



With My True Power, My Sister and I

Strike Back against the Dungeon's

Most Menacing Fiend

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FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER



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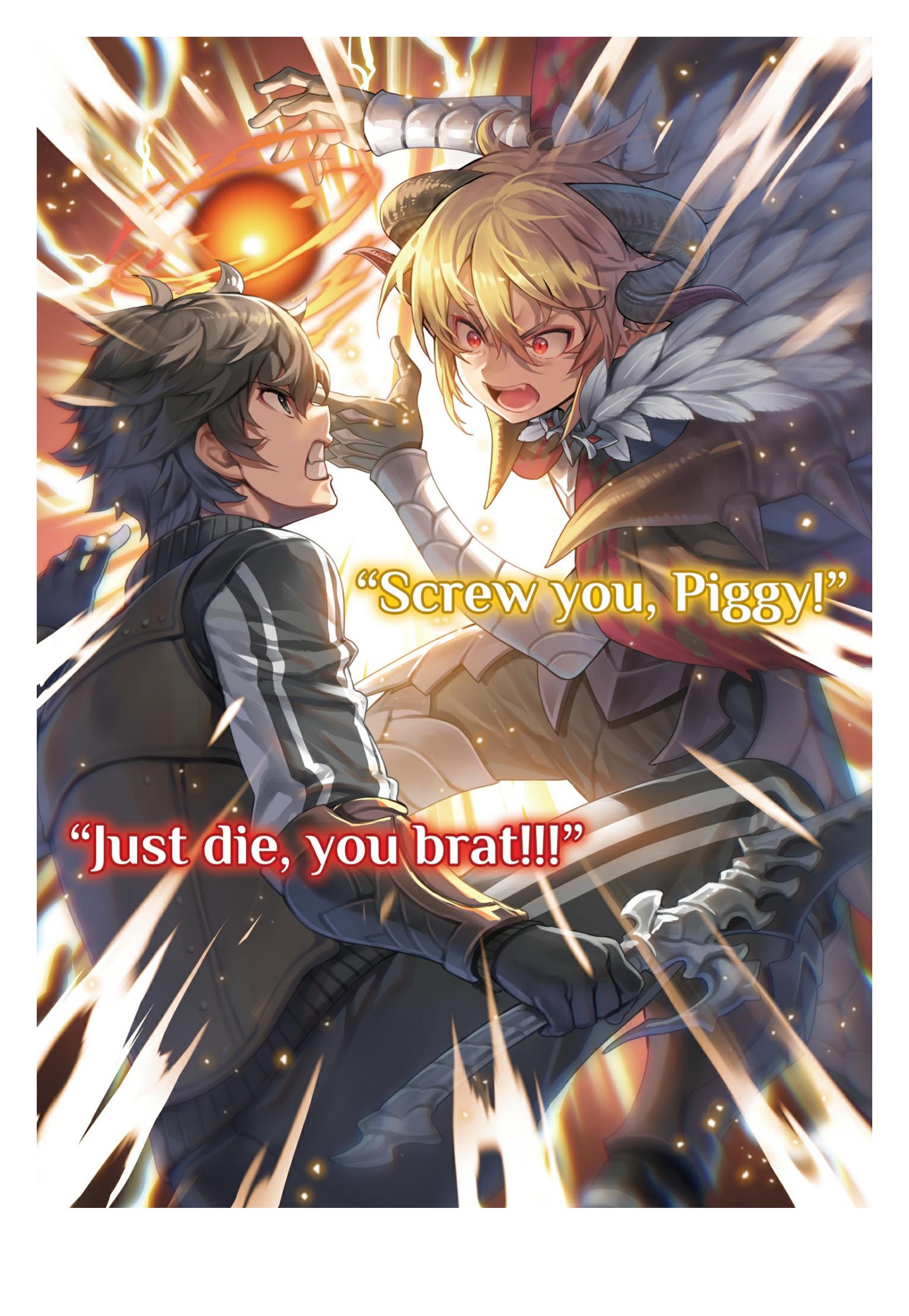
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FINDING AVALON

THE QUEST OF A CHAOSBRINGER



“Screw you, Piggy!”

“Just die, you brat!!!”



Arthur

A mighty fiend who looks like a young boy.
He is quirky, but his unrestrained
magical manipulation power is the real deal.

Kano Narumi

A usually overweight villain many love to hate.
He slims down when he unleashes his secret power!

Haruka Mikami

An intelligent, prominent figure in noble society
who also leads The Red Ninjettes.

Kirara Kusunoki

Second-year student a year ahead of Piggy.
She's Haruka Mikami's niece and a fierce
and determined young lady of noble rank.



If he's using a crazy
weapon like that...

...then there's no reason
for me to hold back either!

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Chapter 1: The Fiend's Curse

"So, guys, here's the deal. I want to get to the outside world. Any ideas on how I can do that?"

Just when Tenma, Kuga, and I had finally defeated the fearsome lesser demon, a fiend appeared.

While the soft features of his face had a youthful appearance, his bright red eyes looked deranged. He was so different from the mild-mannered fiend I remembered from the game. He also knew us, so I suspected he was a player.

The night I met Risa at a park, we discussed the possibility that some players might have become monsters rather than students in Class E. I'd never imagined one might become a fiend. What an unfair advantage!

"C'mon, don't give me the silent treatment," the fiend said.

"Who are you...?" asked Kuga. "What skill did you use?" She stood farther away now, acting more cautiously than when the fiend first arrived.

"Uh-uh, let's stay on topic, please. I'm the one asking the questions. That's one strike. Any naughty kid that gets three strikes will get a punishment," he said, smiling innocently.

The fiend's reply sounded childish, but from the glazed look in his eyes, it was clear he was unhinged. They were the eyes of someone who might lose it and start killing people any second. Maybe he was under the effect of a player-only skill that affected his mental state, similar to my Glutton skill or Risa's Libido skill. Or he might have been suffering the effects of inhabiting a fiend's body. Fiends looked like humans, although I'd heard that their physical abilities, magical properties, and mental faculties vastly differed from ours.

Whatever the case, we weren't safe staying around him. Our best chance of surviving would be for me to take the lead and answer his questions so that he would let us go as soon as possible.

He wants to go to the outside. If he means outside the dungeon, can't he just

use a gate or walk down to the portal? I thought. Then, I took a moment and asked, “When you say you want to get outside, you mean outside the dungeon, right? What’s stopping you from getting out the normal way?”

“Um, you see, I’ve tried Eject a whole bunch of times, and it didn’t work. Return stones and the gates are no good either. When I try to walk to the exit, I’ll get lost or start feeling tired, and if I keep on going anyway, I’ll get warped back to where I started.”

So he’d tried all the relevant items and skills to no avail, and some mechanism interfered with his ability to physically travel the distance. He then explained that, just as he was losing hope, he’d heard the shrill scream of a devil. When he tried to warp toward that scream, he’d miraculously made it here. Maybe fiends could tune into the souls of devils.

“Ever since I arrived in this world, I’ve spent every second of each day looking for a way out... I’ve finally found people that might help. And so...I won’t be letting any of you leave until you tell me how I can get out. Dimension Isolator.”

The fiend thrust his fist up like he was physically grabbing the air, and his skill activated. A loud, grating noise persisted as the entire room began to distort and twist as if I were viewing it through a kaleidoscope.

“Wh-What did you just do?!” shouted Tenma, darting her head to-and-fro as she looked at the room in surprise. “This is hurting my eyes!”

“I closed off this space,” the fiend explained. “Now you can’t use return stones to escape.”

“What? You can do that?!”

The fiend’s skill was a spatial confinement spell similar to the automatic game mechanism that had prevented us from leaving this room during the lesser demon fight, only much more powerful. Even with return stones and escape magic, we wouldn’t be able to break out of our confinement. I’d only ever seen this skill used by unique boss monsters in the very depths of the dungeon, so it surprised me to find out that players could learn it too.

“But...we don’t have any idea how to get you outside the dungeon!” protested Kuga indignantly. Her annoyance was completely justified. It sucked

hearing we were locked in here after the intense fight we'd just gone through.

"Well, you're not leaving until you come up with an idea, so start thinking."

The way this fiend speaks... He really does sound like a player.

For one thing, he was confused about his inability to leave the dungeon, and some of his statements suggested he possessed meta-knowledge about the game. Plus, I'd gotten a feel for how players acted through my interactions with Risa and Tsukijima, so I was sure this fiend was one.

If he was a player, he would have applied his game knowledge in his escape attempts, yet none had worked. Because of that, I couldn't see how any of us could help him... Although, perhaps someone from his own race, another fiend, would know the answer?

I remembered Granny telling me she couldn't leave her store of her own volition when she gave me the quest to slay the Bloody Baron, instead asking adventurers—mostly me—for help. Maybe this was a general problem that affected all fiends, and I decided to bring this up.

"Have you asked any other fiends about this?" I asked. "It might be a quirk of your race."

"Other fiends?" repeated the fiend, tilting his head. "I've always been stuck in one place, so I've never met another fiend that I could talk to. That's a good idea, though. I can't travel to any other floors, so call one here. Or go and ask one."

I couldn't call any fiends here, but I could go to Granny's Goods and speak to Furufuru. However, this fiend would need to let me go to do that. The fiend pursed his lips for a few seconds when I explained this.

"Okay, how about this? I'll get rid of the confinement spell, but to ensure you don't all desert me...I'll freeze you in ice as my hostage. Clinkety clink! Cryonic Prison!"

"What are—"

"Narumi, watch out!" shouted Tenma.

The fiend raised his hand and began casting a spell on me. Tenma saw this and jumped into the spell's path to protect me. A moment after the spell struck her, she was trapped inside a column of ice.

"No!" cried out the fiend frantically. "Why would you try to protect someone like *Piggy*!"

The fiend had cast a paralyzing spell available to advanced magic-using jobs. Because the ice covering Tenma was magical, she couldn't break through it with her Super Strength. I had no means of banishing it either, but there was no immediate risk to her life.

"Well, whatever," said the fiend. "You'd better get a move on, or she'll freeze to death. Make it snappy!" Just then, he noticed that Kuga was holding a knife to his throat. "Oh?"

Kuga had sneaked behind the fiend and leveled her knife at his neck. Clearly, she didn't think blindly following his orders would be a good idea.

"Undo all your spells, or else—"

However, Kuga's threats didn't intimidate the fiend one bit. They only antagonized him further.

"You're wasting your time," responded the fiend. "Your little knife can't even scratch me. I guess I do need to punish you after all."

When Kuga heard that, she pushed down hard with her knife. But the fiend's hand shot up too quickly for my eyes to follow, then he pinched the blade and deformed it with just his fingers.

Sensing the overwhelming difference in their strength stats, Kuga let go of the knife and jumped backward, away from the fiend. She then drew a dagger, her main weapon.

She'd probably used Appraisal on the fiend to find out his level before her attack and determined that she could defeat him. But the greater the level disparity, the more likely it was that appraisal skills would generate incorrect readings. Against opponents like that, it was important to carefully observe your opponent's mental state and check their level several times. It seemed Kuga hadn't remembered to do that...or perhaps she didn't know about this

quirk of appraisal skills. This was understandable; Kuga had probably never encountered an enemy with this high a level. But the fiend was clearly mentally unstable, and he didn't seem to care whether we lived or died, which made it a bad idea to provoke him.

“I think this calls for—”

“Wait!” I shouted. “Calm down!”

The fiend opened his mad, red eyes wide and pointed his hand toward Kuga while making a grabbing motion midair. It was a spell, so I feared it would be terrible. I had to stop him before he cast it. Even though I hurriedly drew my sword and lunged at the fiend, he caught my blade with one hand without even looking at me.

“—the death penalty for Kuga... Death! Just kidding.”

Then, the fiend clenched his fist like he was crushing something invisible. Kuga collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She wasn't moving.

“How about that? Funny, right?”

“You bastard! What the hell did... Oof!”

I lunged toward the fiend and tried to attack him, but he slid out of my way, grabbed my arm with one hand, punched me back, and sent me flying. The world spun around. I could feel a burning sensation in my arm so hot that I thought I might pass out. It hurt like hell!

Looking down, I saw that my arm twisted in an unnatural direction. He had thrown me so hard that I'd hit the wall in a fraction of a second. My arm was swelling up. I could taste blood in my mouth, likely from biting my tongue. It had all happened so fast.

The fiend turned and looked at me like I wasn't worth his attention.

“In what world could Piggy possibly hope to beat me?” he said. “The next time you try to attack me, I'll rip your head clean off your shoulders.”

“Fix back in place!” I said, groaning with pain. “Aaaargh! Medium Restoration!”

I twisted my arm back into place, gritting my teeth to get through the dizzying pain, and cast a healing spell on myself. The spell's effect would reset my bones. I could move my fingers, so the spell had reconnected the nerves and bones, but it hadn't done anything to lessen the pain. It was enough for now, though.



“Yikes!” said the fiend. “That’s impressive, not gonna lie. But...you don’t seem like the Piggy I remember. You *are* Souta Narumi, right? Come to think of it, you’re thinner than I remember.” The fiend touched his chin and examined me from head to toe, simultaneously casting Appraisal on me. “Was that pervert Piggy powerful enough to reach this floor?”

All I could do was wait for my pain to subside. Sweat drenched my whole body. I calmed my breathing and racked my brain for a way out of this hopeless situation.

Why did this have to happen? Right after the three of us had pulled together and emerged victorious over the devil.

I looked over to where Kuga lay, unmoving. We’d just agreed on our secret alliance and were supposed to live the rest of our student years at school in peace! My heart felt like it was about to tear apart. Tenma also found herself trapped in a wall of ice because she had shielded me out of the kindness of her heart. I didn’t know how long she could survive while the ice drained her body heat. I needed to act quickly.

Would the best option be to follow the fiend’s orders and get the information from Furufuru? What proof did I have that the fiend would actually let Tenma go if I went to Granny’s Goods? He’d killed Kuga without a second thought just because she’d gotten in his way. That didn’t seem like the sort of person who’d keep their promises.

I’d been right all along. Players were a threat to the people living in this world. The power and knowledge at our fingertips let us act in unpredictable ways without restraint. The fiend would unleash untold havoc on the world if he made it out of the dungeon. That meant...

Oh, I thought. It’s that simple. I just have to kill him.

The fiend’s confinement spell and ice magic would stop working when he died. Revival magic could successfully bring Kuga back to life since she’d only been dead for a short time. If I was quick, I could find Sera and get her to ask the Holy Woman for help.

As far as I could remember, the fiend’s level would be in the high thirties. The

level difference between us was immense, but I'd rather die than give up. Not that I planned to throw my life away. I would win no matter what. I wouldn't stand a chance in a drawn-out fight, so I would need to finish it quickly with my first attack.

Can I do that...? I wondered.

If I wanted to kill the fiend in a single strike, I'd need to stack up every one of my buffs and attack with my strongest skill from an angle where I couldn't miss. The problem was that I didn't have the time to cast each and every buff spell, meaning the fiend would kill me before I'd finished. What could I do?

"Hey, a little rude for an NPC to be ignoring me, don't you think?"

The fiend sounded slightly annoyed, but his eyes were full of bloodlust. They warned me that the next time I ignored him, he'd kill me. At the same time, it showed that he was utterly underestimating me. Seeing that, I devised a plan and let him see me sweat, acting like the weak and pathetic Piggy he remembered.

"P-Please, I'll do what you say, don't hurt me... I'll go through the gate and speak to Granny... So give me some time, I'm begging you!"

"Hmm? Someone's changed their tune, haven't they?"

Did he not buy the act? Not good. "I-It's because I know I could never beat you!" I pleaded. I didn't let my fierce emotions surface and instead tried to sound as pathetic as possible. "B-But it'll take a long time if I use the floor gate*, so could you use Gate to make one here? You can do that, right?"

*TIPS: Floor gates refer to the permanent gates inside the dungeon. Adventurers must register a gate using their magic to travel to a gate on any floor beside the first. The term floor gate distinguishes these permanent gates from the temporary ones created by the Gate skill.

My act appeared to work, and the fiend sounded cheerful when he replied, "I can. It's super easy for me." He held his right hand out flat, took a deep breath,

and channeled his mana. At once, a gate appeared in front of him. “Hurry up and get going. I’ll leave the gate open while you’re away.”

“Y-Yeah... Thanks. I’ll be right back...”

I stumbled over and entered the gate. The surrounding scenery transformed into the square outside of Granny’s Goods when I passed through it. I focused my reeling mind on the task ahead of me, drew the magic circle for Satanachia’s Stem Cells with trembling fingers, and cast the spell. A spurt of blood sprayed from my arm as the immense HP regeneration of the spell reset my fractured bone properly and healed the damage. In the blink of an eye, my arm was back to normal.

“Whew... Even at this level, this spell is taxing on my body... But I can work with this...”

The spell made me feel dizzy, but I bore the discomfort, equipped my mithril gloves and falchion, and started drawing the magic circle for my most powerful buff spell, Overdrive. I hadn’t used this spell since I fought that crazy skeleton.

“Hang in there, Tenma, Kuga... You’ll be safe soon.”

Chapter 2: The Girl in the Ice

Akira Tenma

A boy with large horns had shown up and cast a spell at Narumi. I jumped into the spell's path to protect Narumi and realized I was stuck inside a transparent, glass-like crystal.

I'd never seen this spell before. The crystal looked like ice, but I wasn't sure because I didn't feel cold and could still breathe. That might've been because of my armor. My suit of armor would generate oxygen and regulate my temperature to remain within a comfortable range as long as the outside temperature wasn't any lower than minus fifty degrees Celsius. I could fall underwater or get frozen in a block of ice and survive perfectly for up to an hour. Well, except for one problem...

How am I going to go to the toilet? I thought.

My original plan for this outing was to have fun eating snacks with Narumi inside the beautiful rooms of the Devil's Keep, chatting about our dieting journeys. And it all would've gone fine if *that idiot* hadn't summoned the Giant Devil and forced us into a fight we hadn't expected. As if to top it off, this new monster had appeared when the battle had ended! Everything had been so frightening and stressful that it was no wonder I felt the need to pee.

If I'd known this was how the day would turn out I would've worn a combat diaper underneath my armor... I wouldn't make the same mistake next time.

As I struggled to figure out what to do, a spell I had never encountered struck my new butler, Kuga, causing her to collapse. I was shocked and thought she was dead for a second, but I could see her chest slowly rising and falling, indicating she was still alive. Was the spell some variety of sleep magic?

Narumi didn't realize that Kuga was alive and furiously struck at the horned boy. The boy knocked him away, and I heard his body hit the wall. I couldn't see where he'd landed from this angle. Although Narumi was immensely powerful,

he failed to dodge the boy's punch. Just how strong was this boy?

I could tell that Narumi was hurt. If I wanted to check whether he was okay, I'd need to break out of the ice as quickly as possible. I used my Super Strength to shatter the ice...but it didn't do a thing. This was no ordinary ice. I had to do something to save Narumi! And to save myself from dying of embarrassment!

While I struggled to break free of the ice, the horned boy brought forth a purple orb of light, and Narumi stepped through. Was that teleportation magic?

Shortly after, the horned boy stood before me and sweetly said, "Hang in there just a little longer, Akira."

He seemed to know who I was, but I couldn't remember him. I inspected his face. Was he a relative...? No. Never mind his face, as I couldn't take my eyes off those big, curly horns on his head. They didn't look like accessories to me. Were they real?

"You won't have to worry about that pervert anymore," the boy said. "I'll beat him to within an inch of his life and make sure he never disturbs you again. Everything I do...I do it for you." He laid one hand on the ice and winked at me.

Who was the pervert he was talking about? Why did he act so friendly toward me and so hostile toward Narumi?

The boy then animatedly defended what he'd done to Kuga. "She started attacking, so I had no choice but to knock her out!" Apparently he'd cast his spell on Kuga in a way that resembled an instant death spell. He explained that Narumi fell for the trick and flew into a rage, so the boy had defended himself.

I guess when he says pervert, he's talking about Narumi. Narumi's so sweet, though. Where in the world did this boy get that impression?

The horned boy continued, "I'm really strong, so let me be one of your bodyguards once I get out of here. I also wanna go to school, so could I get your help with the paperwork? And would you ever consider dating me?"

Wow, you don't want a lot, do you? I thought sarcastically.

For some time, I'd been yelling at the top of my lungs that I wanted him to let me out first so we could deal with the rest later, but it seemed he couldn't hear

me. It was strange; I could hear him perfectly well. I wondered how this ice worked.

While the boy was curling and twisting his body in ever more dramatic poses as he continued his impassioned speech, I saw someone exit the orb of purple light... It was Narumi! Although something about him seemed different.

“I’m back,” said Narumi. “And—”

A dark red Aura clung to his body, and black mist swirled around the creepy curved sword in his hand. He was already in a stance to unleash some kind of skill. One of his hands gathered an astoundingly dense ball of mana and Aura. Narumi was always kind and gentle, but now he had a murderous look of rage.

“—you’re going down! Blade of Agares!”

The horned boy turned around as soon as he sensed this new threat, only to encounter a tremendous crash of thunder and a bright flash of light that obscured everything. It seemed like the same spell the boy used to finish off the Giant Devil.

Narumi tutted. “Not deep enough.”

The boy groaned and cast a spell, “Fly.”

“You’re not getting away!”

The boy hovered in the air for a moment before his body shot upward at incredible speed as he tried to get away from Narumi. He was clutching one of his arms as he flew or rather where one of his arms *had been*. Narumi’s spell must’ve torn it off.

And so Narumi jumped up and kicked off from empty spots of air, ascending in a zigzag pattern. They’d started flying out of nowhere... Was I the only one that didn’t know that was possible?!

What the hell is going on?!

With Narumi hot on his trail, the horned boy summoned hundreds of magic bullets and fired them at his pursuer to shoot him down. The blasts made the white room appear orange as the fist-sized balls of mana rained down from on high.

Narumi weaved his way through the hail of bullets, using his sword to knock away any that might hit him. The fight had barely begun, and he was only a few meters away from the horned boy. Narumi raised his black mist-covered sword and swung it down.

“Just die, you brat!!!” screamed Narumi.

“Screw you, Piggy!” the boy retorted.

The horned boy raised his left arm, pulled a massive scythe larger than his body out of thin air, and swung it down. The blade glowed with a bluish-white light. It was an enchantment, although I wasn’t sure of what kind.

The blades clashed in midair faster than my eyes could follow, creating red, black, and white afterimages in my vision. They were near the ceiling, by one of the walls. A second later, the clashing of their blades formed a shock wave that spread out, ripping stone slabs up from the ground. They struck again and again, letting out battle cries.

Wh-What is this?!

Before a minute was up, almost nothing on the ground, the walls, or the ceiling remained unscathed. This chapel was large but not big enough to contain their fight!

Even inside the ice, I could hear the rumbles of their shock waves and the clash of their blades. The deep gouges in the walls showed that every one of their attacks was at least as powerful as my strongest skill. Sparkling balls of light flew around and exploded when they encountered an obstacle, which told me they were simultaneously using magic and physical attacks.

Th-This is too crazy!

The two of them darted around in the air in every direction at unbelievable speeds, dodging through magic bullets as they delivered mighty strikes. They effortlessly weaved countless feints into their attacks as well, using the magic bullets to accelerate the activation of their weapon skills. I’d never seen a fight this high-level before!

All my life, I’d believed adventurers would pick one path and train their whole lives to perfect it. Swordsmen would master the sword, axe-wielding warriors

the axe, and magicians would focus on magic. That was the obvious way of doing things. Close-combat fighting required completely different skills and equipment for magic. Even different close-combat practitioners like swordsmen and axe-wielders would use wildly different stances and combat strategies. Trying to master two different skills would leave you lacking in both. Even my family's majordomo, Kurosaki, the most powerful fighter in the Tenma family, had only become an expert in combat after devoting her training to a single weapon.

But the fight taking place above my head perfectly intertwined magic with weapons. For example, they would use magic to lure their opponent into the range of their weapons. Other times, they effortlessly switched from physical attacks to magical ones to deliver combo attacks. I'd never seen anything like this before, but I immediately knew it was the ultimate form of combat.

How did they even learn to fight like that?

The techniques Narumi and the horned boy displayed were not part of Adventurers' High's curriculum. They weren't the sort to come naturally either; nobody could pull off such impressive techniques in a life-or-death fight using instinct alone. No, they must've poured countless hours into the study of combat and put their bodies through grueling training. But where...?

I'd gotten so engrossed watching their insane fight that I forgot they were only fighting because of Narumi's misunderstanding. The horned boy had misunderstandings of his own about Narumi too. He hadn't come off as a bad person when I heard him talk. I had to stop the fight. But I couldn't move a muscle inside the ice, and my voice couldn't reach them.

And if I don't get a bathroom break soon, I'll...

Oblivious to my plight, both continued their fight. Unbeknownst to me, the horned boy's right arm had fully recovered, enabling him to unleash a torrent of magic bullets on Narumi while etching a giant magic circle with his scythe-wielding left hand. I could sense the mana around him grow denser as the magic circle neared completion. From the look of it, this would be a spell more terrible than the Giant Devil's worst attack. Was he seriously going to let off such a spell here?!

But Narumi reached the boy before the circle was complete. He grabbed one of the boy's horns and shoved his head into the wall, making the magic circle dissipate.

“Eat wall!!!”

“Ouch! Ow ow ow!!!”

Narumi sprinted across the wall, pushing the boy's head into its stony surface. I supposed he was trying to use the wall as a cheese grater to grind his head to dust, but the boy's horned skull was remarkably tough. The walls and the stone pillars it collided with crumbled instead.

What the hell is his skull made of?!

After Narumi had dragged him for several dozen meters, pulverizing the wall on the way, the horned boy twisted his body around and jumped to safety. He brushed the dust from his head and shot Narumi a look of pure rage.

“Aerial...and Overdrive...” said the horned boy, panting. “And that frustrating way you move around... Of all the rotten players, it had to be you, didn’t it, Mav?! You were a piece of shit in *DEC*, but how dare you creep on my Akira! I’ll kill you for this!”

Vowing not to hold back, the horned boy released a surge of Aura from his body, which swirled around in a vortex. Even though Aura shouldn’t interact with the physical world, it managed to tear tiles from the wall and draw them into the vortex, forming a globe. There were flashes as lightning erupted from the ball of Aura.

I couldn’t believe he was still in good shape after that last attack. It was like his entire body was made of mithril!

Also, I don’t think Narumi has ever creped on me!

“Yeah, fancy meeting you here,” replied Narumi. “And it seems like great minds think alike...because I’m gonna kill you first!”

Narumi’s body swayed, but he slowly readied his curved sword. While he’d had the upper hand in the fight until now, it had taken its toll. He was struggling to catch his breath, clearly exhausted. The explosive way that he moved around

must've been a major drain on his stamina. Plus...

Wait, hold on a second! When did he get so thin?! Am I still looking at the same person?!

His chubby arms had become slender, his trademark, perfectly plump belly had vanished, and his face appeared chiseled. He looked like an entirely different person, although he still had those same drowsy eyes.

Wh-Wh-What the hell is going on?!

I heard a groan while I was freaking out inside my prison of ice. Then I saw my new butler lying nearby had opened her eyes. When she noticed the destruction around her, she immediately readied her knife and scanned her surroundings.

The entire chapel had been reduced to rubble, yet the spot where the butler and I stood remained untouched. Despite their intense fight, the two of them must've taken care to avoid their attacks landing near us.

Narumi looked over at the butler he thought had died, and his eyes shot wide open, his jaw agape. His face was filled with shock, and a second later—

“Oof!”

—the horned boy hit Narumi and knocked him away.

Chapter 3: Floods of Tears

“Oh, for god’s sake! You sure took your time undoing the spell!!!!”

“Akira, where are you going? I’ll come too—”

“Don’t follow me!”

The ice surrounding Tenma shrunk after the fiend reversed his Cryonic Prison spell. She collapsed to her knees, finally free... But she then quickly rose to her feet and ran off. While the fiend tried to follow her, she shook him off, and he returned looking sullen.

My battle with the fiend was finally over. The result was a draw and an oddly painful one at that. I’d convinced the fiend to release Tenma from her ice prison, and Kuga wasn’t dead. Everything was fine... Okay, no, it wasn’t. I was pissed.

“What’s going on, Souta Narumi?” asked Kuga. “What happened while I passed out?”

“It’s all *his* fault,” I replied.

“No, it’s *your* fault for being so gullible, dumbass,” the fiend shot back while jumping around energetically.

Kuga had woken up to find the chapel in ruins, so it was only natural that she’d wonder what had happened.

But the fiend was a player, meaning I had to figure out what he knew and compare our thoughts. That said, his attitude was changing my mind on that. Plus, I was hungry. I’d overexerted myself in the last fight, which made my body shrink. My muscles twitched. I’d depleted all my energy reserves and had to stock up on calories, but that could wait until later.

“So, on that note, sorry about what I did, Kuga,” said the fiend, approaching Kuga to seem friendly. “I just wanted to wind up this dummy. Anyway, I’m called Arthur, and I hope we can be friends—”

He really goes from one extreme to another, doesn't he? And he doesn't see why that makes him look creepy. "Sorry, Kuga. I need to have a word with this guy," I said.

"Uh, I don't think there's anything I need to talk with *you* about, Piggy."

Arthur wasn't the name of this fiend but rather the name of the player behind the fiend.

Sounds like he thinks he's still playing DEC. "Listen, it's in your interest to hear this, so come with me," I said.

I ordered the sullen fiend to follow me to a corner of the room. Even if I held out little hope of a mediation when he first showed up, I remembered what he'd been like in *DEC*. That showed he might listen to what I had to say. With that in mind, I tried to convince him of my viewpoint.

"Just so you know, this world might look exactly like *DEC*, but it's a world of its own. A dangerous and deadly world."

"Huh?" blurted Arthur, looking at me like I was an idiot. "So it's not just a game? I agree. The graphics are way better than those of a game, and it feels truly gruesome when you kill monsters. But this world is identical to *DEC*!"

Arthur looked around and argued that every location here, including all the monsters and the skills, was the same as in *DEC*. The gameplay and setting did match up to the game, but this was an entirely different world.

"If you take the time to speak to Kuga, Tenma, or, hell, anyone, you'll quickly realize they're not NPCs. This world's people are just trying to keep their heads down and survive."

"Keep their heads down?" the fiend repeated, tilting his horned head to one side.

He didn't seem to get it, but he needed to understand what I meant. As someone who'd always been alone, the Narumi family was the first time I'd experienced what it was like to have people who loved and cared for me without an ulterior motive. I felt guilty that I had stolen this body from Piggy. Yet that was even more reason to keep the people he cared about, including his childhood friend Kaoru, safe from threats.

Most players were after their own profit, though. Any action they took could shift the balance of the world in a terrible direction. They wouldn't hesitate to throw a considerable section of this world's populace to the wolves if they thought it would benefit them, believing they were only hurting NPCs in a game world. That meant that the existence of other players could put Kaoru and my family at risk, and I'd rather die than let that happen.

I wouldn't be able to find common ground with any player who couldn't understand that. Because of that, I was ready to get back to our fight to the death if Arthur proved unreceptive. But that was a last resort, so I planned to win Arthur over to my way of thinking bit by bit.

"You do have a point though," Arthur said. "Akira and Kuga didn't feel like NPCs to me. It felt like they were alive."

"They are. You can't ever forget that. Keep that in mind when you listen to what I'm about to say."

I quickly caught Arthur up on everything I'd found out. This world appeared to be the world of *DEC*, but it was reality. The only knowledge the people of this world had about the dungeon was what had existed at the time of *DEC*'s original release. Only select people knew about the extras added in updates. As such, few people knew about the gates, and barely anyone reached level 30. Physical enhancements had disrupted the balance and thrown the world into chaos. There were other players besides him and me.

"They don't even know about gates?" Arthur retorted with surprise. "And they don't know anything beyond the first edition of the game?"

"That's right," I confirmed. "That should tell you just how valuable player knowledge is."

"I've been stuck in the dungeon since I got here, so I had no idea," said Arthur, dejected. His shoulders sank. "This explains why nobody ever wandered into my castle on the thirty-eighth floor."

Arthur had waited for adventurers to arrive at his castle, knowing they were his best shot at finding a way out of the dungeon, but nobody had turned up.

"And... There are players besides you, Mav?"

“There are, but I can’t tell you who they are yet. I’m not sure how many of us there are either.”

“Tell me this, at least. Akira isn’t a player, right?”

“I don’t think so...”

Arthur cupped his chin and sank into thought. Unbelievable as it was, he had been the head of a clan called AKK in *DEC*, and it had been the best, or at least the second-best, Assault Clan in the game. He’d been a celebrity in the *DEC* community, and everyone had called him Flash.

As someone who’d crossed swords with him several times in the game and witnessed his combat prowess and skill in commanding a clan, I had to admit that he was a top player. However, his AKK clan was well-known for another reason as well...

“So Akira isn’t a player, and she isn’t an NPC either. In other words, that means what I think it means, right...?” Arthur couldn’t hold his excitement back and started spinning around spontaneously.

AKK was an abbreviation for “Akira Kudos Knights.” Its purpose was to be an order of knights that loved and revered Akira Tenma. Basically, it was a clan composed of Akira’s fanboys.

I recalled that whenever a new Akira Tenma event occurred, his clan would drop whatever they were doing, be it a raid or another in-game event, put on a special uniform, and charge deliriously into it. Arthur had designated himself Tenma’s chief of security. His devotion had crossed the line from fandom into obsession and creeped all the other players out.

“Yippee! It’s a real Akira! A living, breathing Akira! This is my chance, right?! I’ll make sure she’s safe, don’t worry about that!”

“Cool it. Tenma’s still under the effect of the curse, so you’ll only weird her out if you act too friendly.”

“What, you haven’t broken the curse yet? Welp, guess I’ll have to... At least, I’d like to, but it was hard enough just getting to this floor.”

Tenma still hid her hideous appearance behind her full suit of armor, and

she'd be hesitant to accept anyone who tried to befriend her. I wanted nothing more than to cure Tenma's curse, but I wasn't yet at a high enough level. Besides, Akagi should be the one to break her curse.

"Akagi? Oh, the devilishly handsome protagonist? Why does it matter whether he's the one to break the curse?"

"At any rate, we can't break her curse right now, so let's get back to our conversation. More importantly, you must not tell Kuga, Tenma, or anyone else that you came from another world or that you can tell the future. You'd be putting them all at risk. You understand that, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, there're hordes of people trying to get their hands on dungeon knowledge. Makes sense. The outside world sounds pretty screwed up." Although Arthur was sure he'd protect Tenma, he stroked his chin as he wondered what to do about everyone else.

The fiend had a quick mind, so he could reach conclusions and act on them from the small amount of data we'd given him. At least, I hoped so. There was another thing that I needed to know too.

"Arthur, did you start with a weird skill by any chance? Like, one with unremovable debuffs?"

"I did, actually. I'd forgotten all about it because it did nothing until today. My Jealousy skill activated for the first time as soon as I saw you with Akira. It made me feel so jealous that I couldn't control myself. I was just as surprised as you at how angry I got."

As I'd thought, the crazed look in his eyes when he first appeared had resulted from a player debuff skill. These skills were challenging to overcome with willpower alone. I knew that better than anyone. But... Supposing we got Arthur to the outside world, it would be disastrous if he flew into a murderous rage every time he saw Tenma with someone else. Teaching him how to nullify his debuff skill was my top priority.

"Oh, so I can use Flexible Aura to get rid of the effect?" mused Arthur.

"Yeah. I'll show you the method later. Make sure you learn it before the next time we meet. Otherwise, letting you out of the dungeon would be too risky."

“The next time we meet... Hold on a second! You’re leaving me stranded in the dungeon?!”

Arthur started to practice swirling his thick Aura around, sulking about being left in the dungeon. Even though I felt guilty, he’d have to endure it for now. I had other matters to attend to, preparations to make, and research to do.

“I’ll give you this so that you can contact me. I’ll also register my magic at the gate on the twentieth floor so we can meet up whenever we want.”

“What is this? A wristwatch?”

“It’s like a smartphone,” I explained. “You press this button to open the app and call me. I’ll ring you too, so I’ll always keep it on you. I’ll also ask Granny how to get you out of the dungeon, so don’t worry about that.”

“Wait! At least let me talk to Akira before—”

At that moment, Tenma returned with Kurosaki, the head butler who wore a maid uniform. Kurosaki looked astonished when she saw the destruction inside the chapel.

“H-How did it get like this?!” she exclaimed. “What on Earth happened here?”

“It’s a long story,” Tenma said, “but I should probably check with Narumi before telling you about it. Oh, see this kid?”

Tenma pointed to Arthur and introduced him to her head butler. She explained that she wanted to employ Arthur as a bodyguard.

When the hell did that get decided? I wondered.

“He’s incredibly strong,” continued Tenma, “and I think he’s sweet too. What do you say?”

“This looks like a complicated situation...” Kurosaki turned to me with a glare. “Hey, brat! You and I will talk later about everything that went down here.” She then turned to Arthur and suddenly had a gentler look in her eyes. “My lady took me in when I was down on my luck. If you have nowhere else to go, then I’d gladly welcome you to join us.”

“I hope you’ll try to get on better with Narumi too,” Tenma added.

Arthur burst into tears. Tenma patted his head as he repeated “Thank you” to her over and over.

His days here must’ve been tough. Arthur had spent his entire time in this world confined to the dungeon. He’d been on his own and confused, with nobody to talk to, and his mind unstable due to the body he inhabited. I wished I could’ve set him free immediately, but I had things to prepare and people to talk to first. He’d have to bear with it for a bit longer.

“Thank you, Akira,” Arthur said. “But I can’t come with you right now. I can’t leave the dungeon. When I get out, I hope the offer is still open.”

“Of course!” replied Tenma. “When Narumi finds out how to get you out of the dungeon, I’ll be right there with him coming to pick you up.”

“I’ll school you on our black butlers’ way of doing things so that you can be a butler worthy of serving my lady,” said Kurosaki.

Arthur was putting on a brave face and smiling in front of Tenma and Kurosaki, though I was sure he was scared about being alone again. I told him to give me a call if he ever felt lonely.

Okay, time to go home.

My part of the Battle of the Classes was over now. It had been one surprise after another, and my body ached. I wanted nothing more than to lie down and get some rest, but there were too many things that I had to look into and think about. I’d make sure Arthur paid me back for all the work I would put in for him...with interest.

With a glassy-eyed Kuga tugging on my shirt and asking me to tell her everything that had happened while the maid glared at me from behind, I finally left the chapel, my long fight now over.

Chapter 4: The Golden Lion Medal

Kaoru Hayase

“One warg, coming right up!” yelled Oomiya as she ran toward us, trailing a colossal warg that howled as it chased her.

Wargs were too quick to pull the normal way, and they’d catch up to you in no time. Instead, you needed to use long-range attacks to grab their attention. Oomiya was a splendid shot with a bow and arrow, and her ability to multirole as a damage dealer, scout, and other roles gave our party a massive efficiency boost in our raid.

From the physical strength and stamina that I saw her exert, I felt she was at a much higher level than the monsters and used that advantage. But I wouldn’t complain because she was amazing.

“You’re up, Hayase!” Oomiya called out.

“Leave it to me,” I replied.

The warg was close enough that I could hear its breathing. I was acting as the party’s tank, so I’d need to let the warg attack me and hold its aggro for the rest of the fight. And so I readied my shield and gave the rest of my team instructions with hand gestures.

“To your spots, everyone,” I ordered. “Make sure not to pull too much aggro.”

“Got it!”

“Will do!”

Shields weren’t something I’d used much in my prior raids, but I’d practiced using them in the lead-up to the Battle of the Classes, so I knew what I was doing. Although it was challenging to bear the brunt of the two-meter-long warg’s weight, I knew it wouldn’t knock me down if I timed its attack correctly.

I’d chosen a rapier as my main weapon so that I could wield it with just my right hand. Rapiers didn’t deal much damage, but as long as I defended myself

with the shield, this weapon was perfect for building up the warg's aggro. I struck the warg with plenty of jabs, ensuring it focused solely on me. In truth, Oomiya was a better tank than me but only observed from a distance so the rest of us could get more experience points and actual combat experience.

The rest of my team cautiously spied on opportunities to attack without shifting the warg's attention away from me. This was their first fight against a warg, yet they didn't panic and had good group coordination. We were halfway through the Battle of the Classes, and they'd retained enough stamina to still be fit and fast.

I'm glad we took the plunge and came down here, I thought.

Raiding the sixth floor had been a gamble, but Oomiya was stronger than we'd expected. The rest of the team had also changed to new jobs, so I thought there would be a good chance of success. At the rate we were slaying wargs, we might even overtake Class D in the number of magic gems. Majima and the other top Class E students would join us later too. Our prospects looked bright as our ability to hunt wargs regularly could be the deciding factor in our success for the rest of our time at school.

"Woo-hoo! That makes three!"

"We're making good progress," I said. "Let's take a short break and continue until lunchtime."

"Yeah!"

"Let's do this!"

While we ate lunch, Majima and his team turned up.

"Hey, guys," greeted Majima. "It's a pleasure to join your crack team of adventurers. I'm ashamed to say my team has been letting our side down. Sorry about that." Majima bowed his head apologetically.

"Don't say that!" blurted Oomiya. "We know how hard you've been working."

"Majima, let's turn things around together!" another student chipped in.

Even if they seemed disheartened that their team of Class E's top students

had fallen to last place, they had faced Class D's top students and weren't at fault. I was just glad they'd so graciously accepted to support our gem collecting.

"Hayase, what do you want us to do?" Majima asked.

"We've checked that we can successfully hunt wargs," I said. "However, sometimes goblin riders spawn nearby. We could raid more efficiently if you took down the riders while we're hunting wargs."

"Fair enough," replied Majima. "Goblin riders aren't easy to deal with if you don't have experience on this floor. Okay, we'll do it."

Goblin riders were variants that rode atop wargs. They'd often work in small groups, with lone riders finding them tricky to defeat because they'd flee if the fight wasn't going their way. Since Majima was used to raiding the sixth floor, he'd have no trouble slaying these monsters.

As we reviewed our plan, Majima abruptly lowered his voice and whispered, "By the way, Hayase... Is it true about the helper?"

"It is," I whispered back. "Oomiya brought her in. I'm not sure whether she's coming today though."

"Ah, a friend of Oomiya's. Has Tachigi given you any instructions about her?"

Naoto had messaged me to say that he wouldn't assume the helper's assistance when devising the class's battle plan. The reasoning he'd given was that he wanted our class to do well on our own merits so that the result would bolster our confidence. He was thinking long term for our class.

"I see. So he's not fully behind the..." Majima trailed off when one of our lookouts rushed over. "What's wrong?"

"Majima!" the lookout said. "Wargs are linking up over there! It's a train!"

"How many are there?" inquired Majima. "Everyone, get ready for a fight!"

"Hurry!" yelled Oomiya.

I initially thought Soleil was after us again. But there weren't as many monsters this time, meaning we could fend them off. I put on my armor, picked up my shield, and stood up.

