountain where it snowed all year.

“Okey dokey, so... Huh? That’s your house, Arthur?” asked Kano, looking up and exhaling a white mist. “It’s way bigger than I thought it would be.”

“It’s not so much my house as it is a place I’ve been borrowing,” Arthur said.

“House” wasn’t really the word for the building Kano had spotted. Towers jutted out with no discernible pattern, eerie lights shone from the countless windows, and the gigantic Gothic castle must have been dozens of meters tall. Commonly known as the Devil’s Keep, it was the abode of a fiend.

The twentieth floor of the dungeon was called the Devil’s Keep in this world, but that was just a pale imitation of where the fiend really lived. Kano tilted her head at my display of knowledge.

“So a fiend lives there, but it’s called the Devil’s Keep? Why not the Fiend’s Keep?”

“Well, Kano, that would be because the fiend summons loads of demons,” I explained.

This place was known as the Devil’s Keep and not the Fiend’s Keep because

the fiend called forth hordes of demons with his unique ability, Demon Summon, to repel any adventurers that came his way. Arthur informed us with a frown that it was a real nuisance when that happened because the whole castle would be swarming with them.

Demons had special abilities, were intelligent, and were tricky monsters to fight. The lesser demon that served as the twentieth floor's special floor boss was still fresh in my memory, but he actually belonged to the lowest class of demons. He was nothing more than a grunt, in other words.

The middle orders of demons had tougher physical abilities and could casually reel off high-grade mental attacks and big spells. At our current level, an encounter with just one of these would be sure to see us wiped out. As if that weren't enough, the fiend would summon so many demons that the massive castle was filled with them. For this, the fortress was known to *DEC* players as the Devil's Keep.

Looking back, the times I spent joining up with major Assault Clans and battling the legions of rampant demons were good memories.

"I-I don't suppose you can also use this Demon Summon spell, can you?" fretted Satsuki.

"Not right now, but I think I can get there if I keep working at it. Hnngh!"

Arthur's response to Satsuki's worry was to thrust his hands out and try to summon a demon, but I wished he'd cut it out since it would be a pain in the butt on the off chance he succeeded.

Despite Arthur's happy-go-lucky attitude, it was easy to forget he was a fiend. Just as I had found myself in Piggy's body, Arthur had also found himself in a fiend's. Unlike how Piggy's consciousness had fused with mine, Arthur's fiend was separate from him and remained totally dormant. Consequently, Arthur could neither access the fiend's memories nor use any of his abilities.

The original owner of this body was a fainthearted child fiend who rarely appeared in *DEC*, keeping himself hidden in the castle that now towered before us. His very occasional appearance to adventurers made him a super rare character in the game, so it was some bad luck for him that the merry and headstrong Arthur would ultimately take him over. I could offer him nothing but

my condolences.

“Oooh, it’s way too cold, and the snow’s only getting heavier. Shall we hurry on in?”

“Y-You can say that again! Arthur, lead the way, please!”

Risa had been rubbing her thighs together to keep the cold at bay the whole time we talked and evidently could take no more. She had brought a coat but only had a skirt on her lower body, leaving her legs fully exposed. That certainly must have been rough out in this weather. It looked like Kano also felt the cold in her hands as she urged Arthur to take us inside.

Physical enhancements came with the benefit of being able to withstand changes in temperature to a certain extent, but cold was cold. This conversation could wait until we were inside, so I decided to join in with the demands to be brought in.

We arrived at the front of the keep after a few minutes of trudging through the deep snow, where the enormous castle gates swung upon noisily of their own accord as if to usher in their lord. Beyond them, a bright entrance lay wide open.

“It’s more beautiful and grand than I thought it would be. Hey, are you rich, Arthur?” asked Kano.

“Well, you won’t find any money lying around,” he said.

The entranceway had an ancient feel with its stone construction, but the overall atmosphere was that of a stylish old European castle. A red carpet was laid out on the stone floor, while the chandeliers and wall-mounted candles welcomed us with a warm glow. Smelling money, Kano had that sparkle in her eyes again.

Building a castle like this outside the dungeon would definitely set one back a few billion yen, although there were no construction costs in the dungeon. With someone like Arthur, whose motto was to spend his money as soon as he earned it, it was unlikely he would have any piles of cash saved up.

“This spot would be just fine for the party, but maybe the throne room would

be better since it's bigger and all. Where do you fancy?"

"Throne room?! Let's do it in the throne room!" said Kano giddily.

"Somewhere warm would be nice. I'm chilled to the bone here," said Risa.

This entrance hall was poorly sealed, letting a cold draft enter. The throne room was spacious and well-built, so it was likely a much better place for Risa, who was pulling a troubled face at the nip in the air.

We traveled through the huge castle, ascending several extravagantly wide flights of stairs and walking through long corridors that had so many doors it felt like a hotel. We had already come a long way yet still hadn't reached our destination. Following Arthur's lead, I pondered that this place had to be bigger inside until a large pair of double doors finally came into sight. This looked to be the throne room.

A showdown with the fiend was supposed to happen here. But the lord of this castle—the original owner of Arthur's body—had a neutral stance toward adventurers. Hence, the room never once became a battlefield.

Kano, eager to see inside, impatiently pushed the doors open to reveal a luxurious room that looked like something medieval royalty would use. Its walls and ceiling had simple decorations, and the raised area near the throne had a red, beautifully patterned carpet laid over it. I had this kind of thing in mind, but the only problem was...

"Why's it all like this?" Arthur muttered after glancing around the room.

What appeared to have once been vases were smashed, paintings were torn, and the throne was tipped over on its side. The carpet that covered the room also had holes here and there, which looked like the aftermath of a burglary. There were even patches that looked like they had been burned as well.

Arthur tilted his head in confusion, claiming that the room had been tidy before he left. That meant this had happened after his departure.

But what caused this? I had an idea of my own.

"Um, there's something over there..."

Kano pointed to a mysterious creature that lay dozing on its back. It had a short and stout figure, with a head about three times the size that of a human with a large, fanged mouth. If I had to compare it to an animal, it reminded me of a chubby hippo.

I quietly approached to get a better look and found that its body was covered in reddish-brown scales and had small, batlike wings on its back. This was no hippo. I had no memory of such a strange creature being here... Just what kind of species was it?

“Who’s this? He’s kinda cute. I bet he’s a good boy!”

“Cute? Hmmm, I’m not so sure...”

Looking at the mystery creature’s sleeping face up close, Kano and Satsuki debated whether the thing was cute. It still showed no sign of waking. Far from it, it was happily blowing enormous snot bubbles. If this was a monster, it needed to have its license stripped right away. Just as I thought this, Arthur did something surprising.

“Hey, wake up!”

“Gyah?!”

Arthur pounded a clenched fist hard into the mystery creature, which had been drooling away in its deep slumber. It reacted by flashing its golden eyes open, fluttering into the air, and taking a guarded posture.

“Master?! Gargh... Humans?! You would do my master harm, would you? You scoundrels—”

“Idiot! These guys are my friends, so leave off,” Arthur said.

“Gyah! Friends?!”

After the hippo thing opened its wide jaws to attack, Arthur had given it another blow and sent it sprawling. We all stood blinking, unable to process what was unfolding. It seemed these two knew each other, at least.



“Please forgive me. I was none the wiser. Oh, I’m totally unprepared... Please, make yourselves at home.”

It lumbered over to us on all fours with its head bowed as it spoke in a voice resembling a small child.

“N-Not a problem. Arthur invited us here today. Nice to meet you.” Satsuki offered her own repeated bows, making for quite a surreal sight.

There were very few monsters that could communicate with adventurers using human language. Searching my memories of *DEC*, I could only think of certain high-level monsters with such an ability. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Arthur clenched his fist again. “First. Things. First. Was it you who made this mess? I left it all nice and tidy.”

“No! Some scoundrel wrecked the place, so I was here keeping watch!”

“But... You were asleep, weren’t you?” Kano interjected.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” cringed the hippo thing after a moment.

Despite the professions of innocence, it didn’t seem plausible that an adventurer would be down here on the thirty-eighth floor, and neither had any monsters spawned in the castle. If it wasn’t the hippo who trashed the room, who was it?

The creature sure looked sound asleep for one who claimed to be on guard. When Kano pointed this out, it turned its massive face away and played dumb. It looked like this thing was quite the buffoon.

“Even if it was someone else, we should be fine as long as you’re here. Right, Arthur?” Risa checked with a smile on her face.

“Well, you know. Nobody can touch me when I’m in here,” Arthur confirmed with a self-assured nod.

Devil’s Keep was fitted with devices that strengthened the fiend, simultaneously giving him several powerful buffs. Supposing someone in here was up to no good, it would be no problem.

Regardless, we were only here to eat, not dole out justice to a vandal. I was keen to quickly prepare our meal and chow down before we ran into this person, but...

This place is a little too trashed, I observed.

Since we were in the dungeon, we could leave the vases and paintings alone to fix themselves. They weren't a concern, but dining in a room this messy would spoil our enjoyment of the food. As such, Satsuki suggested that we just sweep all the debris into a corner of the room. She handed each of us the brooms she had brought along, and we started tidying up.

While everyone was at work, I unpacked the gear we'd brought and set it up in a spot that had already been cleaned up.

"I'll put the barbecue and the table here. The meat too," I announced.

"We should cook the rice first. I'll just borrow this power strip," Satsuki told me.

"I've been wondering what smells so good," the mystery creature said. "What are you going to make?"

Satsuki quickly cleaned the room before inspecting the magic-gem-fueled power strip into which she intended to plug the rice cooker. Behind her, I was arranging the Mamu meat on the table when who should approach but the creature, with its nostrils twitching away.

"What a delicious aroma."

"It's Mamu meat. We've got lots if you want to try some?" I said.

"Of course my master's friends would be so kind! Then I most certainly will try some."

With all the drooling right in front of me, I was left with little choice but to make that offer. It wasn't as if we could get through all this anyway. There was no harm in sharing some food.

But the more I look at this thing, the stranger it gets...

Was it a hippo or a lizard? Since I could freely communicate with it, I assumed its brain would work the same way as a human's did. But there was also the

possibility that the creature might operate on a completely different mental framework, much like a fiend. What did this creature think, and what would it do now? This boggled my mind.

Risa, who had just put her broom away, also seemed deeply intrigued by the mysterious beast. She surrounded it, watching it curiously as it stared in captivation at the meat.

“Arthur, was this little guy always in the castle?”

“I found this ginormous egg in the storehouse back there,” said Arthur, drawing a huge circle in the air. “I heaved it into a pan and started boiling it, then he hatched. The hot water didn’t even bother him.”

“Master incubated me, for which I am most grateful,” added the creature.

“So he’s only a few months old?” Risa queried after a pause.

I had been tempted to ask Arthur what he thought he was doing by trying to eat something like the egg when he didn’t even know what it was, but I decided there were a few other things to consider first.

The first was that, as Risa had pointed out, this hippo thing would only be a few months old if Arthur had made the egg hatch. Despite its young age, it had a decent mastery of human language and could even hold a conversation, even if there were a few oddities in its speech. Was it possible to attain such a grasp of language in this short time?

If it was possible, where did it learn? Arthur had been almost entirely absent from the keep, so there was no conceivable way it could have learned from him.

Then there was the fact it came from an egg. Usually, monsters emerged from a black mist, though some hatched from eggs. But I had no recollection of a monster that laid huge eggs around the thirty-eighth floor. The original owner of Arthur’s body must have brought it here from another floor, but what kind of egg was it? There was every chance that its mother had been something colossal.