"Should I help with the close combat?" asked Oomiya.

"I want you to capture the person who created the train," I said. "Can you do that for me?"

"You're right, he got away last time. I'll do it!"

"Here they come!" a student shouted. "Wargs... Five of them!"

We waited with bated breaths for the wargs to arrive, and that was when a man ran about ten meters in front of us. His mask obscured his features, but he had the same scruffy hair as the man who had led the orc lord train to us, so I assumed they were the same person. He held what appeared to be a magic item. After he channeled his mana into it, he became invisible, and I couldn't tell where he was anymore. I recognized this feeling from when I had encountered another masked adventurer.

With the man gone, the wargs' aggro reset, and they spun around and charged toward us, howling. He'd cunningly used his magic item to lead the wargs toward us.

My team took on one warg, while Majima's took on three. Oomiya slew one more with a single strike as she ran past it to chase the man, who was likely still nearby.

"Nobody panic!" remarked Oomiya. "We can handle this!"

We'd slain the last warg and took a moment to catch our breaths. Oomiya dragged the culprit before us and ripped his mask off. The face beneath was distinctive because of his long sideburns.

"How...many times...do I have to tell you?!" the man protested, breathless. "I was just running away from the wargs because they were attacking me!"

Because we had pictures of him from when he led the orc lord train toward us, his uninspired excuses wouldn't help him.

"You can't fool us," Oomiya said. "We've already shared your picture!"

"Oh yeah? Do you have any idea who I am..." started the man. But when my classmates finished off the wargs, they grappled him to the ground and held

him in place. “Hey, stop that!”

“You’re out of line,” Majima said. “We’re taking you to the guild.”

The man struggled to free himself and shouted that Soleil would get us back for this, though he would likely attack us again if we let him go. Majima’s decision to turn him in to the Adventurers’ Guild was the wisest course of action.

At that exact moment, a group appeared—Class D’s gem-collecting team. They had likely been lurking nearby to observe.

“Hey, losers!” one of them shouted. “Your punk class won’t get off lightly for laying your hands on my brother!” It was Tadashi Manaka, the leader of this Class D team. He was the person who had hit Souta the other day, and it looked like he wasn’t interested in talking things through this time either. He unleashed his Aura to threaten us as soon as he showed up. They were probably going to rewrite the narrative to get themselves off the hook...but the look in Manaka’s eyes made me fear they had even worse in mind.

“Thank goodness you’re here, Tadashi,” the man said. “These kids are trying to frame me.”

“Listen, Class D,” Majima said. “We have proof of what he’s done, and threatening us with violence won’t change that.”

“How dare you falsely accuse us?!” shouted Manaka. “You’re dead meat!” He drew his sword, and several others from his class did the same and pointed their blades at us.

Their weapons could be as lethal to people as to monsters. Even if they didn’t intend to kill us, their swords could easily slice off limbs, which could itself be deadly. I didn’t think it would turn out like that, but I knew we needed to contact the guild quickly. When I loaded up my terminal to call the guild...

“You bitch! What do you think you’re doing?!”

I screamed. Manaka had grabbed me by the hair and swung me around, but Oomiya rushed over and grabbed his hand.

“Leave her alone!”

With that, the fight started. Or at least it would have if Oomiya hadn't taken out half of the Class D team before they could move. Her skill showed how remarkable she was.

"I won't let evildoers go unpunished!" Oomiya said.

"How... How are you...so strong...?"

Oomiya's overwhelming strength stunned the Class D students. According to the school's database, most of Class D's gem-collecting team were levels 7 and 8. But none of them were fast enough to keep up with Oomiya, showing she had to be at least level 10.

Although shocked, Majima and the rest of us pulled ourselves together and started trying to call the school and the guild for help. We had to bring the man from Soleil to justice for his crimes, as well as the Class D students for trying to buy our silence at the point of a blade.

Unfortunately, the situation escalated before we could contact the outside world. A rush of air befell as somebody flew into the room faster than my eyes could follow.

"Argh!"

"Enough of that, little kitten."

This newcomer kicked Oomiya in the side and sent her flying before we had time to look at him. His sudden arrival left my mind reeling, unable to keep up with what was happening. He was a large, muscular man with a flashy appearance. Jewelry clinked and jingled on his fingers and ears, and he carried a large sword with golden ornamentation on his back. A sun badge gleamed on his chest... It was a golden lion medal.

That badge is the one for Designated Assault Clans... This is bad!

The Japanese government would award the title of Designated Assault Clan to clans that had demonstrated extraordinary ability and achievements. Any group could call themselves an Assault Clan, but only those recognized by the government could refer to themselves as a Designated Assault Clan. Members of such clans received the golden lion medal the bejeweled adventurer wore as decoration. Most adventurers dreamed of one day pinning this medal on their

chest.

However, Soleil wasn't a Designated Assault Clan. This man likely belonged to a more prestigious clan higher up in the organization.

Oomiya lay on the ground a few meters away, unmoving. The man's kick was too quick for her to defend herself, which knocked her unconscious. Majima and I approached her to check whether she was hurt, but a sudden rush of powerful Aura stopped us.

"Hey, kiddies," the man said. "You don't seriously think you can get off scot-free after laying your hands on one of mine, do you?"

The immense, thick Aura filled me and every other Class E student with terror, and we couldn't help but sink to our knees. Even though I couldn't tell exactly how strong he was, he was certainly strong enough to take on our entire class effortlessly.

If our class wanted any chance of a bright future, we couldn't afford to give in to threats. I *knew* that, but what could I possibly do in the face of such an overwhelming Aura? The situation was dire, and our prospects grim. All I could do to stop my heart from faltering was to keep praying.

What was Soleil?

There was an Assault Clan called Colors. This organization boasted the top spot among Japan's clans, cemented when they made history by slaying the Mad Lich King on the thirty-second floor. Colors had formed from a merger of five Assault Clans, and they still existed as subsidiary clans under Colors's umbrella. One of those subsidiary clans was the Golden Orchid Clan, and Soleil was another subsidiary clan of that one. In other words, they were two steps removed from Colors.

Colors might be a top clan, but its tertiary suborganizations weren't guaranteed to be remotely as powerful. Starry-eyed young adventurers would look up to Soleil as a place to make a name for themselves and potentially rise through the ranks to Colors. But if you ignored their lineage, Soleil was nothing more than an upstart clan a few years old, desperate for their first taste of

glory. Compared to the Golden Orchid Clan's other subsidiary organizations, they were close to the bottom of the ladder.

Despite that, Soleil's fortunes had changed a month before when they remarkably discovered an as yet unknown area of the dungeon. The location was a gold mine for the adventuring world, containing a new kind of monster called golems that were easy to exploit for experience points. There was even a giant building with a treasure chest, which didn't usually occur on such shallow dungeon floors. Colors monopolized the area, securing an easy way to power level their recruits and a stable source of income. This feat propelled Soleil to new heights within the Colors family.

One result of this was an unusual shuffling of personnel: the Golden Orchid Clan promoted Soleil's clan leader to an executive position, and in return, one of their members joined Soleil as their new leader. And the Golden Orchid Clan member who now led Soleil was—

“—and our new leader is...this man, Daigo Kaga!”

That was how the older Manaka, the train culprit, finished his bootlicking summary of Soleil's history. The older Manaka claimed to be the person who'd discovered the new area, but I doubted someone so unremarkable could have pulled that off.

“The Golden Orchid Clan...” interrupted Majima, bravely raising his head despite the immense pressure of Kaga's Aura to glare at the clan leader. “What's such a big shot clan doing meddling in our school exam...?”

Majima's question was the natural one to ask if one were to believe the older Manaka's story. While the Golden Orchid Clan weren't a top clan, they were still a Designated Assault Clan full of immensely skilled adventurers that anybody in the adventuring world would recognize. What interest could a school exam possibly hold for a clan like that?

“We invited ourselves to you kiddies' playtime to see if we could find any promising talent,” explained Kaga.

Apparently, Kaga wanted to transform Soleil into a powerful clan worthy of

the well-established martial tradition of the Golden Orchid Clan. But few of the clan's current members were up to the task. To fix this, they hoped to use the colossal reward money from the discovery of the new area to fund the scouting of new members and came to our school exam to do so.

Once they arrived, they'd realized that all the talented students belonged to the nobility or had already been promised a position in another clan. The rest of the students they encountered were disappointing. As such, they'd been ready to pack up and go home.

"But then, we saw *this...*" said Kaga, glancing sidelong at the unconscious Oomiya. "Who would've thought we'd find someone from Class E who shows promise?"

He elaborated that he'd originally excluded Class E from his list of scouting targets because of our poor results in recent years. After he saw Oomiya's strength, he planned to change that policy for students of similar strength. But he also expected that any student this strong would likely already have an arrangement with a clan, even if they were in Class E. With that, he demanded that we hand him a list with our students' information.

So, he must've been observing us since the warg train, I realized.

From the way Oomiya had moved during that fight, even an amateur like me could tell she was special. I found it unlikely that there were any more students as strong as her in our class though. Even if there were, the school's database probably wouldn't show their true level, so handing Kaga a list of our classmates would be meaningless. Besides, there was no way we'd sell out our classmates to scumbags that ran trains into people.

"You lot don't get a say in this," Kaga declared. "This is your penalty for laying your hands on one of mine. And while we're at it...we'll be taking *her* back with us."

"We won't let you!" shouted Majima, jumping to his feet. He threw a punch at Kaga, but the enemy deftly dodged without even looking and drove his fist into Majima's stomach. The powerful Aura that Kaga had projected earlier had told me this anyway, though this was further proof that he was the real deal. Even Oomiya hadn't been fast enough to react to his kick. The rest of us

wouldn't be able to lay a finger on him.

Soleil and Class D members cackled as they watched Majima crumple to the ground.

"Did he forget he's from the loser class?"

"Don't fight back if you can't fight!"

It's true, we're weak. But even so, there are lines we won't cross! Whatever they might say, I owe my life to Oomiya, and she's my comrade... She matters! I will not let them have her!

I suspected they wanted to take her with them to investigate whether she had any clan backing and threaten her into joining them. No commoner could stand up against the might of the Golden Orchid Clan. Reporting the blackmail to the authorities would be a waste of time too... I wouldn't let that happen!

What future could I hope for if I trembled and watched these thugs get away with this just because they were stronger than me? I mused. If that's the sort of coward I am, then I'll never make my dream come true. My remaining days at Adventurers' High will be empty and soulless, my spirit broken. I wouldn't have the right to talk about using the Battle of the Classes or any other event for personal growth.

I ran in before Oomiya and spread my arms out, blocking their path.



“Oh?” Kaga let out. “What are you playing at? Do you need another reminder of how much stronger I am?”

“Let me handle this, Kaga,” Manaka said, leering at my body. “I’ve had my eyes on this one for some time.” The look in his eyes was ten, no, a hundred times worse than Souta’s had ever been.

“Do what you want. I have no time for the weak. Come on, guys, we’re taking the strong one away!”

I braced myself for whatever was about to happen. However, Manaka didn’t strike a stance and simply reached his hand toward me. And so I grabbed and threw him to the ground.

“Ouch... How dare you?!” Manaka screamed. He pulled a mace out and struck it against the ground threateningly. “I was gonna be gentle, but now you’re gonna get it!”

He’s probably higher level than me, I thought. But I won’t let him win!

As I stood my ground, my classmates walked over one by one and stood by my side. Even if we beat Manaka, there were plenty of seasoned Soleil adventurers right behind him. It wouldn’t matter if we fought together because they’d demolish us. But my classmates had chosen to stand with me anyway, which gave me courage.

“Oh, this could’ve been so much easier,” said Kaga, sighing. “Guys, show these brats just how fearsome Soleil is. I’ll be taking this kid and heading home. See you later.”

“D-Don’t you...touch Oomiya,” Majima wheezed, “or our helper will have something to say about it.”

Kaga stopped and cupped his chin. “What? Who’s he talking about?”

“Umm... Did Class E have a helper?” said Manaka. “Out with it, losers!”

“Call them here,” ordered Kaga. “If your helper can beat me, I’ll say we’re even. Guys, set up camp!”

Kaga must’ve been surprised that Oomiya had connections, or perhaps he found it strange that Class E had a helper... Or maybe he was simply interested

in seeing what would happen next. The Soleil members began setting up a camp, planning to occupy this area's exit so we couldn't escape.

It felt wrong to call our helper into this situation after all the times she'd saved us, though. Doing so would be especially wrong without consulting Oomiya first.

"Majima, are you sure it was a good idea to say that...?" I whispered.

"I'm sure the helper would prefer this to Oomiya's kidnapping," responded Majima. "Anyway, we're not strong enough to protect Oomiya by ourselves. This was our only option."

"Well... Ah, Oomiya's woken up. Let's see what she thinks."

One of our classmates had been cradling her head while she was unconscious, but now she'd finally opened her eyes. Although she had taken a kick to the side, she didn't appear to be suffering from any broken bones or internal injuries.

"I can't believe he kicked me," noted Oomiya. "I didn't even see it coming."

Oomiya explained that it still hurt, even if it would only result in some bruising. She really was tough... A kick that strong should have done much more damage! I was so glad she was okay.

I wasted no time before informing Oomiya of what had happened. She was the only one here that knew how to contact the masked adventurer and had the right to decide whether we called her here or not. When I asked what she wanted to do, Oomiya explained that the helper was scheduled to head here anyway to help with our raid.

"She's really important to me, though!" Oomiya said. "I can't drag her into something so dangerous!"

"But they said they'll take you away," argued Majima. "And that's not all! They've demanded that our gem-collecting team withdraw from the exam. They'll use violence to get whatever they want."

"They said that...? But..."

Class D's plan all along had been to hit our gem-collecting team with a train

and threaten us until we withdrew if that failed. Now Soleil wanted to take Oomiya with them. We couldn't accept their unreasonable demands. That said, we didn't have many other ideas about how to solve these problems. Majima explained this and asked Oomiya what she planned to do.

"In that case, I'll defeat them myself," declared Oomiya. "I let my guard down earlier, but I won't lose this time!"

"You can't win," countered Majima. "His Aura is on another level. I'll admit you're strong, but he's not in the Golden Orchid Clan for nothing."

"We won't know unless I try!"

"I'm down with that," interrupted Kaga. He'd seemingly been listening to our conversation. Then, he threw a gaudily decorated sword at Oomiya's feet and confidently smirked as he walked over. "We've got nothing else to do until your helper gets here, so let's look at what you can do."

Although Oomiya was definitely strong, I'd felt Kaga's Aura and knew she wouldn't stand a chance. I tried to convince her not to fight him, but she smiled and said she'd be all right, and that shut me up.

"I won't...let evildoers go unpunished!"

Kaga roared with laughter. "Ha ha ha! Don't forget, if you wanna champion justice, you need the strength to back it up."

Oomiya smacked her fists together to pump herself up, then lowered her center of gravity and got into her stance, bouncing slightly to get into a rhythm. In contrast, Kaga took no stance and simply let his arms hang by his side. My friend from our so-called loser class was facing up against a member of the legendary Golden Orchid Clan. Such a sight was as absurd as it was thrilling.

Class D and the Soleil members laughed as they watched, confident their leader would win. However, that changed when the fight started.

At that moment, Oomiya leaped forward and closed the distance to Kaga in a heartbeat, using a thrusting technique on her opponent. Kaga crossed his arms to block her attack. The speed and power of her thrust caused even the Soleil members to let out gasps of surprise. She immediately followed up with a rapid combo of a direct kick, backhand chop, and roundhouse kick that was too quick

for my eyes to follow... But Kaga blocked them without raising an eyebrow.

"Your speed is good, but your attacks are too predictable," he commented.

"Oof!"

Kaga grabbed Oomiya's sleeves while blocking one of her attacks and pulled, breaking her balance. Once he'd ensured she couldn't dodge, he drove his foot into her back. She stumbled and let out a choked gasp. Yet Oomiya was still on her feet and courageously got back into her stance.

This fight is so intense! But...

Each of Oomiya's attacks was fast and powerful, well beyond anyone else's abilities in Class E. I'd seen a Class C student fight once before, and Oomiya's attacks were at least as powerful as that. So, why weren't any of her attacks landing? Was it just the level difference? Or the difference in their combat experience? It was probably both.

The spectators on both sides watched the highly skilled martial arts in awed silence. Even the Class D students, who loved to call us losers, stared dumbfounded with their mouths wide open. The Soleil crowd was watching the events with a newfound interest. Those of us from Class E were naturally surprised as well, but we knew that we were still in an awful bind, so our faces looked grim. I wished I could've joined in to help Oomiya, but the fight was too advanced; I'd only get in her way.

Just when the tension was at its greatest, I heard someone singing.

"Pennies, pennies, dollars and dimes, all the money for me!"

Given our current situation, the haphazard melody and silly lyrics felt so out of place. I turned to look at the source of the voice and saw someone skipping toward us.

At first glance, it seemed like she was just skipping but she was traveling at a breakneck speed, twirling around and zigzagging as she moved. Despite her irregular movements, her footsteps made no sound. Why was that?

Everyone stared with wide eyes at the approach of this quirky character.

Chapter 5: Faker

Kaoru Hayase

“La la la... Hmm?”

As I’d guessed, the person who was twirling and skipping toward us at high speed was the masked adventurer. She was probably on her way to help us out for the day. When she noticed that Class D and a group of unfamiliar men were waiting with us inside the room, she stopped by the entrance and tilted her head to one side. She had trouble understanding what was happening, and I couldn’t blame her.

“Oh?” Kaga said. “Who’s this?”

“Stay away, Kan... Uhh, I mean, Miss Mask!” shouted Oomiya.

Spotting Oomiya, the masked adventurer ran over and hugged her. But she tilted her head again after noticing the disheveled state of Oomiya’s hair, the flushed look on her face, and her breathlessness.

“She...doesn’t look like much of a helper. Is this the one, Tadashi?” the older Manaka asked.

“Seems weak, so probably not,” the younger one replied.

The two brothers doubted the masked adventurer’s strength on account of her appearance. Still, the fact that she was traveling solo on the warg-infested sixth floor of the dungeon raised their suspicions.

“Hayase, is that the one?” whispered Majima, looking serious.

“Yes,” I replied. “She’s the adventurer that saved us.”

I’d been there when the masked adventurer wiped out the orc lord train in less than a minute, and I’d witnessed firsthand how she threw the orc lord around with one hand and sliced him in two with a single strike. She might be small, yet her slender arms packed a surprisingly mighty punch.

Majima didn’t have the benefit of having seen her in action, and he was

visibly disappointed. A few of my classmates were also hanging their heads in dismay. They were probably making assumptions based solely on her appearance.

Everyone knew that the best adventurers would have the best equipment. Putting your strength on display allowed other adventurers to recognize your importance, leading to special treatment from clans and the guild. This was why powerful adventurers like Kaga tended to dress extravagantly.

The masked adventurer, however, bucked this trend. She wore only a tattered robe and a wooden mask that had blackened with age. Her only weapon was the simple dagger strapped to her waist, which had no ornamentation. Add to that her small stature, and she *looked* like a complete pushover.

Her equipment is special though, I thought. I'm sure of it.

I believed that her equipment comprised magic items that would conceal her presence or at least make it harder to notice her.

“Oh... I’m so sorry for getting you involved in this dangerous situation!” Oomiya said as she gently hugged the helper back.

The masked adventurer kept glancing over at me as if seeking an explanation for how things had turned out like this. I moved to approach her, but the men from Soleil noisily barged in between us.

“So you’re saying this pip-squeak is your helper?”

“Looks nowhere near as strong as Kaga was hoping for. What should we do?”

“Looks can be deceiving sometimes, so let’s use Basic Appraisal on her.”

One Soleil member rudely cast an appraisal skill on the masked adventurer. Everyone pricked their ears up, waiting to hear the verdict. From the look on the man’s face, it wasn’t good.

“Huh... The skill says she’s weaker than me.”

“Weaker? You’re level 10, right? Which means she’s...level 8, is that all?”

“Uh-oh, Kaga’s gonna be pissed!”

Basic Appraisal would only evaluate a target’s strength relative to the

appraiser. When the appraisal evaluated a target as “weaker,” the target was two levels lower than the appraiser. In other words, the masked adventurer was level 8.

But there's no way someone that strong is just level 8...

The masked adventurer could run faster than my eyes could follow, and she was strong enough to pick orcs up with one hand and throw them, even though they weighed almost a hundred kilograms. No level 8 might be capable of that. I wondered whether the appraisal skill had misfired or perhaps she was disguising her stats. But why in the world would she do such a thing...?

“Just a level 8? You had me scared for nothing!” the older Manaka jeered. “We don't need Kaga to waste his time taking down a runt like you. I'll defeat you myself!” He glared at the masked adventurer and began to tauntingly shadowbox, as if to say, “Bring it on.”

He looked a lot more enthusiastic than he had a moment ago. I had a feeling that he wanted to vent his frustration at losing to Oomiya and probably wanted to show off in front of his younger brother too.

“Could it be that... Hmm, never mind. Do it.” Kaga wasn't as enthusiastic and appeared to have some misgivings, but he permitted the duel.

“One punch,” boasted Manaka to his younger brother, raising his index finger. “One punch is all I'll need to take this runt down!”

And so the masked adventurer approached the older Manaka, apparently accepting the duel. She stared closely at Manaka's face. At first, I thought she was just returning his glare, but the way she kept turning her head to look at him from different angles gave me the impression that she was trying to figure out if she recognized him from somewhere.

“Kan... I mean, Miss Mask, don't do anything dangerous!” warned Oomiya.

“Hang on, Oomiya,” Majima interjected. “I don't think he'll be a problem for her?”

“But... The thing is, she's...”

Oomiya was determined to prevent the masked adventurer from fighting. Her

reluctance struck me as stemming from a familial instinct to keep the adventurer from engaging in anything too dangerous rather than any fear that she might lose.

“Give us a good show, Manaka,” Kaga said.

“Same rules as always?” asked Manaka.

The Soleil members decided on the rules. Duels between adventurers were common occurrences, with the standard rules being that weapons were forbidden and that the duel would end when one participant surrendered or could not continue. These were the rules we’d be using.

Private duels were technically illegal, although the Adventurers’ Guild would look the other way as long as the fight took place somewhere discreet because duels were a way for hot-tempered, proud adventurers to blow off steam. That said, even fistfights could be fatal when one involved physical enhancements, meaning duels carried a certain amount of risk.

I initially assumed the masked adventurer would refuse the duel, having no reason to react to Soleil’s petty provocations. But she was also shadowboxing in preparation, looking surprisingly eager to start the fight. Did she have a specific motivation for engaging in this duel?

“I’ll be the referee,” Kaga said. “Duelists, get to your spots.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” exclaimed the older Manaka. “Bet you can’t make me take you seriously, pip-squeak!”

“Knock that loser flat on her ass and show everyone how strong Soleil is, brother!” the younger Manaka cheered.

The Soleil and Class D groups laughed about how they wouldn’t need to place bets on the victor. A few of the more extreme voices suggested that Manaka should draw out the fight and beat the masked adventurer to a bloody pulp to make an example of her. Kaga observed the two participants quietly, with none of the bluster he’d shown earlier.

On our side, Oomiya couldn’t stop fidgeting. It was my first time seeing her like this; she was always so optimistic, and normally no situation would faze her. I was certain that our victory was assured, though. The older Manaka

wanted to end the fight in one punch, but he'd be lucky to land one on her.

"This could be our chance," whispered Majima.

"What do you mean?" I whispered back.

Majima explained that we could use the masked adventurer's victory as an asset in our negotiations to escape this dire situation in two different ways. The first would demonstrate Class E's backbone. Duels between helpers counted for something, even ones we were goaded into, like this one. A victory for the masked adventurer was a victory for Class E, and we could use that to tell Class D to back off. The second was that Kaga's attention would shift from Oomiya to the masked adventurer. He was watching the events intently and might let us go if he found something that piqued his interest more than Oomiya and Class E.

That felt like a selfish way of looking at things that would save our skins but hang the masked adventurer out to dry.

"I understand where you're coming from," murmured Majima. "But Kaga's strength is in a league of its own. He's too powerful for any of us to fight. The only thing we can do is turn his gaze away from us."

He did have a point. Even the masked adventurer wouldn't be strong enough to defeat Kaga, judging from the power of the Aura he'd projected earlier. And we didn't have any other options. Even so, I couldn't agree with Majima's plan.

"Ready, go!" shouted Kaga.

While I struggled with what to do about Majima's plan, the duel started. Both adventurers had taken their poses and faced each other. When Kaga gave the signal for the duel to start, the older Majima attacked first.

"Suuuuper Tornaaaaado!"

Manaka stepped forward and threw his fist at our helper's wooden mask, screaming out the name of his attack. The punch was as quick and powerful as one would anticipate from a level 10 adventurer. A moment later, I heard a loud thump, consistent with the amount of kinetic energy in the punch. However, that wasn't the sound of Manaka's punch hitting our helper's mask. It was the sound of the masked adventurer grabbing Manaka's fist with her hand,

stopping the attack.

The masked adventurer tilted her head to one side.

Then, the older Manaka's jaw dropped in shock as he froze in place. He surely hadn't expected someone two levels lower than himself to stop his attack, and with a single hand at that! He was visibly shaken.

"I-I..." he stuttered. "Oh, ha ha, silly me. Looks like I accidentally held back..." Manaka tried to free his hand, but the masked adventurer held tight. "I'll just... Hey, let go of me!"

"Hmph!" the masked adventurer snorted.

"Uhh? I... Whoa!!!"

Still holding on to Manaka's hand, the masked adventurer swung him over her head and into the ground, making a loud noise as he splattered onto the ground. He was as durable as any level 10, and his high-speed impact with the ground hadn't knocked him unconscious, so the duel would go on.

"I... I...give—"

"Hmph!"

Manaka tried to say something, but the masked adventurer swung him back over her head and smacked him into the ground again before he could finish. This was enough to do it; Manaka lay sprawled on the floor, unmoving.

For a second, the sheer speed and power of the masked adventurer's victory stunned my classmates into silence. Shortly after, they regained their wits and erupted into cheers, pumping the air with their fists and hugging each other.

"This is bullshit!" the younger Manaka screamed, red-faced. "There's no way my big brother could lose to a pip-squeak like that! She must've cheated!" He drew his sword, looking ready to charge at the masked adventurer... But it was all bravado, and he didn't take a single step forward. Deep down, he likely knew that the masked adventurer who'd made short work of his level 10 brother was the real deal.

Kaga emerged from the crowd where he'd been watching the fight, pushing past the fuming Manaka to face the masked adventurer. "I had a feeling you

were a ‘faker.’ Which clan do you belong to? Actually, don’t bother answering. Fakers do the old nobility’s dirty work, and that’s all I need to know.”

What’s a faker? I wondered.

“Take him away,” Kaga ordered his underlings, indicating the unconscious older Manaka brother. His eyes pierced the masked adventurer with a murderous glare, his relaxed demeanor gone. An immense Aura then burst from his body, radiating in all directions.

“My boss has been dying to start a war,” Kaga said. “I’m gonna rip that mask off and drag you in front of him!”

Not...this Aura again...!

Fear seized me, and my terrified thoughts told me to surrender to his every demand. Regardless of how much I wanted to resist, my primal survival instincts wouldn’t let me. I wasn’t the only one either; we all threw ourselves to the ground in submission as if we were kneeling before royalty. He was so much stronger than us that he could defeat us with his Aura alone, not having to lift a finger.

His murderous Aura enveloped the masked adventurer just as much as it did the rest of us, but she only tilted her head in confusion.

Chapter 6: A Long Way to Go

Kano Narumi

“My boss has been dying to start a war. I’m gonna rip that mask off and drag you in front of him!”

Gold, jewels, and other bling practically covered the man from head to toe, jingling as he walked. I had no idea what he was talking about, and I was still clueless about what was going on... Yet I couldn’t let him unmask me, or *she* would realize my true identity.

“Miss Mask... Run...!” Big Sis Satsuki rasped. She and everyone else were on the ground, struggling to breathe because this guy was shoving his Aura in everyone’s faces.

I had once felt the power of a stronger opponent’s Aura and knew it would instantly shatter your resolve. You wouldn’t be able to think about anything other than giving up. Nobody could face an Aura like that and carry on fighting —nobody except my brother, anyway. I had to deal with this man quickly or his Aura would permanently damage the bodies and minds of my brother’s classmates. How would I stop him?

The bejeweled man wore the same sun badge on his chest as the idiot I’d thrown into the ground, which meant he belonged to Soleil. I was sure he was the one who’d beaten Big Sis Satsuki up too. Soleil was so nasty that even my mom had called them a gang of thugs, so I felt within my rights to smack him around with my full power.

“What’s the matter?” the jewelry-covered man taunted. “You frightened by my Aura?”

He stood only a few meters away without entering a combat stance and hadn’t drawn a weapon, showing his confidence. The amount of Aura he was projecting suggested he was a level or two higher than me, but that level difference was too small to stand as defenselessly as he was. Was he

underestimating my level and my speed? Or did he have a powerful magic item he could use to overpower me? I wasn't sure, so I used my appraisal wand to check. This was a fifteen-centimeter-long stick with a magic gem on its tip. I thrust my hand into the pocket I kept the wand in and channeled my mana into it.

Name: Daigo Kaga

Level: Level 22

Job and Job Level: Warrior, Level 10

Stats

Maximum HP: 68

Maximum MP: 53

Strength: 43+6

Intelligence: 49

Vitality: 58+8

Agility: 39

Mind: 41

Skills: 4/4

Probability of Obfuscation: Very Low

A list of data streamed into my mind. My appraisal wand outperformed the Basic Appraisal skill, even detecting the use of skills like Fake to disguise stats. I noted the probability of obfuscation appeared as "very low," so the stats were trustworthy.

The bejeweled man was one level higher than me, but all his stats were worse than mine, and the level difference wouldn't make much difference in our fight. He had the intermediate Warrior job and only four skills, meaning he hadn't expanded his number of skill slots, which I found strange. I knew Soleil was a part of the Colors family of clans, but maybe Colors restricted the flow of

information to their subsidiaries. Or maybe my brother knew way more about the dungeon than anyone else. Both things were probably true.

Nothing in his appraisal was anything to worry about. Our duel would work under the same rules as the last one, so there were no weapons, and I was looking forward to the fight. There were many things I wanted to try out in a real fight against an actual person. Plus, I had a few tricks up my sleeve if worse came to worst. I didn't think I needed to be too cautious since there was no way I'd lose.

"Was that Basic Appraisal? So you've clung onto that skill... Pathetic. Well, whatever. Let's have some fun."

I heard that people usually looked down on adventurers in combat roles who still had the Basic Appraisal skill taking up precious space in their limited skill slots. Because I carried an appraisal wand around with me, I'd erased Basic Appraisal already. Incidentally, the appraisal wands ranked near the top of the Narumi family's secrets. I was under strict instructions not to let anyone find out about them.

The man grinned villainously and took a stance. It was an orthodox defensive stance: his arms were low, and he leaned his weight onto his back foot. He looked even more sure of himself since he'd fooled himself into thinking that I had Basic Appraisal in my skill slots. Seeing that he wasn't going to make the first move, I was more than happy to.

Let's speed up, I thought. Accelerator.

As soon as the bluish-white light of my speed-increasing spell appeared by my feet, I leaped forward and closed the several meters of distance instantly. I threw my fist at my opponent's unguarded left cheek. He looked surprised at my speed but still reacted instantly, raising his arm to guard his face in time.

Regardless, I let my fist hit his arm without holding back. The force of my blow propelled his body horizontally, allowing me to attack him with a roundhouse kick. But he saw through my plan and crossed his arms in front of his chest to guard it too.

So be it, I thought. The initiative is still mine!

I forced him against the wall with my kick, though he predicted my path and threw a punch at me. Fortunately, I saw it coming and ducked slightly to avoid it to counter with a strike. But he dodged this attack with nothing more than a twist of his head, then he closed the distance on me.

Hang on... This guy might actually be tough.

With the Accelerator skill on top of my base stats, I should have been twice as fast as him. I'd gotten the first attack too. Despite this, he defended against everything I threw at him and even launched counterattacks. Maybe he was accustomed to fighting opponents faster than himself.

"Phew," he let out. "You're...tougher...than I thought. But...now I know for sure...what crowd you run with."

He was talking nonsense again. *The crowd I run with?* I thought. *Does he know about the secret Triple E club I started with my brother and the girls?! Not that it matters if the secret gets out.*

"You're a faker, so I thought you'd be involved with The Red Ninjettes... Now I see you're from Umbra... I was gonna let you off with a simple beating, but that's not enough for someone from Umbra!"

The Red Ninjettes? I thought. *They all wear skimpy ninja outfits. How the hell do you look at my drab brown cloak and mix me up with those exhibitionists?!*

Also, Umbra was just a made-up evil clan. Parents would tell their children that Umbra would take bad kids away to get them to behave. He was a bit too old to believe in fairy tales, maybe never having grown up.

Whatever reminded him of Umbra, his attitude had changed completely. A fierce look of hatred burned in his eyes. Ignoring the rule against using weapons, he walked over to his gleaming sword and picked it up.

Maybe Umbra really did exist, and they had clashed with Soleil before. That would explain his demeanor. Even so...

Why was he so sure he could defeat me after the way the fight had gone so far? He clearly had a lot of combat experience but couldn't keep up with my speed. I had the upper hand. Maybe he had a trick up his sleeve to turn the tide, just like I did?

"We've lost so many to your clan. Colors might promote me if I bring your head to them... You're gonna help me reach the next step up the ladder!" The man glared at me with murder in his eyes.

"N-Not good!" shouted a member of Soleil. "Kaga is gonna use that sword!"

He pulled his sword from its gleaming scabbard. The blade shone with a faint green light, and I saw wisps of air whirling gently around it, showing the weapon likely had a wind enchantment.

I tried to remember what my bro had taught me. *Wind enchantments can increase slicing damage and... Uh, what else?*

My brother had told me there were several types of wind enchantment. For instance, enchantments with a high-speed wind would increase slicing damage. Another type would blast wind in all directions to increase attack speed...no, increase the power of the impact.

The man's longsword looked designed for crushing things with its weight rather than slicing them. Add an increase in impact power on top of that, and even good armor wouldn't be enough to protect me.

If he's using a crazy weapon like that, then there's no reason for me to hold back either!

I jumped backward to pick up the thirty-centimeter-long drawstring pouch I'd left on the ground, which was my magic bag. From the bag, I pulled out two one-meter-long Boost Hammers. One pulsed with a red light due to a fire enchantment, and electric sparks buzzed from the purple head of the other one thanks to its lightning enchantment. My hammers would be good enough to fight against a powered-up sword.

Although, I was never scared of his shiny show-off sword anyway!

"Wh-What the hell is that?!" yelled one of the Soleil members, shocked by my weapon. "What the hell did she just pull from that tiny bag?!"

"I've never seen a weapon like that! They're enchanted with fire and lightning...and she's got two of them!"

"This is a fight between two monsters! We've gotta get out of here, or we'll

get caught up in it!"

All the Soleil members ran away. Seeing this, the terrified students of Adventurers' High fled as well.

"This is too much for us to deal with," said someone from Class E. "Oomiya, we have to run away!"

"B-But...!" Big Sis Satsuki started.

I couldn't guarantee that the man I was fighting wouldn't hurt Big Sis Satsuki and the others, so I turned to her and nodded to indicate that I wanted them to run.

With that said, I thought, I can't believe they'd call a cute and innocent girl like me a monster. Could you be more rude?!

I swung the two sixty-kilogram hammers around, one in each hand, as though letting out my anger at the insult. The whooshing sound they made as they passed through the air was satisfying.

Now that I was level 21, I could easily lift items that weighed more than my body weight with a single hand. I had to be careful when I swung them around, or the force would swing my body in the opposite direction. This had given me a lot of trouble at first. However, I'd spent so many hours pummeling the Bloody Baron that I'd mastered keeping my center of gravity steady while swinging the Boost Hammers. The fight would be an opportunity to demonstrate what I'd learned.

"You're coming at me with two two-handed weapons?" the man asked angrily. "You'll regret underestimating me." The wind around his sparkly blade picked up speed.

I wasn't underestimating him, though. Actually, I'd never seen another adventurer besides myself and my bro dual wield weapons. Maybe it wasn't very common.

So I channeled my mana into my weapons and activated the Boost Hammers, which made the noise of a running engine. One face opened up on each hammer's head, revealing a rocket booster that shot out jets of light. When you swung the hammers hard while in this mode, an explosion from the boosters

would propel them in the direction you were swinging, increasing their speed. I loved that feature.

I twirled the Boost Hammers around and took up a fighting stance. In my mind, I tried as hard as I could to picture how my brother had looked during *that* fight. His sword had seemed to swipe in every direction at once. He'd moved with lightning speed, and his fighting spirit had been unstoppable. My memory of him on that day played back in my mind as clearly as ever.

Yep, I'm in top form.

I still had a long way to go before I'd catch up to my brother, but I was making progress little by little. That thought filled me with confidence and an endless supply of bravery.

Right... Let's go!

Chapter 7: The Power of the True Hero

Kaoru Hayase

Punches were flying faster than I could keep track of, each one sending a shock wave thundering through the air. I could hardly believe my eyes. Although I'd seen how powerful Kaga's Aura was, the masked adventurer tossed him into the wall like a Ping-Pong ball. Her speed and power were far greater than her small figure suggested. Every spectator stood watching with their mouths hanging open, unable to say a word.

I can't believe she's so powerful... She's been hiding her true strength this whole time?

She was reaching higher speeds and attacking with more power than she had when she'd wiped out the orc lord and his massive train in under a minute. The gap between her unremarkable appearance and her immense power truly made her an enigma.

That said, Kaga was a member of the Golden Orchid Clan and was no pushover. He wasn't as quick as her, but he was fast enough to guard against her attacks, maintain a safe distance, and prepare himself for a counterattack. Kaga had also remarked that their fight had given him an insight into her true identity, even though they were only ten seconds into the duel.

"You're a faker, so I thought you'd be involved with The Red Ninjettes... Now I see you're from Umbra..."

Umbra?! It can't be. I've heard rumors about them, but...

My classmates stirred after hearing what Kaga had said.

Umbra was a secret organization, and rumors about it abounded. They often showed up in urban legends or as the architects of one conspiracy or another, so everyone in Japan had heard of this infamous clan. Nobody knew the true identity of any of its members, but I'd heard that you could receive an enormous bounty for turning one in. I'd seen several special features on them

in magazines and on television.

The organization's reputation had always seemed far-fetched since I had been sure they didn't exist. Kaga seemed sure of himself, though. Ignoring the rule against using weapons, he picked up the flashy, decorated longsword he'd put on the ground before the fight and channeled his mana into it as he drew it from its sheath.

That's an enchanted weapon!

His blade glowed with a faint green light as magical wisps of air blew around it. I'd heard that even adventurers on the front lines had trouble getting their hands on enchanted weapons because they were rare and expensive. While I didn't know what this particular enchantment would do, the panicked looks on the faces of the Soleil members made one thing clear: it was powerful.

Seeing Kaga draw this sword, the masked adventurer ran toward us and pulled two giant weapons out of a small leather pouch. I was shocked to see that the leather pouch was a magic bag, but that wasn't as surprising as the two oddly colored hammers she pulled from it.

She wielded the two hammers, each of which likely weighed more than she did. Both weapons had enchantments as well. The one that glowed red likely had a fire enchantment, which I could recognize because those were well-known. The other one though... It had purple electric sparks zapping around its head. What in the world was it? I felt uneasy looking at it.

Things were getting too dangerous. If these two were to fight at their full potential, no one in this room would be safe. Sensing the danger, Majima and my other classmates ran in a mad dash to safety.

“This is a fight between two monsters! We've gotta get out of here, or we'll get caught up in it!”

“This is too much for us to deal with! Oomiya, we have to run away!”

“B-But...!”

The duel was on the verge of becoming an unruly fight to the death. Staying here wouldn't be wise; we'd be better off leaving the room and watching from outside. Oomiya looked reluctant, but I grabbed her hand and took her to the

room's entrance.

Class D and the members of Soleil were also interested in watching the two experts duel, so the space by the room's entrance got cramped with spectators. Everyone had crowded in tightly, so I wasn't surprised when I heard things like, "Stop pushing me!" and "Hey, watch where you're touching!" I thought I also felt someone grab my butt, but I must've been mistaken. Surely, nobody was strange enough to do such a thing in the middle of an emergency.

The masked adventurer spun the hammers in her hands and struck a fighting stance. It was a combat style known as Dual Wielding. Kaga was enraged seeing her take this stance, which was understandable since it was a weak technique for adventurers.

Dual wielding itself wasn't uncommon in the wider world. The swordsman Musashi Miyamoto had famously founded the Niten Ichiryu school of swordsmanship using two swords, and the practice survived in several schools passed down through the centuries. Dual wielders had been unparalleled in battle, and I'd faced some opponents using it in my kendo tournaments. However, the same couldn't be said for fights between adventurers.

Weapon skills were an adventurer's greatest and most iconic tool. If you were to activate a weapon skill while dual wielding, it would only take effect on the weapon held in your dominant hand, reducing its power by half. Some skills would fail to activate at all. This was a critical flaw, so adventurers commonly accepted that dual wielding wasn't worth it.

Does the masked adventurer have some reason to dual wield anyway?

I wasn't sure whether the masked adventurer was a member of Umbra, but she definitely wasn't your ordinary adventurer. She surely had her reasons to continue dual wielding despite its drawbacks.

As I pondered this, the masked adventurer effortlessly twirled the two hammers around and channeled her mana into them. The hammers began making an odd noise, then their shapes changed, and they emitted light. I didn't know what was happening, although that was how it was with first-rate adventurers.

The two stood staring at each other for a few seconds, then leaned forward.

It's about to begin!

Barely a moment after they'd taken the first step, they closed the distance. A loud crash rang out as its impact kicked up a dust cloud that swirled around them. The noise probably resulted from the two enchantments hitting each other rather than the hammer striking the longsword.

The masked adventurer quickly swung down her other hammer and launched a series of rapid attacks. With every swing, the hammers fired out flashes of light, moving at incredible speeds.

It was like the two hammers were moving independently of each other while perfectly covering the weak spots left open by the other one. Her coordination was incredible. Both hammers weighed more than her, so the way she swung them should've made her body fly around as well regardless of how much strength she had... But for some reason that wasn't happening.

Could it be that she is using both hammers as counterweights to each other to keep her balance? But how? She's moving so quickly that I can't see anything!

Kaga was successfully blocking the flurry of attacks with his longsword, at times changing the position of his sword and taking a step back. The force of the hammer blows was tremendous, yet he nullified their momentum and held his ground. His vast experience and combat acumen were evident. So this was how a member of a Designated Assault Clan fought...

Even so, Kaga was still the one on the back foot and activated a skill in order to launch a counterattack.

“Don’t underestimate the Golden Orchid Clan! Flame Arms!!!”

Red flames twisted around his arms. This skill raised his strength stat, so he began knocking the hammers back. As if in retaliation for the masked adventurer's attacks, he repeatedly sliced at her with his sword, raised his longsword overhead, stepped forward, and unleashed a weapon skill.