I wanted to ask all of this out loud, but...

Whatever he is, he doesn’t seem like a bad guy, I thought.

The mystery creature dribbling an ocean of saliva onto the floor reminded me of one of those cuddly mascot costumes. There was no way that he was just acting dumb to trick us into letting our guard down. Kano also appeared to have grown fond of him, constantly caressing his giant head and calling him a good boy. I discarded my concerns in the interest of interspecies relations.

However, Risa's curiosity wasn't yet sated. She took a short stick from her bag and crouched in front of the hippo thing.

"Mind if I appraise you?"

"Ngyah? What is 'appraise'?" asked the hippo thing.

"Risa, you can handle the pork miso soup if you're free," Satsuki said.

The hippo thing turned its two round eyes up at Risa's appraisal wand, but behind them, Satsuki had finished fiddling with the rice cooker and was eager to begin. Risa also gave him a pat on the head and said she'd do it later, then picked up a pan and some ingredients to get to work. I could talk to him anytime; food was the top priority right now. So, I joined in with the preparations.

"All right, the meat's cut and ready to go. Time to grill!"

"I'll do it with you, bro! Hey, get that sauce we brought along."

"I'll use this pan, Satsuki."

"Okay, Risa. I'll help."

Satsuki scraped some freshly sliced vegetables on a plate as Risa filled a big pan with water and turned on the heat beside her. She had even told me that Risa made a mean pork miso soup, so I was looking forward to this.

Meanwhile, Kano had taken up a position by the meat. I handed her some herbs and the sauce made according to a secret Narumi family recipe—something our mother had seen on TV long ago—and instructed her to coat the meat with it. My job was to put the charcoal in the barbecue. Mamu meat was apparently fatty and thus easy to burn if you weren't careful. I'd just have to play it by ear as I went along.

I first tried putting a steak-shaped piece of Mamu meat on the grill to ensure the flames weren't too intense. It started smoking slightly and giving off a fragrant aroma right away.

"Nghyah... Such a superb smell. Completely different from the magic gems I've always eaten," the hippo thing said.

"Speaking of which, that's all you've ever eaten, right? They taste any good?" asked Arthur.

"Some did, others not so much."

The hippo thing claimed to have grown so large by eating the many magic gems that Arthur had amassed by defeating monsters to pass the time. According to him, magic gems retrieved from healthy monsters that had been killed instantly generally tasted better than those from monsters that had exhausted their magic before dying.

From the drool he was producing as he gawped at the meat, I assumed he could also eat regular food. I tested this by pinching a small chunk between my fingers and bringing it to his mouth, after which his massive jaws filled with sharp fangs snapped it up faster than the eye could see.

"Careful, it's hot," I cautioned.

"Mmm, what *is* this? So succulent. I've never eaten anything but magic gems until now. Who knew that meat was so delectable?"

I was worried he might burn his mouth by putting the whole thing in it, but he was utterly unfazed. Slowly chewing on the Mamu must have awakened a taste for meat because now he was saying strange things about how he should have eaten that human who attacked him. What human?

"While master was away, I patrolled the area around home on foot daily. As I did so, I came across a human."

"What kind of human? An adventurer?"

"He wore tattered clothes. He is the same one who assaulted me and vandalized this room. I suspect he's still somewhere nearby."

I pressed the hippo thing for more details about this human, or whatever he

was. He told me he had been taking a nap after a meal of magic gems when he was suddenly attacked. He tried speaking to the human, but the interloper ran away. The human attacked him again other times and trashed the room, which was why the hippo creature had been waiting in the middle of the throne room—so he was ready to fight back.

The hippo thing seemed to be sleeping rather comfortably for someone supposedly waiting to launch a counterattack, though. This creature must be more free-spirited than I'd imagined.

But what he said raises a problem, I realized.

After hearing his account, Risa and I made eye contact and sank into thought. Someone had made it down to the thirty-eighth floor. That meant I would have to seriously reevaluate this world's adventurers.

"So, perhaps Colors's record of the thirty-third floor isn't the real record for the Japanese dungeon after all, perhaps," Risa said.

As shown on TV, Colors held the record for reaching the deepest point of the dungeon. If that wasn't the case, did that mean that the broadcast was a sham?

"If there's an adventurer who can reach these depths, maybe we shouldn't be throwing a yakiniku party down here. There could be trouble," said Satsuki.

"It's all right," the hippo reassured her. "I'm stronger, you see."

Risa pressed an index finger to her cheek as if considering all this with fascination, and Satsuki looked at her with a brow knitted in worry.

Assuming no one could reach Arthur's castle, the whole point of our coming here had been to put aside our worries and kick back. But if a group of level 40 adventurers showed up, we'd be at their mercy. It was no wonder Satsuki was anxious.

For his part, the mystery creature boasted about how he'd knock back anyone who came picking a fight. But I was afraid to say he looked like nothing more than a fat hippo to me. I wouldn't be counting on him. If things got ugly, we'd be better off turning to Arthur and all the buffs he had been getting in here.

Unbothered by such concerns, Kano continued to grill the meat in silence. The

smell of the sizzling Mamu fat filled the throne room, and the hippo's saliva glands went into overdrive.

"I've cooked up a storm here, guys! Why don't you eat first and think later, huh?!"

"You're right," replied Risa. "Don't mind if I take you up on that offer first."

The rice cooker had also just finished, and Kano was right. There would be enough time to think after we ate. Risa removed the lid from her great saucepan and sampled the soup before nodding heartily.

"You know, I've not eaten anything decent in ages. I can't tell you how much I've been looking forward to this day."

"All right, but just don't be fussy and eat plenty of greens, Arthur. Here you are."

"Bro! This is Big Sis Risa's pork miso soup."

I didn't hesitate to take a sip from the bowl Kano handed me. The burdock and onion were deliciously crunchy. It was very fragrant, so it must have had sesame oil or something in it as well. I was just about to put a Mamu steak drizzling with sauce into my mouth, when...

Boooooom!!!

Someone had kicked the door open and was now entering the room.

"Wh-What was that?"

Satsuki widened her eyes and crouched, then turned to look in the direction of the noise. The noise clearly surprised Kano as she loudly spat out the hunk of meat she had been biting into.

"Give me...food," said the panting and coughing figure in the doorway.

The mysterious man was draped in rags. His bloodshot eyes had dazzled terrifically, and his crooked mouth showed a hint of evil. He had more of an air of a humanoid monster than that of a human.

And what now? He sniffed around, looked straight in our direction, and headed our way.

Part of me was peeved that the delicious meat I'd waited twelve agonizing minutes to eat had been delayed again, but I also realized that it was likely the same "vandal" that the hippo thing had mentioned.

In that case, this guy was like a moth to a flame.

"Hey, Arthur. You're up," I said.

"Mmm, now wait just a second. This is way too tasty! How can meat be so juicy and tender?!"

"I never knew such delicious food existed, master. And this soup! I shall stick with you for life!"

The fiend and his hippo were utterly lost in the well-done Mamu steaks. Yes, the food was good, but where had all that big talk of catching the culprit from just a moment ago gone?

I mean, the guy's standing right behind you!

The intruder coughed again. "Could I...have some of that?"

He extended a hand to snatch the piece of meat Arthur brought to his mouth, only for Arthur to casually move his hand out of the way and keep munching. I had to give it to Arthur, he was serious about food. The intruder's bloodshot eyes peeled wide open, fixating on the fiend as if in recognition before he began to tremble.

"I-It's you! The little brat who sent me to this wretched place!!!"

"Eh? Who are you?" Arthur asked.

"Don't tell me you don't remember this face!"

The intruder tore off the rags covering his head and pointed at his own face, mad with rage. He had a long beard and unkempt hair. Although there was a certain sharpness to his gaze, his face wasn't all that unusual. But wait... Why did I get the feeling I'd seen him somewhere before?

Chapter 20: The Guardian of the Throne Room

Arthur and the hippo thing's only reaction to seeing the man's face was to tilt their heads to one side and continue eating. This only provoked another burst of anger from the intruder, who asked if they even had a human heart. It seemed, however, that Risa alone recognized him.

"Isn't that the villain we threw into the gate back in the hall on the twentieth floor? You know, the one who was pulling the strings of those guys dressed as pandas."

"Ah, you're right," Arthur realized. "Instead of smoking him, I chucked him down to the fortieth floor."

The intruder was nicknamed the "nitwit ninja" and was a member of the Abyss of Grizzlies, an evil clan that appeared in *DEC* and engaged in criminal activities like kidnapping and human trafficking. He gave the orders to the pandas who had tried to capture Arthur so they could sell him off back when he was trying to build a house on the twentieth floor. Their plan had backfired, and this guy had been tossed into a gate leading to the fortieth floor. Then we forgot all about him.

All the same, I was impressed that he had made it this far back up.

The route from the fortieth floor to the thirty-eighth must have been littered with monsters that were powerful and highly adept at detecting other beings. While coming from a lower level to a higher one didn't require defeating floor bosses, these depths were full of things that would kill anything the instant they spotted it. Yet, he had effortlessly slipped by them with next to no intel to go on. I could see why someone might be upset at being thrown down here.

Seeing that he wasn't getting anywhere with Arthur, the nitwit ninja sighed and curled his lips into the same twisted smile as he plotted a new approach.

"I never thought I'd get my chance for vengeance so soon. Maybe the gods

haven't forsaken me after all... Hey, listen to me when I'm talking to you, twerp!"

"Mmm, yummy! This one's mine too."

"It's not fair, master! Put some more on my plate!"

"Okay, li'l hippo. Man, what a feast!" Arthur said in a sing-song voice.

The hippo and his master were so engrossed in their Mamu steaks that they overlooked the guy as he thanked the heavens for this shot at revenge and turned on them with a warped grin. Even Kano stroked the hippo's head and piled up the cooked steaks.

Veins bulging, the nitwit ninja swallowed his fury at having been so thoroughly ignored, then turned the palms of his hands upward with a strange kind of confidence. It looked like he was about to try something.

"Coming down to this hell allowed me to obtain a power that can rule the world. I'll give you a taste of it so you can learn some manners."

Failing to read the room, the nitwit ninja began to emit a dense Aura. Before I knew it, the concentration of magic in the room had swollen.

No way... His level's gone up?

He had been around level 25 when he was thrown into the gate, but the way this magic stung my skin made me think he was now over level 30. Surely, he couldn't have beaten any of the monsters around here...

His level would have shot up if he had defeated one monster. Naturally, the monsters down here yielded so many experience points because of how ferocious they were. Regular attacks wouldn't work on them, not that he would even be able to land one in the first place. So, how did he manage to beat one?

"I saw that hippo leveling up by eating magic gems, and I got an idea," he said after a chuckle. "Maybe I'd level up if I ate them too!"

"You ate magic gems?" Arthur said in disbelief. "Hats off to you. The magic gems the monsters around here drop are huge."

Even Arthur was shocked to learn that the nitwit ninja had eaten magic gems to increase his level. But the size of the magic gems aside, I thought that any

other beings' magic was supposed to be poisonous, let alone monsters. Ingesting their crystallized magic sounded nothing but suicidal to me. But the fact remained that there was no other explanation for his leveling up.

Regardless, there was still no way that a mere mortal could eat a monster's magic gem without any consequences. The guy's eyes were already bloodshot, veins popped all over his body, and he was emotionally unstable. He didn't exude the vibe of someone who'd leveled up and more that of a vessel too small for all the magic he had absorbed.

Our hippo, who had been savoring the meat, was huffing and puffing haughtily as he stomped loudly on all fours.