“Burst open! Severing Chop!!!”

The longsword descended at a speed so great that it seemed it would slice through everything in its path. A shock wave rang out, extending several meters before him, kicking up dust and making a deep gouge appear in the ground. A

direct hit from that would deal massive damage, even if you were wearing heavy armor. However, the moment Kaga had begun making his skill motions, the masked adventurer had judged his attack's range and leaped out of the way. She regained her balance with a swing of one hammer, then broke into a dash toward Kaga to attack him while he was vulnerable.

"That won't work!" Kaga shouted.

A pale light appeared around his feet, signaling he had activated a skill. He spun around and parried the incoming hammer blow, then got in several slashes with his sword. Both continued trading blows, moving so quickly and swapping places with each other so often that it was dizzying to watch.

Kaga's speed has increased?!

His speed had increased an unbelievable amount since his legs had begun glowing. The masked adventurer had used a similar skill herself, and I was sure it was the reason their speed had increased. I'd noticed something shining on Kaga's wrist just before he activated the skill, which meant that he was probably using a magic item for it rather than having it in his skill slots.

The outcome of the fight was now balanced on a pinhead, with their speeds nearly equal. Even if the masked adventurer was still a little faster, she'd lost her clear advantage. With that out of the way, Kaga's superior combat experience would give him the upper hand.

"Go to hell!"

Kaga thrust his longsword forward with all his might, making use of its reach. He stepped forward, slashed down diagonally, and swiped horizontally. His attacks flowed seamlessly into one another as his movements and slashes were incredibly fast. It looked like all his attacks were happening at once. This was surely the pinnacle of what a longsword user could achieve.

The masked adventurer jumped back, putting distance between herself and her opponent, preparing to rejoin the battle. She had escaped Kaga's last attack by the skin of her teeth, but the mere fact of doing so spoke to how powerful she was. Still...

"You've lost the advantage you got from Accelerator," taunted Kaga, smiling

as though he'd won already. He pointed his longsword at the masked adventurer. "All you people from Umbra... If you take your speed away, you're just chumps. Get ready for what's about to come!"

The Class D students and the members of Soleil let out a cheer.

"Wipe the floor with her!" one of them shouted.

"Yeah, I should've known Class E's helper wasn't all that!" another jeered.

They were all celebrating. It was hard to imagine that they all looked despondent a second ago.

But they probably weren't wrong. The speed-increasing Accelerator skill had given the masked adventurer a considerable advantage. Now that Kaga was using the same skill, his vast combat experience would likely turn the tables.

My classmates could not hide their despair. We'd all been surprised to find out how powerful our helper was, but realizing that her power wasn't enough to defeat Kaga was devastating. She might not survive the fight. I desperately wanted to stop the duel, but we were too weak to do anything; we would get in her way if we tried to intervene. I cursed my ineptitude.

When I turned to my side and saw Oomiya, the look on her face told me that she hadn't given up hope.

"I wonder what face you're making under your mask now that you know your speed won't help you. Are you panicking? Are you scared? I'll rip that filthy mask off and let everyone see for themselves!"

Kaga pointed his longsword forward and crouched, lowering his center of gravity. He'd driven the masked adventurer into a tight spot, but she only tilted her head to one side.

"My speed?" she said. "You haven't seen my true speed..."

This was the first time I'd heard her. Even though she spoke quietly, her soft and cute voice resounded clearly throughout the room. There was no hint of panic or fear in her voice. Instead, she sounded full of confidence. But why?

Kaga must've noticed this as well, because he stopped smiling and shot her a suspicious look. "What? Your true speed...? Don't take me for a fool."

"I'll just have to show you then... Show you the power of this world's true hero, the power that vanquished the Demon Lord." Her voice was a whisper. She extended both arms to either side of her body, still carrying the hammers, and began to dance. "Shadow Step."

The next thing I knew, everything had turned black.



Chapter 8: A Dark Shadow

Kaoru Hayase

An almost painful tension gripped everyone in the room, and nobody uttered a sound. In that silence, the masked adventurer chanted the name of her skill in a singsong voice. Her soft voice continued to echo throughout the room, then the light dimmed. She'd been oddly tricky to perceive before, but now it was even more difficult. But that was the only change. Perhaps she intended this skill to hinder her opponent's vision.

"I've never seen that skill before," remarked Kaga, examining the masked adventurer closely. "And you're not casting it from a magic item."

He appeared to treat the masked adventurer's latest skill with caution, yet I didn't think that making herself harder to see would regain her the upper hand.

The Soleil members near me appeared to come to the same conclusion, and they ridiculed the masked adventurer.

"She's bluffing!"

"Grasp at straws all you want. It's not gonna help you against our Kaga!"

"You crafty little brat, hurry up and die!"

The Class D students joined in on the insults, shouting at the top of their lungs. I could sense a worried tone in their voices, though. They'd been certain of Kaga's victory initially. Yet the masked adventurer had surprised everyone and fought toe to toe with him, so they felt the stress.

That didn't change the fact that we were in a difficult situation ourselves. It was possible that if our helper lost, they would beat us so badly that we'd never be able to rise again and lose all hope of a bright future. For the masked adventurer, the stakes were even greater. Defeat would likely mean death.

I can't see her giving up without a fight, though.

Despite Kaga's vicious, murderous glare, the masked adventurer wasn't

running away. She seemed entirely unfazed, like she'd never lost the upper hand. If it was true that she belonged to a legendary clan, it wouldn't be surprising for her to have a special secret ability... Perhaps that last skill she'd used was her secret?

"Oomiya," I called out. "Do you know what that skill does?"

"It makes you go crazy fast," Oomiya replied. "I had a feeling she'd learned it as well."

"Wait, what?"

According to Oomiya, the masked adventurer didn't intend to impair her opponent's vision by making the environment darker. Instead, its effect was to increase her speed. The comment she'd made earlier suggested it might have another effect.

"It's about to start again!" shouted Majima.

This statement brought my attention back to the fight. Kaga crouched low and pointed his longsword at the masked adventurer. His mocking grin was gone now, and he had a serious look in his eyes. Perhaps he'd sensed that her skill wasn't a bluff.

The masked adventurer took up a stance as well... But it looked like she was hopping around and dancing for some reason. Her immense power was evident in how she could move around so nimbly despite the massive combined weight of the two hammers.

Kaga leaned in and leaped forward, letting out a battle cry as he charged. He quickly closed the distance and plunged his longsword toward the masked adventurer's throat. The crowd erupted in cheers at his whirlwind speed.

Just then, the masked adventurer swiveled her body around in a half rotation and effortlessly dodged the high-velocity attack...and then she disappeared! A heartbeat later, she reappeared behind Kaga, swinging her hammer down!

Even though Kaga desperately spun and tried to guard against the attack with his sword, he could not fully nullify the hammer's momentum, and the impact sent him flying backward. Once again, the masked adventurer appeared next to the spot where Kaga landed. It was like she'd teleported.

“How’s she doing that?” asked Majima, stunned by her speed. “Is she warping?”

“No!” Oomiya replied energetically. She was clenching her fists and swinging them around with excitement. “She’s just moving so quickly that you can’t see her! That skill is honestly astounding!”

I’d just about been able to follow the masked adventurer’s movements until now, but that was no longer possible. The most I could make out when I tried to strain my eyes was a faint, dark shadow.

After being blown away, Kaga got up and spun around, trying to defend himself, yet the masked adventurer was an invisible shadow, attacking him from every angle. The clamor of metal clashing rang out as the hammer struck his longsword, sending sparks flying in all directions. With each attack, the masked adventurer was in a new position. My classmates blinked in astonishment watching this unfold.

A burst of light shone from the hammers, and their speed increased even more. The loud sound they made each time they struck Kaga’s longsword made it clear that their power had amplified immensely.

Kaga could not move away from where he stood without leaving himself vulnerable to the attacks raining down from every direction. In one final desperate attempt to save himself, he began performing a skill motion despite his awkward stance.

“I’m gonna rip you apart!” Kaga shouted. “Delay Slash!!!”

“Double... Full Swing!”

Delay Slash was a high-level weapon skill that involved two powerful slashes. Adventurers on the front lines primarily used this skill. The masked adventurer swung her hammers wide out to either side and began performing the skill motion for Full Swing to coincide with Kaga’s skill.

Full Swing was a one-shot skill that would be powerful, but not as much as Delay Slash. However, the distinctive Aura effect of her weapon skill shrouded her left and right hands. It was as if she was activating Full Swing twice simultaneously...

Whirling wind wreathed Kaga's blade as he slashed out twice. The Full Swing attack of the two hammers with red and purple enchantments struck the blade. A shock wave that felt like it would tear the room apart reverberated and subsided.

Kaga's eyes were wide open with shock. I wondered whether he was more surprised that his opponent stopped the two slashes or that the masked adventurer had used Full Swing on both of her weapons at once.

For a moment, neither of them could move due to the cooldown from their skills. The masked adventurer was the first to move. Her purple electric hammer struck Kaga's left leg with explosive speed, finally breaking his equilibrium.

"Argh...!"

Kaga wore light metal alloy armor on his lower body, but the hammer blow was so fast that he might as well not have been wearing armor. The strike caused his leg to twist at an unnatural angle, and electricity coursed up his entire body. He stumbled and groaned. He was barely keeping himself on his feet. He avoided collapsing by using his longsword as a crutch. Kaga tried to get away, but the masked adventurer didn't let him. She lifted her hammers and went in for another attack.

They exchanged several more blows until the tremendous force of the masked adventurer's hammer sent Kaga's longsword flying out of his hands. Her next attack broke his dominant arm, and her final one knocked him unconscious.

She's...way too strong...

The masked adventurer was powerful enough to roundly defeat the bearer of a golden lion medal. Her strength was so unbelievable that I couldn't help but shiver. She hadn't been using her full power... Not during their initial weaponless duel, not even when Kaga had taunted her by using Accelerator. Nobody in the Golden Orchid Clan would be a match for her true strength. They'd need to call someone in from their parent clan, Colors, to stand a chance.

Shortly after, she deactivated her skill. The mist around her feet dissipated, and light returned to the room. She stood in the center of a room for a

moment, and appeared to come up with an idea. Then she pulled out some wire from her magic bag and wrapped it around Kaga, tying him up. She was probably tying him up so that he wouldn't go on a rampage once he regained consciousness. Despite his broken right arm and left leg, he could still kill those of us in Class E.

Watching this, the members of Soleil let out shrieks of terror.

"This can't be happening! How could Kaga lose?!"

"What's she doing to Kaga?! She's wrapping him up like a spider does before it eats its prey!"

"Eating...? Oh god, she's gonna eat us too!"

"Sh-She's a monster!!! Run away!"

"Wait for me!"

Fearing they would be the masked adventurer's next target, the Soleil members fled in terror. The Class D students hurried after them in a panic.

If the masked adventurer wanted to, she could've taken them all down before they had a chance to flee. It seemed she wasn't interested in that, though.

While they all made their escape, Oomiya ran toward the masked adventurer.

"I can't believe you'd put yourself in danger like that!"

Oomiya warmly embraced the masked adventurer's petite body, who hugged her back. I felt like I was looking at two loving sisters, meaning Oomiya had likely been beside herself with worry throughout the whole fight. I had plenty of questions for them, but I decided to let them have this moment together for now.

Majima walked over to me with a troubled look on his face. "I can't believe they have an Assault Clan in here. It's ridiculous."

He'd recovered his wearable terminal from Soleil, who'd taken it from him earlier and had used it to make contact with the administration team running the Battle of the Classes to explain our situation. A teacher would come to meet

with us directly. Fortunately, the teacher was on a floor close to this one, so we'd only have to wait about twenty minutes.

"What did the teachers say?" I asked.

"They've ordered everyone here to stop what they're doing and wait for further instructions," replied Majima. "There's no way they can ignore this huge mess, though. They'll have to come out here themselves to decide and figure out what to do with the guy we laid out."

His gaze turned to Kaga, who lay tied up on the ground.

We'd only made it through okay because of the masked adventurer's help. Without her, there would've been nothing we could've done to stop a big shot from a powerful clan. I wondered what the school's take on that would be.

"That said, it was worth seeing the panicked faces of the Class D students," remarked Majima.

I laughed. "I know what you mean."

Our group had been through a lot, but we needed to pick ourselves up and keep going. We'd take a short break, rally our spirits, and figure out how to fight on to the end.

Oomiya, Majima, and I began discussing our next steps. The amount of time we'd lost during the incident with Soleil would require a change of plans. Class E was having a hard time with every exam task, and our gem-collecting team had the best chances of winning back our position. We couldn't afford another setback and needed to devise an effective plan to hunt as many wargs as possible in the time we had left.

However, the incident with Soleil hadn't been all bad news. For one, it showed us that Oomiya was much stronger than we'd expected. We also had the help of the masked adventurer, who was strong enough to defeat a member of the Golden Orchid Clan. Our safety was less of a concern with those two around, so we could hunt wargs more aggressively. As long as we put the effort in, we'd be able to catch up to Class D.

While discussing our ideas and refining the finer points of our raid plan, Kaga regained consciousness. He wouldn't pose a threat because we had tied him up

and confiscated his weapons... But I was still uneasy with him around.

Kaga grunted with pain. “Aren’t you gonna kill me?” He glared up at the masked adventurer with a fierce look in his eyes. His loss hadn’t broken his spirit, and his persistence was exasperating.

Oomiya stood in front of the masked adventurer as though shielding her. She declared, “We’re turning you in to the teachers. She isn’t from Umbra, so you leave her alone!”

“Whatever you say,” said Kaga, snorting. “Oh, looks like someone’s coming.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw a group of people running toward us at incredible speed. Murai, Class E’s homeroom teacher was leading them. He carried a sword with a slender blade, killing any wargs that got in his way with a single slash until he arrived at our room in no time. Then, Murai walked over to where the masked adventurer stood and Kaga was tied up. He wasn’t the slightest bit out of breath despite running all the way here at such a high speed.

“My name is Murai, and I’m a teacher at Adventurers’ High,” he said while looking up at Kaga and the masked adventurer on his terminal. “You’re Daigo Kaga of the Golden Orchid Clan, I assume?” He turned to one of the other teachers. “Prepare immediate transport to the medical team. And you, in the mask... You don’t appear registered as support personnel for Class E. Do you have your adventurer ID on hand?”

Murai’s tone was more polite than the instructive one he used with us as if he was addressing an important customer. This felt odd to me, and I wondered why he’d used the word “registered.”

“Ah, my apologies,” he continued. “I know some adventurers need to keep their identities secret, so there’s no need to show me your ID if it will inconvenience you... Now, as for you kids.” Murai’s voice grew cold and low as he turned to face us. “Are you aware that enlisting the help of an adventurer not registered as support personnel is grounds for immediate disqualification?”

“Hold on a second!” shouted Oomiya. “Nobody told us that rule! What’s the deal?!”

“We weren’t even told outside help was allowed in the first place!” added

Majima furiously.

Nobody had even told us that helpers were allowed, so how were we supposed to know it worked on a registration system? Oomiya and Majima protested about the unfairness, but Murai remained calm.

“The school will deliberate about what to do with your gem-collecting team, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up. I am ordering all of you to head straight to the square outside the guild, where the exam’s operations team is located.”

“B-But!”

Only two days remained in the Battle of the Classes, and we were on the sixth floor of the dungeon. Going to the guild and back would leave us barely any time to raid. We’d finally reached a point where Class D wouldn’t interfere and we could make progress, and then this happened... This setback would ruin any chances of us overtaking Class D.

Why hadn’t Murai told us about the helper rule anyway? Had he assumed there’d be no point because we wouldn’t know any good adventurers to call in as helpers? Disqualification was an extreme reaction. It was like he intentionally sabotaged our chances of doing well.

Murai was looking down at us with ice-cold eyes. Everyone on our team was deeply nervous, yet we had no choice but to leave the dungeon.

Chapter 9: Tachigi's Decision

Naoto Tachigi

“Disqualified?!” I blurted. “But why?!”

Kaoru texted me, “The school is going to hold a meeting about what to do with our gem-collecting team.” I immediately jumped into a group chat with Kaoru and Majima. This meeting was to determine whether the gem-collecting team should be disqualified for enlisting the help of an unregistered helper.

“So you’re telling me the helpers the other classes are using are all registered?”

“Seems so,” responded Kaoru, lowering her eyes. “The teachers showed me the register. It had the names of all the Soleil helpers as well as Kaga from the Golden Orchid Clan.”

We’d definitely received help from the masked adventurer, but only when a train had attacked us and Soleil had tried to abduct Oomiya. Was it fair to say that protecting us from those dangers counted as helping us in the exam? Besides, the fact that nobody had told us about the helper rule meant that we would never have a fair shot.

“And you’re saying the Battle of the Classes operations team wasn’t interested in anything you had to say?”

“Yep,” replied Majima, his frown growing deeper as the class leader. “The way it went, I don’t think we can escape disqualification. And if we do avoid it by some miracle, there will be no time left to hunt wargs. Basically... The Battle of the Classes is over for us.”

Our specified quest team had been getting good results, but a good single task wouldn’t be nearly enough to catch up to Class D. There was nothing we could do in the short time we had left.

“And we actually had a chance too,” said Kaoru, sounding disappointed. “It’s such a shame...”

Conversely, Majima was surprisingly optimistic. “The helper rule was definitely unfair. Still, we’ve had some good outcomes from the Battle of the Classes.”

He had a point. For one, we’d learned that Oomiya was an extremely powerful asset to our class. Class E’s morale was high, and our class surpassed expectations and showed great teamwork in multiday team tasks. Now that we had a taste of the real thing, everyone felt confident that we’d perform even better in the next Battle of the Classes.

But still, defeat is defeat.

We’d lost, and nothing would change that fact. I felt my hands clench into fists with disappointment. I couldn’t let myself get emotional, though. As the class strategist, it was my job to think. I needed to be levelheaded and continue looking for solutions despite our current situation.

“Okay,” I said after a pause. “For now, take the time you have to rest up. We’ll keep working on the other tasks to have as much data as possible for next year’s Battle of the Classes.”

“Got it,” said Majima. “It’s not the outcome we wanted, but we won’t come last next time!”

“We’ll let you know if we hear anything else,” Kaoru added.

I disconnected from the call on my terminal, breathed, and turned around to Nitta, who’d been watching over my shoulder. Knowing she’d been listening to our call, I wanted to hear her opinion to collect my thoughts.

“Do you think Murai intentionally kept the helper rule a secret from us?” I asked.

“I don’t think he’d decide that on his own authority,” answered Nitta. “Seems more likely that he was instructed to keep it from us.”

The class had been slowly but steadily building up experience and getting stronger. But the helper rule destroyed any chance of fair competition with the other classes. While the rule was likely implemented to safeguard nobles’ precious heirs and heiresses from unforeseen dangers, the other classes used it to beat down Class E.

One of our biggest priorities in preparing for the following Battle of the Classes would naturally be to ensure our students continued to grow stronger, although another one might be to try to get the helper rule changed. The helper rule was not the only example of our class being targeted maliciously. There was also the issue at the club fair last month and the Class D duel. More hurdles would likely present themselves in the future.

What would we need to do to solve all these problems at once?

“Let’s see,” Nitta said. “Maybe we could win the support of a group that could protect us from these sorts of attacks?”

After a moment, I asked, “But what if the ones behind the attacks are the Eight Dragons?”

Class D caused us the most trouble, and it was easy to think that the harassment would stop if we appeased them. But they weren’t our true enemies. They were working on someone’s orders, who in turn was likely working on someone else’s orders. If we were to follow the trail to the originators of the hostility toward us, we’d find the Eight Dragons.

The Eight Dragons were the eight most powerful factions that dominated Adventurers’ High. There were two whose identity I didn’t know. The other six were the First Swordcraft Club, the First Magic Club, the First Archery Club, the Class A Alliance, the Thief Development Club, and the student council. These factions had the support of major nobles inside the government as well as big corporations, which gave them massive influence over the school’s administration. I found it likely that the Eight Dragons had pulled strings with the school’s management to compel Murai to keep quiet about the helper rule. Realistically, whose support could we enlist to go against enemies that powerful? It didn’t seem possible that we could find anyone capable of that.

Nitta kept on smiling, though. From the look she gave, I could tell that she already knew the Eight Dragons were our true enemies, and she had an idea to stop them. In that case, I also wanted her to hear my idea.

“The student council president election is coming up,” I said. “The candidates will compete against each other to win the presidency.”

In the election, the school’s students would vote on who they wanted to be

the next student council president. However, the decision would not come from the ballot box. The balance of power between the Eight Dragons would determine the outcome.

At Adventurers' High, the student council presidency was a lucrative office that enabled its bearer to direct the flow of vast sums of money and influence the school's administration and the other factions. When one of the Eight Dragons successfully planted one of their own as student council president, they could command the student council and give orders to the remaining factions.

Securing the presidency was no easy feat, even for the Eight Dragons. The factions would all fervently act to restrain each other's ambitions so that no single faction grew too powerful. I was certain that the factions engaged in numerous backroom deals and maneuvering. Soon enough, they'd decide on their candidate and drop by our classroom to order us to vote for them.

"And that's why," I continued, "we should approach one of the factions beforehand and use our votes as a bargaining chip to strike a deal with them. What do you think?"

"It won't be as easy as it sounds, you know?" commented Nitta. "These are nobles we're talking about, and they think little of us. We could end up annoying them and having to pay for it."

"That's true... But we must take risks, or we'll never claw our way up. I know that for a fact after the way the Battle of the Classes has turned out for us."

We'd found ourselves on the brink of despair several times already, and it was likely that the attacks on our class would only grow worse and more vicious in the future. In my mind, that was precisely why we had to raise the stakes and put everything on the line to end the attacks. Class E would have to confront the Eight Dragons at some point if we wanted to progress.

Which faction would we approach? Our votes alone likely wouldn't be attractive enough, so what other conditions would they accept to strike a deal? If the negotiations failed and we offended our chosen faction, they could eradicate our class. Implementing this plan would require decisiveness and precision, like threading a needle, and the smallest mistake would ruin

everything. Would we avoid succumbing to the pressure and take the right step at every turn to pull it off?

But past student council president elections showed that the Eight Dragons weren't a united front. We'd need to conduct thorough research, analyze the results, and use that data to devise a concrete plan. That would be too much for me to do by myself, and that was why—

"I can't do this by myself," I said. "But I think we'll have a shot with you and Oomiya. Will you help me?"

I knew that Yuuma and the others would help without hesitation, and of course, I planned to get them involved too. However, we would step into the Machiavellian world of noble politics by approaching the Eight Dragons. I knew that Nitta and Oomiya would be able to deftly bring their intellect and strategic minds to bear without fear, even in those circumstances. Nothing would give me more confidence than to have them working with me.

I looked Nitta in the eyes—those kind and intelligent eyes that lay behind her cute glasses—and held out my hand. She didn't take my hand, instead smiling sweetly. Had I failed to win her over?

"Hmm," she said at last. "Satsuki and I will help you out, sure, but you should probably get Souta to join in too."

"Huh?"

She'd accepted more readily than I'd expected, but she'd also mentioned someone's name simultaneously. The way she spoke sounded like he was someone she both trusted and liked. Sou...ta? Who was that?

Somehow, it felt like that name was the greatest barrier between me and Nitta.

Souta Narumi

On my wearable terminal's screen, Satsuki angrily explained their situation, and Risa was frowning.

"—and that's how it ended," Satsuki said, finishing her explanation. "It's way too unfair to disqualify us, right?"

"It's the first I've heard of helpers needing to be registered too," added Risa.

After I'd parted ways with Arthur, I joined Tenma and her black butlers. While on our way back, Satsuki messaged me, so we started an emergency meeting. I spoke into my terminal in an empty, safe spot on the twelfth floor.

So there's knowledge that even players don't know, I thought.

I'd been aware that Kano had been taking part in the exam as a helper, but I had no idea that helpers required registration. Risa and I were players, and neither of us knew this. With that said, there'd been no way to call in a helper in the game, so it made sense that we wouldn't know.

"And because of me," Oomiya said, "Kano had to put herself through a lot of trouble... I don't know how I'll ever be able to apologize enough to you, Souta."

"Don't sweat it," I said. "I've made sure Kano can escape fights, so she's safe unless she's going up against someone much stronger than herself."

Before she'd started helping with the exam, Kano begged me to help her become a Shadow Walker. Since she'd persisted, I'd given in and spent all night gathering the required items to change jobs. Anyone who wanted to take Kano prisoner would have a tough time now. I'd also completed a few quests and gotten escape items as rewards, which I'd given to her. So she'd have no trouble escaping from powerful opponents if she didn't try to fight.

According to Satsuki, however, the person she'd fought was a member of the Golden Orchid Clan. I was surprised they were showing up so early in the timeline. They'd been relatively powerful foes that showed up in the middle of the game's story. Something wasn't right. Soleil was supposed to be the only clan Class D called in for help in the Battle of the Classes.

"I dooo want to find out what the Golden Orchid Clan were doing here," Risa drawled, "but I'm more interested in hearing how you've gone super slim."

"Yeah!" Satsuki chimed in. "I can't believe my eyes!"

After a pause, I said, "It's a long story..."

My eyes took on a thousand-yard stare as I recalled all the events of that long story. Because of what happened, my body weight had plummeted, and I was

desperately hungry.

I was still stunned by the trick Arthur had pulled on me... I'd completely fallen for it. And to make matters worse, he didn't show the slightest hint of guilt! He was blowing up my phone every few hours, day or night, calling for updates on what Tenma was up to. I could only imagine that he'd mistaken me for Tenma's watchdog.

"I'll tell you all about what happened and who I met when I went to the twentieth floor, but not now. Let's schedule a time to discuss it because I want to go through everything in detail, and I want us to decide on our next steps."

"Yeah, of course!" Satsuki said. "I think it's amazing you got to the twentieth floor too! We'll probably get a whole bunch of points for the deepest-depth task."

"It'll count as joint first place, so maybe we will?" Risa added.

As I'd made Tenma take the lesser demon's magic gem, I wouldn't have to worry about explaining that. But how would I explain how I got to the twentieth floor? With any luck, I'd be able to stick to the line that Tenma's guards had surrounded me.

"I'm not sure it'll be enough points to push us over the line," remarked Satsuki. "Guess we'll be in last place after all."

"Yeah, the problem with the helper rule really hurt us," expressed Risa. "Although it pushed Tachigi into coming up with a bold new plan."

"Is he gonna start something?" I asked.

Risa explained that Tachigi was planning to win the support of one of the Eight Dragons by promising them Class E's votes in the upcoming student council president election in July. Apparently, he'd asked for the three of us to help enact his plan. I could understand why he'd want Risa and Satsuki's help, as they were brilliant. What did he want with me, though?

That wasn't the only thing that worried me about this plan either.

"I thought you needed to be quite a high-level adventurer to go up against the Eight Dragons," I said. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Yeah, I guess Tachigi is still just level 6," responded Risa. "Their slow progress leveling up is a bit worrying."

"We might not be able to tell them about the gates, although I think we should at least help them power level," stated Satsuki. "I'd be more than happy to take the lead on that."

Using Class E's votes to charm one of the Eight Dragons at the negotiating table wasn't a bad idea, but it wouldn't be enough by itself. Many people involved with the Eight Dragons were meatheads who'd try to resolve everything with their fists, and beating them in a fight was usually more effective at winning them over than negotiating. The recommended level for this had been between levels 15 and 20. Even in the game, achieving this in the first year of school had been too difficult.

Even so, the central figures of this plan—Tachigi, Kaoru, and the others—were still at a low level. Their inability to use the gates increased the time needed to travel to raiding locations, and the speed at which they increased their levels would only slow down as time passed. Following Satsuki's idea and teaching them a few power leveling tricks would be best. There were plenty of game events that only the protagonist's team could solve, so we'd all be safer that way.

"I should probably help with that as well," Risa said. "I'm always with Satsuki, and I imagine Tachigi has figured out that I'm at a higher level too."

"That makes sense," agreed Satsuki. "Let's do our best, Risa. Ah, they're about to announce the results!"

"Thanks," I said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

We agreed to catch up later and ended the call.

Everyone had made it through one annoying game event by getting to the end of the Battle of the Classes. But the next was already waiting for us in the form of the student council president election. If things continued to play out like in *DEC*'s story, there'd still be an endless stream of challenging game events that we'd have to contend with. I remembered that something else troublesome was supposed to happen before the election, but I couldn't identify what it was. It probably wasn't a big deal.

Glancing down at the clock, I noticed that we reached the official end of the Battle of the Classes. The school was likely beginning to announce the results in the square outside the Adventurers' Guild. Even though I could live stream the results on my terminal if I wanted, I was tired and wanted to rest. Intermittently revealed standings throughout the exam hadn't shown our class in a positive light, ensuring we would finish last.

"God, I'm starving..."

I slowly lay down and stretched my tired legs in an area where undead monsters spawned and ominous clouds swirled in the sky. It wasn't the most appealing view, but I preferred it to the confined feeling I got from the cave maps. Some Class B students were fighting undead monsters with their swords nearby. Their enthusiasm was admirable.

"The only thing I'm doing here is carrying people's bags, so I think I'll just go home... Oh, what's this?!"

Dozens of notifications began bombarding my terminal, ringing on a continuous loop. I was also receiving phone calls from Kaoru and Majima, making me realize something had happened.

But I was sure it wouldn't be fun, so I switched my terminal off and ignored them.

Chapter 10: The Battle of the Classes Results Announcement

Kaoru Hayase

Once it was time for the exam to end, a notification appeared on every student's terminal. Everyone began to gather at the exam's operations team's center in the square outside the Adventurers' Guild, where the exam results, the class rankings, and the points awarded for each task would be announced. The chief topic of conversation among the upper classes was who the winner would be.

The chatter in Class E was more mixed. We knew we'd be in last place, but we'd come to the announcement determined to sear that image of last place into our minds so that our frustration would motivate us to use what we'd learned to do better next time. The other classes looked baffled that we'd come when our results were obvious, but we were expecting that.

I ignored their stares and instead checked the time. The announcement would begin soon. In front of the crowd, teachers scrambled back and forth inside the operations team's work area.

In the square, a woman in her midthirties wearing a suit ascended the stage. She was the head teacher for Adventurers' High's first-year class. Once on the stage, she picked up a microphone and announced, "We have finished tallying the points, so we'll start announcing the results of the Battle of the Classes."

She paused and looked over her shoulder at the large screen behind her. "The screen appears to be working."

A group of people were operating large cameras a small distance from her. They were broadcasting a live feed so students inside the dungeon could follow along by accessing it through a web address on their terminals.

"Phew, made it," I heard someone say behind me. "That took longer than I thought."

The voice belonged to Tsukijima, who had left our team after boasting that he'd go and find a big magic gem. He claimed that he'd found the gem he was after and had verified it, but I wasn't sure I believed him.

"This gem I got is better than anything Class A will have found, so get ready to be amazed." Tsukijima winked at me as he bragged.

I would've preferred he'd stuck with our gem-collecting team and helped us rather than run off to impress us. And if he was telling the truth, I wanted to know how it was possible for him. But first things first, I wanted to focus on the announcement.

"The results are as follows," the speaker announced. "In first place is Class A with 846 points. The breakdown of—"

Then, the stage's screen displayed Class A in first place, along with their total number of points and a breakdown of their performance in the individual tasks. The live update released at 9 a.m. had shown them in the lead in several tasks, so their victory wasn't a surprise.

A cheer rose from Class A at the front of the crowd.

"That's what I'm talking about!"

"We did it, Lady Sera!"

"It's thanks to all the work you've put in, team!"

The breakdown showed that they'd come in first place in three tasks: the specified location task, the deepest-depth task, and the specified quest task. Class A had won the specified location task by a considerable margin. Yuuma had done his best in this task up until the very end. But there'd been no way to compensate for the difference in level and experience, especially given that the upper classes used helpers.

"That class has a deep bench," muttered Tsukijima, scowling. "Don't let their results get you down. They don't have any dead weight to carry."

No struggling students were in Class A, meaning they'd get good results regardless of how they arranged their teams. The presence of exceptional

students like Kikyou Sera and Akira Tenma, the top two in our year group, indicated they could push themselves harder than any other class. It wouldn't matter which students they put in which team for what task; they'd always be untouchable, the strongest class in our year.

Although I always aimed to reach Class A, the finish line felt impossible as I watched the results. I could feel pessimism creeping into my mind, so I shook my hand and refocused on the announcements.

“Next, in second place is Class B with 828 points.”

Class B let out disappointed sighs when they realized that they'd only lost to Class A by a slim margin. Many had a deep-seated rivalry with the latter, and I could see them glaring at the other class.

“Damn it, just eighteen points away.”

“Suou... I’m sorry.”

“We did our best. We’ll beat them next time.”

They'd come first place in the specified monster task, the deepest-depth task, and the gem-collecting task while placing second in the remaining ones. Even though I thought Class A was far better than them, the breakdown of points put them on a nearly even footing. Class B apparently had its share of talented students. I wondered whether they'd negotiated with Class A to come joint first in the deepest-depth task.

In the center of their group, a boy with long, dark hair was consoling the other students. His name was Suou, and his popularity and leadership had likely driven Class B's strong showing. I wanted to examine the data of their exam performance and analyze it with Naoto later.

“In third place is Class C with 438 points.”

There was a huge gap between Class C in third place and Class B in second. Each task's first and second places had mainly gone to Classes A and B, which explained the large point differentials. Class C wasn't worse than Class B in terms of level and equipment. They also had several talented students, like the one wearing traditional Japanese clothing, so I wasn't sure why their performance had suffered so much.

“Class C doesn’t have any helpers,” elaborated Tsukijima. “They have big groups that support them but don’t get nannied like the nobles do. Their backers don’t go out of their way to meddle in school exams.”

My experience confirmed that the exam was a lot tougher if you didn’t have helpers. All this further proved that if we wanted to compete against the upper classes, we’d need to find helpers to support us or eliminate the helper rule. Neither option was easy for us at the moment.

The teachers were confused as they prepared to announce the following result, which was fourth place. Something must have happened.

While I watched the first-year head teacher, Majima explained what was happening. “Hayase, some more points came in right before the final tally.”

“More points?” I repeated. “From Class D?” I couldn’t imagine Class E getting any more points at the last second, making me assume they had to be for Class D.

“That might be the magic gem I got,” said Tsukijima, butting in from my side. He prodded his chest with his thumb and grinned boastfully.

Even if Tsukijima had obtained a relatively high-level magic gem, it wouldn’t net us enough points to catch up to Class D. In other words, our ranking wouldn’t change... Or so I thought!

“Pardon me,” the head teacher said, continuing to read from the paper in her hands as though there had been no interruption. “In fourth place is Class E with 343 points.”

Hang on... Did she just say Class E?

“What?!”

“What’s going on?”

“Look, they’re about to show the breakdown!”

Not just Class E, but every class responded to the result with surprise. In the interim results released in the morning, Class D had a hundred-point lead over us for fourth place, completely justifying the shocked reaction. I couldn’t process what was happening, and it seemed the same applied to my

classmates. Everyone scoured the breakdown on the screen to figure out what had happened.

Naoto's team placed third in the specified quest task. This was not surprising as I knew that their performance had improved significantly around the midpoint of the exam. We'd finished last for the specified location task and the specified monster task, so we received almost no points. Additionally, we received zero points for the gem-gathering task because of our disqualification.

So far, the breakdown showed the same dismal picture as I'd seen in the morning results. Our standing was so awful that it was inconceivable we could catch up to Class D. However—

In the deepest-depth task...we came first?! How?! What the hell has Souta been doing...

I tried messaging Souta several times yesterday to inform him about our gem-collecting team's disqualification, but he hadn't replied. Before that, I'd tried to get in touch to find out where he was and what he was doing. Again, I heard nothing back. Part of me had wondered whether he had ditched the exam and been sleeping at home, yet Class E getting joint first place in the deepest-depth task meant that he'd gone to the twentieth floor. I couldn't believe that he'd tagged along with the upper classes to the end... What was he thinking?!

Going that far down the dungeon would have exposed him to the Aura of high-level monsters. The Auras wouldn't be as powerful as we'd experienced from the man from the Golden Orchid Clan, but they would still be strong enough to wear away at and weaken his mind. I'd felt safe knowing that Souta was too cowardly to put himself in danger. What had gotten into his head?

I also found it strange that Classes A and B had let him join them. Helpers surrounded the nobles of those classes, so an alliance with Class E was completely unbeneficial. Perhaps they'd let him tag along on a whim, but they must've known how dangerous it would be for a level 3 to be on the twentieth floor.

I hope he's okay.

"But... Even if we really came joint first in the deepest-depth task, that shouldn't give us enough points to overtake Class D," remarked Majima

suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

He was right. The difference in points between us and Class D was too significant to be overcome by getting first place in the deepest-depths task. I turned my eyes back to the large screen, searching through the breakdown to find the missing link. At last, the screen displayed the final piece of the puzzle, creating another stir among the crowd.

“The magic gem bonus?!”

The magic gem bonus consisted of points awarded to the class that obtained the magic gem with the highest amount of magic energy. To get our hands on such a gem, we’d need to slay a monster so high level that even the two best students in Class A could not do it. The points offered were enormous, but we’d ignored this bonus task in our planning because it was entirely beyond our abilities. Or it was supposed to be, anyway.

To add to the confusion, the magic gem in question was no ordinary gem.

“A level 25 gem...from a raid boss?!” exclaimed Majima. “How the hell did one of our class get their hands on that?!” He was just as confused that we’d received this bonus as the rest of us. As such, he began asking the students in our class to find out who had found the gem.

“Wait... Is that your gem, Tsukijima?” I asked, recalling his earlier boasting.

“No,” replied Tsukijima after a pause. “That’s not the one I got. I wonder who did.”

If it’s not him... Then who could possibly get a magic gem from a raid boss...?

Only specific circumstances could summon raid bosses, and I’d heard that many were more powerful than floor bosses. They dropped magic gems at least two orders of magnitude more potent than those dropped by ordinary monsters. In particular, a magic gem dropped by a level 25 raid boss was unimaginably valuable. It was basically a treasure.

Needless to say, the difficulty of obtaining such a gem was extreme. You’d need to assemble a team of dozens of adventurers, each as strong as Kaga from the Golden Orchid Clan, and they’d also need to have a balanced set of jobs. Our class didn’t have helpers to rely on, so it was inconceivable that we could

get our hands on a gem like that. And yet we'd been awarded the points for it, so I had no choice but to believe it.

While my classmates were trying to decipher the truth, I heard a loud shout from the upper classes.

"What's the meaning of this, Kikyou Sera?!" someone shouted.

"I'm not sure, but," Sera replied. "Yes... That's the only thing I can think of..."

"I checked the levels of those loser class students beforehand. Are you telling me Tenma defeated *that* by herself?!"

Everyone turned around to listen to the sudden shouting from Class B leader Suou, whose eyes were wide with disbelief. His tumultuous reaction was so unexpected that it shocked me. The person he was addressing was our year's valedictorian, Sera. It seemed they knew something.

Suou approached the head teacher onstage and pressed her for information. "Teacher, was the magic gem the Giant Devil's magic crystal?! Show me the data!"

Throughout the Battle of the Classes, our wearable terminals transmitted detailed data to the school, including the monsters slain, the number of people involved in the fight, and their names. With this information, it would be possible to determine which student had slain the raid boss and looted its magic gem.

"The data shows that a lesser demon was slain on the twentieth floor. The party that slew the monster consisted of three students: Akira Tenma, Kotone Kuga, and Souta Narumi."

The Class A students reacted to the raid boss's identity with astonishment.

"I-Impossible! How could they defeat the Giant Devil?!"

"Three of them? That's ridiculous! There must've been helpers with them!"

"I know Tenma, but who are the other two?"

The monster had to be something serious. Otherwise, the Class A students wouldn't be as shocked as they were. Of course, the fact that it had a unique name, the Giant Devil, was enough evidence for even an amateur like me to

realize this was no run-of-the-mill monster.

How could just three people take out a monster like that...? I wondered. Did they have assistance from helpers? If they did, the data wouldn't say a party of three slew the monster. Clearly, only three people were involved from the start to the end of the fight.

The monster wasn't the only surprising thing, though. Souta was there, but even more surprisingly, so was Kuga. I remembered that she'd sneaked away from the gem-collecting team, still unable to wrap my head around the idea that she'd fought a raid boss on the twentieth floor. Everything was so far removed from what I'd expected that I couldn't imagine what events led to their fight.

"It wasn't Piggy..." muttered Tsukijima. "He's just a background character. Not Tenma either, she's not at a high enough level yet. What about Kuga? If she used her true strength, then maybe..."

Souta might have leveled up recently, I wasn't sure, but there was no way he could fight a level 25 raid boss. Kuga had been a serial underachiever until recently, so it couldn't have been her who fought the monster either. Did that mean that Tenma had defeated the raid boss by herself? Even if she was strong enough to do so, why would the magic gem go to Class E?

None of this makes any sense... But I know how I can check.

I loaded up the phone app on my wearable terminal and called Souta. The simplest way to find out the truth would be to ask him. Even though I tried calling his number several times, he didn't pick up or read the messages I was sending him either.

God, why can't you pick up? At least let me know you're okay!

Majima and some of my classmates tried to call and send him messages, but they had no luck.

"Quiet!" the head teacher called out. "I will now announce fifth place. Class D —"

The bombshell revelation of the magic gem bonus had stolen everyone's attention, and nobody was listening to the announcement anymore. Even the

questions on everyone's lips soon bred speculation, rippling through the crowd and growing ever more complex. I could see people breaking away from their classes to swap information with each other. Some students from the upper classes asked Majima what sort of students Kuga and Souta were, but he had no answers. Our class was as clueless as everyone else.

Just then, an elegant woman walked through the confused crowd, her bright blue hair swaying as she moved. Her posture marked her as someone important.

Our eyes met, and she smiled sweetly at me before heading straight in my direction. She pointed at me with a folded black fan, then opened it and used it to hide the lower half of her face.

"You there," she called out. "Is someone by the name of Souta Narumi here by any chance?"

She was a student, and the blue of her scarf told me she was in her second year. Pinned to her chest was a shiny gold badge that only nobles wore.

My heart nearly jumped out of my chest as I was unused to nobles speaking to me. I answered nervously, "Souta should still be inside the dungeon, I believe. Do you mind if I ask who you are?"

"I am Kirara Kusunoki," the girl replied. "He's scheduled to attend our tea party tomorrow. Could you do me a favor and tell him to do his best to arrive on time?" Kusunoki turned to look at the screen, and under her breath, added, "It looks like he's caught everyone's attention."

Kirara Kusunoki... I'd heard the name before. She was the leader of one of the Eight Dragons. Why was an important figure like that taking Souta to a...tea party?

That was one more shocking revelation in an evening full of them. My brain was on the verge of overheating. Unable to do anything else, I stood staring down at Souta's phone number on my terminal.

Chapter 11: Rain

As we returned from the chapel on the twentieth floor, I deftly dodged questions from Kuga and Tenma's majordomo, Kurosaki. Eventually, I reached my home.

The return journey would've been almost instantaneous if I'd used the gates, but that wasn't an option because I was keeping them a secret. Another secret I wanted to keep was my true strength, so I had to change the topic or stay quiet whenever they asked something. After a while, they stopped asking me and closely watched every little thing I did. I felt like I was walking on ice and was completely mentally and physically exhausted.

Ding dong.

I collapsed onto the old sofa in the living room, too tired to climb the stairs to my room, and then I heard the doorbell ring. Narumi's General Goods was closed today because my family was away on a dungeon raid, and I was the only person home. I fought my drowsiness and headed over to the door just in case it was a customer.

When I opened the door, I found my childhood friend staring at me scornfully with her arms crossed.

"Why didn't you pick up the phone?" she asked.

"Oh, it's you, Kaoru."

The phone? I remembered hearing my terminal buzz several hundred times from calls and messages from my classmates. But I'd been so tired that I just ignored them. I wondered whether something had happened.

I didn't answer immediately, pausing to come up with an excuse. Just then, Kaoru stared intently at me, and her large eyes grew wide with surprise. I had lost a lot of weight in a short period and expected some awe, but she seemed a little too shocked.

"Wh-What happened...? Why are you so thin...? You *are* Souta, right?"

"You know what they say. Boys change quickly," I answered. "Come on in. Since you're here, I'll make you some tea."

Kaoru probably had a few questions for me, so I let her in. I couldn't answer in detail, but I knew she was worried about me, and I wanted to try to explain things.

She briefly considered my offer, then nodded slightly and took off her shoes. Perhaps she was a little cautious since I was the only one home. I was annoyed at myself for not considering that, yet my tiredness made me less sharp.

I won't do anything to you, so don't worry, I thought. Moreover, I wanted to take a break and decided to make enough tea for two people. *We have some nice tea leaves somewhere... Ah, here they are.*

I filled two cups with hot tea and placed them on the table.

"Hope you like it," I said. Looking at Kaoru, I noticed she was still staring at me. "What?"

It appeared I had startled Kaoru, and she hurriedly snatched the cup up.

"Ah! Th-Thank you." She then fixed her posture and slowly sipped from the cup.

Her ability to transform a simple act like drinking tea into something beautiful always struck me as impressive. I decided to sit down across the table from her and have a rest myself. After slumping into the chair, I reached for the teacup, which was when Kaoru started talking.

"I want to ask you about what happened in the Battle of the Classes. Is that okay?"

"Fire away."

I'd had my wearable terminal either switched off or stuffed into a locker for most of the exam, which would've made Kaoru's task of coordinating our class's efforts a lot harder. Being unreachable had probably caused her to worry about me too. I couldn't tell her everything, but I wanted to be honest about how I could make up to her.

"You were supposed to break off from the other classes on the seventh floor

and regroup with us... Why did you put yourself in danger by going to the twentieth floor?" asked Kaoru, looking into my eyes to judge whether my answer was truthful.

The way she was looking at me made me uncomfortable. I needed to calmly sift through my memories and filter out the things I had to keep secret from what I could tell her. Yet Piggy's mind was so excited that I couldn't think straight.

"Well, I tried to turn back, but the nobles in Class B—"

I explained that the nobles had forced me to tag along to carry their bags and that there had been no need for students to fight because dozens of helpers were around to slay monsters for us.

Although there was one fight at the very end...

Next, Kaoru asked why the Giant Devil's magic gem had been shown as being picked up by Class E. I could hear the suspicion in her voice.

I hadn't realized that the school's systems had recorded me as the retriever of the magic gem even though I'd made Tenma take it. Since I couldn't deny that I'd fought against the lesser demon though, I minimized my role, played dumb, and suggested that Tenma had given it to me as we'd become friends.

She didn't buy my story and uttered, "And she just gave you a valuable gem like that? You do realize it has a market value of over ten million yen, don't you?"

"T-Ten million?!"

Magic gems dropped by raid bosses were apparently treated as luxury jewels, giving them a value far more than their magical energy, and people would trade at ten times the price if they were dropped by a famous monster. Business was booming at Narumi's General Goods, but we'd never handled an item that expensive. Now that I knew the huge price tag on the gem, I had to make sure I shared the profit with Tenma and Kuga.

"And while we're on that topic, I hear you've been spending a lot of time with our year's second-best student. She must've taken a liking to you..." Kaoru paused momentarily. "Many people seem to know your name these days...like

Kirara Kusunoki, for example.”

Kaoru explained that Kirara Kusunoki showed up at yesterday’s Battle of the Classes results announcement and asked her to pass on a message to me.

“She said there’s a ‘tea party’ tonight.”

Hearing that, I remembered that Kirara Kusunoki had invited me to one of The Red Ninjettes’ tea parties. “Oh yeah, I’d nearly forgotten she invited me.”

Everyone knew about The Red Ninjettes because their leader was a hot actress who was regularly on TV, leading me to believe they mainly worked in the entertainment industry. However, Risa had told me that they were actually a violent, conservative clan. Most of their operations took place in the underworld, where they specialized in espionage and covert operations.

I would’ve preferred turning down their invitation than getting involved with such a dangerous clan. Unfortunately, their leader, Haruka Mikami, had invited me herself, so I couldn’t refuse.

According to my research, Haruka Mikami was a countess whose father had once been a cabinet minister in the House of Lords with strong ties to the military. Her mother had been born into a wealthy family of marquesses. The prosperous Mikami family was well-connected in both financial and political spheres. Incidentally, Kirara Kusunoki was Haruka Mikami’s niece.

“Do you know what sort of person Kirara Kusunoki is?” inquired Kaoru.

“More or less,” I replied.

“The last time I asked you, you said you didn’t know her very well... But yesterday, she sounded like she knew a lot about you.” Once again, she looked into my eyes as if to discern my thoughts.

It was entirely reasonable for Kaoru to be suspicious. After all, one of Adventurers’ High’s highest-ranking nobles was going out of her way to contact me. Kaoru would find it strange enough that her unremarkable childhood friend was suddenly on speaking terms with a noble.

Nobles tended to be overly proud and didn’t concern themselves with commoners. Some were powerful enough to bend our country’s laws to get

what they wanted. Tenma was a noble who was openhearted to everyone she met, but she was the exception and not the rule.

When a noble entered a commoner's life, the effects were indistinguishable from a natural disaster. Kaoru's questions about Kirara likely stemmed from this concern.

"So tell me about this tea party..." Kaoru said.

"Err... That's, well, how do I put it..."

The tea party they'd invited me to was a hornet's nest. I was sure that they'd only invited me because their investigation into me hadn't been fruitful, and they wanted to judge my strength firsthand before deciding on their approach toward me. They were nobles, so I had no choice but to accept. Regardless, there was a good chance that I'd find trouble waiting for me there. I planned to ask my family to stay overnight in the dungeon for tonight at least, and I didn't want to get Kaoru dragged into this either.

However, Piggy's mind was screaming at me to confess everything to Kaoru so we could face this together. His mind told me that Kaoru Hayase was incredibly sincere, clever, and trustworthy.

I'm well aware of that, I thought.

Turning her into an ally had crossed my mind plenty of times. But I had to remember that she still had little trust in me, thanks to the awful way I'd treated her over the years. Finding another ally would be easier than repairing our broken relationship.

On the other hand, I have to keep Akagi and the others in mind too.

Akagi had charged into the Battle of the Classes at too low a level, which had unsurprisingly led to significant challenges and a lack of success at the end of the exam. If left to his own devices, he would struggle to overcome the events yet to come. In the worst case, the game's main story might end with failure. In that case, mending my relationship with Kaoru to use her as an intermediary to support Akagi and help him get stronger would be best.

"Is there something you can't tell me?" asked Kaoru, staring at me with her big, round eyes.

Of course, it wasn't just because of Akagi that I wanted to let Kaoru in. She was talented, kind, and cute. As such, I couldn't ask for a better teammate. I was sure that every day with her would be bright and wonderful. Piggy's mind sensed my thoughts turning in this direction and urged me over and over, *Tell her!*

But...

"No, nothing," I said instead. "She's said she'll treat me to a meal, and I thought I might as well go along and enjoy it."

"I see..."

Kaoru's long eyelashes fell as she lowered her eyes in disappointment when she realized I wouldn't tell her the whole truth. Her fate in the game wasn't as disastrous as that of Satsuki, and none of her endings were all that bad. The years to come wouldn't be without any hardship. But she had good, smart friends to help her and was talented enough to overcome anything that life threw at her with her unconquerable will. She would have a bright future, and I had no right to risk ruining that by dragging her into my problems for selfish reasons.

If she ever got into trouble that she couldn't escape, I had every intention of running to her side to help. I didn't think this was a way to make amends for how I'd treated her, but I would do whatever I could to support her from behind the scenes. Risa and Satsuki had said they'd support the protagonist's party through Tachigi, so I could wait to see how that turned out before deciding to involve Kaoru.

I sipped my tea without saying anything else and looked up at Kaoru to see what move she'd make next. The silence was unbearable.

This tea tastes more bitter than I remember, I thought while trying to find something we could talk about to break the silence until I heard a dripping sound. It had started raining.

Kaoru stared vacantly out the window with a worried look. I noticed her long eyelashes, almond eyes, nose shape, and the perfect structure of her face. Seeing how beautiful she looked, I remembered that she'd been one of the fans' favorite *DEC* heroines, although not quite as popular as Pinky or the future

student council president. I could understand why Piggy would feel possessive of her because she was such a beautiful childhood friend.

Her beauty wasn't her only charming point either. She could come across as standoffish in the game, but a closer look revealed that this was just the result of a bit of social awkwardness and her straitlaced personality. She worked hard, and at her heart, she was a nice and straightforward girl.

While Piggy's mind and I were admiring my all-too-wonderful childhood friend, she suddenly opened her eyes wide and rose to her feet.

"Souta, I..." she started, then she stopped abruptly and appeared to change what she would say. "I need to think about something, so I'll be leaving now."

Her sudden reaction startled me, and I initially assumed that she was angry at me for staring at her. "Oh, err, okay. Have a safe journey back, I guess... Although, it'd be hard to have an unsafe journey when you're only going to the next house over."

"I'll let our classmates know what happened to you. See you later."

She walked through the living room door in the blink of an eye. Her exit was so sudden that I couldn't believe we'd been leisurely sipping tea moments before. Had she remembered something urgent she had to do? It made me feel grateful that she had taken the time out of her busy schedule to deliver a message to me and could fill our classmates in on what had happened to me. I walked with her to the front door and thanked her before she left.

When the door closed, silence had shrouded the Narumi house again. I performed some stretches to relax my stiff muscles and returned to the living room.

"Still, I thought I could take it easy now that I'm finally back home. I completely forgot about the clan party."

I wanted nothing more than to run away from it, go to my room, and dive into bed. However, I shook my head and fought the temptation. I couldn't anger any nobles until my entire family was safely above level 30. Until then, I would have to do my best not to draw attention.

Additionally, I recalled that she'd told me I'd be okay to wear my school

uniform to the event. I decided to take a shower and use that time to think about what to do, picking up some fresh clothes and walking toward the bathroom.

I heard thumping footsteps on the stairs above. It had been so quiet that I'd thought I was home alone, but it seemed Kano was here.

"Welcome home, bro! Wow, you really got thin again!"

"Oh, you're home? All the lights were off, so I thought you were in the dungeon."

"I was asleep! Uh-oh, the rain's really coming down! I've gotta bring the washing in!"

Kano grabbed a laundry basket and ran outside to collect the clothes on the washing line.

Why would you hang washing out when the sky's been gray all day, dummy? I thought. I told her, "There's something I want to talk to you about when I get out of the bath. Make some time for me, will you?"

"Here's the towel...and the T-shirt...and my mask...and my... Oh no, my robe is soaking wet! Argh, it's a pain to dry too!"

This would be my first shower in a week. I'd used Purification to clean my body, but nothing could beat the feeling of hot water.

Chapter 12: A Mansion in the Noble District

I looked into my mirror as I fixed my hair for The Red Ninjettes' clan party. The figure looking back at me was far more handsome than Piggy had originally been. I'd thought a slimmer Piggy would be quite attractive, given how the rest of his family looked, and I wasn't wrong. My eyes and nose were well-defined, and the contours of my face were sharp. I was also looking a little gaunt, but that was the only detraction.

Since I no longer looked like a stereotypical villain, it could be easier for me to fit in with the rest of my class. It wasn't unthinkable that with my new look, cute girls would start talking to me. The last time I'd gone through this, I'd regained my lost weight almost immediately, although I was fighting against my strong sense of hunger this time. I was determined to hold on to my slim figure.

My sudden weight loss presented problems of its own, namely in the wardrobe department. I wasn't worried about wearing a baggy jacket, but my pants were too loose and looked awful. Additionally, my waist size had dropped so much that I'd probably need a new pair. There wasn't enough time to do that before the party, so I hooked a belt through my pants to tighten them up.

Now that I'd finished getting ready, I needed to have a chat with Kano.

"Kano, we need to talk."

She lay on the sofa in the living room, then raised her head from her magazine and looked at me. "Wrong time of day to wear a school uniform, isn't it?"

"Mom and dad are hunting skeletons inside the dungeon tonight, and I want you to join them."

"I was planning to anyway. Is something up?"

"Things might get dangerous today, so I want you somewhere safe."

“Huh, dangerous?” Kano tilted her head almost ninety degrees, looking confused.

The address on the invitation I’d received, likely The Red Ninjettes’ base, was where I was about to head. I doubted there’d be any violence—they would’ve attacked me already by now if they’d wanted to—but I couldn’t take any chances. As such, I wanted to make sure my family wasn’t anywhere nearby. My parents were raiding a spot where many skeleton warriors would spawn. They’d sent me a video of my mother ruthlessly gunning down monsters with her newly acquired magic. The look on my father’s face in the video told me they were both having a wonderful time. If Kano joined them, they could fight the Bloody Baron, so I wanted them to spend their night raiding the dungeon.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” I said. “I’m just meeting up with someone for dinner, and I don’t expect any danger. But if there is, I’ll be fine. I’ve got plenty of tricks up my sleeve.”

“Hmm... Well, that makes sense. It’d take Kotarou to take you down, after all!”

She was probably referring to Kotarou Tasato, the leader of the Colors Clan. He was a celebrity, and he featured in various parts of the game’s main story. There was never any occasion to fight him in the game though, making me unsure of his strength. It’d be interesting to find out.

“Oh, take your mask and robes with you when you go to the dungeon,” I said. “They’re incredibly useful if you have to fight other people.”

“Kay. The robes got wet earlier, so I’ll check if they’re dry yet,” said Kano, humming as she inspected the robes that she’d hung up to dry in the living room.

The robes made her harder to perceive, and the mask would disrupt others’ appraisal skills. These effects didn’t help against monsters but were instrumental when fighting other adventurers. I was keen to buy a few more sets so that my parents and I could have some.

“Okay, I’m heading off now,” I said. “Give me a call if anything comes up.”

Kano collapsed again onto the sofa and waved at me as she picked up her

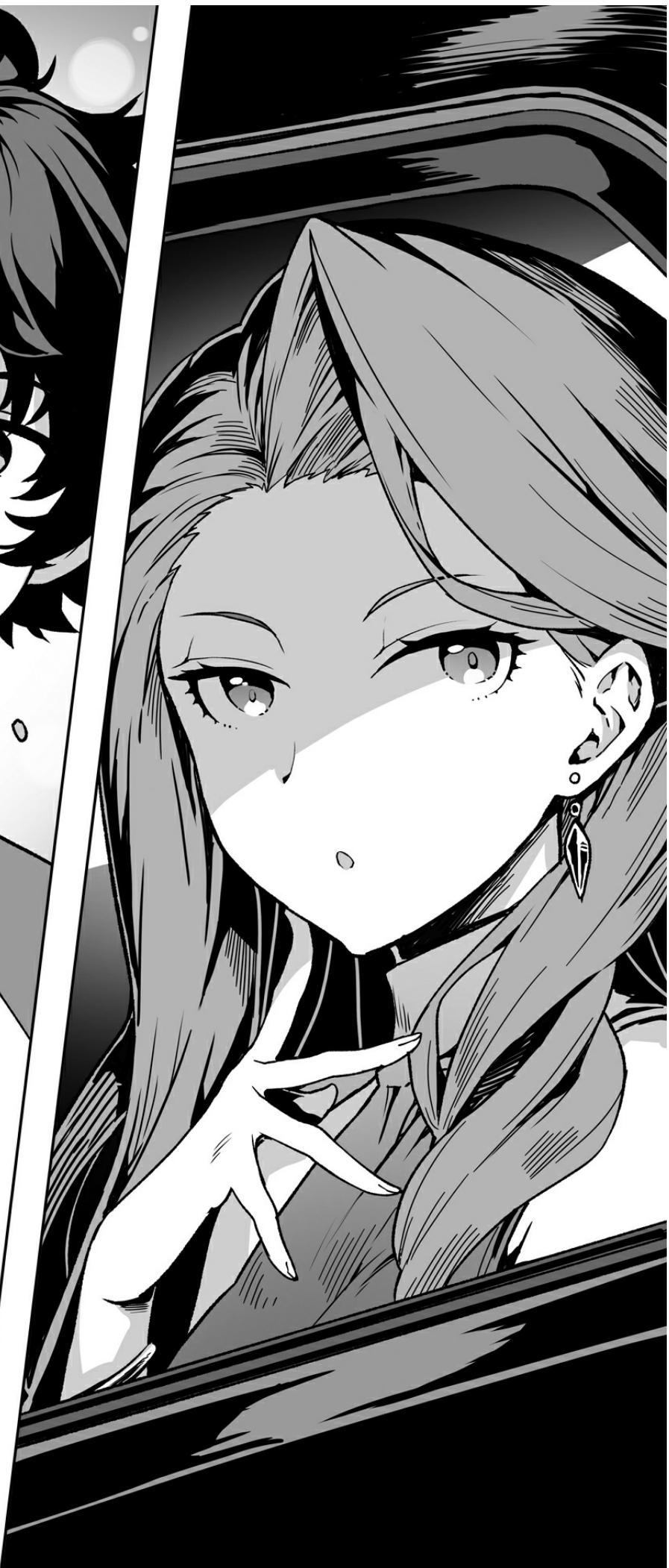
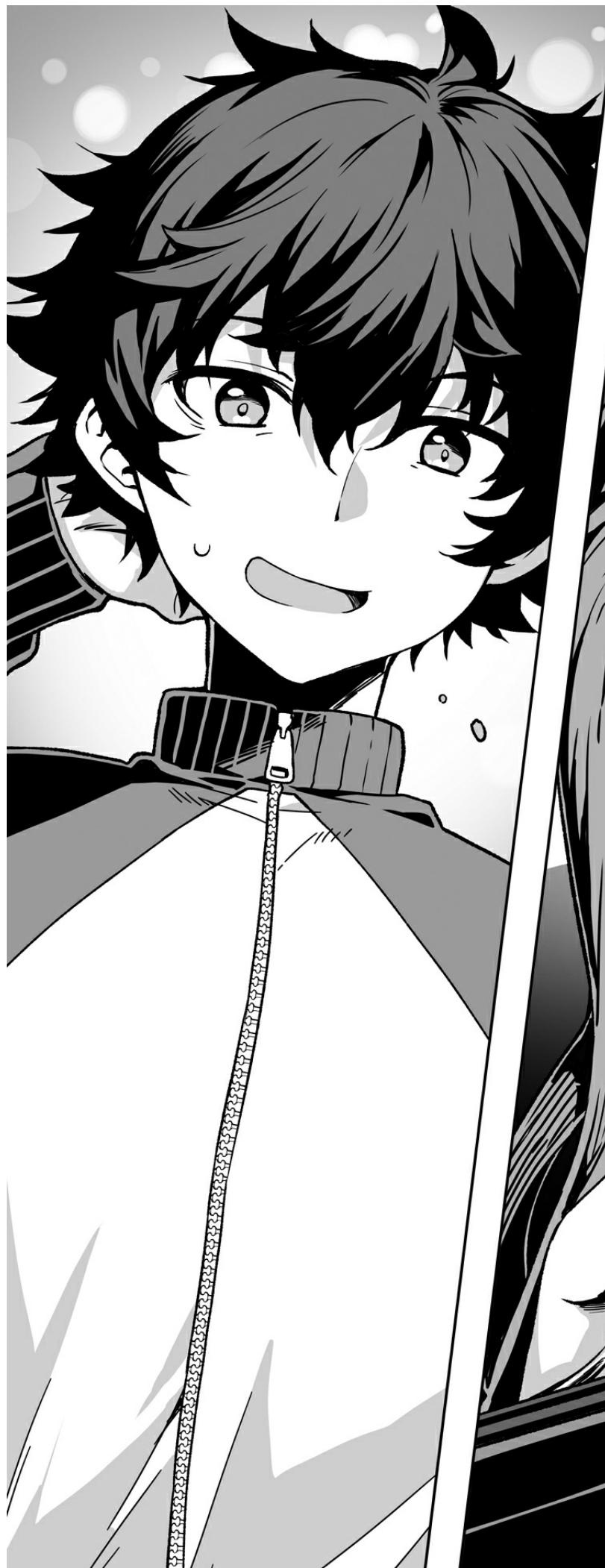
magazine. "Will do. Be careful."

Now that the Battle of the Classes was over, I wanted to get back to power leveling my family in earnest. However, I'd first need to get tonight's troublesome business over to focus on that.

After walking through the front door, I glanced at my watch and checked that I still had plenty of time. Looking up, I saw that the sky was much darker than it should've been at this time of day. The rain had stopped, but the weather forecast predicted more showers. I checked my magic bag to make sure I'd packed an umbrella inside.

"So, The Red Ninjettes..." I murmured. "I just hope everything goes peacefully." I tried to force myself to think positively about the party I didn't want to attend. A luxury black car pulled up as I walked toward the road.
"Hmm?"

I looked at the car, hoping to catch a glimpse of the person inside. One of its windows rolled down, and inside was a girl in a sleeveless dress. She had long blue hair with red floral hair accessories. It was Kirara Kusunoki, looking as elegant as a princess.



Kirara furrowed her pretty brows as she looked at me. “Oh? Are you Souta...Narumi’s brother?”

“H-Hi,” I stammered. “Good evening.”

“You don’t look as much like a tanuki as I remember,” muttered Kirara as she looked me up and down suspiciously, cupping her chin.

She didn’t believe me when I told her I was Souta. It wasn’t until I showed her my invitation that she finally believed me.

“Right then, allow me to reintroduce myself. I’m Kirara Kusunoki. Have you read the message that I sent you?”

“What message?”

I hurriedly opened my terminal and flicked through my messages. Buried among the flood of notifications I’d received from my classmates was a message from this morning stating, “I’ll come and pick you up an hour before the clan party starts.”

I’ll need to sort out my messages when I get home, I thought.

“Never mind,” Kirara said. “Anyway, you can get in.”

At Kirara’s signal, a person in a butler’s outfit opened one of the rear doors. The smooth, elegant way he moved suggested that he was a member of a former samurai family rather than a butler.

I climbed inside the car as instructed. Once I’d sat on the unnecessarily padded back seat, the man outside shut the door. All the noise outside suddenly cut off, leaving only the classical music playing quietly through the speakers. The white leather upholstery made it clear how high class the car was, but I was so low class that I found it uncomfortable. It made my butt itch.

When Kirara raised her hand, the engine started, and the driver pulled away smoothly. I could see a faint smile on her face. She looked more relaxed than when I’d first met her, as she had been very suspicious of me.

We had nothing to discuss, so I looked out the window and watched the passing scenery.

My memories of this town from my world were of a quiet residential area. Yet the discovery of the dungeon had turned it into a bustling city and led to the construction of countless new buildings, making it a lot livelier in this world. One street housed a line of bars where I could see adventurers drinking together after a day in the dungeon, still clad in their armor. Elsewhere, a crowd was cheering at a performer offering a hundred thousand yen to anyone who could defeat him in a fight.

Leaving the entertainment district, we drove toward the noble district. A little farther ahead was a flat plane that was higher than the surrounding area, where the nobles had built their estates. It had a proper name, but the locals just called it the noble district. The nobles at Adventurers' High commuted to school from here rather than the dorms.

Except to work there, commoners would never enter the noble district for fear of what a capricious noble might do upon seeing them. I would've stayed away if I could help it. However, I was also interested in using this opportunity to observe how nobles lived. Piggy's mind was excited to be going somewhere new, so I decided to try some tasty food and enjoy the night.

"Narumi..." Kirara said while I was looking out the window. "You made quite the big show during the Battle of the Classes, didn't you?"

"Aah, there were some misunderstandings," I said.

"You don't have to hide the truth from me. I already know that you're no ordinary student."

No ordinary student, eh? I thought. I knew that The Red Ninjettes had likely carried out an investigation into me. Since I was curious about how much they'd found out, I decided to see whether I could get Kirara to reveal anything. I said, "You're overestimating me. Everyone says that Class E is a bunch of underperformers, and even they treat me like a loser."

"I'm not sure how strong you truly are, but I do know that you're a faker, and that's practically a guarantee that you're reasonably strong."

Even though I hadn't heard the term "faker" before, it was easy to guess that it referred to people who used the *Fake* skill to disguise their stats. Apparently, *Fake* was a tightly held secret known only to a handful of organizations. The

entire reason that The Red Ninjettes sent Kirara to contact me was because I knew that skill. What did they want to find out from me? Their investigations would've revealed I had no backers... Or maybe they'd found out something else?

“Please, don’t be so defensive. My lady has instructed me to treat you with the utmost courtesy.”

“By your lady, do you mean Haruka Mikami?” I asked.

“I do. She’s a marvelous woman and beautiful too. Though she is forgiving, you would do well to be on your best behavior in her presence.”

“I’ll keep that in mind...” I replied.

Frankly, I didn’t think particularly highly of nobles. But I knew some treated commoners well; Tenma and Sera fell into that category. I turned back to the window while praying that The Red Ninjettes’ clan leader would too.

As the car climbed the gentle incline of the hill, I noticed that the streetlights changed from the bleak metal poles of the rest of the city into antique-style illuminations. Cobbled paths replaced the asphalt sidewalks. We’d entered the noble district, where every building was a noble’s mansion. Peeking through the fences, I could see enormous gardens and beautifully sculpted trees and hedges.

The car traveled through the dusk-lit street for several minutes, then a mansion illuminated by floodlights came into view. *I wonder if that’s a state guest house or something.*

“That is my lady’s residence,” Kirara explained. “Wonderful, isn’t it? She lets us host our clan events there.”

“It sorta looks like a castle from the Middle Ages,” I remarked.

It was a three-story, U-shaped building, about fifty meters wide. Floodlights illuminated it in warm, elegant colors, and the water of a large fountain at the front of the building reflected the light onto the wall in sparkling patterns. I was amazed that anybody in Japan could actually own a building like this. The extravagance suddenly made me feel even more nervous.

"We'll get off here," Kirara said.

Soon, the car reached the metal gates. The butler opened the door next to me. I took the hint and got out of the car. When I saw a metal plate on one of the doors of the gate bore the name "Mikami," I knew we were in the right place.

I looked over at Kirara and noticed she had put on a mask, the sort people would wear at masquerade balls. It was a highly fashionable carnival mask that hid only the top half of her face.

Wait, I didn't bring one of those...

"Don't worry. Only clan members will wear masks. Follow me," Kirara said.

I followed Kirara through the open gate and inside the grounds of the Mikami residence. Lights illuminated the fabulous hydrangeas in two colors that surrounded a small path we walked along. Beyond the neatly trimmed lawn was a flower bed with various potted plants. I wondered how many gardeners were required to tend to such a garden.

We walked around the circular water fountain and approached the house's entrance. Two guards armed with swords stood at the door. Despite being dressed in suits to look civilized, I got the impression that they weren't strangers to violence. They were probably hired adventurers. This area wasn't inside a magic field, but they would probably use a magic item to generate an artificial magic field if they needed to.

After I showed them my invitation, they patted me down for weapons and then told me I could go inside.

All right, let's see what we find here.

Since the garden and the exterior of the house were ridiculously luxurious, the commoner in me was excited to see how amazing the interior would be. Nervously, I walked through the huge entrance, and the lobby on the other side was dazzling.

The beautifully polished marble floor reflected the light from a massive chandelier, at least two meters large, dangling from the ceiling at the top of the atrium. The interior design was fantastic, with ornaments and furniture placed

throughout the room and large paintings lining the walls. Placing valuable items so close to the entrance was like begging thieves to come and steal them. Although few thieves would be dumb enough to break into a mansion that was both a private noble's residence and the base of operations for an Assault Clan.

If I had to guess though, this house is high quality, even by noble standards.

Moreover, the luxurious interior design was certainly extravagant but still had a sense of history and elegance. The fine inscriptions and engravings on the furniture suggested that each one was the work of a skilled craftsman. Even among nobles, few could furnish a house with this much treasure. I'd heard that the Mikamis were a family of counts, and I wondered whether higher-ranked nobles would be even wealthier.

I glanced over at the guest sofa by the window and saw a woman in a red and black dress sitting there, relaxed. She was waving at me. I couldn't tell who she was because of the mask covering the top half of her face, but she must've been high-ranking because Kirara suddenly stood up straight and bowed her head.

The woman gracefully rose to her feet, walked over, and turned her red-painted lips into a warm smile. Her dress was incredibly low cut, which was...distracting.

"Welcome, Souta Narumi," she said seductively. "It's nice to see you again."

"This is our vice leader," Kirara explained. "I believe the two of you met inside the dungeon once before."

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks again for that day."

She was the sexy ninja I'd encountered in my adventurer rank-up exam. I liked the red ninja outfit she'd worn on that day, but the tight dress she had today accentuated her figure in an equally attractive way.

"A few more guests are coming too," the ninja lady explained. "We'll be taking *very* good care of you."

"Th-Thanks," I said. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Our clan leader wants to chat with you later. For now, take full advantage of

the food we've prepared."

"Let's go, Narumi," Kirara said.

The two beautiful women in dresses escorted me into the party hall.

A pretty woman on either arm and food to boot... I'm glad I came!

I was so engrossed in my situation that I completely forgot I was entering a hornet's nest.

Chapter 13: A Beauty on the Stage

I followed Kirara and the ninja in the dress down a corridor toward the party hall. At the end of the corridor was a set of double doors. The staff waiting there smiled and opened the doors as we approached.

On the other side was a fancy hall about as large as a school gymnasium. When we entered, a dozen or so servers and butlers bowed their heads and welcomed us in unison. Grand receptions like this took me out of my comfort zone as a commoner, but perhaps that was the intention. Although I flinched momentarily, I recovered before anyone noticed and apprehensively followed after Kirara and the ninja.

Toward the back of the room was a large table with huge plates of food. My escorts told me that I could indulge in anything I wanted. Only a few kinds of dishes were available at the moment because we'd arrived early, but more would be coming.

"Fill up your plate with whatever you like," the ninja encouraged. "I recommend trying this one. We got it in just for today's party."

The ninja pointed toward a large serving dish covered by a big, round metal cloche. She lifted the cloche to reveal a roast duck, cooked to an amber color. It was probably Peking duck, and it looked delicious.

Noticing how hungrily I was eyeing the duck, a nearby chef quickly carved off a portion. The duck was supposed to be eaten with vegetables and sauce all wrapped in a crepe.

I hadn't had a bite to eat since my fight against a certain idiot on the twentieth floor, and I was close to passing out, so I decided to partake.

"This is soooo good!"

The duck was roasted to perfection, the vegetables soft, and the crepe crisp, leading to an indescribably appetizing taste.

Seeing my reaction, the chef continued carving slices off, and I continued to

wolf them down. I couldn't stop myself.

The ninja chuckled. "Got an appetite, don't you? Why don't you try this one next?"

She brought over a big dish that she said contained large lobsters. I lifted the cloche and found giant Japanese spiny lobsters, about fifty centimeters long, glazed in white sauce. Another chef served some onto a small plate and held it out to me.

"Oh my god, how is it so tender?!" I exclaimed.

I ate some, and the lobster meat and sauce blended perfectly. With each bite, flavor poured out of the lobster and creamy sauce. I'd never tasted lobster this good before.

I would've ordinarily preferred to savor each bite, but I couldn't wait for each little slice to be placed onto a small plate. Instead, I grabbed a large plate and devoured an entire lobster in one mouthful. I loved the taste so much that I began trembling. While I was eating some fruit next to the lobster on the plate, the chefs brought three new dishes over. Their lovely smell was so appetizing.

Which one should I eat first?

"A-Are you sure you should be eating so much?" asked Kirara.

"He's our guest," the ninja chided. "Stop standing around and serve him."

"Y-Yes!" Kirara hurriedly began pouring vinegar onto my food.

The ninja gave orders to keep the food coming. The chefs and servers rushed back and forth, bringing out more and more dishes filled with colorful, gourmet food. As each dish arrived, the ninja helpfully explained how rare and difficult it was to acquire the food it carried.

I even momentarily considered how I would regret eating so much, but the temptation of the all-you-can-eat food drowned such concerns out.

While I happily chowed down on the endless supply of food, I noticed that the servers and butlers began to line up in front of the doors. Somebody was about to arrive. I kept an eye on that part of the room to see who it would be. The doors opened, and the serving staff bowed, just like when I'd arrived. Through

the doors came an overweight man with a gorgeous masked woman on either arm.

Hmm, I thought, I know that face from somewhere.

“He’s a professional who’s been good to us,” the ninja stated. “He can be a bit temperamental, though.”

“A professional?” I repeated.

The man wore a shiny, golden badge on his lapel, which wasn’t enough to pin down his profession. He could’ve been a politician, a lawyer, or even a member of a crime syndicate.

He strode through the hall, sat heavily on the large sofa, and demanded in a high-pitched voice, “Bring me more women!”

At once, several masked women wearing dresses walked out from one end of the room to attend to him. He unabashedly threw his arms around the women and drew them in close before loudly telling them to pour him an alcoholic drink.

I’m so jealo... Ahem, that’s out of order.

The women simply smiled and said, “For you, minister,” as they poured his alcohol without showing any signs of discomfort.

Did they say minister...? I thought. As in, a real minister in the Japanese government?

I remembered then that a former minister of one of the military ministries was a member of the Mikami family, so perhaps that was how they knew this man. The political institutions of this world’s Japan were largely unchanged from the prewar period, and the military wasn’t restricted to only acting in self-defense as it was in my Japan. Instead of a single defense minister, there was an army minister and a navy minister. If I had to bet on which of these two ministers The Red Ninjettes had connections to, I would lean toward the army minister, who had jurisdiction over the Adventurers’ Guild. However, the thought that I was devouring food in the same room as someone so important made me feel really nervous.

“Come on,” said the ninja beside me, “there’s plenty more delicious food. Eat to your heart’s content!”

“Open wide, Narumi,” Kirara said, bringing a fork to my mouth.

I chowed down on the food. As I bit down, juice oozed from the meat, then I tasted the spicy flavoring. Rarely did I get the opportunity to eat such tasty food, so I forgot about everything else and just focused on eating.

I continued stuffing my mouth, periodically loosening my belt. While I did that, the servers and butlers assembled by the doors again. Was another guest coming?

The doors opened, and a white man in his thirties stood there in a nice pin-striped suit. He had his hands in his pockets, and glared forward as he walked in like he owned the place. There was also a shrewd look in his eyes, making it clear that he wasn’t an upstanding citizen. Two masked women were attending him, but they followed a few paces behind as if to keep a cautious eye on him, their facial expressions unreadable.

Wait... I know him. He’s—

“He’s a member of a foreign organization that we’ve had dealings with for a long time,” the ninja near me explained. “We heard that he was in Japan for business, so we took the opportunity to invite him along.”

“I shee,” I replied, my voice slurred by my full mouth.

They were being vague about what organization he belonged to, but I recognized his face. He held a position of importance in the Holy Empire, a country in Eastern Europe founded by adventurers, and he was dangerous. He’d shown up near the culmination of the game’s storyline as a boss character. I hadn’t realized that he would already be in Japan at this point. So, I was interested in finding out why he’d come to this country. While several of his subordinates had arrived in Japan, I couldn’t see them here.

This is getting serious, I thought. Maybe I should stop filling my belly and start paying attention.

Akagi and this man would engage in a battle to the death if this world followed the game's story. Eating food in the same room as him was deeply unsettling. The ninja had said that The Red Ninjettes had been involved with him for a long time, so they would know that he was in a high position in the Holy Empire. But I wasn't as sure whether they knew just how dangerous he was.

"Um, looks like you've called in some really important guests," I said. "Is it really okay for a nobody like me to be here?"

"Narumi, of the three people we've invited to tonight's party, you're the main guest," the ninja said.

"Me? Why?"

It was absurd that a commoner like me could have higher priority than a government minister and a high-ranking official from the Holy Empire... Actually, it wasn't entirely unthinkable if they knew a lot about me, but I didn't think they did. I'd initially thought they'd seen me use the Fake skill and wanted to know whether I belonged to any particular organization. Perhaps they knew more about me than I thought.

In response to my question, the ninja replied that she didn't know the details. The guest list was entirely up to the leader, Haruka Mikami. She told me their leader was looking forward to having a nice chat with me later and recommended that I ask her directly.

I was beginning to get a bad feeling about this party, but it was too late to leave and go home, so I gave up and continued eating.

"Umm...by the way, Narumi," Kirara said, knitting her brows. "You're getting a lot...bigger. You're as large as you were the first time I met you."

"You're right!" the ninja agreed, staring at me as if I were an exotic animal. "I wonder how your body's doing that."

I'd known that I had to loosen my belt a few times because the fit had felt tight, but I hadn't realized that it wasn't just my belly expanding. The fat was returning to my whole body. I wondered what I looked like now and wanted to check my reflection in the mirror. At the same time, I didn't want to do so. I felt

conflicted.

As I reached out to grab my next plate, spotlights suddenly lit up a stage in the room, and the curtains slowly pulled up.

“My lady is coming out!” Kirara squealed with delight.

As the curtains rose, they revealed a group of people with string instruments and saxophones playing soft jazz music. A woman in a glamorous purple dress appeared on the stage, displaying a bright smile. This was Haruka Mikami. The butlers and the masked women all clapped at her arrival.

“Thank you all for coming,” Mikami said. “We’ve got a good night prepared for you, so I hope the three of you enjoy yourselves tonight.”

She had braided her bright aquamarine hair up with floral hair ornaments. In addition to her purple dress, she’d accessorized with earrings and a necklace, all of which contained large jewels. Her facial features were perfect, and she looked even more dazzling in person than on television.



Mikami made eye contact with her servants, who then dimmed the lights. A pianist began playing the prelude to a low-tempo melody. Next came satisfying beats from the drums and the bass, and Mikami began singing with soft, mellow vocals.

“You don’t know how lucky you are to be allowed to hear her sing live,” remarked Kirara from beside me with tears in her eyes, entranced by Mikami’s performance.

I didn’t know much about jazz, yet I could recognize that Mikami’s vocals were outstanding. Her clear voice hit notes both high and low, which was gratifying. The only way I could’ve enjoyed it more would’ve been if I had a beer. Since the body I was inhabiting was still a minor, that wasn’t possible.

The staff and the butlers all applauded when the song was over. Kirara jumped to her feet and frantically clapped her hands as well. The applause was well-deserved for that vocal performance. *Bravo!*

“I hope you continue to enjoy our fine drinks, luxury food, and the music you’ll hear from celebrated musicians!” Mikami said. “I’ll come around to greet each of you and have a chat.”

After bowing, Mikami climbed down from the stage. The fat minister was the first person she headed for, and he leered at Mikami the way Piggy would have before I’d taken over his body, but Mikami’s golden smile didn’t waver. The minister got cocky and tried to put his arm around her, but she deftly dodged his hand by leaning forward and pouring him another drink. Mikami seemed well-accustomed to this sort of interaction.

I’d assumed that the minister would receive the most attention. But after only a few minutes of conversation, Mikami told him, “It’s time for you to leave.”

“No, I want to have more fun!” the minister protested, clinging to his chair.

However, men in black suits showed up and grappled with the minister, forcibly removing him from the hall. From what I could tell, some sort of negotiation had broken down.

Next, Mikami went to the table where the white man was sipping his drink and looking bored. He’d combed his longish blond hair to the sides and he had a

well-groomed goatee, both of which looked sophisticated. But the muscles that bulged under his suit and the sharp look in his eyes made him look more like a mafioso than a businessman.

They exchanged a brief greeting, then the man scowled and put his legs on the table. *That's an arrogant way to start a conversation*, I thought. Mikami didn't react to this, and she continued smiling. Their behaviors were so different that I wondered whether they were taking part in the same conversation.

I tried to prick my ears up and listen in, but the ninja near me started asking me questions about Adventurers' High.

"Kirara says you attend the same school. I bet you have amazing grades."

"Huh? Oh, no," I replied. "I'm actually from Class E, which is—"

"Yes, Narumi caused quite a big stir during the Battle of the Classes," Kirara interjected. "I know because I was there."

Apparently, my actions had allowed Class E to overtake Class D and get fourth place. This caused a commotion among all the first-year students at the result announcement. I wanted to tell them that although reaching the twentieth floor had scored my class many points, it wasn't my achievement because the noble students' guards had defeated all the monsters along the way. But I didn't think they'd believe me.

"You fought like a level 20 when I first saw you," commented the ninja. "It wouldn't be surprising if you could reach the twentieth floor by yourself."

"I agree," Kirara said. "What I don't understand is why someone so talented started school in Class E... The school's examiners must be blind."

Now that I thought about it, I remembered that the ninja had witnessed me thrashing the corrupt proctor during my rank-up exam. According to her, I'd need to be at least level 20 to pull that off. She wasn't entirely wrong...

"Kirara, don't I remember you saying that you were looking for strong recruits to join your Thief Club? Have you asked Narumi?"

"Not yet," responded Kirara. "Would you consider joining, Narumi?"

"I like going home when the bell—"

Bang! Smash!

I turned to look for the source of a sudden, loud noise and saw an upturned table. The table had shattered glasses and plates, with food scattered everywhere. It looked like the white man had kicked the table over. A server rushed over with a towel to wipe away a small amount of wine that had landed on Mikami's dress.

"What?!" faltered Kirara, gasping. "M-My lady!"

Kirara tried to run over to the white man in blind fury. Still, the ninja immediately grabbed her shoulder and ordered her to stop, "Wait."

The other butlers and masked women could not hold back their anger. I even saw one server try to pull a weapon out from under her skirt.

White, I thought. Also, what? She's not a normal server?

I'd assumed she was an ordinary server because she handled food and drinks without hiding her face beneath a mask. Now I realized she was also a bona fide member of The Red Ninjettes.

Once I took a moment to sear the image of her bright white secret area into my memory, I glanced around the room to gauge the situation.

Will there be a fight...? I don't think so.

Some people had briefly lost their composure, but everyone else was remarkably well-controlled. The server quickly returned her weapon to its initial location, fixed her smile, and continued serving food and drinks.