"That's the human!" he declared. "The one who ate my magic gems and made such a mess in all those different places! And one more thing... I'm no hippo!"

"Huh?! You're not?"

The magic gems that Arthur had provided were the hippo's precious baby food, kept in a special room. This creature was so infuriated that not only had so many of those been eaten, but his master's home, which he had been tasked with watching, had also been desecrated. And what did he mean he wasn't a hippo?

Apparently, magic gems weren't the only thing kept in that storeroom. The nitwit ninja produced something resembling a magic item and held it in his hand. It was made of crystal and imbued with red flames...

Hey, that's a...!

"The gods have granted me a new power. This sacred treasure shall permit me to become a god in my own right!" remarked the nitwit ninja.

Before the nitwit ninja charged the crystalline object with magic to activate it, I didn't have time to point out that he hadn't received the item but had just swiped it. Its effects were immediately apparent.

"I'll savor that food once I've erased the lot of you from existence. O all-consuming flames of judgment, O flesh and blood of the gods! Come into my person! Wroooarrrrgh!!!"

A dazzling light radiated from him, followed by eruptions of scorching fire from his shoulders, feet, and mouth. Eventually, orange flames enveloped his entire body, making him look like some kind of fire demon.

“Let’s see...” He coughed. “...if you still ignore me now.”

“Wow, a fire monster! Awesome!”

“Stay back, Kano,” I ordered. “Damn, this guy’s trouble...”

Blistering heat and blinding light filled the room. Satsuki shielded her face from it with both arms while Kano was leaning forward with excitement written all over her face. Beside her, Risa looked at me as if to ask what our move would be, but I could do nothing at the time.

The crystal the nitwit ninja had just used was a magic item that temporarily transformed its user into a fire elemental. In *DEC*, street performers used it as a gag item, but its ability to turn one’s body into plasma rendered physical attacks ineffective. A lot of preparation was required to defeat someone using it, and since we were only here to eat, we weren’t ready for this.

“The moment I get out of this hell... I shall wield this power of the gods to its full extent and rule over the world as a god. You lot...are a sacrifice to be made on my way to supremacy.”

With his hand extended, he sparked a fireball, then crushed it in his fingers as if to make a point to us. Sure, there might not be any other adventurers out there who could stand up to this kind of might...

But that’s not what the future’s got in store for you, buddy.

Arthur wasn’t shaken up by the nitwit ninja turning into a fire spirit made of plasma. Granted, someone like me had no hope against him now that he’d leveled up by eating magic gems and enhanced himself with a magic item. But this was child’s play next to a fiend getting buffed at Devil’s Keep.

Arthur took one look at the nitwit ninja, gave a derisive laugh, and went right back to devouring the Mamu with the hippo.

“Hmph! Still ignoring me, eh? Then you may die without a fight! Hellfire Charge!”

The ninja's body grew noticeably brighter still, and orange flames lashed out angrily. He stooped down, then rushed toward Arthur at a terrifying speed akin to a fiery bullet.

As I watched from a distance, I thought that Arthur couldn't ignore him this time when the hippo thing stepped in front of the ninja's path and opened his massive jaws wide.

"Naaaaaaan..." escaped the hippo thing's gaping mouth. Then came some munching, followed by a gulp.

"Hey! You need to be more careful what you eat!" Arthur scolded.

The hippo had just opened his mouth two meters wide and gobbled the nitwit ninja up whole. Even as the nitwit ninja flailed around for a few seconds and sputtered fire, the hippo soon swallowed and carried him to its stomach. Not a peep was heard from him after that...

Kano opened her eyes wide and went rushing over to the beast. "A-Are you okay? He looked pretty hot, but you don't seem to be burned. Say 'aah!'"

"He's fine," Arthur said. "He's got a freakish tolerance for heat."

"What a horrid taste, though," said the hippo, burping as if nothing had happened. "Oh, and I've leveled up."

With that, the hippo thing returned to asking Kano for more Mamu steaks. This was some serious commitment to eating, not to mention some nerve.

Upon contemplation, that was definitely no ordinary ability he had shown. Even at my distance, I had felt the ridiculous heat and tremendous impact. The hippo had swallowed the ninja without sustaining any harm, and his robust stomach had digested him instantly. Just what was this thing?

"Hey, hey. What kind of creature are you? I've never seen anything like you before," asked Risa.

"Ngyah? Why, I am a proud and noble dragon."

"Dragon?!"

A dragon.

These creatures were just as extraordinary as the fiends back in *DEC*. Dragons had enormous bodies twenty meters in length, unique skin that could almost negate physical and magical attacks, fiery breath so devastating it could lay waste to an entire floor, the ability to fly at supersonic speeds, and even intelligence superior to that of humans.

As far as I knew, there were many types of dragons: some specialized in certain elements, while others could manipulate time or space. The black, laser-firing dragon that we players had fought before coming to this world was another variety of dragon. What they all had in common was their fierce and wicked expressions.

So what was going on with this chubby, hippopotamus-like thing? I couldn't help but tilt my head to one side in confusion, though Kano's and Satsuki's eyes filled with reverence as they told him how cool and amazing it was that he was a dragon. Licking his lips, the hippo-dragon soaked up the praise and looked delighted.

Still, his being a dragon explained many of the questions that had come up thus far.

"So, that's why you can talk, right?" Risa surmised.

"Precisely. My mama's consciousness lives on in me."

In *DEC*, dragons laid a single egg immediately before they died, and it was said that they cast a spell that transferred their consciousness into it. If this hippo-dragon's parent—his own past life, in a sense—could speak human language, there was a good chance that he was reusing this dragon's consciousness and memories. To take it one step further, he shared the memories of his previous incarnation as a full-grown dragon.

Risa's eyes shone brighter, and she took a magic item from the magic bag on her waist to appraise him.