Phew. I was a little worried things were gonna get violent. I was concerned this man wasn't the sort of person you'd want to pick a fight with.

The Holy Empire, also known as the land of adventurers, was powerful enough to keep the combined armies of the rest of Europe in check by itself. Plus, the man present tonight was one of their very best fighters. Their empire had not bestowed the rank of cardinal upon him for nothing! I wasn't sure how powerful The Red Ninjettes would be when fighting as a group, but I knew they'd suffer casualties before the fight was over.

But the man was savagely cruel, logical, calculating, and wouldn't lose his

temper without cause. For that reason, I found it likely that Mikami had intentionally said something to provoke him, prompting his explosive outburst.

"I'm sorry," Mikami said calmly. "I'll have new food brought out at once. Please wait a moment."

Mikami ordered the staff to replace the lost food. Yet the man angrily muttered and stormed off. The nearby butlers let him go without trying to stop him, bowing their heads as he passed. It looked like another negotiation had failed.

Left behind, Mikami shrugged and looked at the final guest—me. She smiled as she sauntered toward me, then slightly bowed her head and sat in the chair opposite me. It was frightening how attractive her face and figure were up close. She clapped her slender hands twice. At this signal, a butler brought drinks and snacks over, and the musicians on the stage resumed their relaxing performance. The atmosphere in the room had calmed back down again.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Mikami said. "Anyway, it's a pleasure to meet you, Souta Narumi. I'm the head of the Mikami family, Haruka Mikami." She bowed her head deeply as she introduced herself.

Her approach stunned me into silence. I never expected a noble with the high rank of count to bow her head to a mere commoner. Conversely, her demeanor made me wary. Why go to such lengths to be deferential? A man from the Holy Empire, some minister, and me. Bringing the three of us, who had no connection, to pamper us for a night made no sense. That the two other guests had already left was further proof of this. I had no idea what she wanted to ask me. Or if she wanted to negotiate, what deal could she possibly want to make?

I was sure that I'd find out soon enough once the conversation started.

"The pleasure's mine," I replied. "I'm Souta Narumi from Adventurers' High Class E."

Chapter 14: The Plot Hatching Across the Table

Haruka Mikami, the clan leader of The Red Ninjettes, sat across the table from me as we finished introducing ourselves. I wasn't interested in dragging out the pleasantries, so I got straight to the point and asked her why she'd invited me here.

"So, I'm guessing you called me here because I have the Fake skill."

Fake was a skill that allowed you to disrupt appraisal skills by disguising your true statistics and name. In this world, the Basic Appraisal skill fulfilled the societal function of verifying adventurers' identities. If the Fake skill became widespread, it would have dire consequences.

Even if the public discovered Fake and started using it, they could still use a more powerful skill known as Appraisal to see through it. But America closely guarded Appraisal as a state secret, and no other country knew how to acquire it. Although you could buy a magic item that could cast Appraisal, a single use of the spell would set you back millions of yen, leading to its sparing use. My theory was that countries worldwide deemed Fake too dangerous and made its existence and the method of acquiring it classified before the public had learned about it.

I possessed that classified skill, which was why I'd appeared on The Red Ninjettes' radar. At the very least, I was sure that had been their thinking when they'd sent me their invitation.

Mikami slowly nodded, confirming my assumption. "Yes, we certainly are interested in your possession of Fake. However, before we get into that, I'd like to ask you, how much do you know about our clan?"

Because Mikami and The Red Ninjettes were always on television and in magazines, most people would respond that they were a group of performers, a talent agency, or something similar. I considered using that as my answer, but playing dumb wouldn't progress the conversation. Instead, I answered honestly.

"I'm told that you manage the Adventurers' Guild and...you also perform various covert operations."

"That's right," said Mikami. "The Fake skill is only given to members of organizations like ours, but our investigation revealed that no country has allowed you to use Fake. And yet, you have it... I've come up with a conjecture as to why that is." She tapped her index finger against her cheek as if she were thinking.

Skills were supposed to be learned automatically by belonging to particular jobs and gaining experience points from slaying monsters. That was how it worked in *DEC*. In this world, knowledge of a skill's existence was necessary to learn it. Fake was a secret skill known only to certain clandestine organizations. Even if an adventurer had the right job and gained enough experience points, they wouldn't be able to learn it unless they were aware of it. The question Mikami had was: Why had I been able to learn it?

She explained that she'd first suspected me of being a foreign spy like Kotone Kuga. Around the world, spies who worked for national governments usually possessed Fake. Mikami had suspected that a foreign country had dispatched me to spy on Adventurers' High, a special facility within Japan. She explained that she was greatly interested in anyone who had overcome the school's thorough background checks and security to infiltrate it.

However, the existence of my family and my history in this town had disproven that theory. Their thorough investigation had shown that my family was all ordinary citizens.

"When spies erase their pasts or manipulate their backgrounds, it always leaves some trace. Still, we verified every stage of your and your family's lives and determined that you're ordinary citizens. In that case—"

The only possibility was that I belonged to a covert organization in Japan. In other words, I would spend most of my life as an ordinary person and only reveal that I was in the same line of work as The Red Ninjettes when I was on a mission.

"—there are many organizations that teach their members the Fake skill," Mikami continued. "But of those, I only know of one group whose members'

identities are a complete mystery to us.”

I was confident that she was barking up the wrong tree, yet she seemed convinced of her conclusion. Regardless, I was interested to hear what she was about to say.

“And I hear they showed up in the dungeon recently, didn’t they?” Mikami smiled smugly, seeming proud that she’d supposedly discerned my true identity. “Umbra.”

“Umbra...?” I repeated.

The ninja didn’t react, so I assumed that Mikami had told her already, but Kirara’s eyes grew wide when she heard the name Umbra.

Umbra was a secret society allegedly behind several conspiracies and the subject of many urban legends. I could remember them showing up in *DEC*. There’d been several quests to identify and apprehend their leaders. What connection did Mikami think I shared with Umbra though?

“For my benefit, can I check that you mean the legendary secret society?”

“The very same,” Mikami replied. “By all accounts, a member of Umbra showed up as a helper for *your* very class, didn’t they?”

My class’s helper? I haven’t heard about anyone helping our class except my sister, so I’m guessing that’s who she’s talking about. Why does she think Kano belongs to Umbra?

“We’re aware that an unidentified masked girl defeated the Soleil clan leader. This clan leader is also a member of the Golden Orchid Clan, and—”

The Red Ninjettes had learned that a powerful member of the Golden Orchid Clan, an Assault Clan, had needed medical transport. As guild officials, members of The Red Ninjettes had rushed to his sickbed and interviewed him. He’d testified that the unidentified girl was a member of Umbra.

Kano had told me she’d defeated a member of the Golden Orchid Clan, so there was no mistaking it. She’d said that he’d been over level 20 and that she’d needed to fight at full strength. I didn’t know what about Kano led him to believe she was a member of Umbra, though.

Mikami must have noticed that I was having trouble following her logic because she continued her explanation.

“The girl in question was a faker. That isn’t definitive proof that she’s from Umbra, but she appeared to use a particular skill to increase her speed.”

“A skill to increase her speed?” I repeated. “I take it that’s a skill that only members of Umbra know?”

“It’s the skill that makes Umbra so formidable. We want to get our hands on that skill at any cost.”

It seemed that Mikami suspected that both the masked girl and I were members of Umbra and that we knew a specific speed-increasing skill. Kano only knew two speed-increasing skills: Accelerator, which would increase her movement speed by thirty percent, and Shadow Step, which also increased evasion. But I’d seen Kuga use Accelerator, so that couldn’t be the skill that tied us to Umbra.

There would be no benefit if I provided her with more information about myself by correcting her misunderstanding. I did want to set one thing straight.

“I’d love to help you, but I don’t know that skill so there’s nothing I can do. Even if I did, that wouldn’t automatically mean that I belong to Umbra. You’re jumping to conclusions.”

“With all due respect, you must think we’re fools if you think we’d blindly accept that a powerful, unidentified adventurer possessing Fake and Umbra’s speed-increasing skill just so happened to show up to help *your* class. And anyway—”

Mikami explained that even if the masked girl wasn’t from Umbra, that didn’t change the fact that she knew their speed-increasing skill. It was the skill that they were after, not intelligence on Umbra. She was inquiring about the specifics of the skill, the type of job required, and the number of experience points needed to learn it.

Acquiring the speed-increasing skill would be a great leap forward for The Red Ninjettes, enabling them to undertake a wide range of new missions. Mikami argued that this would help improve the stability of our country and society.

None of that mattered to me. I only cared about keeping the people I loved safe, and I didn't need The Red Ninjettes for that.

When Mikami saw that her persuasion wasn't working, her bright facial expression soured, and she played her first negotiation card.

"I think you're going to need our help," she said.

"And why's that?" I asked. *There she goes again, saying something that makes no sense. I'd rather be in the dungeon with my family than ask The Red Ninjettes for help.*

I decided to hear her out, though.

"What I'm about to tell you is highly classified information that we've received. The Golden Orchid Clan are planning to declare war on Umbra."

Mikami crossed her legs and began telling me about the Golden Orchid Clan.

Before they'd entered the Colors organization, they'd been a larger clan than they were today and frequently fought with other clans over government concessions. Mikami explained that conflict was just a fact of life for large-scale Assault Clans. I knew that the Ten Devils, Japan's largest clan, was always in conflict with someone, so this made sense to me.

The countless conflicts that the Golden Orchid Clan had engaged in had gradually earned them various concessions. Also, they'd secured a string of sponsorship deals and recruited promising new talent. Their success had catapulted them into the ranks of Japan's best clans, and they'd reached the peak of their power, but this hadn't lasted long.

One day, about ten years ago, a conflict broke out with Umbra for one reason or another. In under a month, the Golden Orchid Clan's strength had dwindled to half of what it had been. More than half of their members had been killed, and their sponsors and allied clans had deserted them in droves. The clan had teetered on the brink of destruction. In order to rebuild their strength, they'd swallowed their pride and submitted to the up-and-coming Colors clan.

"The original Golden Orchid Clan members from before the Colors merger still harbor a deep hatred for Umbra... A few days ago, someone believed to be from Umbra defeated one of their own."

When the top brass of the Golden Orchid Clan learned from the Adventurers' Guild of their loss to Umbra, they'd flown into a rage about the humiliation it signified. Their leading members had gathered to hold an emergency meeting and debated whether to take revenge or simply monitor the situation, as nobody had died. It had been closer to a shouting match than a proper debate.

"After a long and bitter argument, they decided that Soleil's former clan leader should take command of their forces to destroy Umbra and restore their honor."

"The former leader of Soleil?" I repeated.

"Yes, a man named Sousuke Kirigaya. Daigo Kaga, the man who the masked girl defeated, is Soleil's current leader. But that's a recent appointment. Until recently, Kirigaya was their leader."

Sousuke Kirigaya... During our family meeting, I remembered my mother mentioning that Soleil's clan leader was dangerous. Still, I hadn't known that he'd risen to a top position in their parent clan. That was a staggering promotion to achieve in such a short amount of time.

Mikami added, "From what I've heard, they elevated him to second-in-command outside of the usual process as a reward for his extraordinary achievements. His nickname is Mad Dog. We haven't finished investigating what sort of person he is. From all accounts, he's as hot-tempered as his nickname would suggest."

Mad Dog, eh? He sounded like a thug, and it was easy to imagine what he'd do when given command of the Golden Orchid Clan's forces. He would use the threat of violence to gather information on Umbra from those he suspected of being connected to it. Kano, Satsuki, and Kaoru would all be in danger.

Mikami noticed my eye twitch, and she made a show of clutching at her chest as though in distress. "As you can imagine, there is a risk that harm could come to the masked girl as well as your school friends. I can't bear to think about what must be going through your mind now."

She had some gall to act worried while at the same time using this information as a negotiation tactic. Even so, I wanted to address some flaws in her logic.

“Supposing that Kirigaya infiltrates my school and harms students, the school and the government will be forced to retaliate. The Golden Orchid Clan must be aware of that,” I declared.

Adventurers’ High was a training facility for adventurers that the Japanese government had created, and their prestige was tied to that of the school. They would have to react if any harm came to students enrolled there. Even if the culprits were an Assault Clan, they’d face severe punishment.

“You’re correct to say that the government would have to take action if they openly attacked students on the school grounds. There are many places without prying eyes outside the school and inside the dungeon. There’s a reason he’s called Mad Dog, and there’s no telling what trouble he might cause.”

“Okay,” I said. “But I have another question. You said that the Golden Orchid Clan was half-destroyed by Umbra ten years ago when they were larger than they are today. So what chance do they have of winning against Umbra in their current diminished state?”

How could the Golden Orchid Clan, driven to the brink of destruction in less than a month at the height of their power, hope to win against Umbra by rushing into a fight without due preparation? Colors nominally supported them, but I doubted that clan would step in to fight against Umbra over the defeat of a single member of a subordinate clan; there was nothing for them to gain. But the Golden Orchid Clan would have to be incredibly optimistic to think they could defeat Umbra alone.

“It would be wise to assume they’ve found a way to win,” answered Mikami. “I believe it has something to do with the extraordinary achievement attributed to Kirigaya. They’ve probably discovered a powerful magic item or skill, or maybe a new job. Either way, they wouldn’t declare war on Umbra without an assurance of that magnitude.”

Mikami explained that Colors and subsidiary clans had recently shown a change in attitude. Something had clearly happened. She didn’t know what that was but said that it would only be a matter of time before she found out.

“I’ve already dispatched several of my subordinates to keep an eye on the Golden Orchid Clan. With our prowess for spying, it won’t take long for us to

learn the truth. This is also why we could protect your friends from them.”

The Red Ninjettes would monitor the Golden Orchid Clan, spy on them, and protect my classmates. Mikami explained that they would also negotiate on our behalf if necessary.

That would certainly help me out a lot. However...

“I see, so that’s why you said I’d need your help. But I can’t agree to this deal.”

Mikami had been a picture of confidence so far, but for the first time, she looked stunned at my reply. “May I ask why not?”

“Because I’d need to trust you to accept your terms. Who’s to say that you won’t back out of our deal after I’ve given you the information if that suits you better? I need to know that you’re as good as your word before I agree to anything... Of course, that’s assuming I even know the speed-increasing skill you’re talking about.”

Risa had told me that The Red Ninjettes were a far cry from a force for good. They were an aggressive clan that wouldn’t hesitate to use violence if they encountered someone they believed didn’t align with their or the country’s interests. I’d be an idiot to trust my and my family’s safety to a clan that could stab us in the back at any moment.

“You impudent little...” fumed Mikami. “Are you insinuating that we’d break a contract?”

“Narumi,” Kirara hissed, turning pale. “You take that back. And apologize to my lady!”

The second I refused Mikami’s offer, I saw the macho butler who’d been standing behind Mikami screw up his face with fury. I could sense that the nearby servers wanted to kill me too.

Perhaps I could have phrased it more politely, but the people I cared about could be in danger, and I had to be cautious.

Actually, the people behind her do look pretty pissed off... Is this gonna get me in trouble?

A dozen glares focused on me, and I felt like I was standing on razors. I couldn't take them all on in a fight, so I wondered whether I should begin preparing to make a run for it. When I looked at Mikami, she appeared deep in thought and wasn't saying anything to calm her subordinates. Maybe the aggression they were showing was just another negotiating tactic.

It didn't look like they would attack me immediately, so I ate some snacks and waited to see what Mikami would choose to do.

But, uh... Kirara, do you really think she'll let me off if I apologize?

Chapter 15: Swelling Pockets

Kirara Kusunoki

Souta Narumi was openly confronting my lady inside the base of The Red Ninjettes, unfazed by the fury he'd provoked in the nearby members. That included the head butler behind him, who was also the head of our suicide squad.

Everyone in the party hall was a professional fighter with a wealth of experience in combat against adventurers. Our vice leader and the head butler were particularly strong. At level 25, they were an even match for members of the strongest of clans.

In contrast, our investigation had shown that Narumi's level was around 20. While that was an impressive level to reach at such a young age, he wouldn't last a second against our combined combat experience. So why was he so calm? He was eating snacks quietly, seemingly unaffected by the head butler's sharp glare and my clanmates' angry looks.

"Hey, these are really good," Narumi whispered to me. "Do you mind if I take some home with me?"

Without waiting for my reply, Narumi began stuffing his pockets with snacks. This wasn't just daring; it was utterly absurd. Did he not feel the least bit scared of the furious people surrounding him? Maybe he was actually quaking with fear, and his body fat simply made it hard to see. Maybe that was why he'd devoured an unthinkable amount of food earlier and fattened himself. That could be a special ability that helped him conceal his emotions.

Everything about Souta Narumi was so abnormal that I couldn't figure out what to make of him, and it was driving me crazy. The standoff lasted for another thirty seconds until my lady finally raised her head, emerging from her thoughts.

"Very well," she said. "We'll leave it there for today. However, I'd like you to

read through this before you leave.”

My lady handed Narumi a sheet of paper.

“Is this...a contract?” asked Narumi, staring at the document. “A contract on behalf of...the Golden Orchid Clan.”

I glanced over Narumi’s shoulder to read the document. The contract offered an upfront one hundred million yen fee for investigating and potentially arresting the masked girl and her associates. In other words, the Golden Orchid Clan wanted to hire us.

Narumi looked up from the contract at my lady, but it was always impossible to tell what he was thinking. He asked, “What are you trying to tell me by showing me this? Are you saying you’re gonna side with them?”

“No,” my lady replied. “I want to prove that we value our relationship with you above them.” As she said this, she tore the contract in half. She then signaled to a butler, who handed her an envelope. Several golden cards were inside, and she placed one down in front of Narumi. “I would also like to give you this.”

“What is this?” asked Narumi, picking up the card. “An invitation to another clan party?”

“Yes, the Golden Orchid Clan will host a party soon. They’ve sent invitations to a wide range of recipients, including those they don’t usually deal with, which is why we have them.”

Journalists, politicians, businessmen, and others were among the guests scheduled to attend, and they all expected the Golden Orchid Clan to make a major announcement. My lady suggested that it could be related to Kirigaya’s big discovery.

“You may soon find yourself an enemy of the Golden Orchid Clan. Attending the party and seeing for yourself would be in your best interests.”

“They don’t know what I look like,” Narumi said, “so I could walk through the front door into their party without being discovered. But...”

“If it’s your safety you’re worried about, we can assign you guards.”

The two discussed a few more details of the upcoming party before ending it. Considering all that had happened, the mood was relatively relaxed. My lady told Narumi that he could stay and enjoy the rest of our party, but he said he needed to return home and think some things through. He was furrowing his brows as if contemplating something difficult, yet the lumps in his pockets from the snacks he'd stuffed away detracted from any semblance of seriousness he might have had.

"I'll escort him home," I said as Narumi exited the hall. I stood up to leave only to have the vice leader stop me.

"No, you stay here," she ordered.

"As you wish. But who will take Narumi home?"

"Haruka wants to talk to you about him," the vice leader said. "Over there."

The vice leader pointed to a spot by the window, where my lady looked out onto the garden and seemed to be thinking about something. The gentle smile she had worn all night was gone. I walked up to my lady and stood by her side, then she handed me a pair of earphones and told me to put them on.

"We're about to see Souta Narumi fight," my lady said. "You will observe and see just how strong he is."

"Huh?!" *Why's there going to be a fight?* I wondered, astounded. The way the discussion had ended made me feel we were building a friendly relationship with Narumi, so what my lady said made no sense to me. I shifted back to the window, then I saw Narumi and the head butler by the water fountain facing each other.

Sound began to play through the earphones.

"Listen here, you brat," the head butler said. "You don't get to just walk out of here after the way you ran your mouth about Lady Mikami and our clan." He was making threats, which could only mean—

"Oh, err, I'm very sorry about that," responded Narumi.

"Do you remember why we invited our three guests today?" inquired my lady.

"Yes, to determine whether they represent hope for our country or disaster,"

I said.

The Red Ninjettes operated as a modeling and talent agency in the public eye. However, our true mission was to investigate individuals and organizations that posed a risk to the government or society. Our clan was under the direct control of the government, and there were times we'd even conducted assassinations. The main objective of tonight's party was to summon several key individuals and observe their reaction to the information we provided them so we could judge whether they were friends or foes.

"Is the head butler acting like that because Souta Narumi was deemed a threat?" I speculated.

"What did *you* make of him?" asked my lady.

I recalled her conversation with Narumi, pointing out that he might be a member of Umbra and might soon find himself in conflict with the Golden Orchid Clan. Although I would've preferred it if Narumi had spoken to my lady more respectfully, nothing he'd said had been particularly concerning. Plus, there was a chance that he possessed the skill we were seeking. Getting rid of him without learning what he knew about the skill would be premature.

"He honestly doesn't seem like a threat to me," I said. "Besides, we haven't learned what he knows about Umbra and acquiring the speed-increasing skill. Do we really need to eliminate him right now?"

"While I would like to find out what he knows, our top priority is determining whether he's a threat," my lady said. "But we couldn't let him discern our true objective. And so, I made the less important objective the subject of our negotiation and used that to gauge his reaction."

Of course, we wanted to learn more about Umbra and the speed-increasing skill.

My lady continued, "I am concerned about his lack of complete loyalty to our country, although he doesn't appear to be obsessed with violence or subscribe to any dangerous ideology. Regardless, we can't pass our final judgment until we learn which group supports him."

The most plausible explanation for being such a high level at such a young age

was that he'd leveled up in another dungeon, either one in a foreign country or one whose existence we didn't know about. If that were the case, he would need the support of an organization at least as powerful as Umbra. My lady wanted to determine the identity of the group supporting him before passing her judgment. However...

"So...the head butler isn't acting on your orders?"

I looked down through the window. The head butler was unleashing his Aura, and it was powerful enough that I could feel it from inside the mansion. This meant that he'd activated an artificial magic field, allowing him to use skills and physical enhancements within the mansion grounds.

If the head butler wasn't eliminating Narumi on my lady's orders, then what I'd heard him say through my earphones had been the truth. He was punishing Narumi for the disrespect he'd shown to my lady.

"No, I did order him," stated my lady. "I hope this will allow us a glimpse of his true strength." She narrowed her eyes into slits and watched the two of them outside intently, trying to observe Narumi's fighting style and skill usage. We could narrow down his true identity if he used any rare skills. Fights between high-level adventurers were perfect opportunities to collect valuable intelligence.

So our aim is just to gather more information, I thought. I worry we've picked the wrong man to test Narumi, though.

The man Narumi was facing was a specialist in fighting other adventurers. His fists could drill through boulders, and the number of powerful foes he'd slain was beyond counting. He was also about five levels higher than Narumi. I found it hard to believe we'd see a proper fight since the two were too mismatched. The other clan members muttering and watching through the window showed they thought the same way.

"Souta Narumi might be strong, but the head butler will overwhelm him before we can glean any meaningful information."

"Most of our members share your opinion, it seems," my lady said. "But Narumi is a real monster. It won't be a one-sided fight."

Narumi was only fifteen, but he hadn't shown any signs of nervousness after inviting the anger of the head butler and every member of The Red Ninjettes. My lady explained that he could possess such mental fortitude if he'd survived extremely trying situations.

"Or he's just reckless," I almost blurted out, but I managed to stop myself in time. My lady was wise, so perhaps she viewed things differently than me. I decided to trust her and watch the fight.

"W-Wait, hang on, let's calm down!" Narumi pleaded, trying to talk his way out of fighting.

The head butler wasn't backing down and instead took up a fighting stance. He turned so that his body was facing off to the side but kept his face pointed at Narumi and held his left hand toward Narumi's torso. It was a stance from aikido often used against powerful opponents, which meant he wasn't taking any chances with Narumi.

Narumi took a stance to lower his center of gravity and placed both hands slightly in front of him. From the looks of things, he'd given up on finding a peaceful resolution and would fight back. I'd never seen this stance before, so I wondered what kind of martial art it belonged to.

"That's an unusual stance," I remarked. "What is Narumi trying to do?"

"It's the Hasso stance from Chinese martial arts. The aim is to lure your opponent into attacking your center and then hit them with a counter."

My lady was a skilled fighter with mastery of various martial arts. She explained that Narumi's stance derived from Chinese Shaolin kung fu, which aimed to set up a counter against a thrust at his torso. The head butler specialized in thrusts, but how had Narumi figured that out before the fight had even started? I was astounded that Narumi could have achieved such mastery over martial arts at such a young age.

I gulped as I watched what was shaping into an incredibly high-level fight. My lady continued watching intently, determined not to miss any clues.

"Here I come, you brat..."

As the tension reached its peak, the first one to move was the head... No, it

was Narumi! He brought his body even lower to the ground, almost as if he was... No, he actually *was* lying down?!

“Please forgive meeeee!” Narumi screamed so loudly that it was almost deafening, even at this distance. He’d thrown himself to the ground with such force that the snacks he’d put in his pockets had spilled out and scattered around him. The other members standing by the window watched with their mouths hanging open, trying to figure out what was happening. I was just as confused as them.

Narumi had thrown away all his pride and prostrated himself in front of the head butler, who glanced up to the window as if asking for my lady to tell him what to do. He looked baffled.

My lady cleared her throat. “Impressive. He found a way to hide his true nature. Very well, you can come back.”

Uh... What if that is his true nature?

To me, it looked like Narumi had gotten scared by the head butler’s unrestrained Aura and had surrendered. But Narumi *was* fairly powerful, so he could’ve surrendered with more dignity if he wanted. Taking that into consideration, it was reasonable to think that he’d successfully avoided fighting without revealing any of his secrets. It was remarkable, meaning he might have planned everything out.

My lady removed her earphones and heaved a heavy sigh before turning to face me. “Kirara, I command you to investigate Souta Narumi. You will interact with him at school and find out what you can.”

“Understood,” I replied. “What will we do about the Golden Orchid Clan?”

Soleil and the Golden Orchid Clan had bad reputations at the Adventurers’ Guild because of numerous violent incidents. They had the support of Colors, so punishing them wasn’t easy, though my lady had said that we would eventually bring them down. I wanted to know what my lady thought about the Golden Orchid Clan’s latest actions.

“We’ll continue to investigate them as well for the time being,” responded my lady. “I doubt they’ll make any big moves before they make their important

announcement. If they storm your school, I want you to let me know right away.”

“Understood.”

“It would be great if we could use Souta Narumi to corner them...” my lady quietly said as she let her hair down and walked out of the hall.

I let out a sigh and began thinking about Narumi. Our organization had gathered a considerable amount of intelligence to prepare for our negotiations with Narumi. We’d even resorted to the brute force approach of sending the head butler to fight him, only to learn almost nothing in return. He guarded his secrets closely, and I doubted I could discover them easily. I would need to focus on making my new mission a success.

Through the window, I saw Narumi picking the scattered snacks up from the ground, blowing the dust off them, and returning them to his pockets. He seemed so harmless. Could he really be a new hope for our country? Could he really be a new disaster in the making?

Whichever it is, mark my words...I'll uncover your true identity!

Chapter 16: A Familiar Reflection

I had wanted to figure out what Mikami planned to do with me at last night's clan party. As if that wasn't hard enough, there'd been all the stuff with the Golden Orchid Clan and the head butler. There'd been too much to think about, and I'd come home exhausted. I'd jumped straight into bed and fallen asleep. When I woke up, I looked in the mirror...and a familiar sight greeted me.

"Oh no... How is this even possible?"

When I left for the clan party, I'd had no excess fat around my waist or on my face, and my muscles had been visible. I'd looked slim and macho...but the figure looking back at me from the mirror had regained the lost fat. It looked like I'd put on about twenty kilograms. While an ordinary person could only gain a couple of kilograms in a single day if they overindulged, I had an annoying skill called Glutton. One effect of this skill was that I had an insatiable appetite, but this latest change to my body weight suggested there was another effect. Glutton likely converted calories to fat when consumed in excess.

"Maybe I never got thinner and was just imagining it all."

It didn't make sense that fighting a tough battle or overeating could have such a drastic effect on my weight, especially as I was already dieting. The most logical answer was that my weight changes were all in my imagination. Whatever the case, the main thing was that I was still fat, so I'd need to stop worrying about it and continue with my diet.

Feeling a little down, I headed into the living room and began brushing my teeth. As I was brushing, I heard a noise from my wearable terminal that I'd set down on the table. I tapped the screen to bring up the display, which showed Kano and my mother smiling proudly. Their gloomy, desolate surroundings looked like the Gathering of the Fallen, where the Bloody Baron would spawn.

"Bro!" Kano chirped excitedly. "Mom and dad just hit level 17! Do you think we can start raiding the next area now?"

"Souta, I'm a Wizard now," my mother added. "I call on you, o scorching flames! Fire...baaaall!"

My mother generated a fireball as large as a person's head in her hands and launched it at high speed into a corpse warrior that had spawned about fifteen meters away. The fireball struck the ground near the monster with a dull thud. Dust exploded into the air, and left a crater several meters wide. The corpse warrior flew ten meters into the air before turning into a magic gem.

This sort of magic was powerful enough to finish off level 16 monsters in one strike. On the other hand, the spell's long cooldown meant you'd need to wait ten minutes between uses, so it wasn't entirely practical.

Kano spun the camera around, and my display showed an adventurer in a metal suit of armor running around with a longsword. His helmet obscured his face, but I knew it was my father. I could remember hearing him moaning about his back pain when I'd first arrived in this world, although he was strong enough to run around while swinging a massive sword and wearing armor that weighed more than he did. Physical enhancements really were amazing.

Still, Kano seemed incredibly excited as she showed me our parents' leveling progress. Then she noticed something and suddenly stared at me.

"Hang on... Bro, did you get fat again?"

"Has he?" asked my mother. "He doesn't look any different to me."

"No, he was super thin yesterday!" Kano keenly explained. "I took pictures, look." She showed my mother the pictures she'd taken of me the day before.

I guess I wasn't imagining it after all.

I swore to myself then that I would never eat so much again, then I got the conversation back on topic.

"Just like we planned, we're ready to move on to the next raiding spot," I said.

"Yay!" cheered Kano. "We'll be waiting by the gate!"

"Dear, Souta says he's taking us to the next raiding spot," my mother called out to my father. "Let's get ready."

I watched my sister's and mother's excited faces as I hung up. It made me

glad that my parents continued leveling up while I was occupied with the Battle of the Classes. And so I gathered my raiding gear and prepared to meet up with my family.

Then, I exited my house. As I was locking my front door, I noticed Akagi, Tachigi, and Pinky walk out with Kaoru from her house across the road wearing warg leather armor. The protagonist's party was together again.

"Oh?" exclaimed Akagi as he noticed me, rushing over to me. "Good morning!"

"E-Err, morning," I said, retreating a few steps back at his sudden approach.

He had a bright smile on his face. A depressive mood had hung around him ever since his loss to Kariya, but he looked as cheerful now as he had at the beginning of the school year. I was curious about what had caused this change. While this new positivity was likely a good omen for our class, he wasn't supposed to recover his spirits until later in the game's storyline. Had something happened during the Battle of the Classes?

Behind him, Kaoru gawked at me with wide eyes. "How have you gotten big again?"

I wish I knew, I thought. The only explanation I had was that I'd eaten too much. I was impressed that the four were heading out to raid the very day after the Battle of the Classes.

When I mentioned this, Akagi replied, "We're not, actually. Just doing training today. You can come join us if you want?"

Ah, so they're going training instead of raiding.

Akagi was just as oblivious as he was in the game, happy to invite Piggy along without realizing he was a villain that everyone hated. That was probably what made him a good hero. Pinky looked startled behind him and shook her head from side to side, showing that she wasn't comfortable with Akagi's decision. She reacted the same way small animals did when they weren't happy, and it was somehow delightful to watch.

Kaoru cupped her chin with her hand and appeared to think something over. "I agree. It would be good to train together every now and then."

I'd been sure she'd argue against me joining, so I was surprised she agreed with Akagi. Was she feeling all right? I would've liked to find out why she'd changed her mind, but Tachigi shot Akagi's proposal down before I could.

"Oomiya has prepared a lecture appropriate for our current level," Tachigi said. "It wouldn't be fair to her to bring someone along who isn't at the right level."

Pinky nodded vigorously.

When he said that, I remembered that Satsuki had told me she'd help them level up. The protagonist's party was making slow progress because they couldn't use the gate. Risa would also support them, so they'd be fine without me.

Besides, I was smart enough to know when I was making people uncomfortable. I didn't want to disrupt things by barging between these four friends. Anyway, I had already planned to raid with my family.

"I've got other plans, so I'll have to say no," I said. "But thanks for the offer."

"Ah, okay," Akagi said. "But I have a feeling you're actually pretty amazing. I'd love to go raiding with you sometime, so think about it!"

"What do you mean by that...?" asked Kaoru, looking suspicious.

Akagi explained that he believed I'd reached the twentieth floor in the deepest-depths task of the Battle of the Classes because of my fervent desire for Class E to win. According to him, there was no other explanation for how I'd been able to brave the undead area where powerful monsters lurked around every corner.

"Hmm, Yuuma makes a good point," declared Tachigi. For a moment, it looked like he was remembering something. He then bowed. "In that case, I hope you'll join us sometime."

The truth was that the nobles had just dragged me along to carry their bags... But Akagi was a handsome guy who only saw good in people, which made me feel guilty.

Conversely, I knew that Tachigi worked tirelessly for the good of our class, and

I wanted to help him if I could. I decided to text Satsuki a message wishing them good luck for today.

“Right, we’ll get going then,” added Akagi. “See you later, umm...”

“It’s Narumi, Yuuma,” Tachigi reminded him.

“See you later, Narumi.”

The protagonist’s party left. Akagi was popular in our class for being kind and considerate, yet he’d forgotten my name. I was just a background character, so I shouldn’t take it personally.

I sneaked into the first basement level of the school and headed toward the dark classroom. When I poked my head through the door, a girl in a robe was inside. She was polishing her dagger in the middle of the room. A magic item lit her work area, so I wondered why she was alone.

“Kano, where’s mom and dad?”

“Hey, bro! Mom and Dad are shopping on the tenth floor. Oh, looks like they’re back!”

As Kano spoke, the symbols on the gate on the wall began to glow violet, and a man in full plate armor emerged. He carried a big leather sack like Santa Claus, then lifted his visor and smiled as he spotted us.

“Ah, you’re here, Souta,” he said. “We’ve got a good haul here!”

The armor my father wore was composed of mithril alloy. You’d need to spend ten million yen to buy it all new, but he had it crafted using mithril that he’d gathered himself, so it had only cost about two million yen. He’d gone to bed hugging the armor the night he’d gotten it, apparently always having dreamed of having full-plate armor.

My mother followed him through the gate, wearing reddish-brown light armor fashioned from felbull leather, a kind of minotaur. Metal armor tended to impede the flow of mana, making it a lousy choice for magic users. That was why magic users usually wore armor made from cloth or leather; my mother followed that custom.

My parents panted as they laid their heavy leather sacks on the ground. Each one probably weighed about a hundred kilograms.

Kano pinched her nose and grimaced. “Yuck... They really do reek.”

The sour stench of ammonia came from the leather bags due to the rotten meat collected from undead monsters they’d packed inside. We hadn’t bothered gathering rotten meat in our earlier raids because it wasn’t worth much money, and we had no use for it. Since we’d need plenty of it for today’s raid, I’d instructed Kano to gather as much as they could.

“We’ve got a couple hundred here,” Kano said. “But what do we need so many for?”

“We’re gonna use them as bait to lure monsters,” I explained. “We’re hunting worms.”

“Worms?” Kano repeated. “So we’re gonna use these to lure worms?”

Our destination for today was a DLC expansion area on the twenty-first floor. The area’s map was a savanna-like field with a few short trees scattered around. I’d registered my magic at the gate on the twentieth floor during the Battle of the Classes, so it would be a short trip to the twenty-first floor. I waited until we’d arrived at our raiding spot before telling my family about the monsters we were hunting and how we’d do so.

“I’ll open the gate now, so hop in,” I said.

“The twentieth floor is the place they call the Devil’s Keep, right?” my mother asked eagerly. “I’ve only seen it in pictures. I can’t wait!”

“Yeah, they say only the best adventurers can get there,” my father added proudly. “And now it’s time for us to go there!”

I didn’t want them to be satisfied with their current level. After all, I needed them to be strong enough to kill level 20 monsters with a single punch without even thinking about it.

So, I laid my hand on the geometric patterns on the wall and channeled my mana. Purple light flowed along the grooves in the wall, accompanied by a low frequency noise as the gate opened.

“Last one to the twentieth floor is a rotten egg!” Kano avidly jumped through the gate.

My mother and father picked up their leather sacks and followed after her.

“You carry that one, dear,” my mother said.

“Let’s have a good raid!” shouted my father.

The raid I was planning wasn’t too difficult if you knew the strategy, so we could take it easy.

“I can’t see anything!” Kano remarked. “I’ll get us some light.”

Kano retrieved a small magic item shaped like a lantern from her pocket. When she channeled her mana through it, the lantern began to glow and lit up our surroundings.

This gate room was similar to the classroom we had just left, but the large stone tiles covering it could make you feel like you were trapped in a ruin. This didn’t disturb my family, who looked around the room with interest.

“We can head straight down that hallway to get to the twenty-first floor,” I explained. “But we can take a shortcut by turning left down a small alleyway and climbing the ladder at the end. I’m going to share my map data for the twentieth floor with you now... Hmm? Did you hear that?”

During my explanation, I heard someone singing in the distance. It sounded like the high-pitched voice of a young boy whose voice hadn’t dropped yet. The problem was the melody he was singing—it was the opening theme for *DEC*.

It’s been a couple of days... What’s he still doing there?

Chapter 17: Arthur's Plan

After arriving at the twentieth floor gate room, I heard someone singing while I was preparing to explain our raiding strategy. I thought I recognized the voice, but to be safe, I wanted to check that it belonged to who I thought it did.

"Stay here for a minute," I said. "I'll take a look and see who's there. I think I know who it is."

"Sure, we'll be here!" Kano replied.

I climbed the ladder as quietly as possible in case it wasn't who I thought it was; no one else could find out about the gate room. I lifted the stone floor tile slightly and peeked inside the room.

"Hmm hmm hmm, da dee da daaa..."

A short boy in a red cape was carrying a massive five-meter-long log and building something. Every now and then, he'd vigorously wiggle his body to dance with the rhythm of his humming. The dungeon's physical enhancements let him carry massive objects despite his small size, though it was still weird to see. I strained my eyes to get a better look at what he was building.

What is that? A house?

He was building a house inside a dungeon structure that other adventurers would pass through. It was so dumb that I couldn't stop myself from calling out to him.

"Hey, Arthur, what the hell are you doing?"

"Hmm? Oh, hey, Mav." Arthur swiveled around to look at me, still carrying the massive log. "I'm building a secret base! Can't you tell?"

At least I could tell that he was building some kind of log house. When I looked closer, I realized that the logs were heavily knotted and had a bluish tint. These were no ordinary logs, and he'd gathered enough to form a huge pile in the back of the room.

"Those are the logs the frozen treants drop," I remarked. "I'm impressed you managed to get them at your level. Do monsters leave you alone because you're a fiend?"

"Nope, they attack me all right. The treants that spawn in my base drop these, so I can get all the logs I want."

"What?!"

Frozen treants were level 40 monsters, which was higher than Arthur. It was easy to get mobbed by frozen treants because they usually spawned in groups, and their incredibly low drop rate made it difficult to get them. Arthur had so many, though. The logs could be used to craft powerful arrows with frost enchantments. *I wonder if I can get him to sell me some*, I mused. But first, I needed to ask him why he was building a base here.

"Why are you building this inside? You do realize plenty of adventurers pass through this room, right?"

The magnificent cathedral, with its many stained glass windows, was the hallowed spot where the holy woman had battled against and defeated the Giant Devil. Monsters would no longer spawn here, meaning adventurers often used the cathedral as a place to rest. I couldn't imagine why he'd chosen this room to build a house in.

My fight against Arthur a few days ago nearly destroyed the walls and ceiling, but the dungeon's automatic repair feature had restored the cathedral to its original state.

"I figured out I could warp here, so I decided to make it my new base. My plan is to talk to the adventurers that come through here and see what I can learn."

"What do you want to learn?"

Arthur's original base was on the thirty-eighth floor. However, he could not gather information because no adventurers had made it that deep in the dungeon. Moreover, Arthur explained that he was building a new house in a safe area where monsters didn't spawn so that he could ask passing adventurers about the outside world.

He'd failed to notice a few big flaws in his plan, though. First of all, structures

built inside the dungeon would vanish due to the dungeon's automatic repair feature within twelve hours. You'd need to use a golem core to keep a structure intact.

"Oh snap, I forgot about that! But golems don't spawn anywhere I can get to... Do you have any cores on you?"

"I do," I answered. "I'll trade ten wood golem cores for one of your logs."

"Hey, these logs come from frost treants, remember? Make it twenty."

"You won't be able to get golem cores from your average adventurer. Golems spawn in areas most people can't get to. I'll raise it to fifteen cores."

We glared at each other as we haggled. I had hundreds of wood golem cores, so I could've settled for giving up twenty of them, but then I'd feel like I'd lost and continued haggling. Eventually, we struck a deal at one log for fifteen cores.

Nice! This will allow me to create powerful weapons! I smirked, knowing this would give an unexpected boost to my plans for getting better equipment.

"Bro," Kano whispered from below. She'd lifted the floor tile and poked the top half of her head above the ground. "Can we come out now?"

I'd gotten distracted talking with Arthur, and she'd probably been worried that I hadn't returned yet. Arthur seemed sane at the moment, so it would be safe to let him see them. I signaled to Kano that they could come out.

"Oh wow, you've got big horns!" commented Kano. "Are you the same as Furufuru?"

"Oh, hello," my mother said, giggling.

"This is a tight squeeze," said my father as he climbed the ladder. "Heave ho! Ooh, so this is the famous Devil's Keep?"

Arthur froze at the sight of Kano approaching him. He ran over to me and whispered into my ear. "Hey, that girl with the pigtails is super cute... What's she to you?"

"She's my sister," I responded. "The other two are—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, don't lie to me, buddy. She's way too cute to be Piggy's

sister. It's a biological impossibility!" Arthur began shaking me. "Stop being coy and tell me the truth!"

I remembered having the same reaction when I first saw my family in this world. The gap between their looks and Piggy's was too big.

"Hello, I'm Kano Narumi," said my sister. "Do you and my bro know each other?"

"N-Narumi?" Arthur repeated with disbelief. His head darted back and forth between me and my sister "Your... 'bro'? Are you really siblings?" The realization must've rattled his brain because he started calling me his brother-in-law. I smacked him on the head to bring him back to his senses.

Kano's personality was quite similar to Tenma's after her curse was lifted. Arthur's obsession with Tenma explained why he seemed to like her.

"So, what are you building?" Kano asked. "A log house?"

"Exactly!" exclaimed Arthur. He looked unusually stiff when he moved. "I'm setting up my new base here—"

Just then, ten armored adventurers piled in as the door at the entrance suddenly flew open.

"There he is! Leader, that's him, there!"

Judging from the quality of their equipment, they appeared to be around level 20. A huge man over two meters tall was at their head, and he was probably a few levels higher than the rest.

"His level is... lower than I expected," said one of the men toward the back of the group as he pointed a wand at Arthur. The wand was probably enchanted with Basic Appraisal. "When you said it was a rare monster, I thought it'd be a floor boss."

What's going on? "Excuse me, who are you?" I asked, wanting to find out who these pompous newcomers were.

However, they immediately cast Basic Appraisal on the rest of us. Once they saw we were at a lower level than themselves, they used their Aura to intimidate us. "Shut up and stay out of our way, weaklings!"

Let me speak, damn it.

“Yeah, keep your paws off our prey!” shouted another man, pointing at Arthur. “The Giant Panda Brothers found him first!”

“Looks like he was building a nest,” another one added. “Might be a new kind of monster?”

“If we kill him and turn his magic gem in to the guild, we should get a hefty reward,” said an additional underling, drooling at the thought of money.

They must’ve seen the horns on Arthur’s head and mistaken him for a monster.

What a name, the Giant Panda Brothers... True to their name, black-and-white splotches mottled their armor. *They must really love pandas.*

Arthur looked angry, seeming to recognize them. He shouted, “Hey, you’re the guys that tried to destroy my house! You’d better not try to stop me again, or I’ll have to punish you!”

“That’s unusual,” one of the pandas said. “Monsters can’t usually speak. Maybe we should keep him alive as a pet? Ah ha ha!”

“We might be able to sell him for a lot of money, so we’re gonna show him how strong we are and take him prisoner. Surround him!”

Taking no heed of Arthur’s warning, the pandas drew their weapons and surrounded him.

“Bro...” said Kano, looking at Arthur with concern. “Can we do anything to help him?”

She didn’t need to worry, though. Arthur was at a much higher level than the pandas and was a specialist in fighting others, so he could handle all ten of them at once. I was more worried about the pandas. There was a chance that I’d need to jump in and stop Arthur from going overboard.

“Don’t kill him,” the head panda commanded. “Just break his arms and legs. Let’s go!”

“Beating this weakling will be a piece of cake! Take thiiiiis... Uh, huh?”

“He’s flying!”

Two of the pandas had raised their maces and charged at Arthur, but he’d dodged their attacks by flying up into the air without even looking in their direction. Arthur gathered magic in his fingertips, so much magic that it made my skin prickle, and quickly drew out a magic circle in the air with both hands. The magic circle he’d drawn was—

“Come on out, Chappy!!!”

When the spell activated, a magic circle five meters in diameter projected onto the stone tiles. The magic circle on the floor began to glow a dark red. Arthur had used Manual Activation to cast a summoning spell, making the entire room begin to tremble. Kano and the pandas looked around in shock, trying to figure out what was happening.

“Eek!”

From the center of the magic circle emerged...a tiny white spider. Its body was about twenty centimeters long, much smaller than the circle. The spider had a round body and two vertical columns of rubylke red eyes.

Something’s not right about this picture, I thought.

“Eeeeeep... Ah? Huh, you had me scared for a second there. That was such a crazy amount of magic that I was worried about what was gonna come out.”

“Is this white spider a new kind of monster too?” one of the pandas asked. “I’ve never seen it before...”

Arthur had called it “Chappy,” although the spell he’d cast was actually Arachne Monarch, which summoned the most powerful variant of arachnid. The summoned spider would only be level 70, so it wasn’t the strongest summoning magic available to top players. But the spider could use skills that increased its summoner’s speed and decreased that of nearby enemies, making it a favorite among players who valued mobility.

However, the Arachne Monarch spell I knew would summon an adult woman with the body of a two-meter-wide spider from the waist down. It should have been a monster that matched the common depiction of Arachne. What Arthur had summoned was instead a spider small enough to fit in my hand, and the

upper body of a woman wasn't anywhere in sight. The spider *was* white and still belonged to the same royal species...

"Chappy, I want you to wrap up all the guys wearing black armor," said Arthur.

"Eek eek!"

"Huh? What are you... Wha!"

"Whoa!"

Upon receiving its orders from Arthur, the white spider zipped across the room faster than my eyes could follow. It squirted out a white web that it used to entangle the pandas one after another. The speed at which it moved suggested it was around level 30, which was certainly high, but much lower than the level 70 it was supposed to be. Maybe Arthur's skill had weakened in the same way my Void Slice had.

"Oof!"

"Let me go!"

"I won't go easy on you next time, okay?!" Arthur shouted. "All right, bye-bye. Eject!"

Arthur used Manual Activation to open up a black, swirling gate, throwing the tied-up pandas into the vortex one after another. Eject was a spell used to escape from the dungeon and a valuable tool for disposing of items.

Kano and my parents stared blankly at Arthur after the encounter ended quickly. The fact that he'd summoned a spider and hadn't caused the pandas any harm proved that he'd been going easy on them. Once he'd thrown all the pandas through the gate, he turned to the spider and said, "You can go now."

The spider dissolved into a swirling, glowing mist.

Arthur stood glumly in the middle of the now silent room. He'd hoped to encounter adventurers that he could talk to and befriend, yet his plan had completely failed.

I had to tell him the truth and said, "Arthur, adventurers in this world don't raid the dungeon because they enjoy it. Most of them are selfish assholes

looking for wealth and fame. Building a home here will just bring you trouble.”

“Yeah...you might be right,” noted Arthur. “Oh, it seemed like such a good idea!”

A major difference existed between players who raided the dungeon to enjoy the world of *DEC* and adventurers who raided in search of fame, and confusing the two was a recipe for disaster. Because Arthur had never seen the outside world, it was entirely understandable that he’d made this mistake.

The depressing mood had finally disappeared when Kano dashed over to Arthur with excitement in her eyes. “Th-That was awesome!” Kano grabbed his hands. “What spell did you use to summon the white spider?! And, oh my god, you were flying!!!”

Arthur lifted his head and instantly displayed a wide smile.

“Oh, it was no big deal,” he said, taking immense pleasure in the attention he was receiving. He then started boasting about what he’d done.

Nothing keeps you down for long, eh?

Chapter 18: The Spider and the Narumi Family

My family and I chatted as we walked together, accompanied by one white spider. The ground was dry, and the only things growing were a few scattered weeds.

"I didn't know you could use summoning magic like that!" Kano exclaimed. "What skill do you need to possess a summoned creature like that?" She poked at the white spider sitting on my shoulder.

"Eek? Eek!"

After the incident with the pandas on the twentieth floor, Arthur had said he wanted to join our raid. However, the maps fiends could access were limited, making it impossible for him to follow us to the twenty-first floor. Instead, he'd used a skill to borrow the five senses of a summoned creature and currently possessed the body of his spider.

Even though it seemed Arthur wanted to tell Kano something, the arachnid he'd summoned had no vocal cords, meaning he couldn't speak. The spider turned to me and began squeaking, urging me to explain the spell to Kano.

"It's a skill called Possession that creature summoners can learn, often used for scouting. Small summoned creatures tend to be weak, while large summoned creatures are better at fighting but more difficult to move. Also, when using Possession, you can only use your summoned creature's skills. All in all, it's hard to find a good use for the skill."

"Huh... But I bet it's fun to become all sorts of different creatures!" beamed Kano.

"Yeah, I'd love to try possessing a flying creature. Summoned creatures have limited skill slots, so most people don't hang onto the Possession skill."

Using your stealth skills for scouting was more effective than relying on summoned creatures, which were usually weaker than their summoners. Possessing a creature wasn't useful for combat either. The primary benefit of

summoning magic was in calling a creature to fight alongside you, and Possession essentially got rid of that advantage. It was a useless skill. In fact, it had been so worthless in *DEC* that I'd completely forgotten about it until Arthur had used it. In this world, however, it seemed it had its uses.

"Summoned creatures can't die," I continued, "so Arthur's safe from danger, and his spider can get into areas that he can't. It's a good thing he kept the skill."

"Eek!"

The spider stood up on four of its legs while it clapped its other four legs to express his happiness. I wondered how he was able to move all his limbs independently like that. I'd have to ask him later. Arthur's body was safe in his base on the thirty-eighth floor, where nobody would find him.

"Hey, do you think I can learn it too?" Kano asked.

"No, you need to get several other magic-based jobs before you can become a Summoner," I explained. "Anyway, I thought you wanted to master the Thief jobs?"

"Oh yeah... I've gotta finish those first."

Kano began playing with Arthur, chasing his spider around. My parents and I watched her out of the corners of our eyes as we continued along at a leisurely pace. The weather was extremely comfortable; it wasn't too hot or humid, and there was a refreshing breeze.

"It's lovely and tranquil here," my mother said. "Are we really still inside the dungeon?"

"I know what you mean," my father agreed. "There are no walls, the sky is blue, and no monsters are attacking us."

My parents were walking side by side, carrying their big leather sacks. Since no active monsters would attack you as long as you didn't stray from the path on this map, we were all as relaxed as if we were heading out for a picnic.

In the distance, I could see a herd of monsters with two horns resembling rhinoceroses eating the grass. They weren't active monsters but had incredibly

high HP and would link up with the rest of their herd if attacked. As such, they were a poor candidate for hunting.

Far above in the sky, I could see what looked like little specks flying around by themselves. These were birdlike monsters with a five-meter wingspan, but they were so high up that they looked tiny. Most spells and ranged weapons would be unable to reach monsters at that height, so these weren't easy to hunt either.

So what were we going to hunt here? If we continued along the main street leading to the twenty-second floor, we'd eventually encounter Mamu, which were giant man-eating lizards. They dropped tasty meat when you killed them. Since I'd eaten that meat before with Tenma, I wanted to hunt a few of them if I saw any. However, they weren't the main target of today's raid.

After we walked for another thirty minutes, admiring the scenery, reddish-brown sand dunes came into view.

"Is that the desert we wanted to go to, bro?" Kano asked.

"Eek!"

Arthur squeaked in agreement. He then jumped down from my shoulder, and Kano raced after him. The dunes weren't too big, about one square kilometer in size. I found some nearby bedrock large enough to set up camp and began to put my bags down. Once I got everything we'd need for the hunt out of the bags, I began explaining our plan.

"Okay, I'm gonna explain how we hunt worms, so listen up," I said.

"Isn't this area too dry for worms?" my father mused.

"I can only see rocks and sand," my mother agreed.

My parents were perplexed because the worms they knew could only live in moist soil. While a few rocks were scattered here and there, the only thing here was sand. Everything was so dry here that neither plants nor monsters could survive, justifying their confusion. Kano scooped up some sand to check for worms.

However, the worms we'd be hunting were lurking beneath the sand.

“Kano, stay off the sand,” I warned. “They might attack you.”

“From inside the sand?” probed Kano.

“That’s right. Look.”

I took a piece of rotten meat from one of the leather bags, hooked some wire into it, and hurled it toward a dune. My family looked confused at the meat, but we only had to wait for around thirty seconds. The sand began to vibrate, and something vigorously pulled the rotten meat under the sand. Seeing that it had taken the bait, I pulled on the wire, and—

“This is a level 21 sandworm.”

I fished a monster out from beneath the sand. The sandworm was two meters long and thirty centimeters wide, and its writhing body was reminiscent of an earthworm. Despite it weighing over a hundred kilograms, that wasn’t a problem for me, thanks to my physical enhancements. I pulled it over to the bedrock, where we’d set up camp, and noticed how it flopped around like a lively fish.

“It’s huuuuge!” shouted Kano. “When you said worm, I imagined something smaller.” She and Arthur walked over to the worm and stared down at it.

The worm had a round mouth like an octopus’s sucker. On closer inspection, I spotted the grotesque sight of spiraled rings of fangs inside. Sandworms were deadly monsters that would hide beneath the sand and wait for their prey to walk over it. Then, they would sink their teeth into them and drag them beneath the sand. Once you’d pulled a sandworm onto the bedrock, they were unable to flee back into the sand. At that point, they were just big, floppy earthworms.

“Start hitting it, but watch out for its mouth.”

“Let’s go, dear!”

“Yep!”

My parents began hitting the worm with the mace and the longsword they’d brought along. I joined in and attacked the sandworm, and before long, it stopped moving and turned into a magic gem.

Kano picked the gem up and tilted her head. “What a big magic gem... Doesn’t it drop anything else, though?”

“It has a very small chance of dropping a sandworm stomach, which you can use to craft magic bags. They fetch a good price when you sell them too,” I said.

“Now that you mention it,” my mother said, “one of my colleagues at the guild mentioned that magic bags are made from a monster’s stomach. So they were talking about sandworms.”

Sandworms could ingest things that were several times more voluminous than their own bodies, thanks to a property of their stomachs called spatial contraction. The magic bags made from their stomachs shared this property; you could fill them with more items than their volume should allow. This property made magic bags a must-have for top adventurers on dungeon raids.

“But if it’s this easy to hunt them, why are magic bags so expensive?” my mother asked.

“Eek...?”

She explained that the cheapest magic bags on sale at the Adventurers’ Guild cost several million yen, and the larger ones cost over ten million. Arthur looked surprised since magic bags had been dirt cheap in *DEC*.

“Part of it is because most adventurers don’t know they can lure the sandworms out with rotten meat, but mostly it’s because sandworms usually only spawn much deeper in the dungeon,” I said.

A DLC expansion had added this desert area to *DEC*, so this world’s perception interference prevented adventurers from reaching this area unless they already knew it existed. The only non-DLC maps that sandworms would spawn in were on the twenty-fifth floor and below, and the only adventurers who could raid that deep inside the dungeon were members of Assault Clans and adventurers in the employ of great nobles. On top of that, a round trip journey to the twenty-fifth floor would take at least a month, adding to the high cost of most items found there.

“Also, you’ll occasionally have a rare encounter* with a monster called a gigantic worm. If we snag one of those, I’ll need you all to help me fish it out.”

*TIPS: Rare encounters happen each time a monster respawns. There is a fixed probability that a different monster will spawn in its place. Usually, this will be a rarer monster than the original. Gigantic worms spawn only once daily, and ordinary sandworms will spawn in their place after being slain.

“Gigantic?” Kano repeated. “Is it even bigger than the one we just saw?”

“Yep,” I replied. “It’s a rare monster that only spawns once a day, but nobody else has been here besides us. It’ll surely be hiding under that sand somewhere. The magic bag you can make from its stomach is a rare item that shrinks the size and mass of the items you store inside, so I really hope we get one.”

Carrying sandworm stomach magic bags was tiring because they shrank objects but kept their mass the same, and the leather was flimsy. Even though it was an enchanted bag, it could rip open if you overfilled it. On the other hand, improved magic bags made from gigantic worm stomachs were durable. They reduced the weight of items you stored in them, meaning you could carry around a suit of armor that weighed a hundred kilograms in your pocket. It would open up a ton of new strategic options.

“That’s amazing,” my mother remarked. “I’ve never seen anyone selling a bag that reduces items’ weight.”

“I bet you can sell it for a fortune!” Kano exclaimed. “It might even get registered as a national treasure!!!”

“Eek?!”

Kano’s, my mother’s, and Arthur’s eyes sparkled as they wondered how much money they could get for an improved magic bag. I would happily sell some improved magic bags once we had enough. But when you sold items that weren’t available anywhere else on the market, it was easy for others to trace them back to you. We’d need to be careful and either find a buyer to carry out a one-on-one sale or secure a safe route to sell it.

“Awesome, let’s kill a bunch of worms and make a ton of money!” Kano called out, bursting with enthusiasm now that she knew there was a chance to make money.

“Yeah, we’ve brought plenty of rotten meat,” my father agreed.

“Here you go, Arthur,” my mother said.

“*Eek!*”

My family began hooking wire through hunks of rotten meat. Arthur was also participating in the fishing, using a wire that my mother had given him. His arachnid body was about as big as my hand, but it was surprisingly powerful.

Because we were the first to hunt worms here, we got a bite on the lines as soon as we threw the bait. We were fishing out so many sandworms that I was sure it wouldn’t be long before we caught a gigantic worm. Arthur skillfully used his eight legs to hook wires into the meat and throw them into the sand.

“*Eek eek! Eeeeeek!!!*”

We’d all join in to pummel the worms as soon as anybody fished one out and repeated this until we slew about thirty sandworms. While I was tying the wire to the next piece of rotten meat, Arthur began squeaking loudly, so I turned to look at him. His small white legs were digging into the bedrock, and he was pulling desperately on the wire, which looked like it was about to snap. From the amount of tension in the wire, it was likely that Arthur had fished a gigantic worm.

“Everyone, help Arthur pull it in!”

“G-Got it!” Kano shouted.

“Let’s do this!” my mother said.

“It’s so strong! This one’s gotta be massive!” my father yelled.

All of us pulled as hard as we could on the wire, then a giant mouth a meter wide appeared. With a mouth that size, the body buried beneath the sand had to be at least five meters long. Sand was flying everywhere, obscuring my vision; the beast must’ve been writhing furiously under the sand.

“Ptooey, is this wire gonna hold?” my father asked, spitting out sand.

“It’s strong enough to tow a minivan. It’ll hold,” I said. When I bought the wire, I made sure it would be strong enough to withstand a gigantic worm, so my father had nothing to be worried about... Hopefully. The worm was putting up more of a fight than I’d expected, though.

“But it’s gonna take us ages to pull it in!” Kano said. “Mom, do that thing!”

“Okay,” my mother replied, pulling a wand off her belt. “You first, Arthur. Summon your strength, Strength I!”

Arthur began to glow red when she waved her wand like a conductor. Strength I was a spell that would only increase your strength stat by twenty percent, but that was enough to give you significantly more pulling power.

After my mother had cast the buff spell on everyone, we all coordinated to pull on the wire simultaneously. This helped us finally pull the gigantic worm entirely out of the sand as it roared.

“It’s massive!” Kano called out with amazement. “It’s a completely different beast to the other worms!”

“Eek!”

The gigantic worm erupted out of the ground, kicking up a sandstorm. It was as big as a large tree, about seven meters long. Seeing the creature was thrashing around violently, we’d need to be careful when approaching it.



“So it’s got a monster level of 26,” my father expressed with shock after using a magic item enchanted with Appraisal to check its level. “That practically makes it the same as a floor boss.”

“Hit it, but be careful you don’t get trapped beneath its body!” I stated.

“Got it! Here we go!”

The worm looked larger than I remembered from *DEC*, possibly because it had lived without anybody to hunt it for a long time. I’d thought the four people in my family would be enough to take the gigantic worm down, but now that I saw how big it was, I knew we wouldn’t have stood a chance without Arthur. I was so glad we’d brought him along.

Our raid had been a big success. We’d slain two hundred and four sandworms and obtained a gigantic worm stomach. Arthur offered to tag along to our next worm-hunting raid, and I gladly accepted his offer.

Back to school tomorrow... I thought.

If this world continued to follow the game’s storyline, many game events were about to trigger at school in quick succession. The best way to survive the coming events would be to avoid standing out. Thankfully, nobody paid attention to me anyway which made that easier.

I wanted to enlist Arthur’s help in overcoming some of the other events that waited down the road, so I’d need to find a way to remove the restriction on his movement as soon as possible.

Chapter 19: A Meeting of the Eight Dragons

Decorative lights illuminated a sizable Persian rug in an extravagant room. In the center of the room, five people sat spread spacially apart around a U-shaped table.

Akizane Sagara was sitting at the head of the table. He was the student council president and was responsible for managing the Eight Dragons as a member. This unique position gave him control over a budget of tens of billions of yen and strong influence over the staff of Adventurers' High and the Adventurers' Guild.

Sagara peered through his glasses with a steely gaze. "It's time, so let's commence our regular meeting. We'll be discussing next month's election in today's—"

"Hold it, Sagara," interrupted a large, muscular student with a mustache. He was Sakon Tachibana, the president of the First Swordcraft Club, another of the Eight Dragons. It was said that nobody in the school could match him with a longsword. "Nobody's surprised the brawlers aren't here, but where are the Archery Club and the Class A Alliance?"

"The Martial Arts Club isn't interested in our topic of discussion today," replied a petite woman with long red hair in a side ponytail. She was Otoha Isshiki, the president of the First Magic Club, also one of the Eight Dragons. Although she was only a second-year student, her profound magical talent had garnered her renown within the walls of Adventurers' High and worldwide. The "brawlers" that Tachibana referred to were the Martial Arts Club. "The Archery Club has said that they don't see the point in attending if their pick won't get chosen, but I'm not sure why the Class A Alliance is absent."

Isshiki's prestige had dramatically elevated the First Magic Club's influence among the Eight Dragons over the previous two years. A large staff emitting mysterious magic from a purple jewel on its head was propped up against the right side of her chair.

“Hmph,” Tachibana grunted. “So it’s down to the five of us to decide on the next student council president?”

“It would appear so,” said a tall boy with a sickly complexion who was Tsukasa Hourai, president of the Weapons Club and part of the Eight Dragons. The purpose of his club was to craft, research, and develop weapons; they were a recent addition to the Eight Dragons. Their rise to prominence resulted from the backing of the powerful Hourai family, some of Japan’s wealthiest nobles, giving them access to vast amounts of funds, materials, and personnel. Many smaller manufacturing clubs took orders from the Weapons Club. “It’s a sorry state of affairs that we can’t assemble all Eight Dragons for a matter as important as this, hee hee.”

“Let’s get back to the discussion at hand,” Sagara said, glaring at the others around the table. “I’ve received a list with the names of the candidates seeking election, which I’ll read out now. The First Swordcraft Club has nominated Keigo Ashikaga from the second-year Class A. The other candidate, nominated by the First Magic Club, the Weapons Club, and the Thief Club, is Kikyou Sera from—”

Tachibana pounded the table with his fists. “Hey, how many times have I told you that first-years are too young to be president?! There’s no way a kid who’s barely started high school can control the Eight Dragons!”

The Eight Dragons were a quirky bunch, and it wasn’t likely that they’d follow a first-year’s orders.

“I believe we all recognize her tremendous accomplishments during middle school,” Isshiki from the Magic Club rebutted as soon as Tachibana finished speaking. She didn’t raise her voice, but there was a power in it that was just as imposing as Tachibana’s shouting. “She is also a descendant of the venerated Holy Woman. In skill and pedigree, she is more than worthy to sit at the head of our table.”

“Exactly!” Hourai from the Weapons Club agreed. “She may be a first-year student, but her ability to support her team is truly astounding. And that weapon she has, that national treasure... I’ve only seen it once myself, but let me tell you, it was remarkable.” His voice sounded ecstatic as he lavished praise on Sera and her weapon.

The secretary wrote Keigo Ashikaga's and Kikyou Sera's names on a whiteboard and recorded one vote for Ashikaga and three for Sera.

Tachibana looked at the whiteboard, and his mood grew fouler as he growled, "What backroom deal did the three of you strike?" He projected his Aura. "And don't you have anything to say, Thief Club?"

"Put your filthy Aura away," said a girl dismissively. She had long, wavy blue hair, a small nose, and strong-willed, dignified eyes. This was Kirara Kusunoki, a second-year Class A student, president of the Thief Club, and one of the Eight Dragons. "And I haven't voted for Kikyou Sera. I merely said that I would accept her to avoid wasting time arguing." Despite Tachibana's reputation as the most powerful student in Adventurers' High, Kusunoki had dismissed his Aura with a wave of her fan.

Kusunoki wasn't as well known as her second-year classmate Otoha Isshiki. But she was a remarkably gifted student, talented enough to frequently be a challenger for Isshiki's top spot in their year group exams. Second-year students often called the two of them the twin stars of their year group. Many nobles participated in the Thief Club's various activities, which gave the club an influential voice among the Eight Dragons.

"That's ridiculous," Tachibana shot back. "Why not join me in voting for Ashikaga if that is all you care about?! Then we'd have an even split."

"I fear this isn't getting us anywhere," said Hourai. "The candidates are here, aren't they? Bring them in. We can decide once we've heard them speak for themselves."

Tachibana turned his head around toward the doors and shouted, "Hey, get your asses in here!"

Kusunoki frowned at Tachibana's crass command.

The heavy doors of the conference room opened, and the first to enter was a slim male student with visible muscles on his neck and shoulders. A Japanese sword hung from his belt, and he walked like a soldier. This was Keigo Ashikaga, Tachibana's preferred candidate.

Next came a girl with waist-length, lustrous silver hair that swayed as she

walked elegantly toward the table. She was Kikyou Sera, a first-year Class A student. The fierce gazes of the Eight Dragons didn't appear to make her nervous. Her large eyes were actually bright and sparkling, and she was smiling.

Sagara looked at each of the two candidates. "We'd planned to call you in later, but so be it. Introduce yourselves to the room. You start, Ashikaga."

"As you wish," Ashikaga said. He stepped forward, crossed his arms behind his back, and puffed his chest up. The golden badge pinned to his breast pocket, symbolizing his status as a noble, shimmered in the light. "I am Ashikaga from the second-year Class A. I have no wish to impose my will on the Eight Dragons, intending to respect the independence of the various factions and do whatever I can to let the name of our incredible Adventurers' High ring out throughout the world. That is my mission."

"As far as sword-fighting goes," said Tachibana, "he's second only to me despite being a second year. If he doesn't get in as student council president, I wanna install him as the next president of the First Swordcraft Club."

Ashikaga delivered his self-introduction to the Eight Dragons without stumbling over his words, which was an achievement in front of such a quietly intimidating audience.

He had a conservative mindset and wanted to find a way to improve the school while respecting its existing traditions. Additionally, he was the heir to a prestigious noble family and an elite who'd served in the student council in his first year. His grades were exemplary, but not to the level of the other second-year students in the room, Isshiki and Kusunoki.

Sera now bowed her head and stepped forward. "Good day, everyone. I am Sera. It is my fate to become student council president, and I accept that fate."

"Your fate?" repeated Sagara. "Are you saying that because of those eyes of yours that we've heard so much about?"

"Yes," answered Sera. "My Clairvoyance allows me to see into the future."

Sera's eyes were violet but would change to a burning red when her Clairvoyance skill activated, and she could foresee the people's futures and coming events. This power had allowed her to discover talented individuals and

avoid disaster on many occasions in her life, with accomplishments so great that everyone in the Eight Dragons had heard about her unique skill. She'd also consistently ranked as the highest achieving student at Adventurers' Middle School, beating out Kouki Suou and his shape-changing sword and Akira Tenma, who was incredibly strong and an expert at close-range combat. On top of that, she was the granddaughter of the first adventurer in Japan, the original Holy Woman, and it was widely rumored that she would be the successor to that title. She was an overwhelmingly powerful presence among the first-year students.

Isshiki rose to her feet and began applauding loudly once Sera had finished. "Your power and numerous accomplishments are exceptional; your bloodline and family impeccable! I would gladly stand down and hand you the reins of the First Magic Club if you were to join our club, but someone of your caliber deserves an even greater title. Sera, I would be remiss if I didn't support your candidacy for student council president."

Hourai joined Isshiki in heaping praise on Sera. "Ashikaga's not bad, but he doesn't compare to Sera. We at the Weapons Club wholeheartedly support your candidacy."

Rumors abounded in Adventurers' High that several factions had reached out to Sera. Any witness to this meeting would likely suspect the factions to be the First Magic Club and the Weapons Club.

Tachibana was still grumpy, while Kusunoki looked out the window as though she were bored.

"Which candidate will the student council back?" Hourai asked. "Also, I'm surprised the Thief Club is so quiet, considering how passionately they fought for their candidate in the last election. Why is that? Is there another student you're both interested in or something?"

Hourai appeared suspicious that the heads of the student council and the Thief Club weren't actively participating. The upcoming election was a major event that would significantly affect their factions, so it was unusual for the two of them to be so uninterested. He looked at both and tried to discern their motive from their facial expressions.

“The student council is having trouble deciding which candidate to back,” replied Sagara. “But there *is* a first-year student I’m interested in... What was his name again?”

“Oh my!” said Isshiki, gasping and leaning forward in her chair. “I just *have* to know which student is talented enough to catch the great Sagara’s attention. Who is it?”

The student council president, Akizane Sagara, was a genius of a student. He was as prodigious in magic as Isshiki, as skilled at combat as Tachibana, and so academically talented that he’d never scored lower than first place in an exam. Any interest Sagara showed in a student guaranteed they were powerful.

Isshiki wasn’t the only one present who was fascinated by this revelation. The student council was the most powerful of the Eight Dragons, and their preferred candidate would greatly influence the upcoming election. So everyone began searching their memories to work out who Sagara might be interested in.

“A first year... Could it be Tenma?” mused Hourai. “I’m a big fan of the DUX line of weapons that the Tenma family business produces. We were hoping to bring her into the Weapons Club, though.”

“It’ll be Suou or Takamura,” said Tachibana. “They’re way more powerful than most first-years. Suou has agreed to join the First Swordcraft Club, so I won’t let you have him.”

“But if it were any of them, Sagara wouldn’t have trouble remembering their names,” said Kusunoki.

Tenma, Suou, Takamura. These were the names of prominent and promising first-year students that the leader of the Eight Dragons couldn’t possibly forget. Since Sagara couldn’t remember the name, it indicated the person he was interested in had to be someone else.

“If it’s not them, then... Wait, could it be...?!” Kusunoki suddenly gasped, then shut her mouth. She had an idea who the mystery student was.

“Kusunoki, please don’t keep the name to yourself if you know who it is!” said Isshiki.

“So this first-year kid Sagara’s interested in, is the Thief Club trying to snatch him up too?” Tachibana asked.

“My, my. I didn’t expect to find out there’s a new rookie to be on the lookout for!” effused Hourai.

While Tachibana and Hourai were surprised that there might be a powerful first year they didn’t know about, they calmly wondered about who it could be. The discussion continued in a deadlock as nobody could figure out the student’s identity.

“If it’s none of the students you’ve already named, could it be someone from Class E?” inquired Kikyou Sera, interrupting the discussion. She leaned forward, and smiled widely. “You never know where you’re going to find true talent.”

Ashikaga blanched, then leaned over to Sera and whispered, “You must be crazy to interrupt the Eight Dragons!”

Sera seemed unperturbed, however.

“Don’t be stupid!” Tachibana barked, lowering his thick eyebrows in a frown. “The first-year Class E students were level 1 commoners just a few months ago. There’s nothing remarkable about any of them!” Being a commoner was enough for nobles to look down on someone. He was furious at the suggestion of comparing new Class E students with only three months’ experience to the likes of Tenma, Suou, and Takamura.

“I think so too,” said Hourai. “Nobody in Class E is of noble blood, and I can’t imagine finding anyone with talent or future prospects among them. But from the looks on Sagara’s and Kusunoki’s faces, it seems Sera might be correct.”

“I-Is that true, Kusunoki?! I, too, find it hard to believe there’s a powerful rookie among the commoners of Class E,” said Isshiki.

Nobles received preferential treatment, but the Japanese government would have given commoners who had shown potential a letter of invitation to Adventurers’ Middle School, just like they would a promising noble child. To look at it another way, anyone who joined Class E starting from high school could only be “fairly good for a commoner,” and they wouldn’t be as talented as the middle school cohort. This was the common belief of those associated

with Adventurers' High, showing why Sera's suggestion had infuriated the noble supremacists of the Eight Dragons so badly.

Kusunoki's continued silence made Hourai and Isshiki grow increasingly suspicious, eventually begging her to tell them who the student was.

She kept her mouth shut and turned her face away.

The meeting aimed to discuss the candidates for the upcoming student council presidential election, but the conversation had been thoroughly derailed. Sagara sighed and ended the meeting, regretting that he'd brought the student up.

"We should leave things here for now," said Sagara. "I'll arrange another meeting in a few days. Oh, and Kusunoki, I want to stay behind and discuss a few things with you."

"What a coincidence, Sagara," remarked Kusunoki. "So do I. However, I won't let you have *him*."

While the Eight Dragons argued, one person in the room stared off into the distance with a longing expression, like someone yearning for love—Kikyou Sera. "Class E... So there's someone powerful hiding in that class I don't know about. I'll have to find him and sear his image into my mind. Wait for me, my hero..."

Chapter 20: The Usual Formation

“You want me to keep everything that happened in the Devil’s Keep a secret? If that’s what you want, Narumi, then that’s what I’ll do!”

I was sitting in the rear passenger seat of a long, black limousine. Akira Tenma, a girl covered from head to toe in armor, sat to my left. Her armor was as shiny as ever, gleaming in the sunlight that entered through the windows. On my right was a woman in a perfect maid outfit with an Alice band on top of her long, lustrous black hair. She was Kurosaki, the majordomo of the Tenma family’s black butlers.

Although I wanted to tell Kurosaki that her outfit looked nice, I had second thoughts when she leaned over and whispered, “Lay a single finger on my lady and I will end you.” I was doing my best to avoid touching Tenma because I didn’t fancy being ended, resulting in an incredibly uncomfortable posture. The limousine might’ve been big, but the three of us sitting together made it cramped.

“There’s something that shocked me though, Narumi,” Tenma continued. “You were incredibly slim when we were leaving the dungeon, but now you’re back to normal. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine,” I replied, slapping the round mass of my belly. “I just ate too much.”

“Oh, right. I also overeat sometimes, so I’ve got to watch out for that!”

Weight loss was a topic close to Tenma’s heart, so my sudden weight gain was shocking for her. She’d frozen in place when she’d seen me in my current state.

“By the way,” Tenma said. “Do you, uh... Have you made plans with anyone to raid the dungeon in the summer? I think the two of us could make it pretty far together!”

“I won’t allow this!” interrupted Kurosaki. “I can’t let you raid with this *beast*!”

"For goodness' sake, Kurosaki, I don't know where your ideas about Narumi come from. Anyway, I'd be really pleased if you'd consider it, Narumi."

It was standard for Adventurers' High students to plan long-term raids in the dungeon over the summer break. Tenma had apparently taken her black butlers raiding with her until last year, but she wanted to raid with me this summer. The head butler had furiously intervened and declared that she'd join us, not wanting us to be alone together.

Hadn't thought much about summer break, I thought.

I had no plans for the summer and would probably raid the dungeon with either my family or Satsuki and Risa like usual, so I'd have spare time. However, raiding deep into the dungeon without using gates would entail a monthlong commitment, with most time wasted traveling. Unless I could find a way around that problem, I wasn't eager about joining Tenma...

Actually, maybe I could get Arthur to create gates for us?

Thinking back to the first time I'd encountered Arthur, I remembered that he'd created a gate exit in the middle of the cathedral. Ordinarily, gates would only connect to the outside of the dungeon or to gate rooms. But it seemed that Arthur knew how to create gates that led to wherever he wanted. Perhaps we could use that to take Tenma and me straight to the twentieth floor.

There were a few reasons why I wanted to raid with Tenma as well. One reason was to dispel her curse, and another was that Arthur had been blowing up my phone with calls and texts begging me to bring Tenma to see him. He probably wanted to partner up with Tenma like I had done with Satsuki. A requirement for that kind of partnership was sharing a certain amount of player knowledge with the other person.

"I found a place where you can get lots of Mamu on my last raid," said Tenma, laughing. "I got to eat all that I wanted. I hope I get to eat Mamu with you this year, Narumi!"

"My lady, please don't forget how hard it was to lose the weight you gained after that!"



I remembered Tenma risking her life to protect me from the lesser demon like it was yesterday. She hadn't given up on me. I was confident she could be trusted, and so I had no objection to sharing player knowledge with her on that basis. But the leak of player knowledge like the gates would have severe repercussions on the world, and even her noble rank might not keep her safe. We'd need to be extremely cautious about inviting her to join us. As such, I wanted to talk this over with Risa and Arthur as soon as possible.

"Thanks, I'll think it over," I said. "Also, Tenma... You really don't have to come and pick me up for school."

"Oh, is it an inconvenience?"

There had been a bit of a disturbance earlier. The doorbell rang while I was preparing for school, and when I opened the door, I found over ten butlers in sunglasses glaring back at me from my porch. Five expensive cars, including this limousine, had been parked outside, and a crowd of neighbors and passersby formed nearby. The butlers had grabbed my arm and thrown me into the backseat of the limousine, where Tenma had been sitting waiting for me.

Because we were friends, she'd pledged to pick me up daily for school. My house was only a five-minute walk from school, and I didn't want the same spectacle to happen on my road every morning. Thus, I politely declined any future offer.

"Okay..." said Tenma. "But if you ever want me to pick you up, just say the word!"

"The sentiment is enough for me," I said. "Thanks."

"How dare he refuse my lady's offer... But this way, she spends less time with the beast... Actually, there's—" Kurosaki was muttering to herself, raising her fist, then lowering it again.

"Right, I'll see you later!" Tenma said as I climbed out, then the limousine sped away.

After a stretch, I thought about going to school but then felt someone staring

at me from behind. I turned around and saw that Kaoru was scowling with her arms crossed. While I thought she would've headed off to school without me, she must've been watching us in the car the whole time... I wondered what I should say.

"That was Akira Tenma from Class A just now, wasn't it?" asked Kaoru. "You two seemed to be getting along very well."

"Err, yeah... We hit it off during the Battle of the Classes, so we're friends now."

"Friends? She's a bona fide noble. Are you sure that's safe?"

Japan's commoners often idolized the nobles, the upper class of our society. However, they were just as feared as they were loved. Nobles could misuse their power and make commoners disappear if they didn't like someone.

Kaoru was indirectly warning me, suggesting that Tenma's friendly attitude toward me today might change tomorrow. Even if it didn't, the people around her might disapprove of our relationship. That was why it wasn't safe for commoners like us to get too close to nobles.

Her viewpoint was certainly correct, but I would stay with Tenma for at least as long as it took to dispel her curse. It would be wise to avoid acting friendly with Tenma in front of others if it caused any unnecessary trouble.

"Still... You've changed, Souta. Until recently, I wouldn't have imagined you trying to make new friends. In fact, you barely spoke a word to anyone but me." Kaoru stared into the distance as she recalled what I'd been like in middle school.

In middle school, I'd kept myself isolated, refusing to let my guard down around anyone. That was how Piggy had acted in the game too, so I had an easy time imagining it.

Kaoru had a perplexed demeanor as she remembered the old days. Her smile somehow looked both pleased and lonely. She had absolutely detested Piggy during middle school, yet her facial expression hinted that perhaps there was more to it than that.

"We'd better get going," Karou said, then she started walking. "We're late

already."

I grabbed my bag, ran to catch up, and walked behind her as usual.

It was June when the rainy season would usually begin, but the sky was clear and blue. The temperature was also hot for the morning, which wasn't comfortable for my fat body.

Chapter 21: Class E's Hero

“Here he is, our hero!”

“Great work, Piggy. Maybe I was wrong about you!”

Several classmates welcomed me into my classroom with applause when I arrived, hailing me as their hero. It took a second for me to figure out why, but it was because of the points I’d won in the Battle of the Classes that had let us beat Class D. This sudden flood of friendly voices that I wasn’t used to caused my sphincter to tighten. My classmates had always acted like I was a burden until now, and that was if they even acknowledged my existence at all.

But for every positive comment, two more weren’t so friendly.

“All he did was tag along with stronger students. Man, the deepest-depth task sounds like a breeze. Wish I’d chosen it.”

“Yeah, if following the other classes is all you need, then I could’ve done that too.”

“You can’t be a hero if you haven’t done anything. It’s cheating. He’s just Piggy anyway.”

During the Battle of the Classes, everyone had run themselves into the ground chasing around the dungeon, all for the sake of our class. Their meals had been minimal, and they’d slept on the floor. They’d also had to fight monsters continuously for a whole week while fending off traps from the other classes. Naturally, they found it unfair to treat me as a hero when all I’d done was stick with the higher classes without fighting any monsters.

In a sense, they were right. I hadn’t fought a single monster on my way to the twentieth floor, instead watching from the back of the group while the other classes’ helpers took care of them. I hadn’t encountered any trouble (except at the very end). The Pig’s Tail Inn had served me fancy meals, and I’d returned home to sleep in my own bed on several nights. I did feel a little guilty for all of this... Tee-hee.

I began staring into the distance, but somebody threw his arm around my shoulders. “Still, were you okay being exposed to the Aura of powerful monsters, Piggy?” It was Takuya Tsukijima, a boy with shoulder-length blond hair. I was surprised he was talking to me since I’d only ever seen him chatting with Kaoru or his friends in class.

“The helpers made sure to fight a safe distance away,” I replied. “The monsters’ Aura could barely be felt back where I was.”

“Sounds about right, ha! I worked hard to get a huge magic gem for Kaoru, and I don’t like getting shown up by background characters like you!” Tsukijima kicked me in the butt, then returned to his seat.

Tsukijima had been eager to impress Kaoru by getting Class E first place in the magic gem bonus task. I had no idea what kind of magic gem he’d brought back, though I could estimate his current level if I knew. I decided to ask around later.

I sat down at my desk in the back of the classroom. A pair of skirts entered my vision while I was hanging my schoolbag on the hook beside my desk. Long, slender legs extended from one of them, and the legs below the other were nicely plump. Looking up, I noticed Satsuki and Risa smiling down at me as they always did, which reassured me.

“Souta, good morning!” exclaimed Satsuki.

“Morning, hero,” said Risa, giggling. “I would’ve thought everyone would be a bit more grateful after your big achievements.”

“They’re all so selfish!”

Risa giggled again. “That works out better for you. Right, Souta?”

They must’ve seen what had happened when I entered the classroom. I was too much of a chicken to enjoy having a spotlight shone on me as a hero. A kick in the butt, on the other hand, was the sort of reaction I could live with.

“They’re not wrong, though,” I said. “I just followed the other classes, and I had an easy time with it. Changing the topic, how are things going with Akagi and the others? You went training with them, right?”

“We only trained on the first floor yesterday,” answered Satsuki. “I could tell

they were really serious about getting stronger. All four of them have an amazing intuition for combat too. I was surprised by how good they were!"

"And also," said Risa, "we've agreed to raid with them once a week to help them level up."

Satsuki and Risa had invited Akagi, Tachigi, Kaoru, and Pinky to train with them. They wanted to gauge the group's knowledge of the basics and fill in any gaps before they began power leveling in earnest.

Unlike in the game, power leveling in this world was a special service only available to nobles or those who could afford to pay huge sums to hire high-level adventurers, so this would be Akagi's and the others' first experience with it. Taking that into account, Satsuki and Risa had wanted to coach Akagi's party on the quirks and strategies of various monsters and plan their roles and responsibilities so they could hunt many monsters efficiently and without incident. That was the right decision.

Satsuki explained that they'd sparred as part of the training. The four in Akagi's party had all been better at combat than she'd expected, and they were quick to learn new techniques. They were the protagonist's party, after all. Their basic abilities were among the best of *DEC*'s characters, so I wasn't surprised.

They had already arranged to power level on the seventh floor by hunting wargs this weekend. For regular raids, hunting golems in the DLC expansion area would be more time efficient. But wargs were more suited to power leveling because you could gather them into huge groups.

Considering what lay in store, I hoped they could reach level 10 by summer break. Akagi, in particular, would trigger several of the game's storylines, like breaking Tenma's curse. The faster he could level up, the easier things would be for me. If Akagi got stronger, that would lighten the mood in Class E, a side effect that I'd be happy to see.