"This little guy's a juvenile flame dragon. Hence his tolerance to heat," she informed us. "But his monster grade's too high for Appraisal to tell me anything else."

"Hippo, shmippo, who cares? Where's the rest of the meat already?" Arthur

responded.

“But master, I am a *dragon*!”

The young flame dragon loudly stomped his feet in frustration upon hearing his master call him a hippo. Adult flame dragons were really impressive things that lived in the craters of massive volcanoes, while their young were the spitting image of hippos. I was face-to-face with one of the great mysteries of dungeon monsters, but then I remembered that there was something else to do first.

“Give me the meat!!!”

We polished off a whole mountain of meat, then after washing up, we cleansed our palates with some crème caramels we’d brought along. As she watched the hippogon lap away at the large dessert on his plate, Kano’s brow furrowed in disappointment.

“So you won’t be able to go hunting with us for a while, huh?”

“No, I cannot travel to places with thin magic,” the hippogon said.

“I guess that can’t be helped,” Risa said. “You are supposed to be a floor boss for the eightieth floor and below, after all.”

If the hippogon could join us on hunts, any monster on the thirtieth floor or beyond would be a breeze. Kano believed this would make hunting fun and invited him to join our party. However, the hippogon shook his big head and explained that he couldn’t get around very well on floors higher than this one as the magic wasn’t dense enough.

As Risa said, flame dragons were monsters of such a caliber that they ruled over the greatest depths of the dungeon as floor bosses. Even this young one was far superior to us in terms of the volume of magic we could handle. It seemed that even the magic on floor thirty-eight was too weak for these monsters, as a creamy-mouthed hippogon explained that he couldn’t help but feel sleepy up here.

“Then once we can come down here regularly, would you hunt with us?”

At Kano's question, the hippogon fixed his round eyes on her and gave a big nod.

"I certainly would. I shall patiently await that time."

Dragons had a long lifespan, and those in *DEC* were supposedly thousands of years old. Since they could transfer their memories into their next incarnation when their time was up, they were close to being immortal. The hippogon assured us that he could happily wait years or even decades until the day we could make our way down here.

"Until then, I would request that you and my master consider a good name for me."

"You haven't given him a name yet, Arthur? Hmmm, what would be a good one?" Risa wondered.

"Hippogon should do, right?" I suggested.

"I am *not* a hippo!"

Dragons had a trait of revealing their true names only to those with whom they shared a deep bond. Their names, accordingly, held special meaning to them. Not knowing this at the time, I had proposed "Hippogon" as a name, provoking the monster to open its wide jaws again and snap at me. This guy had a violent streak.

"Yeah... But by the time we can come down here, we'll be the strongest adventurers in Japan," Risa restated.

"And don't forget about my curse either," Arthur chimed in.

A determined Satsuki posed with her small fists clenched and swore that we'd reach these depths. But just like Risa had pointed out, the ability to do that would mean no one else in Japan was as tough as us.

We could also expect the monsters we faced to grow more fearsome, and leveling up would become increasingly challenging. Nothing would boost morale more than the liberation of Arthur from his curse so that he and Hippogon could join us. The very thought of it made my heart skip a beat.

But before we get that far, there's a whole heap of other stuff to get done, I

thought.

Although we would have to lift the fiend's curse that afflicted Arthur, the breakdown of the game's story also made several individual events urgent. We could not afford to forget the need to deal with Soleil and other malignant clans or as yet unknown players. Would we have safely navigated those troubles when we returned to see Hippogon?

The atmosphere was an indescribable mix of hope and unease. Hippogon said he was tired, then slumped flat on his back. Before long, he was blowing snot bubbles like he had been when we first came to this room. The heartwarming sight of this beast of leisure made the rest of us exchange glances and giggle despite ourselves.

If we can't pull this off, I guess we're not worthy of having fiends and dragons as allies.

I was not alone. I had so many friends I could count on and a supportive family to back me up. Bringing a spoonful of the slightly bitter crème caramel to my mouth, I quietly resolved to seize a bright future for all of us and hummed a tune as I did it.

Afterword

Hello again. And to those who have taken the plunge and bought all five volumes together, nice to meet you. I'm Akito Narusawa.

This volume saw a clash between two players: Tsukijima, brimming with confidence in his certain victory, and the ever-cautious Souta. It was their completely different outlooks and predicaments that made their showdown inevitable. What type of personality would you have if you entered the world of *DEC* as a veteran player?

Owing to the limited real estate I have on this page, I am afraid I will have to rush through my usual words of gratitude. I would like to sincerely thank KeG for exceeding expectations even when faced with my unreasonable requests, my editor for their support, the proofreaders who helped bring this book to print, the designers, and everyone at the printing company. And I save my greatest thanks to you, the readers who picked this book up.

Lastly, some news. Volume four of Zero Satou's manga *Finding Avalon* is on sale now from Shueisha. An exclusive short story is included with it, so be sure to read it if you haven't already. I'm currently hard at work to have volume six of the novel series for you around the time it starts getting cold out.

Until then, I look forward to seeing you all again.

Akito Narusawa, June 2024

Finding Avalon



Character affiliation



The Narumi family

Daisuke Narumi

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

Sayuki Narumi

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

Kano Narumi

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

Souta Narumi / Piggy

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

Satsuki Oomiya

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

Risa Nitta

The intelligent and sly second player to appear.

Kaoru Hayase

Piggy's dignified, beautiful childhood friend.

Yuuma Akagi

DEC's original, charismatic protagonist.

Naoto Tachigi

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

Sakurako Sanjou

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

Hiroto Majima

One of the strongest students in Class E.

Takuya Tsukijima

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

Kotone Kuga

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

Class E

Isamu Kariya

The leader of Class D and a cunning thug.

Tadashi Manaka

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

Class D

Masakado Takamura

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

Meiko Mononobe

Takamura's retainer, whose bare forehead is cute!