"I see," I said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help. I plan to be more proactive in supporting you."

"Hmm, if you want to support...maybe you could help get everyone better equipment?" asked Satsuki. "We're strong enough to play whack-a-mole on the

fifteenth floor now, but it takes ages to gather raw material.”

“I’ve got plenty of mithril alloy, so you can have some of that. I can tag along if that’d help too.”

“Ooh, are you asking us out on a date?” asked Risa, chuckling.

Despite Satsuki and Risa being enough to play whack-a-mole, they couldn’t yet defeat the Bloody Baron and were having difficulty gathering the mithril needed to make enough armor and weapons for Akagi’s party. I had plenty, so I offered to hand over some of my stores.

As we chatted and caught up, we suddenly heard a commotion from the hallway. It sounded like somebody was screaming. I wondered what was going on. My classmates stopped their conversations and looked over to the classroom’s door.

“Out of my way!”

A group of students in tracksuits and armed with wooden swords flung open the doors and threw two male students inside the classroom. The two students were lying face down, so it took me a second to realize who they were. However, the crop of red hair on one and the crew cut on the other told me they were Akagi and Majima. Their faces were swollen, with cuts and bruises covering their arms and legs. They hadn’t just been knocked around a bit, they’d been beaten up so brutally that they couldn’t even stand up.

The classroom grew tense. Everyone held their breath as they watched this sudden development. To make matters worse, the two leaders of Class E had been beaten up. Some of my classmates were so frightened that they almost began to cry.

“What do we do now?” one of the intruders asked. “We were ordered to find him at all costs.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna anger Ashikaga,” replied another. “He’s terrifying when he’s angry. What can we tell him...?”

“We’re out of time, though. We’ll have to come back later.”

The name of the Second Swordcraft Club was embroidered into the breast of

their tracksuits. Although the club wasn't composed of nobles, it boasted powerful students, each of them easily over level 10. Why would they have to catch two level 6s and beat them up so badly? Also, who the hell was Ashikaga?

"Hey, punk, how dare you give us the name of two weaklings!" one of them spat out, striking the ground with his wooden sword. "Next time you lie to us, you'll regret it!"

"We'll come back with more questions. You'd better not run!"

The students from the Second Swordcraft Club left our classroom. Once they were out of sight, Pinky ran over to Akagi and Majima, and Satsuki ran out of the classroom to bring a teacher from the infirmary. Tachigi began asking students questions to figure out what was going on.

"They asked me who the strongest person in our class is," one student responded to Tachigi. "So I told them it was Akagi and Majima. I didn't think they'd do all this... There's no way in hell any of us could be a match for the Second Swordcraft Club. What were they after?"

"Once they've both recovered, I'll ask Yuuma what happened," said Tachigi. "They'll be okay. The Priest teacher will patch them up."

Tachigi tried reassuring and calming the classmate who had given up Akagi's and Majima's names. It was great to have Tachigi around; his ability to remain considerate of others no matter what else was happening around him was a big help.

But why did the Second Swordcraft Club want to know who our strongest student was? Were they hoping to recruit them? But there were easier ways of testing someone's strength than beating them to a pulp. The brutality of the beating indicated that they'd been letting out their anger. But why was their anger being directed at us? Had Class D gone crying to them to get back at our class? That wouldn't be enough for the Second Swordcraft Club to take action... I had no idea what was going on.

Whatever the case, I've got to keep Satsuki safe.

Satsuki had shown her true strength during the Battle of the Classes. That had been her only way to protect our classmates, but I found it likely that the

Second Swordcraft Club had heard about that and was now looking for her. The upper classes had targeted Satsuki in the game, leading to her expulsion, so I was especially worried about this possibility. I'd need to come up with a surefire countermeasure to prevent that. I considered inviting her to the Narumi family worm-hunting session this coming weekend.

I wasn't the only one doing some thinking as it seemed Tachigi had a few ideas too. He called out to Risa with a somber look on his face. "Nitta, we need to talk later. I think we should speed up our timeline for what we discussed earlier."

"Yeah... Okay," replied Risa. "All right. In that case, we're counting on your help too, Souta."

Risa appeared to understand what Tachigi was talking about, and it sounded like she was expecting something from me. If it involved me, it was probably to do with their plan for the student council president election that Risa had told me about on one of our video calls. In other words, Tachigi believed the Second Swordcraft Club's actions were related to the election.

In the game, the student council election storyline had started with the various factions coming in and threatening our class to win our votes. It hadn't begun with Akagi and Majima getting beaten up...

Even with my game knowledge, I felt lost. I decided that I'd help Tachigi and Risa with their plan and see what Tachigi had in mind.

Chapter 22: The Puppet President

“You took your time!” chided Majima. “Hurry up and give it to me.”

“Sorry, it was packed in there,” I said. “I got enough for everyone though...”

“Don’t be so rude, Majima!” said Satsuki. “Souta’s just bought you lunch!”

Tachigi, Satsuki, Risa, and I headed to a quiet location in the school at lunch so we could ask Akagi and Majima about the morning’s events. We’d chosen somewhere without other students rather than our classroom or the cafeteria in case the Second Swordcraft Club came by again.

Seeing that we would have a discussion while eating lunch, and I had the most forgettable face, we decided that I should be the one to buy everyone’s lunch. And so, I pushed through the busy crowd in the cafeteria and successfully wrangled enough food for everyone. I handed out what I’d bought while Majima complained about the long wait. When Satsuki stood up for me, I could feel tears well in my eyes.

The Priest teacher had cast healing magic on Akagi and Majima, fixing most of their cuts and bruises. The only reminders of the morning’s beating were a handful of band-aids on their skin. I still found it amazing that a little healing magic could instantly heal injuries severe enough that they prevented you from standing up by yourself. It was another reminder that I lived in a world of swords and magic.

“Thanks, um... What was your name again?” said Akagi as he took a bread roll from me. “Never mind. Anyway, they nabbed me out of nowhere when I arrived at school and told me to show them my full strength.”

“Me too,” said Majima. “I tried to fight back, but I was no match for them.” Majima punched the ground with his fist. He was a plucky guy, so he hated that he hadn’t been able to do a single thing to defend himself against a group of stronger opponents.

Members of the Second Swordcraft Club had apprehended them outside their

dorms, taken them to their club training grounds, and beaten them to a pulp.

“What’s the point of asking to see your full strength? They know what your levels are, right?” inquired Risa, tilting her head.

“Yeah,” Akagi replied. “I showed them my terminal screen and kept telling them I’m level 6, but they wouldn’t listen.”

The terminals provided by the school could view a database listing every student’s current level, so it was simple to look up. Akagi had shown them the list, but they hadn’t believed that he really was level 6.

“It’s ridiculous, nobody hides their level,” commented Majima. “Well, I guess Oomiya proves that’s not the case.” He glanced at Oomiya.

At Adventurers’ High, it was common practice for students to update the database as soon as they leveled up, as perceived weakness could be highly detrimental. Satsuki hadn’t done this, and Majima was probably wondering if that was more typical than he’d believed.

“Also,” Majima continued, “they kept asking me who the strongest student in Class E was while hitting me. You’re currently our strongest, Oomiya, so maybe they’re looking for you.”

Majima assumed that Oomiya was the strongest in our class because he knew from his experience raiding the dungeon that no one could have leveled up higher than her in the short time since we’d started high school. If you ignored players and their unfair advantages, he wasn’t wrong.

“But why would the Second Swordcraft Club be after Satsuki?” asked Risa.

“They said they were working on the orders of somebody called Ashikaga,” said Tachigi. While chewing on a bread roll, he tapped on his terminal and brought up a screen to show us. “Only one person pops up in the database when you search that name. This guy is trouble.”

We all leaned in to look at Tachigi’s screen. Keigo Ashikaga, a second-year student, was listed. He was the heir to a viscount and a member of the First Swordcraft Club. He’d finished in second place in the school’s martial arts tournament. His eyes were piercing, and his body was in great, muscular shape. The way he held his head high and his posture was characteristic of a noble

upbringing. I could easily imagine someone like this throwing their weight around at school, but I couldn't remember him from the game or recognize his face. When I glanced at Risa, she looked at me and tilted her head. Neither of us recognized him, so he probably hadn't appeared in the game.

"Mind if I ask you something?" Akagi asked Satsuki after inspecting the data on Tachigi's terminal. "This shows that the First Swordcraft Club was calling the shots this morning, not the Second. From what Kaoru tells me, you're around level 10. Don't take this the wrong way, but level 10 isn't strong enough for the First Swordcraft Club to be wary of you. Is that really your level?"

After a pause, Satsuki said, "Sorry, I don't like telling people my real level. I'll say that my level is a lot lower than Ashikaga's, and I don't think either Swordcraft Club has any reason to come after me."

Apparently Kaoru had judged that Satsuki was around level 10 based on how she fought during the Battle of the Classes. According to the database, Ashikaga was level 19. Plenty of members were over level 15 in the First Swordcraft Club, so a level 10 like Satsuki wouldn't threaten them. Satsuki implicitly confirmed Kaoru's estimate of her level but couldn't think why the clubs would target her. Would they really attack us so brutally if they didn't have a reason? It seemed unlikely.

"I wish we could ask Ashikaga directly why he set the Second Swordcraft Club on us, but he's a noble," said Tachigi. "He wouldn't waste his time speaking to the likes of us. I do know a noble who might be willing to talk to him on our behalf, but I don't want to ask her unless we have to."

Tachigi explained that he knew someone in the First Magic Club. I could remember a girl from the First Magic Club showing up in Tachigi's storyline in the game, but she was a hardline proponent of noble supremacy. Perhaps she would be willing to help Tachigi with personal matters, although I couldn't imagine her being interested in sticking up for Class E.

"Okay, I think those are all the questions we had for you both," stated Tachigi. "We'll do some digging and get back to you if we find anything out."

"Sounds good," replied Majima. "Sounds like we've got our best people on the case: our strongest student, Oomiya; our best strategist, Tachigi; and the

smartest in the class, Nitta. I couldn't find a better team to solve this if I tried."

"I agree," said Akagi. "And I know Nitta and Naoto will be able to keep Oomiya safe. Be careful, anyway. We don't know what they might try next."

Risa smiled and waved at Akagi and Majima as they returned to the classroom, while Satsuki glanced sidelong at me with a forced smile.

The two boys had forgotten about me, but I wouldn't correct them. The more people knew about me, the harder it would be for me to get things done. Satsuki and Risa would work on this openly, and I'd stay out of sight behind their shadows.

Now that our questioning was over, I'd finally be able to eat my lunch. At least that was what I thought, until I tried to eat a bread roll and noticed somebody staring at me intently.

"By the way, Narumi," said Tachigi, lifting his glasses with his index fingers and staring straight at me. "How strong are you, and what can you do?"

"Uh, well, I can get lunch for everyone...and small stuff like that—"

"Don't mess around. Nitta wouldn't insist you be here just to run basic errands. I believe, and I may be wrong, that you and Nitta have formed a party with Oomiya. Maybe your level isn't as high as Oomiya's, but it's definitely higher than the number in the database."

Sharp as always, Tachigi, I thought. He'd been just as smart in the game, and that intelligence had turned the protagonist's party's fortunes around countless times. I wasn't going to admit my true strength to him, though. If I did, he'd factor that into his plans and strategies for our class. My best option was to play dumb.

"Not going to admit it? Suit yourself. But from now on, I'm going to assume you're as strong as Nitta and Oomiya. That's because I have faith in Nitta, and she has faith in you. From what I can tell, Oomiya does as well. I might need to call on you to help out in some dangerous situations, so I want you to know that I'm going to count on your assistance."

Risa giggled. "We're counting on you!"

"B-But, if you can," Satsuki said, "I think you should only use him for behind-the-scenes support where he doesn't have to show himself in front of people. That works best, right, Souta?"

Satsuki tried to help me, but Tachigi only replied, "I'll think about how to use him later." Then, he went over the events of the morning once more. "Let's summarize what we know: the Second Swordcraft Club is looking for the strongest Class E student, and they're getting their orders from Ashikaga from the First Swordcraft Club... Is there anything we can deduce from this?"

It was basically impossible to deduce any motive from such a small amount of information. Akagi and Majima were the ones who'd been beaten up, and even they had no idea what was going on. However, Satsuki said that she had noticed something.

"The First Swordcraft Club is a powerful faction that has control over a bunch of other clubs, right?"

"Yeah," agreed Risa, "they're one of the Eight Dragons, the eight factions that de facto rule this school."

"There's still a chance that Ashikaga is acting for personal reasons rather than on behalf of the First Swordcraft Club," said Tachigi. "But if the whole club is taking action, we're in dire trouble."

In addition to club activities, the Eight Dragons had a deep connection to all aspects of school administration, such as exams and academic progression. Taking on the Eight Dragons was tantamount to picking a fight with Adventurers' High. Tachigi was of the opinion that we wouldn't stand a chance of winning that battle. This was an unusually pessimistic take from the strategist of the protagonist's party.

"I told Murai and the teacher from the infirmary about what happened this morning," said Oomiya, staring at the ground and clutching her skirt. "They said it was part and parcel of regular training and didn't see a problem with it... But I don't want to just sit around and twiddle my thumbs while they keep attacking us!"

In the game, she'd suffered excessive reprisals after she stood up to the upper classes and nobles. I was a little worried that my Satsuki would try the same

thing.

“It’s not like this morning is the first time something like this has happened,” said Tachigi. “During the Battle of the Classes, the school also let the other classes cheat using the helper rule, and they disqualified our gem-collecting team. Even before that, I’m fairly certain that the duel between Yuuma and Kariya was planned in advance. Somebody is out to destroy us external students in Class E, and I suspect that the Eight Dragons are behind it all.”

Tachigi believed that the Eight Dragons were working to keep the students of Class E down. That had also been the case in the game, so he was probably right. So what were we going to do about it?

“What should we do to keep Class E safe, Tachigi?” asked Risa.

“Hmm. I’ve already spoken about this with Nitta, and what I think is—”

Tachigi thought that if we couldn’t fight them and win, we could get them to stop targeting us by pledging our loyalty to one of them. If we could associate ourselves with one of the Eight Dragons, neither the higher classes nor the nobles, like Ashikaga and the First Swordcraft Club, would be able to touch us, at least not without difficulty.

His plan took advantage of the upcoming student council presidential election. Every year, the Eight Dragons would compete against each other to install their preferred candidate as student council president. As a result, they’d come to Class E to get our votes. Tachigi wanted us to make the first move and deliver our votes as a present to one of the factions, ingratiating ourselves with them.

“Success in the negotiations will protect us from violence and unfair school rules, improving our position. Failure might turn all of the Eight Dragons against us. If that happens, we’ll find ourselves in an even worse position than we’re in now.”

His plan didn’t come as a surprise. Risa had already told me about it, and the game’s Tachigi had also tried to cozy up to one of the Eight Dragons. However...

What will happen if we try to make contact with the Eight Dragons at this stage in the storyline?

The plan to reach out to one of the Eight Dragons took place several months after the election, when Akagi had already befriended the new student council president, Sera. She had used the student council to improve conditions for Class E, which had caused several of the Eight Dragons to revolt. One after another, the students of Class E had fallen victim to a new wave of violence, and there had been countless duel events. Pledging our loyalty to one of the Eight Dragons was a last resort to escape this dire situation. This world's Tachigi was setting things in motion much earlier than he had in the game.

I had a few misgivings about our plan to win over one of the Eight Dragons with our votes though, and so did Risa.

"Do you think our votes will be enough to satisfy them?" asked Risa. "Won't they try to test us to see if we're worthy of working for them?"

"Testing our worth...? Do you mean they'll challenge us to a duel?" mused Oomiya.

The Eight Dragons were mostly school clubs whose purpose was to practice combat, and their bellicose leaders tended to settle their conflicts with their fists rather than expend mental energy to talk things through. If we wanted them to see that we could add value, we'd need to prove it by defeating one of their leaders in a duel.

But Tachigi knew that nobody in our class was strong enough for that. He was probably planning to place all his hopes on the slim chance that negotiation by itself would work. Even so, other factors could affect our chances of success.

"The question is, which faction should we try to negotiate with?" queried Risa. "The Eight Dragons each have their own priorities and ambitions, so we should learn what we can about them and narrow down our options."

"That makes sense!" agreed Satsuki. "Approaching multiple factions will hurt their impression of us. I don't know if any of them will be sympathetic to what we're going through though."

Many of the Eight Dragons detested Class E with a passion. The First Swordcraft Club and the First Magic Club were clear examples of this in the game. These two factions were noble supremacists, so it would be best to avoid them.

"The faction I'm thinking of approaching is...the student council," said Tachigi.

"Th-The student council?" said Satsuki. "But their current leader will be leaving after the election!"

"Hmm..." Risa hummed indecisively.

The student council president before Sera, the current president, was known in the game as an incapable leader. He remained a background character, with neither his name nor face visible. In essence, he'd been a foil to make Sera look good in comparison. As a noble, he was probably a high-level adventurer but had never achieved anything significant. He hadn't tried to mobilize the student council like Sera had, and he hadn't enacted any serious reforms either. He'd held the low reputation of being just a puppet of the Eight Dragons.

Supposing we pledged our loyalty to his faction, would such an impotent student council president be able to rein in the Eight Dragons?

Actually, looking at things another way, the fact that the president is so incapable might make it easier for us to charm him into doing what we want.

His noble status was his only positive quality, so we would have a chance of winning him over by flattering his nobility. It would definitely be much easier than holding a sane conversation with the bellicose, short-tempered intellectuals who led the rest of the Eight Dragons.

Plus, his faction was the student council, which exercised the most power of all the Eight Dragons, thanks to their special privileges. We'd have time to think about how we would protect ourselves from the other factions after investigating what the student council could offer us. The current president's term was ending, meaning we'd have to ask fast.

"I'm not against the idea," said Risa, "but why the student council?"

Risa had the same game knowledge as me, and she asked Tachigi this so we could uncover what he was thinking.

"Hm, that's simple," responded Tachigi. "The current president is logical and fair. I also hear that he's extraordinarily capable and powerful."

"Huh?!" Risa blurted.

"Really?" asked Satsuki. "He sounds like a good bet!"

Tachigi elaborated that the current president could control the other Eight Dragons. If he was fair, he'd likely be willing to hear us out when we explained the problems Class E faced. Tachigi added that the president was rumored to be an upstanding individual, so the risk of reprisals if negotiations failed was low.

Risa and I were shocked by this answer, which wasn't what we expected to hear. I could not tell whether the president really was so different from the character in the game or whether Tachigi had been given incorrect information.

While we were talking, I received a text on my terminal. It was from...the student council.

The message read: Come to the student council room immediately.

Chapter 23: Why Was He Summoned?

Naoto Tachigi

The four of us stood in the hallway outside the student council room, preparing ourselves to head through the door. The message from the student council hadn't hinted at their reason for summoning Narumi, but that didn't stop us. This was a golden opportunity for us to forge a relationship with the student council president. We'd decided to accompany Narumi to his meeting to probe the student council.

"Okay, everyone," I said, "remember to stick to the plan."

"So the plan is to get a feel for what sort of people they are, right?" asked Oomiya, clasping her hands into fists in front of her chest and looking eager. "And if it looks like they're reasonable, we'll submit a complaint about what happened this morning."

"And we wanna find out what we can about the student council and the upcoming election while we're at it," Nitta added, sounding as relaxed as ever, wearing her usual smile.

It was reassuring to have these two girls with me. The most influential student in the school was inside the room we were about to enter, but neither looked worried.

Narumi appeared worried based on the frown on his face. Was he merely playing the role of a coward to fool people into underestimating him, or was he truly afraid? I couldn't discern what was really going through his mind behind those timid-looking eyes. Oomiya didn't seem concerned about him, however, so he'd probably be fine.

"Here we go," I said. "Narumi, it should be you that knocks on the door."

"Mmm... I've got a bad feeling about this..."

I could see sweat dripping down Narumi's face as he lightly knocked on the door to the student council room.

A few seconds later, a voice called back, “Come in.”

Narumi pushed the heavy wooden door open. Inside, the room was decorated like a fancy hotel reception. The space wasn’t furnished with mere antiques; every desk, chair, and lamp was the work of a famed master craftsman. Everything must have cost tens of millions or even hundreds of millions of yen to purchase. I wondered how many donations they’d needed to fund the furnishings.

A bespectacled male student was sitting on a leather chair at the very back of the room. He focused on us with a sharp, inquisitive stare. Only one person could sit in that chair: the student council president. My fact-finding suggested that he possessed the sort of talent that only came around once every ten years, and I wondered how powerful he truly was.

But...who’s that woman...?

Another person was standing next to the student council president. She had long, blue hair and was calmly waving a black fan in front of her face. She wore the blue scarf of a second-year student. Was she another member of the student council?

I hesitated for a moment, unsure whether we should revise our plan to account for this unexpected other person, yet I decided against it.

“Thank you for seeing us,” I said, bowing my head. The four of us entered the room, and the thick carpet muffled our footsteps. Seeing as the room was eerily quiet, perhaps the walls and windows were soundproofed.

The people we were speaking to were our superiors in level, social class, and standing within the school. If they wanted to see us expelled, they could do it. I could feel my throat drying up already because I hadn’t expected to start feeling nervous so soon.

“He is the only one I summoned,” the president said, indicating Narumi. “Who are the rest of you?”

“I’m Tachigi from the first-year Class E,” I answered. “This is Oomiya, and this is Nitta, both from the same—”

“Go away.”

I almost stumbled backward, overwhelmed by the intensity of the president's glare and his assertive tone. Everyone said that while the president of the First Swordcraft Club was the best swordsman in school and the president of the First Magic Club was the best in magic, the student council president was the strongest student of them all. How could I remain unflinching in the face of such power?

But I couldn't turn around and leave. I wasn't here for my own sake; the future of my entire class was at stake. Realizing that I wouldn't have enough time to observe what sort of person the president was, I decided to change the plan and get straight to the heart of the matter.

"We've come to submit a complaint," I said.

The president narrowed his eyes. "What...?"

Fearing that he was about to reiterate his order for us to leave, I butted in and hurriedly explained the events of this morning. I summarized the Second Swordcraft Club's attack, orchestrated by Ashikaga from the First Swordcraft Club. Then, I explained how we'd been attacked numerous times before and how the unfair rules had disadvantaged us.

If the president was as fair-minded as I'd heard, then my pleas would surely reach him. Unfortunately, his response was the complete opposite of what I'd hoped for.

"I don't have the time to deal with your problems, and they're of no interest to me anyway."

He was heartless. He wasn't interested in helping us at all.

Angered by his emotionless response, Oomiya stepped forward and said, "People say the student council president is a fair person, but you're not fair at all! You kicked us out the last time we came to see you, didn't you?!"

Nitta immediately rushed over and held her angry friend back. "Come, Satsuki, calm down, yeah?"

The president was a prominent noble with influence over the school's management staff, so provoking him was far too risky. We needed to stay calm and think.

We need to be extremely careful with what we say, I thought. We might not get another chance. But what do we tell him...? What can we say that will stop him throwing us out?

The girl standing by the president had looked surprised at the mention of Ashikaga's name, and she cupped her chin in thought. She obviously had a hunch about what was going on. Was her hunch about the First Swordcraft Club? Or Ashikaga? Or perhaps—

"I'm assuming that Ashikaga, the person behind the attack on our class, is somehow related to the student council. Am I wrong? Or perhaps he has something to do with the student council president election?" I said.

"We don't have to answer your questions," the president replied.

"Forgive me, but our classmates were attacked, which gives us the right to some answers. Also—"

A sudden slapping noise interrupted my thoughts. The woman standing next to the president had struck the table with her hand. Now that she'd lowered her arms from her chest and was facing toward me, I could see the shining gold badge on her uniform.

So she's also a noble.

"You brain-dead dropouts don't know when to shut your mouths, do you? Everyone except *him* needs to leave. Or else..." As she finished speaking, she unleashed a huge wave of Aura.

Fear overcame me. Goose bumps prickled all over my skin, and my muscles tensed involuntarily. My body stooped into a kneeling position against my will. I'd suspected she'd be at a high level when I assumed she was a member of the student council, but I hadn't expected her to be this powerful.

"Oh?" she blurted. "This is a surprise."

As I struggled to stay upright, I felt the waves of mana subside. Oomiya and Nitta stood before me, shielding me from the woman's violent Aura stream.

The president was quietly watching this happen. Meanwhile, the woman's smile broadened. She now seemed intrigued.

“I thought a little taste of my Aura would send you scurrying away, but maybe you’re not the dropouts I thought you were. What are your names?”

“I’m Satsuki Oomiya, and I’m staying right here. No running, no hiding!” Oomiya declared, crossing her arms.

“I’m Risa Nitta, just an ordinary girl.”

It’s amazing she’s still claiming to be just an ordinary girl in a situation like this.

I had to admire Oomiya and Nitta for holding their ground in the student council room, a hub for the school’s most influential personalities. However...

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen students with as much mettle as you,” remarked the blue-haired woman. “It makes me want to embrace my sadistic side.”

She increased her Aura output even further. The ground seemed to tremble, the air began to vibrate violently, and her thick, black Aura blotted out my vision.

It can’t be... She was holding back the first time she released her Aura...?

The amount of Aura she was exuding was on another level. My heart palpitated as I realized just how tough this person was.

“Enough, Kusunoki,” the president ordered.

The woman called Kusunoki immediately stopped releasing her Aura, and the world returned to normal. “As you wish, Sagara. I got carried away.”

I’d only been briefly exposed to the Aura, but my whole body was now drenched in sweat. Was I really attending the same school as students who’d reached such a high level of proficiency? I felt my confidence waver. Were these the sort of monsters we’d have to go up against? I glanced back at Narumi and noticed he was also sweaty, likely with the same thoughts going through his mind.

The president closed his eyes and exhaled. He then slowly and deliberately said, “First of all, we’re too busy to deal with your problems. And even if we had the time, we’d side with the First Swordcraft Club, not you.”

“But why?!” Oomiya demanded. “They’re the ones in the wrong! We’re the victims!”

Oomiya’s ability to continue arguing despite the exposure to Kusunoki’s Aura surprised me. Where did she get her courage from?

Unlike Oomiya, the president didn’t let any of his emotions show, and he continued in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “The purpose of this school is to train and cultivate adventurers of the highest quality. The government and various businesses donate large sums of taxpayer money and capital for those adventurers. For that reason, the quality of our students matters more than anything else, even more than justice.”

What he was saying made sense, but if the quality of its graduating students was the top priority, how could they justify crushing students before they had a chance to improve? Wouldn’t the government and businesses benefit most from an environment where students could compete and learn from each other in a fair and free way?

I’d come here to protect the future of my friends and classmates. Even though my legs were trembling, I wouldn’t let Oomiya be the only one fighting back.

“Maybe we could turn out to be better adventurers than the First Swordcraft Club if we had the chance to grow,” I said. “But this school’s unfair rules are writing us off before we can achieve that growth. Your donors are missing out on the value we could bring!”

“For the last ten years, every single Class E student has either dropped out or submitted themselves to be the slaves of other students,” replied the president. “And you expect me to believe you could surpass the First Swordcraft Club? Ridiculous. If this is more than a simple boast, prove it to me now. Otherwise, you can leave. I’m busy.”

Students without value weren’t worth protecting to him. In terms of value, the blue-haired woman who had unleashed an unparalleled level of Aura was like a giant gemstone. She would surely bring untold value to the country or any organization she joined. Compared to her, we were worthless pebbles.

But I had no intention of giving up on my potential to improve. My mind began working at full speed as I searched for a reply. I wanted to argue back...

Just then, a two-meter-tall wall of purple light appeared in the center of the room. Everyone gasped and turned to look at the light. I knew what this was though and who had made it.

“Pardon me.” Otoha Isshiki emerged from the wall of light, wearing a black velvet cape and carrying a large staff. Her long red hair blew in the wind as she looked around the room, noting who was present. “I sensed a huge emission of mana here, so I hurried over. Sagara and Kusunoki... Nothing strange there, but why are you here, Nao? Ooh, is the student that Sagara is interested in one of you?”

Oomiya and Nitta looked astonished at Lady Otoha’s sudden arrival, while Narumi stood against the wall as if attempting to remain unnoticed. Lady Otoha looked at each of them in turn, examining them thoroughly. She then lifted her left arm and looked up their stats on her terminal.

“So you’re all from the first-year Class E. Nao, I want you to tell me whether Sagara summoned any of them or if he expressed interest in one of them. I already know their names, so I’ll investigate them more thoroughly later and find out the truth either way.”

“This is a misunderstanding, Isshiki,” said Kusunoki. “These students came to file a complaint for their class. They wouldn’t take the hint and leave, so I used my Aura on them.”

Lady Otoha wanted to know whether any of us had been summoned. Upon reflection, we still didn’t know why Narumi had been called to the student council room. I pondered what the members of the Eight Dragons, like the president and Lady Otoha, wanted from him. Kusunoki didn’t appear to want Lady Otoha to find out what was going on, though.

“A complaint?” mused Lady Otoha. “It wouldn’t be about the First Swordcraft Club, would it? I see. The election has got them acting hastily.”

“Isshiki, don’t say anything about our conference,” warned the president.

Even though we hadn’t replied to Lady Otoha’s questions, she’d figured out the answers from the looks on our faces. I learned some new information from the following conversation, but the president cut it short before it could go any further.

He heaved another sigh before turning back to us and stating, “It’s time for you all to leave for today.”

The president, the blue-haired woman, and Lady Otoha exchanged looks. While I wasn’t sure what was going on between them, it didn’t seem friendly. I sensed that it would be dangerous to stay here any longer.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you for seeing us.”

The president had said “for today,” which surely meant that we’d be able to arrange an appointment for another day. We could take our time to devise another plan and seek a chance to speak with him again.

We hurried out of the student council room and began to speak about the woman who’d teleported in, Lady Otoha. Her voice had sounded gentle, but her eyes had been cold and emotionless when she looked at us. The difference between the two was jarring. She had once been a sweet girl with a kind smile, but she’d changed since joining Adventurers’ High.

“So the person that came through the wall of light is the president of the First Magic Club?” asked Oomiya. “The look in her eyes was terrifying...”

“Yeah,” said Nitta. “Those were the eyes of a scientist watching their lab rats.”

“But at least we confirmed that the First Swordcraft Club was behind the attack and that it’s about the election.”

“And that it was both the student council and the Thief Club that wanted to see Souta.”

I now knew that the woman who’d unleashed her Aura on us was the president of the Thief Club and one of the Eight Dragons, Kirara Kusunoki. Narumi explained that he’d befriended one of Kusunoki’s superiors and received an invitation to dine with them once, claiming that the student council had likely summoned him for a related matter.

That doesn’t make sense, I thought.

Nobles wouldn’t invite a commoner to dine with them under normal circumstances. Also, Narumi had been summoned to the student council room,

where the president was staying. There had to be a more important reason that two of the Eight Dragons wanted to see him, but what was it?

I wonder if that has something to do with the election as well.

I came up with the following hypothesis: First, the student council and the Thief Club had tried to nominate Narumi as a candidate for the next student council president. Next, Ashikaga had gotten wind that a member of Class E was in the running for the race. Ashikaga then used the Second Swordcraft Club to discover the identity of this Class E student, which led to this morning's attack.

That hypothesis would explain everything, but the forced logic ignored several major problems. Would they really nominate a Class E student as the next student council president? Such an act would fundamentally threaten the Eight Dragons system, which was set up to prevent the rise of the new nobility. The old nobility might use their wealth and political influence to intervene. I couldn't see the president and Kusunoki risking their positions and the stability of Adventurers' High just to nominate Narumi.

However, it was indisputable that the student council president and the president of the Thief Club were trying to contact Narumi right before the election. Lady Otoha, another member of the Eight Dragons, was indeed vigilant for anyone summoned to the student council room. So maybe my hypothesis was possible?

Just who are you, Narumi?

I looked at Souta Narumi, the overweight boy hunching up and mumbling responses to Oomiya and Nitta. He was wearing the same sullen look, and I couldn't sense any ambition from him. Was it all just an act?

Would he be the key to us crawling out of our desperate situation, or was I just overthinking things? I didn't have enough information to answer that. There was a limit to how much I could investigate. Kaoru knew him well, so perhaps I could enlist her help to examine him further.

Chapter 24: A Suspicious Homemade Lunch

When I was called to the student council room. I wanted to go alone. But Tachigi and the others had also come, so I'd been worried about what he might hear. Fortunately, the meeting had ended without incident (more or less), and I'd been able to return to my seat in my classroom. Lately, I had slipped further away from the peaceful and quiet high school life I wanted. I couldn't help but worry about the direction things were heading.

And now I'm getting texts like this too...

Kirara had sent me another message, reading, "I'd like to talk to you about what happened earlier. Let me know which days work for you."

I had no idea what could be so important that she would involve the student council president, although problems like this were best dealt with sooner rather than later. That said, a lot had happened today, and I needed a rest. I had other plans anyway, so I'd meet with Kirara another day.

At any rate, I could finally catch my breath after a long and troublesome morning. But as I collapsed into my chair, a girl slipped into sight in front of me, approaching without making any noise.

"Why didn't you show up...?" she asked.

I raised my head from my desk. Kuga's eyes were narrowed, but I couldn't tell if it was because she was tired or she was glaring at me. When I asked her what she was referring to, she told me to check my messages. I opened up my terminal, flicked through the screens to the messaging app, and found a message I'd read earlier. This was probably what she was talking about.

Hey, Souta!

I made lunch today, and it's DELISH!

I was wondering... Will you share it with me?

I'll wait for you on the roof!

On closer inspection, I saw Kotone Kuga was the sender, contrary to my initial assumption that the message was spam or a prank. What reason could she possibly have for sending me this monstrosity...? Maybe it was written in some kind of code? I didn't know the cipher, so I couldn't decrypt it.

"Umm, what does it mean?" I asked.

"Exactly what it says," replied Kuga. "I made enough for both of us, but you never showed up..."

She clutched a cloth-wrapped box, claiming it was her homemade lunch. She turned her face away and pouted. This new side of her was so cute! Okay... No it wasn't. At all.



Kuga was the sort of shy girl who'd only slurp on cup noodles or chew on store-bought bread in a quiet corner of the room. The only possible explanation for why she would have broken that habit and brought in a homemade lunch was that it was part of a scheme. The way she was acting was weird too... Throughout the Battle of the Classes, she'd looked at me like I was a burglar and she was a hard-boiled detective conducting an interrogation. Now she was acting oddly fidgety, possibly attempting to look cute. It was like she was following instructions from a manual on how to act like an ordinary girl. Was this the result of some special training she'd received in America?

"Did you have something you wanted to talk to me about?" I asked.

"Yeah. I wanted to catch up on our plans going forward... I was also hoping to set up some raids together if we could find the time."

A catch-up, eh? Kuga and I had agreed to a secret alliance. We would cover for each other and say we were training properly if any of our classmates asked us, while maintaining the facade that we were at a low level. That was the main appeal of the alliance for me, but Kuga had another motive.

Kuga had a habit of arriving late to class and snoozing through lessons, but that wasn't from a lack of enthusiasm. Instead, she would stay up late because she worked too hard, reporting back to her handlers in America or running secret missions. She probably wanted to talk to me so that we could plan when I'd need to cover for her with school events while she performed her duties as a spy.

At level 25, it would now be impossible for her to level up by raiding alone, so she had invited me to raid with her. This would be her main reason for wanting to talk to me.

I needed to remember that Kuga had no meaningful attachment to Japan, nor did she care about Akagi or any of our classmates. If she learned any of my player secrets, she'd report every little detail back to her superiors in America. Assuming we raided together, I'd need to closely monitor her storyline's progress and control what information she learned.

She was undoubtedly aware that I didn't trust her yet. That was probably why she was trying to flatter me with homemade lunch and creepy messages. Kuga

had the unmatched beauty befitting a *DEC* heroine but still came across as emotionally distant, and her flattery fell flat, thankfully for me.

“Sorry, I’ve got stuff to do today,” I said. “We can catch up when we have enough time to talk things through properly.”

“Oh... I’d prefer not to wait too long... Okay, I’ll make you lunch another time...”

With that, Kuga returned to her desk, silent as a ninja. I had a morbid curiosity about what sort of lunch she would produce, but I told her not to make me any. I didn’t want to run the risk of her spiking it with a truth serum.

There were plenty of things I’d need to consider to prepare for the coming days, and I hoped it would all go smoothly.

“Th-The mana is so thick down here...” Oomiya remarked, blinking her large eyes in surprise. “So this is what the twentieth floor is like...”

“Okay, everyone, I’m turning the light on now,” said Risa.

We were in the dark gate room on the twentieth floor. Risa switched on a magical lantern and placed it on the floor, dimly illuminating a small room measuring twenty square meters. Three large shadows appeared on the cobbled walls.

“Um, this is where we were supposed to meet him, right?” inquired Satsuki. “I feel kinda nervous...”

“He was exploring around here in arachnid form a little while ago,” I related. “His message said he’d get here soon, so we should get ready while we wait for him.”

“A-Arachnid...?”

The three of us had planned to sit down with Arthur and plan our next step, and this would be the girls’ first time meeting Arthur. Satsuki was fidgety, unsure what Arthur would be like. He had a pretty relaxed personality though, so she had nothing to worry about. If anything, I was more worried that he’d slip up and say something rude to her.

"He uses summoning magic to summon spiderlike monsters, then he possesses them so he can explore the parts of the dungeon around here," I explained.

"I didn't know there was a spell for that!" Satsuki said.

"Good for him that he found a way to get around," Risa said. "I'd be bored to death if I had to stay in one place all the time."

The fiend's curse prevented Arthur from traveling between floors, but he'd learned that he could move around without restriction by possessing the bodies of summoned creatures. He'd spent the last few days exploring several floors of the dungeon using his arachnids.

I'd initially thought that using summoning magic to summon powerful monsters was incredibly dangerous because there was a risk of losing control of them, but it also had its merits. For example, one could use it to complete dangerous quests or to scout ahead.

Maybe I should learn a summoning skill or two. Then I began preparing the room for our meeting and said, "I'll get the table and chairs out."

"I'll get the nice tea ready!" Satsuki said.

"Here are the snacks," Risa added. "I hope you like them!"

I opened my improved magic bag and retrieved four stools and a fold-up table that I'd been able to take from my family's shop because nobody had bought them. Next, I placed the furniture in the center of the room. My family's shop was a treasure trove for camping equipment because it catered to adventurers.

Satsuki seemed more interested in the improved magic bag than the fold-up table. "Is that the special magic bag you told us about? The one that reduces an item's weight and size?"

"I can't wait to get one of those," Risa said. "I hope I get lots of worm stomachs when I go raiding with Kano."

Risa began pouring hot tea from a flask into paper cups and placing boxes of cookies on plates. She said that she'd bought the cookies from her favorite shop. The floral scent of black tea and the sweet smell of butter wafted through

the room.

The room was dark and damp, but being here with two cute girls made it feel warm, bright, and beautiful. *All right, might as well eat some of the snacks!*

Just as I picked up a cookie, I heard a voice humming a tune slightly out of pitch and the clunks of someone climbing down a ladder. Arthur was finally here.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Arthur said. “When you said you wanted to introduce me to some people, I didn’t think they’d be girls... Wait! Oh wow, it’s Satsuki Oomiya!”

“Huh? Uh, hello...” Satsuki stammered.

“Wow, it’s the real Satsuki! The dopey eyes! The pigtails! The small boobs! So cu— Ouch!”

Arthur circled Satsuki and stared at her from every angle once he stepped off the ladder and saw her. I knew the thrill of encountering a character from a game in real life for the first time, but he was creeping her out, so I struck him on the head. He deserved it for acting so rudely.

“Hey, that really hurt... So, who’s the other pretty lady?” wondered Arthur, giggling. My punch hadn’t discouraged him at all, and he immediately began hitting on Risa.

“Long time no see,” Risa said. “You never change, do you, Flash?”

“Huh?!” Arthur jumped a step back and raised his fists. “Who are you, and how do you know my nickname?!”

“I suggest we all introduce ourselves,” I said. “It’ll help our planning go more smoothly.”

Arthur bared his teeth at Risa like an angry dog.

Risa failed to stifle a laugh at Arthur’s reaction. “I expect we’ll be seeing a lot of each other for quite some time, so that makes sense.”

Arthur was acting wary now, but he’d be even more surprised when he learned who she’d been in *DEC*.

“I’ll start. I’m Souta Narumi, and I’m a player. We’ll face a lot of problems

together in the future. But I hope to help out wherever I can and that we can all work well together.”

“Huh? Have you explained what *DEC* is to Satsuki?” Arthur asked after he heard me use the word “player.”

“We told her we came from a parallel world,” Risa chimed in.

“Yep, that’s what I’m told!” Satsuki confirmed.

Risa had apparently explained that we were from a parallel world. I wasn’t sure whether Satsuki actually believed that, but she didn’t question it or argue back, probably because of her high trust in Risa. To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure what this world was. We didn’t have enough information to form a judgment. It would be easier and more convenient to explain to Satsuki that we were from a similar world than telling her this world was a game. I planned to reveal everything to Satsuki and my family one day, but now it would be premature.

“Hmm, okay, I’ll go next. I’m Arthur, and I have no idea how I got shot into this world. I’ve been crazy bored since I got here, but I’m relieved that I finally met some other people,” he said.

“Are those horns real?” Satsuki asked.

“Yep, I’m a fiend. The mind of this body’s original owner is sleeping now. He doesn’t even respond when I try to talk to him lately.” Arthur leaned forward while chewing on a cookie, presenting his horns to Satsuki. “Be gentle when you touch them.”

This creeped Satsuki out again.

Arthur’s mention of his body’s original owner made me think about Piggy. His mind was always awake, and I had the feeling it had begun merging with mine. Lately, there were times when I found it hard to distinguish between myself and Piggy. Arthur also shared a body with another mind. In his case, the two minds hadn’t merged, likely because human and fiend minds were incompatible.

“My turn. I’m Risa Nitta, and I’m also a player. You can call me Risa,” she said.

“So, Risa,” Arthur said. “You seem to know who I am, but who were you on

the other side?"

"You're famous, so almost anyone would know who you are, Arthur. Same goes for Souta, I guess. On the other side, I was called... Let's see... The Dark Knight, I think it was."

"No way!" yelled Arthur in shock, lurching forward over the table.

When Risa added that her body was the same as it had been in our original world, Arthur looked her up and down, then trembled.

"I can't believe the Dark Knight who led those fanatics into battle was such a glamorous woman! I was sure you'd look like a gorilla!"

"Careful what you say, or I'll punish you!" Risa said, sounding playful.

I'd thought the same thing as Arthur, but I kept that to myself. He couldn't be blamed for thinking that, though. In *DEC*, Risa had been a battle-hardened badass who'd led her followers into countless fights against groups of PKers and large clans. It was difficult to reconcile that image with the laid-back woman before me.