The Masked Man

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

Class C

Kouki Suou

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

Class B

Kikyuu Sera

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

Akira Tenma

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

Class A

Akagi's Party

Team EEE (Triple E)

Bonus Short Story

The Satsuki-Strengthening Strategy

We found ourselves on the fifth floor of the dungeon, a place comprising a complex network of ravines and caverns. This floor was famous for being the spawning ground of the orc lord. It had taken us hours to reach this spot, and a uniform-clad Risa beside me spoke with the voice of someone who had enough.

“Here at last... I think I’m a little sick of other humans now.”

“Yeah, that was way too many people,” I agreed. “Reminds me of when we first came to this world.”

The entrance to the fifth floor was a wide-open space, and many adventurers decked out in all kinds of equipment were coming and going with hardly any room between them.

Typically, we would have used this floor’s gate room to head straight down here. Since I had already removed the spell for the fifth floor from my repertoire, we had been forced to walk through the crowded streets all the way from the dungeon entrance.

I recalled entering the dungeon when I’d only just arrived in this world and experiencing the constant jostling from the crowds. I was part nostalgic and part fed up.

“Now, is Satsuki already here?” Risa wondered aloud.

“Hmmm...mmm? That’s her over there, isn’t it?”

Glancing around the place we’d arranged to meet, I spotted some young girls dressed in black leather armor—it was Satsuki and a few others. A couple of guys were in front of her, and she frowned as she exchanged words with them. They were probably hitting on her.

While I tried to assess the situation, Risa gallantly put herself between the two parties with a dash that sent her skirt fluttering.

“Excuse me,” she began. “These girls are with us. You have some business with them?”

“Huh? What the hell are you...? Hey, that’s an Adventurers’ High...” the first guy trailed off.

“U-Uh, all right, then. We’ll leave it at that for today,” said the other one.

When they saw the Adventurers’ High uniform, the two men opened their eyes wide in stunned silence. Immediately afterward, they hunched over and made themselves scarce, repeating as they went that there was nothing they could do.

Risa’s uniform was designed to ward off trouble, much like this. Adventurers’ High inspired fear because of its many upper-class students, and this tactic was especially effective against common thugs.

“You’re our hero, Nitta!”

“Thank you!”

“Don’t mention it. You’re welcome.”

The two girls hiding behind Satsuki bowed their heads to Risa. They were both classmates of ours and were exceptionally mild-mannered when compared with the rest of Class E’s self-assertive bunch. They even gave me slight bows, even though I had done nothing.

“There are a lot of unsavory types on the floors around here. I guess I would have been better off wearing my school uniform too.”

Satsuki, wearing demon wolf equipment that matched our classmates, had a dejected expression. Apparently, the girls behind her had come to take a look at the fifth floor now that they were level five, and she had kindly offered to accompany them since they seemed nervous about it.

They had arrived here early in the morning, finished a whistle-stop tour of the place, and were just about to part ways when two pushy guys tried to make them join their party. Their refusal had led to the dispute I saw.

Satsuki could have knocked those guys back with one punch as she was now. Instead, she had turned down their advances over and over again, seemingly

because she wanted to avoid violence wherever possible. Her efforts looked to have been in vain, but...

“Next time I’ll take something that shows I’m a student at Adventurers’ High,” she resolved.

“Thanks so much to you too, Satsuki. We should be fine from here,” one of the girls said.

After a brief, lighthearted chat, we waved goodbye to our two classmates. It wasn’t like this happened every time one went to the fifth floor, but adventurers were rough by nature and thought they could get whatever they wanted by brute force. As such, the inside of the dungeon was quite a lawless place. There was no harm in taking measures to protect oneself.

Once we saw our classmates until they had safely disappeared from view, Satsuki slowly turned around to greet us.

“Thank you both for coming. I’m sorry you had to find me like that, though.”

“Heh, heh. Shall we set off to wash the bad taste from our mouths too?” Risa suggested.

Incidents went hand in hand with dungeon diving; one couldn’t let every little thing get to them. Forgetting all about the unpleasantness, we exchanged a smile and a nod before moving on.

Any other adventurers had all but disappeared when we were a few hundred meters away from the entrance hall, and there was now enough space to run. At our level, we could match the pace of a regular person sprinting at top speed with little effort. I enjoyed the sensation of the wind rushing past my face. At this velocity, I didn’t expect that any goblins or orcs along the road would form a train. But Satsuki, dagger in hand, dispatched each one we passed.

We were heading for the orc lord’s room.

“It’s been so long since I’ve been there,” Satsuki said. “The first time I went, I was so scared that I thought my heart would stop.”

“Yeah...” Risa said. “But I bet it seems like nothing to you now, huh?”

Despite running a kilometer, the two of them were chatting away and not at

all breathless. I estimated that we should be there in a few minutes at this rate. Maintaining our pace, we crossed the rope bridge, turned off at several junctions, and... There was our destination.

We slowly tiptoed up to the room and poked our heads around the entrance to see a giant orc in the center, wielding a club the size of a tree trunk. It must have been about two-and-a-half meters tall and over five hundred kilograms. It was facing the other way so we couldn't see its face, but its movements suggested it was asleep.

"You ready, Satsuki?" Risa whispered.

"Okay, so I just spread my magic thin... Yeah, I've got this."

Satsuki turned the palm of her hand upward, let the magic flare from it, and nodded to signal she was ready to fight at any time.

She was already at level 20 and would only receive meager experience points by defeating the monsters on this floor. Magic gems we could obtain had a significantly worse rate than our usual hunting grounds. And so, we had not come to the fifth floor to defeat monsters but to see the results of Satsuki's training.

"I think I'll be fine, but you watch too. Okay, Souta?" Satsuki requested in hushed tones.

"Yeah, but there shouldn't be anything to worry about," I responded.

Satsuki walked up to where the master of the room slept and gently prodded at its back with her finger. The orc lord turned to face Satsuki with an endearing "Oh, gar?" expression of confusion. It was about two times taller than Satsuki's slight frame and as many times wider.

The orc lord had sleepy eyes for a few moments. As soon as it became aware of the girl in front of it, its porcine face twisted into a sadistic one, and it activated a skill by way of greeting.

"Oooohhh garrrrr!!!"

Several clouds of black mist appeared in the vicinity, revealing the orc soldiers it had summoned, each armed with a curved sword. The orc lord was trying to

ensure its prey didn't get away by enlisting minions who were quicker on their feet than it was. Satsuki showed no sign of trying to escape; instead, she let her magic flow and closed her eyes as if in meditation.

The orc lord continued summoning additional minions, bringing the total to nearly twenty. There was still plenty of space left in the room, but I hated to see Satsuki stifled by those snorting, overbearing orcs like this. Alas, this was all part of the plan, so I'd have to grin and bear it.

Observing nervously from outside the room, I saw one of the underlings adopt the same sadistic expression as its master and step forward. It leered up and down at Satsuki before raising the tip of its sword and thrusting it toward her legs, only to miss its mark. Apparently puzzled by this, it inclined its head, then made another swing at her. It missed again.

The orc lord must have been irritated at seeing its minion miss twice in a row as it crushed it under its enormous club. Satsuki remained still, her eyes closed, despite the terrific sound of the impact and the orc soldiers' shaking from this utterly merciless punishment.

"Her magic's flowing nicely, huh?" Risa whispered to me.

"Let's see what she's got."

The orc lord, eyes bloodshot, gave a short grunt to its trembling minions. On this command, they let out a roar and fell on Satsuki at once.

With the bare minimum amount of movement required, she evaded the blades coming at her from all directions, then turned what at first seemed just to be a pirouette into a palm-strike counterblow that sent two of her attackers flying. This only got the other orcs into even more of a frenzy, and the fight developed into a wild brawl.

Just when it seemed there was no escape from the jumble of ten and change swords swinging for her, Satsuki evaded them all, spreading a small and sparse amount of magic around the room as she went. When someone else's magic mingled with one's own, there was a palpable chill from this contact with a foreign body. This made it possible to perceive what was happening around oneself even without looking. By using this principle when fighting multiple foes, one could minimize their blind spots.

After overwhelming several more orc soldiers with the fewest number of steps possible and nothing but palm strikes, only a handful of grunts and their master remained. Perhaps realizing that a change of plan was in order, the furious orc lord stepped forward, brandishing its gigantic club. But no sooner had it done so than Satsuki had already snuck into the pocket with it, taking up a stance with her arms drawn back dramatically.

“Oh, gar?”

“Sorry about this. Qigong Fist!!!”

A massive maelstrom of magic swirled around Satsuki’s hand, which she plunged into the monster’s big, round belly. The orc lord immediately went hurtling into the stone wall, making a noise that sounded just like a car crash. This powerful strike that reduced the boss to a magic gem was Qigong Fist—a signature move of the fighting job Monk.

Unable to process what had just occurred, the leftover orcs stood frozen. Risa crept up from behind and wiped them all out with a flash of her longsword. We only had magic gems as company now, and silence fell on the orc lord’s room.

“Well done, Satsuki,” said Risa.

“How did I do?” she asked with a pained smile. “I know I messed up a little...”

“No, you did great. Especially for your first time.”

Although her movement could use a little work and her opposition had been soft, this was more than a passing grade for Satsuki’s first time fighting multiple enemies at once.

We still had the best part of an hour until the orc lord respawned, so we went for a little stroll to review Satsuki’s performance and take out some small-fry monsters. That was when we spotted some familiar faces.

“Ah, there they are!”

“Huh, they’re both nice-looking chicks. This should be fun.”

Approaching us from the opposite direction were the two men who had tried to pick Satsuki up—and several other new faces with them. They leered at Risa and Satsuki with the same lecherous look in their eyes as the orcs, so there was

no mistaking that these were some bad guys. It seemed they hadn't noticed me yet.

"I couldn't give a crap if you're at Adventurers' High," one of them spat. "If you're hunting on floor five, you've gotta be a Class E commoner, so we ain't scared of your uniform."

Another guy said, "We'll teach you good and proper for tricking us. Come on, baby. Let's dan—"

These guys were dumbasses. Didn't they realize that since nobody else was around, we would not need to hold back? Exasperated by their idiocy, I considered the best way to send these jokers packing when Satsuki sent her braids up in the air with the full force of her Aura, and the fifth floor of the dungeon was filled with an impossible amount of magic.

Risa and I could shrug it off as Satsuki didn't have a level advantage over us. But the group of would-be assailants, whose levels were likely in the single digits, frothed at the mouth and fainted instantly. Though he had been floored, the one who seemed to be the leader had stayed conscious.

Guess there's a little more to you, huh? I thought.

"Next time you try anything with my friends... I won't show any mercy," said Satsuki.

"Y-Yes..." the leader whimpered.

Satsuki's words prompted the trembling man to nod, prostrate himself on the floor, and beg for forgiveness. A blast of Aura was all it took to subdue someone so much weaker, meaning Satsuki didn't even have to get her hands dirty, much less fight another group of foes. We could expect these guys to keep to themselves more from now on.

She stood with her hands on her hips as she watched the man rouse his cronies and run away. Eventually, she nodded slightly and turned around, beaming as if nothing had happened.

"Souta, Risa—shall we?"

The Satsuki-Strengthening Strategy was surely progressing. With Risa's prior

achievements and experience in leading a major clan, it wouldn't be impossible to bring Satsuki to our level. That was both reassuring and exciting.

Seeing those braids joyfully swing from side to side, I couldn't help but break into a smile.



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Finding Avalon: The Quest of a Chaosbringer Volume 5

by Akito Narusawa

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