Although I hadn't believed her when she told me who she was, I had been convinced that she was *DEC*'s Dark Knight after training with her. How she held her distance in a sword fight and stepped forward to attack were exactly the same as I'd seen the countless times we'd fought to the death. Aside from that, I wondered what kind of punishment Risa had in mind.

"I'm up last, then. I'm Oomiya. I'm just a normal...completely average, unremarkable girl who might get in everyone's way, but I've really enjoyed our adventuring so far! So please let me stay around!" Satsuki bowed her head.

Risa also bowed her head. "I hope you'll let her stay around too!"

I'd enjoyed our time adventuring together as well, and I was still incredibly grateful to her for looking out for me at school when we met. It was true, however, that I was apprehensive about dragging Satsuki into our mess as players.

I had planned to enlist her help with game events that took place in the school, even if it meant going up against violent students. Moreover, I had

expected there'd be times when we'd actually need to team up and fight people. I'd been okay with these cases because I thought they'd help her to enjoy her time at school more.

Large organizations that thought nothing of killing their enemies and fighting *DEC* players with innumerable offensive skills would cause a dramatic increase in danger. Players like Risa and I knew the future and had a responsibility to fight against these threats. But Satsuki was an ordinary girl, and I'd wanted to keep her as far from that kind of danger as possible.

Risa had changed my mind when she said that Satsuki was her one and only partner—they lived with each other day and night, shared meals and their deepest thoughts, and trusted the other to watch their back in a fight. Satsuki had said that she wanted to be there with us if the rest of us were heading into danger. So I'd changed my mind, bowed my head, and asked Satsuki to join us.

"I hope we can work together," I said. "We desperately need people we can trust to help. I can't tell you how much it means to me."

"No objections from me!" Arthur exclaimed. "I can't complain about our team getting prettier!"

"Thank you, Souta, Arthur!" Satsuki responded joyfully, tears forming in her eyes as Risa patted her head.

Arthur's rationale showed that he hadn't given the matter much thought, but I decided to ignore that momentarily. There would be plenty of time for them to build a proper bond and recognize each other as teammates as we worked together.

"Okay, on to the main topics," I said. "Broadly speaking, we need to figure out how to handle Adventurers' High events, clan countermeasures, and leveling up. Each of them gives us plenty of problems to deal with."

"Those are all important!" Satsuki said.

"Adventurers' High... I'm basically stuck here because I'm a fiend, so I doubt I'll be any help with that one... Man, I wish I could go outside." Arthur let his body collapse onto the table, upset that his fiend's curse prevented him from leaving the dungeon and helping us in the outside world.

Even if he used one of his arachnids, summoned monsters would disappear once they exited a magic field. He also complained that he wouldn't be able to use the full benefits of his high level when helping us inside the dungeon because he'd need to accompany us in spider form.

If we could find a way to remove his travel restriction, we'd reap the full benefits of having an ally that was nearly level 40. That would give us an advantage in tackling the issues I'd raised and help us gather materials for our equipment and complete game events.

Our future would greatly change if we could remove the fiend's curse from Arthur. He'd searched tirelessly to find a way to break it but never had any luck... However, saying we'd learned nothing about it would be a lie.

"Let's talk about that first," I said.

Chapter 25: A Conference of Players

The four of us sat at a table in the middle of the dark gate room on the twentieth floor. I wanted to discuss our approach to game events at the school, how we'd deal with external clans like Soleil, and how we could cooperate to level up. There was a lot of ground to cover.

None of these issues demanded an immediate decision, but they were important and would need to be addressed. In my original plans, I wanted only Risa and me to be involved, with the possible inclusion of Satsuki as well. Having Arthur on our side would make things much easier though, which was why our most immediate concern would be breaking the fiend's curse that prevented Arthur from traveling beyond certain dungeon floors.

"I thought the best way to learn more about the fiend's curse would be to ask another fiend, so I spoke with Furufuru—"

Hearing this, Arthur's body jolted over the table and interrupted me, "Did she tell you how to break it?!" His eyes were glowing, and the horns protruding from his forehead were trembling with excitement.

There had been several fiends in *DEC*'s story, and they were a weird and wonderful race of beings. It was hard not to feel a sense of kinship with these creatures that resembled humans in every way other than the spiral horns on their foreheads. In truth, their behaviors and psychology were irreconcilably different from ours. While some fiends were amicable toward adventurers, some were impossible to communicate with, and others would roam the dungeon with packs of demons and slay any adventurer unfortunate enough to cross their path. Furufuru was one of the friendly ones, but it was still unclear why she ran a store that no customers ever visited. I didn't even know when she'd opened it. In short, fiends' minds worked on completely different mental algorithms than ours, resulting in a radically distinct sense of values we could not understand.

Their physical characteristics were also very different to ours. A fiend's

intelligence, vitality, and MP stats were usually double those of an adventurer of the same level, so they were extremely proficient at physical and magical combat. Plus, their distinctive mental architecture also gave them immunity to mental attacks.

These incomprehensible beings had a truly unfair number of advantages and beneficial traits, but they also suffered from a terrible disadvantage: they could only travel to specific locations. For example, Furufuru could only travel to a few of the dungeon floors when she left her store, which made her give adventurers quests to retrieve items. All of Arthur's player knowledge wasn't enough to help him escape the constraints of this fiend's curse.

Arthur looked at me desperately, hoping that I held the key to unlocking his shackles. Of course, things were rarely that easy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Furufuru told me that the curse is unbreakable as long as you're a fiend."

"Huh?" Arthur reacted. "There has to be more to it, right? You wouldn't get my hopes up for nothing, right?" He glared at me, but he looked like a child, so it wasn't scary.

Calm down, Arthur. I'm not getting your hopes up for nothing, I thought before speaking up with emphasis. "As long as you're a fiend. In other words, you just have to stop being a fiend. Relinquishing your fiendhood does cause some complications, however."

The role of fiends in *DEC* had been to guard the dungeon, likely why their movement was restricted. It wasn't clear what would happen to his base on the thirty-eighth floor if he stopped being a fiend, and he'd also lose the high stats and unique skills that his fiend nature gave him.

"The thirty-eighth floor?" Arthur repeated after I'd explained this. "I don't really care what happens to that house if I can get out of the dungeon. Everything in it is junk anyway. I'm less happy about losing points in my stats, but I can live with it. More to the point, is there really a way to stop being a fiend?"

"I asked Furufuru multiple times, but she kept saying that she couldn't remember because her memory was hazy."

In all my time playing *DEC*, I'd never heard of a spell that could change a character's race. I asked Furufuru whether such a spell existed and whether anyone had successfully cast it, stressing its importance. But she always replied in the same way: "There might be, I can't remember... But I might remember if you bring me another thousand of *those*."

"By 'those,' you mean the things we collect for Furufuru's quests, right?" asked Satsuki. "Collecting a thousand of them sounds almost impossible. It would take us at least six months, assuming we spend every day collecting them."

"She's not an easy woman to please," said Risa, giggling.

The task would be difficult, but Arthur leaving the dungeon would benefit us greatly, so it was worth it.

"This is great news!" said Arthur. "I was sure I'd be stuck inside the dungeon for the rest of my life. Once I get out, I hope I get to attend Adventurers' High with the rest of you."

"It's not guaranteed to work yet," I reminded Arthur. "And even if you can get into Adventurers' High, you won't start until next year."

I was sure that every player who had spent countless hours playing *DEC* had dreamed of attending Adventurers' High. I had a similar dream when I played the game.

Arthur would need to pass next year's entrance exam to get into Adventurers' High. First, he'd actually need to be entered into Japan's family register. While I was thinking about the practical aspects, Satsuki said something I hadn't considered.

"Next year..." Satsuki trailed off. "Kano might join our school next year too, so maybe the two of you will be classmates. Next year's Class E will be something else!"

The thought of Arthur joining the same class as Kano filled me with dread. I couldn't see it ending well!

"Until then, I guess you'll be using your arachnid to raid with us, I suppose," she continued. "I look forward to it!"

"I mean... My arachnids are great to use because they're small and fast, but the problem is that I can't speak to you through them. Also, I had trouble exploring with them because everyone thought they were monsters," explained Arthur, adding that they'd attacked him. So he wished that he had a humanoid creature he could summon.

Wait, just how much exploration have you done as an arachnid?

"If you want a humanoid-summoned monster, you could get an elemental or an angel," said Risa. "Although, the summoning skills for both are a pain to acquire."

Although there were several kinds of humanoid summoned creatures, all of them were powerful monsters you could only summon after acquiring an expert job. The arachnid that Arthur summoned was also supposed to be a powerful monster, a level 70 monster called an arachnid monarch and the highest form of its kind. For some unknown reason, his skill instead summoned a smaller, weaker version of the ordinary kind of arachnid. It wasn't the most convenient creature for him to possess, but we couldn't do much else than make the most of it for the time being.

Once we finished talking about the fiend's curse, I took a second to relax and drink the tea that Satsuki had poured for me. When we ate all the cookies on our paper plates, Risa brought out a dark green Swiss roll. She sliced the cake and put the slices on our paper plates. I noticed the distinctive aroma of matcha as I ate my slice.

"This is so good!" exulted Arthur with matcha cream smeared over his mouth. "More, please! So anyway, what's it like at school?"

"Even though the Battle of the Classes is over, the student council election is about to begin," I said. "Sera will probably win the election. But many things have happened that I wasn't expecting, and I'm not sure what to make of it."

"Like the student council taking an interest in you?" inquired Risa. "Or was it the Thief Club?"

"I think it's mainly the Thief Club," I replied. "It'll have something to do with

The Red Ninjettes.”

The Red Ninjettes were acting suspiciously as well, but I didn’t feel they were hostile toward me. Kirara had gone out of her way to contact me and hadn’t revealed my secrets in front of my friends when we were in the student council room. However, I remained curious about why I was summoned to the student council room.

“So the Eight Dragons and the Red Ninjettes are already taking action?” asked Arthur. “This is getting so interesting! Man, I wish I was at Adventurers’ High. I could’ve taken a stab at running for student council president!”

Arthur began tapping his feet against the floor, seeming frustrated that he couldn’t participate in school events. However, the actions of The Red Ninjettes and the Second Swordcraft Club showed that we were drifting away from the game’s storyline. I was worried that our game knowledge would soon become useless.

“Another problem is that our classmates are struggling to level up,” said Risa. “Especially Akagi and his party.”

“Why don’t you just power level them?” questioned Arthur. “Oh, wait. You said you haven’t taught them about the gates, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Satsuki. “So we can only power level them during the weekend.”

Traveling to the right locations in the dungeon for power leveling without using gates would take half a day at least, so we couldn’t help them level up on school days. If Akagi’s party couldn’t raise their levels high enough, they would fail the many game events at the school. In the game, that would result in flunking out of Adventurers’ High at the end of the first year and getting a bad ending.

“So Class E might collapse?” asked Arthur while taking a bite out of the second round of Swiss rolls that Risa dished out. “Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you!”

“Wh-What do you mean we’ll collapse?” Satsuki gasped.

“It might get so bad that some of our classmates might stop coming into school, essentially dropping out,” Risa explained.

Our class would fall apart, but it wasn't like anyone would die, so it wasn't the worst possible ending. Satsuki deeply cared about our classmates and wanted them all to succeed, and I could see her frown as she wondered how we could stop this from happening.

I didn't want to see Kaoru drop out of school after all the hard work she'd put in, and I wanted to remain at Adventurers' High to enjoy the school with Arthur and Kano next year. I would do my best to stop the collapse of Class E.

"Several key factors will determine whether Class E collapses," I noted. "The biggest will be how much time we can invest in raiding over summer vacation."

"If we can get them up to level 10, we should be able to hang on until winter," said Risa.

"So we've got to do whatever we can to support them!" added Satsuki.

Class E's progress was far from perfect, but not so bad that we couldn't recover. As long as we could level them up enough over summer vacation, we'd have a chance to make it through the year. The Second Swordcraft Club's attack on our class and the student council summoning me were both problems, but there was nothing we could do about those in public. All we could do was monitor the situation and continue supporting everyone.

"I see," said Arthur. "One other thing, are there any other players?"

"The only other player we know about is Tsukijima," answered Risa.

"Tsukijima? Who's that?"

"It's this guy," I said, showing Arthur my terminal screen. It displayed Tsukijima's page in the school database, including a photo of his face and his stats. "Have you found out anything more about him, Risa?"

I occasionally saw Risa and Tsukijima together because I'd asked her to investigate him. Risa had been reluctant, but I'd insisted. Tsukijima knew that Risa was a player, so he acted friendly toward her, often inviting her to hang out or to go eat. But he was careful not to reveal any information about himself.

"It still looks like he's not going on any raids," remarked Risa. "All he does is hang out on the main street and have fun. He does appear to be leveling up at a

good pace, though.”

“So he’s leveling up without raiding the dungeon,” said Arthur. “Maybe he’s using summoning magic?”

Arthur was suggesting that Tsukijima could be summoning a creature to fight alone inside the dungeon and was using that to level up.

“Summoning magic?” repeated Satsuki. “He can do that?” She blinked several times, surprised that Tsukijima could use this method to level up without putting any effort in.

I’d also considered that Tsukijima might be using summoned creatures, but I doubted whether it was possible.

“Arthur, if he sends a summoned monster into the dungeon to level up, won’t it disappear when it gets too far away from him?” I asked. “Even if the monster doesn’t disappear, he shouldn’t have enough mana to maintain a summoning over several hours at a low level.”

In *DEC*, summoned monsters would despawn if they exceeded a certain distance from their summoner, so sending them to other floors was impossible. While you could keep a summoned monster alive for several hours if you got a mana boost from legendary equipment, that wouldn’t be possible for a low level adventurer with starter equipment. Unless we could find work-arounds for these two problems, we’d have to rule out the summoned monster theory.

Arthur responded, “It seems summoned monsters won’t despawn as long as they’re loyal to their summoner. Take Chappy, for example. She loves me to death, so she can go to other floors without despawning when I give her the order. And when you’re too low-level to summon a creature properly, it’ll instead spawn in a weakened state. Weakened creatures don’t need as much mana.”

In this world, summoned monsters had a new loyalty parameter. If a monster’s loyalty parameter was too low, their summoner wouldn’t even be able to use Possession on it. Also, summoning a monster when you were too low a level would grant a weaker version of the monster that wouldn’t cost as much mana. This wasn’t how the mechanic worked in the game, so one could only discover it by experimenting with summoning magic. The summoned

monster theory was even more believable if what Arthur said was true.

The only other problem was—

“But if Tsukijima is using summoned monsters to raid the dungeon, why hasn’t anyone reported seeing one? Can you summon monsters that are invisible to other people?” wondered Satsuki.

“Some monsters have a low chance of detection,” replied Risa. “But if you sent one through somewhere like the first floor that’s absolutely packed with adventurers, there’s no way it wouldn’t get seen.”

“Couldn’t he just summon a humanoid monster and dress it in armor?” suggested Arthur. “Then nobody would know. I bet that’s what this Tsukijima guy is doing.”

If anyone had seen a summoned monster on the first floor of the dungeon, it would have been big news, especially if it was one of the giant monsters like a dragon or a mythical beast. I could easily imagine the panic it would create. However, Arthur’s suggestion of disguising a humanoid monster sounded plausible.

“Summoning creatures for solo raids won’t allow him to advance much beyond level 20,” stated Arthur. “After all, summoned monsters are usually weaker than those who summon them. What sort of guy is Tsukijima anyway? What made you choose not to invite him to this meeting?”

I agreed that Tsukijima would have difficulty reaching level 20... Would he form a party soon? If so, I wasn’t sure how he planned to do it. It didn’t look like he was priming any of our classmates to join him.

“Well yeah, he’s the sort of guy that says he wants to run the world,” said Risa. “I don’t think he’d be very cooperative... Teamwork isn’t his strong suit.”

“So he’s an ambitious guy who’s not that functional,” said Arthur. “I don’t have a problem with people like that, but they’re not a good choice for allies.”

It was natural for Tsukijima to be ambitious after arriving in this world with game knowledge. In fact, it was proof that he was sane. Only people unable to recognize the awesome opportunities at their fingertips, or those burned out by their lives in their old world, would choose to live a meek life in this one without

making the most of their game knowledge.

For that reason, his ambition alone wasn't enough to keep him at arm's length. If that were all there was, I'd be the first one to invite him to join us; we had to overcome many obstacles. I viewed Tsukijima as a threat because he thought of the people around him as mere NPCs. And so I couldn't risk my family's safety by putting them in a room with Tsukijima. Even if we teamed up to overcome the game's main story, it wouldn't help bring about the world I wanted to see. Risa was trying to change his way of thinking about the other people in this world on my behalf, but he seemed set in his ways, which was worrying.

"He said he's going to start putting his plans into motion at school soon," said Risa. "I'm not sure what his plans are, so I'll keep a close eye on him... Even if I find out, I doubt I'll be able to stop him."

"Class E isn't ready for a fight yet..." I said.

"Yeah, we don't have anyone strong enough to stand up to the students of the higher classes right now," said Satsuki.

If Tsukijima started picking fights and we ended up in an all-out conflict with the higher classes, we'd need to fight their level 20 nobles. In the worst-case scenario, the Eight Dragons might get involved. Tsukijima might be strong enough to fight them, but our other classmates would have their spirits crushed by the first burst of Aura. How could he think this was a good idea? Perhaps we could salvage the situation if he delayed his plans until the next school year, but Risa probably wouldn't be able to convince him to wait.

I had only planned for today's meeting to be a quick catch-up so everyone could get to know each other. Though I hadn't thought that we'd delve so deeply into our discussions, Tsukijima had given us a new, serious problem to add to the list of things going wrong. I wasn't sure what we could do about it.

I heaved a sigh and took a sip of tea to soothe my dry throat until I heard a rough voice out in the distance.

"Hey, get out here, brat!"

"We're gonna pay you back for last time!" another voice shouted. "Show

yourself!"

When I heard the word "brat," I looked over to the fiend happily munching away on a Swiss roll. His expression confirmed my suspicions that he was the target of the shouts.

"That's coming from upstairs," said Satsuki.

Arthur drank some tea to wash down the cake. "They just don't know when to give up," he grumbled, standing up. "I'll make sure they learn their lesson this time."

Fearing there would be a fight, I reached out a hand to stop Arthur, but he brushed it off.

"Just wait here. I'll sort them out in no time," he said.

Arthur opened a gate and walked through.

Chapter 26: Uninvited Guests

The three of us who remained behind looked at each other in shock, trying to understand what was going on.

“I think there’s going to be a fight,” said Satsuki.

“Seems like it,” I replied. “It doesn’t make sense, though.”

“Oh? What doesn’t?” asked Risa, puzzled.

The shouts certainly didn’t sound friendly. Based on Arthur’s angry reaction, I expected the shouts had come from the Giant Panda Brothers, a clan whose members dressed in panda costumes. They were bad news since they’d already tried destroying the house Arthur was building and attempted to capture him to sell him off.

However, they ought to have known they wouldn’t stand a chance against Arthur after the way he’d wiped the floor with them last time. Had they prepared some kind of countermeasure against him?

“Maybe they’ve figured out a way to defeat Arthur,” said Satsuki. “I’m starting to get worried...”

“I’m sure he’ll be all right,” said Risa, “but why don’t we go take a look just in case?”

Arthur was a combat specialist, and I was sure he could fight them simultaneously without breaking a sweat, regardless of what trick they had up their sleeve. But there was a slim chance they’d employ some trick that surpassed our expectations, so I agreed with Risa’s proposal to sneak up and observe what was happening.

“We should wear the masks and the robes to be safe,” advised Oomiya. “Risa and I bought some.”

“Yep, we’ve accessorized them so that they’re not such a fashion nightmare,” said Risa.

Both girls quickly pulled out masks and robes. Satsuki's were yellow, while Risa's were turquoise. The masks would provide protection from appraisal skills, and the robes would make their wearers difficult to perceive. The girls had made the robes look cuter, gluing on colorful beads and embroidering floral patterns, and they'd shortened the masks so they only covered the top halves of their faces.

Players could change the color of items in *DEC* but not alter them as drastically as this. The enchantments on the masks still seemed to work, though. When they put on the masks and robes, it suddenly felt like they weren't really here, and I could no longer recognize the halves of their faces that I could still see.

"Do we just have to climb this ladder?" asked Satsuki.

"We'll just pop our heads over the top and peek in," said Risa. "Be careful not to make a sound. They shouldn't notice us while we're wearing these robes."

Risa climbed the ladder first. I wasn't sure there'd be enough room to poke our heads through, yet I climbed after her.

"It's a tight squeeze," whispered Risa. "We just about fit though."

As I was sandwiched between Risa and Satsuki, I quietly lifted the stone slab so we could see into the room.

"Wow, they really are dressed as pandas," murmured Satsuki.

Arthur was the closest one to us, and facing him were a group of the pandas in their black-and-white mottled outfits. But I struggled to focus on them... I was too distracted by the feeling of soft lumps pressing against my back and arms.

Calm down. You need to focus! I thought.

I cleared my mind of impure thoughts and tried my hardest to listen to the conversation above. Fortunately, everyone was shouting, so I didn't actually have to try too hard.

"Didn't I tell you that I wouldn't hold back the next time you punks showed up?!" yelled Arthur.

"Hmph," snorted the man leading the pandas. He was two meters tall and muscly. "Your weird skill might've worked against us last time, but this time we came with a trick up our sleeve. Prepare yourself! Take a look...at this!" He triumphantly held a transparent container aloft his trunklike arms. Inside the container was a swirling white mist that appeared and disappeared at random. Was that the trick up their sleeve?

"If the mist inside that jar is in the shape of a skull, then it's probably a magic item with the Mind Shock spell," whispered Risa. "I can't tell for sure without my glasses."

"That's a skull all right," Satsuki whispered back. "Its mouth is flapping open and shut. I hope Arthur will be all right..."

Many magic items could inflict status impairments, and some of the most popular were items enchanted with the Mind Shock spell. The spell greatly reduced its target's mana and stamina. If the magic worked, it would practically take you out of the fight. But beginner adventurers generally only used cheap versions of the item, which wouldn't work against opponents with a high mind stat.

The large man leading the pandas pointed the skull jar at Arthur and boasted, "I bet you think this is one of the cheap items, don't you? Well, let me wipe that smirk off your face. You won't stand a chance against this item! You're gonna have a taste of the power of a ten million yen magic item!!!"

"T-Ten million yen?!" Arthur blurted. His face showed panic, which was clear as day. He held his hands out, pleading for the pandas not to use the item. "Wait, guys, let's not do anything hasty!"

When the head panda saw this, his sadistic smile widened. "Ha ha ha! Take this!" Deaf to Arthur's pleas, he crushed the jar in his hand, and the mist flew toward Arthur.

Arthur let out a strangled cry. He fell to his knees, lurched forward, and ceased moving.

The pandas stood in silence as they watched the incredible effect of their magic item. Then they began to celebrate, some raising their fists, others cheering about the bonus they'd receive for a job well done. All of them were

celebrating way too much. It wasn't like they'd fought a tough battle against a raid boss or anything.

I heard a shocked gasp from Satsuki to my side. "Arthur... Quick, we have to help him! We just promised to work together... We can't leave him out there by himself!"

"Satsuki, wait," whispered Risa, stopping Satsuki as she tried to climb out. "Someone else just arrived. Let's hang back and watch a little longer."

The person who entered had waited until the magic item had taken effect on Arthur before showing himself. Footsteps echoed from the room's entrance as a man dressed all in black walked over. His eyes were the only part of his body not covered in black cloth, so I couldn't see his face. Daggers hung from both his hips, making him look like a ninja.

"We did it, boss! Look!" said the head panda.

"Well done," the man in black replied. "So it really can speak our human language. This definitely is a new breed of monster. Tie it up with rope so that it can't escape."

"Does this mean we can now rise into the Abyss of Grizzlies?"

"That depends on how much this monster is worth..." responded the man in black as he looked down at Arthur, who was on his hands and knees. "It speaks our language, so we might pry secrets about the dungeon from its lips. Or maybe we can kill it and obtain a powerful item that drops as loot. In any case, we don't know enough at this point in time to ascertain its true value."

The emotionless, flat way that the man in black spoke stood in stark contrast to the pandas' comedic appearances. He had the ice-cold mannerisms of someone raised in the criminal underworld. I recognized the name of the clan they'd mentioned as well...

"The Abyss of Grizzlies," whispered Risa. "A clan of criminals that make money through kidnapping, human trafficking, contract killing, and espionage. Plenty of ordinary civilians have become their victims."

"That's right," I said. They were a band of criminals who appeared in *DEC*'s story. "The pandas seem to be working for them... Ah, Satsuki, wait!"

Upon learning they were criminals, Satsuki instinctively jumped into the room and ran toward Arthur. Risa hurried after her. Although I wanted to watch how things played out, that wouldn't work anymore, so I followed the girls.

"Stop what you're doing!" shouted Satsuki, standing defiantly with her hands on her hips. "I won't let you lay a hand on my friend!"

"Ah ha ha, hi there," said Risa awkwardly, poking her head out from behind Satsuki.

"Who the hell are you?" barked the head panda. "Where did you come from?!"

Our sudden appearance had caught the pandas off guard while they were arguing about how to split their spoils. They ran around flustered, getting into position. The man in black took several steps back to watch from a distance. One of the panda lackeys toward the back of the group shoved an appraisal item in our direction and cast Basic Appraisal on us. It wouldn't get a correct reading because our robes and masks would replace our actual stats with dummy values.

"Boss, it says they're around level 18," said the head panda. "What should we do?"

"They've seen me, and they cannot be allowed to leave alive..." stated the man in black. "Kill them all."

"Hear that, boys?" shouted the head panda. "They're in our way, so kill 'em all!"

There was the sound of metal sliding against leather as the pandas drew swords from sheaths on their belts.

I just knew it would end up like this, I thought, glancing at Arthur. He was still on his hands and knees for some reason, not moving. *The one time we need him, and he's out of action.*

A moment passed before I spoke up.

"The first thing we need to do is kick that idiot in the ass. That'll bring him back to normal."

"Ha ha, I think so too," concurred Risa, giggling. "Satsuki, I'll fight in the front. Cover me."

"Got it!" replied Satsuki.

I drew a scimitar from the small magic bag hooked onto my belt and moved forward. Behind me, Risa lifted her longsword as Satsuki pulled out a wooden wand. The twenty or so pandas were likely around level 20, while the ninja was probably a few levels higher. I would probably need to rely on my player skills to have a good chance of beating them, but I didn't want to do that. While I couldn't let them learn about my skills, it wasn't like I could kill them all to keep them quiet.

"I don't know what you're doing here, but the boss has given me my orders," said the head panda. "You're gonna have to die. As for the two girls behind you, we can have some fun with them before killing them."

The other pandas cackled, smirking as they shifted to surround us. They didn't seem the least bit disturbed about the murder they were about to take part in. Risa's and Satsuki's curves that peeked through the robes had caught their attention. They looked right past me like they didn't even consider me a threat. I was going to make them regret that.

As soon as one of the cruelly smirking pandas entered my range, I jumped up, swung down into his left arm, and brought my sword back to slice off the hand of another panda beside him, glove and all. The two injured pandas began screaming and writhing in agony, and then the rest of them suddenly became serious.

"You bastard!" one of them yelled. "Get him first—"

"Not on my watch!" shouted Satsuki. "Scorching flames, give me your power! Fireball!!!"

When the pandas focused on me, a red ball of fire flew over my shoulder and crashed into the ground by their feet. The blast created a shock wave that sent broken stone slabs flying, causing several of the pandas to stagger. Risa took this opportunity to charge toward Arthur, cutting down the pandas in her path. Satsuki switched her weapon to a dagger and followed Risa to protect her from rear attacks. They were trying to settle things as fast as possible.

“Th-They know how to fight!” the head panda shouted. “Boys, get away from them!”

“As if I’d let you!” I retorted.

The panicking pandas were trying to recover and regroup, but I had no intention of standing by and letting them. As I stepped forward to attack where their formation was crumbling, something flew in at high speed from my blind spot. I dodged the attack by the skin of my teeth. Another projectile flew toward Risa, which she deflected with her longsword.

“Judging from your agility, reflexes, and ability to see and react to my attack, you must be around level 20,” remarked the black-clad ninja, his voice muffled by the cloth. “The other woman is a little weaker, maybe level 16. But you’re all proficient in combat. Are you also from the underworld?”

The ninja approached. He’d likely stayed out of the fight to assess our strength, and he only joined in now because the pandas had been defeated faster than he’d expected.

We could probably avoid a fight if he were to hand Arthur over to us... Will he do that?

Assassins in *DEC* were usually cautious and untrusting individuals who wouldn’t enter fights unless they knew they could win. This ninja probably followed the same principle; he would surely rather avoid a risky fight. I didn’t want to fight either, so I decided that it would be worth it to give negotiation a shot.

“We’d appreciate it if you left our friend alone,” I said. “Do that, and we’ll leave without any trouble.”

“Do you really believe we’ll hand the monster over just like that...?” the man in black replied, refusing my offer. “We have spent too much time and money to simply hand it over. Besides, I don’t allow anyone who’s seen me to live and tell the tale.”

“Get him, boss!” one of the pandas yelled.

“You’re all going to fight as well,” the ninja told the pandas. “Surround them, now.”

I could see a murderous glint in his eyes through the mask on the ninja's face. He brandished two daggers in a reverse grip and must have calculated that he stood a good chance of defeating us. The pandas began moving out to the left and the right, even more cautious this time.

So he's a dual wielder, huh... I thought.

He was the first dual wielder I'd encountered. Few adventurers in this world practiced dual wielding because of the penalties it imposed on weapon skills. I was quite fond of dual wielding, feeling it gave you a greater range of attack patterns, and it looked cool.

I think I'll use a dual wielding style too.

I drew another sword from my magic bag. This was the Sword of Volgemurt, the weapon I'd retrieved from an insanely tough skeleton monster. I slashed the air in front of me several times with both swords to get a feel for their weight balance.

Not bad.

"Do you even know what you're doing...?" said the man in black. "Hmm, perhaps you do. But it's still incredibly naive of you to believe you can best me in this regard. I'll show you which of us is better and which is more skilled... Have you any last words?"

"Go easy on me," I said.

My choice to dual wield appeared to have inspired a spirit of competition in my enemy, but my main objective was getting Arthur back, and this would be a merciless fight to the death rather than an honorable duel. This wasn't a game, and it didn't matter who was better. With that said, I was interested in finding out how strong dual wielders were in this world, so I'd test him out while trying to kill him.

"I'll take the ninja," I whispered. "If it comes to it, I'll use my player skills."

"Thanks," Risa said. "Leave Arthur to us. Satsuki, let's go."

"Okay, Risa. I'm ready," concurred Satsuki.

We took up our positions and readied our weapons once more. I glanced over

at Arthur and saw that he was gathering fragments of the skull jar magic item from the ground, trying to put them back together.

What does he think he's doing? I thought. Never mind. Arthur, Risa's coming to kick you in the ass, so wait right there.

The ninja and I stood glaring at each other, each wielding two swords, ready to end the other's life. A soft, muffled voice broke the painful silence in the room.

"Here I come," said the ninja.

He jumped forward, kicking off the ground with such force that cracks ran through the stone slabs. He was darting forward with such a low posture that it looked like he was crawling on the ground, and he instantly closed the distance between us. Once he was within range, he swiped at me with one of the daggers he held in a reverse grip.

"Slash," I said, performing the skill motions and aiming them to match my opponent's low posture. I didn't actually activate the skill. Slash was a weapon skill that used one-handed swords, but it didn't activate since I wasn't channeling my mana. The ninja instantly jumped to avoid Slash, thinking I was using it. He planned to attack me during the skill cooldown.

Once he realized that my Slash was a feint, he threw several kunai at me to counter my true attack. But I was one step ahead of him! I leaned forward and swiped the kunai out of the air with my right-hand sword. Then, I performed my skill motions again, funneling an unrestrained amount of mana into my attack against the ninja hanging defenselessly in the air.

"Yeeeeaaah! I'm gonna slice you up!!! Slash!"

"You brat!!!"

I stepped forward more powerfully than before and unleashed a high-speed Slash with my left-hand sword. The ninja panicked and crossed his swords in front of his chest. Sparks flew as my sword struck him, but he blocked my Slash successfully. That was fine, though. My attack had knocked him off-balance, and he was vulnerable from almost every direction. I began another attack, thinking this would end the battle... But several pandas showed me my mistake

a mere second later by swiping at me. I had no choice but to stop my attack and retreat a few steps.

I was panting. *I was hoping I was about to end the fight...*

As I felt the strength of his physical enhancements when our swords had clashed, I knew he was several levels stronger than me. The best way to beat higher-level opponents was to overwhelm them with the first attack, but it looked like this fight wouldn't be so simple.

"I'll kill you!" shouted the enraged ninja, his pride injured. "Men, attack him!"

I was hoping they'd charge at me without any thought, but the man in black began giving them detailed instructions.

"Don't get too close. Use your swords' tips to keep him in check. Stay in motion so that he doesn't have a clear target."

The ninja was even more cautious than I'd expected. His advice would make the pandas much harder to fight against; I wouldn't be able to fend them off one by one or hit them with counterattacks. To make things worse, he hid behind the pandas and threw kunai at me whenever he saw an opening so I couldn't chase after him. He was using attrition against me... It wasn't good.

While I was deflecting kunai and running around so that the pandas couldn't surround me, Risa said, "Souta, I'll take over. Can you buy me a little time?"

Wondering why she wanted me to buy her time, I turned to look at her and noticed that she was twirling her sword. Then I realized what she was planning —she would use a player skill.

I generally didn't want to reveal any information about secret skills to outsiders, but the one Risa was about to activate was special. Like Dual Wielding, most people witnessing it wouldn't even realize that it was a skill. Part of me was reluctant about her plan, but we were in a tough spot, and it was probably the best way out.

"Satsuki, you and Souta need to stay behind me when my attack starts," said Risa.

"O-Okay," Satsuki replied.

Risa continued twirling her sword. At first, the sword swiveled slowly until she began performing a dance incorporating the blade's rotating motion. At times, she swung the sword around like nunchucks and then vertically. As the sword picked up momentum while Risa swung it with both arms, her body began spinning around, and the steps of her dance became more intense. The dance was graceful, an amazing display of swordcraft mastery, and I could feel everyone watching growing more tense.



“Wh-What is that technique supposed to be?!” exclaimed one of the pandas. They were all watching with disbelief.

“That’s no ordinary sword dance,” commented the ninja, realizing that the amount of mana and speed Risa was channeling into her sword increased with every rotation. “Stop her this instant!”

He threw several kunai at Risa, but I jumped into their path and knocked them out of the air. *She hasn’t danced enough yet. I need to buy her at least another thirty seconds...*

Despite her sword spinning incredibly fast, the pandas were four or five levels higher than her, and there were plenty of them. The longer she danced, the better. I needed to buy her the time for that.

“Satsuki, we need to hold them back until the dance is finished!” I said.

“Okay!” Satsuki affirmed. “I can tell something will happen when the dance is over!”

Satsuki and I positioned ourselves in front of Risa and prepared our weapons to keep her covered. Following the ninja’s orders, the pandas charged at us in disarray. Satsuki shot a fireball at them, and I clashed swords with several of them to hold them back. After I’d beaten them back a couple of times, I saw Risa move past me. She’d finished sooner than I’d expected. Her dance hadn’t reached completion, but perhaps it would be enough.

“It’s been a while since I’ve used this, but I’ll tryyy to be gentle,” Risa drawled, chuckling. “Sword Dance!”

This was Sword Dance, an extra skill from the Sword Dancer job.

Like drunken boxing, where the combatants grew stronger the drunker they got, Sword Dance was a skill that would become faster and more powerful the more its user danced. It was unbelievably powerful, but only a handful of *DEC* players, like Risa, had mastered it because of its biggest drawback: you couldn’t stop the dance once you’d started. But could Risa use the skill properly at her level?

One of the pandas got close to her, so Risa swiped his sword to the side and

jumped in the air while spinning around as if she were still dancing. She then brought her sword down toward him.

“Aaaargh!!!” the panda screamed.

“Sh-She’s too fast!” another shouted. “This is bad!”

The dance’s buff was already giving her attacks a huge speed boost. The dance continued, and her sword speed and mana increased, even as she clashed swords with her opponents.

“Get her!” the head panda yelled.

The pandas emitted a warcry and charged at Risa. She leaned her upper body to dodge the attacks and countered with a wide, horizontal swipe of her sword. She twirled the sword’s hilt around with a flick of her wrist like she was spinning a baton and swiped downward. A panda tried to grab her, so she kicked him and used the momentum to propel herself into the air. When a panda attacked her with an antiair weapon skill, she deflected it with her blade. She swung her sword in a full revolution toward her attacker, hitting him with tremendous centrifugal force.

Still, the Sword Dance continued, both on the ground and in midair. Risa danced through a rain of weapon skills aimed at her, dodging some attacks and parrying others. All the while, she swung her sword around in every direction with such incredible speed that there was no defense against it. Sparks flew everywhere as maces and swords met. She successfully cut open a path for us to walk through. Satsuki and I followed her, blocking the pandas’ blows as we kept Risa’s rear safe.

“Sh-She’s amazing,” Satsuki said, her eyes shining as she watched the hurricane of Risa’s Sword Dance. “I knew Risa was strong, but I didn’t know she was *this* strong!”

Risa really was amazing. This was art. Although her opponents were stronger, her sword dance pushed them back, not the other way around. One of Sword Dance’s flaws was that it had a predictable rhythm, but Risa accounted for this by jumping into the air at random intervals, performing somersaults, and spinning around. Even with these extra motions, she continued spinning her sword, and its speed was increasing without bounds. Her sword was moving so

fast that the pandas had no hope of stopping it.

Clashes of metal and screams echoed throughout the room until Risa finally reached Arthur.

“Arthur, snap out of it!” she shouted.

Her robes fluttered as she kicked down the last panda standing in her way. She gently kicked Arthur in the ass, knocking him forward toward me and Satsuki.

That's it, you show him!

“Ouch!” cried Arthur. “What was that for?!”

“Take a look around you!” Risa said, panting. “Things are pretty bad right now!”

“Oh, it’s you, Risa...” said Arthur. He looked surprised to see Risa wearing a mask in front of him and even more shocked when he saw the sword fight behind her. “Hang on... When did everyone start fighting?! I was so busy trying to fix the ten million yen magic item that I didn’t notice.”

When he heard that the magic item was worth ten million yen, his only thought had been to fix it.

“Diiiieee!” shouted a panda. “Uh, huh?! L-Let me go!”

Arthur had grabbed the arm of a panda who was swinging a mace at Satsuki.

“Listen here!” growled Arthur. “First you tried to bother me, and now you’re attacking my friends! There goes any chance of me going easy on you!”

The panda tried to punch Arthur with his free hand, but Arthur easily evaded the strike. He then threw the panda into the wall.

“It’s that kid! I thought our magic item had paralyzed him!” The head panda appeared surprised that Arthur could move after being hit with the magic item they’d spent a small fortune on.

“Arthur, are you...all better now?” Satsuki asked, panting. “Thank goodness...”

Though I knew that fiends were immune to weak mental attacks like Mind

Shock, Arthur's stillness had been so convincing that even I thought it had worked for a second. Satsuki rejoiced that Arthur was back to normal, but her worries might have been wasted on this idiot. He was just a miser who'd been distracted by money.

Now that he's back with us, he'd better hurry up and finish off the rest of the pandas, I thought. I'm almost out of energy.

"Ooh, what's this? Is the great Mav struggling to defeat some puny little pandas?" taunted Arthur. "Ha ha ha. Boy, am I glad I got to see this."

"Less talking," I panted, "and more helping us out!"

I had to constantly deflect kunai that flew in from my blind spots and fend off an unending wave of attacks so that I had no time to rest and struggled to catch my breath. I was doing my best to cover Satsuki, but her shoulders were heaving, and I could tell she was also at her limit. It was understandable. We were fighting against a group of stronger opponents, and this was her first experience with such a fight.

"Fine, I'll help you out," said Arthur, walking toward me calmly as if this were no big deal.

This whole fight started because of you! I wanted to shout.

Arthur tilted his head from side to side to crack his neck as he approached. He just looked like a kid in his later elementary school years, yet his past victories over the pandas had left them frightened.

"Don't falter..." the ninja ordered. "I'll punish anyone who dares to run... Attack him!"

The head panda flinched at his boss's threat. "H-He doesn't have that white spider with him this time, boys! We'll be okay! L-Let's get him!"

The pandas looked and sounded like petty underlings from a bad movie. At level 20, they'd fit right in at an Assault Clan, and each of them would be powerful enough to slay an average undead monster by themselves if they put their mind to it. They formed a semicircle, partially surrounding Arthur, and they all attacked at once... But the fight was over in an instant. I heard a dull thump, and the men's roars were replaced with whimpers, after which the

pandas collapsed in agony.

After fully using my player skills, I barely managed to land an attack on Arthur. The pandas didn't have any buffs, so it would've been impossible for them to hit him, even if they all attacked at once.

"Have you learned your lesson yet?" asked Arthur. "You're too weak to fight me." He turned to the ninja. "You're up next."

"Your power surpasses my wildest imagination," the ninja said. "How can you be so strong...?"

Even with all his underlings out of action, the ninja still looked as calm as ever. A second later, I realized why. He'd retrieved a return stone from within his clothes. He was planning to run away and leave the pandas to their fate.

"The three of you in masks... I don't know what group you belong to, but mark my words: I'll uncover your identities and slaughter you and everyone else in your group. I swear this by my name."

"Oh, what's this?" said Arthur playfully. "He thinks he can get away! You're not going anywhere. I've got to punish you first."

Arthur's confident tone caused the ninja to furrow his brow for a moment, then he burst out laughing. "Ha ha ha! I get it. You don't know what this item does, do you? What more could I expect from a monster? You're about as smart and knowledgeable as a monkey. If you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way now. Get ready for the fun I'll have in store for you the next time we meet..."

"There won't be a next time," Arthur replied. "When. I. Cast. This. Spell. Nobody can get away. Dimension Isolator."

A pale light enveloped the ninja as he channeled his mana into the return stone... But Arthur raised his hand, grabbed the air, and squeezed. The world seemed to fracture into geometric patterns, and the mana in the return stone fizzled out. A high-pitched noise rang throughout the room like something had shattered.

"What have you done...?" fretted the ninja. "Why won't the return stone work? The door won't open either. What have you done, you bastard?!"

Seeing that his return stone wasn't working, the ninja darted backward and tried to leave through the door, but it didn't open. Arthur's isolation spell had sealed off the entire room.

"I told you," Arthur said. "I won't let you get away. Anyway, let's change the topic. Your clan is a super evil organization that engages in all sorts of bad stuff, like kidnapping, human trafficking, and sabotage, right? I might not look like it, but I'm on the side of justice. And I don't hold back when I bring justice to the evil."

"Get him, Arthur!" cheered Risa.

"You can do it!" cheered Satsuki. "But be careful!"

Risa and Satsuki must have finished tying up the unconscious pandas, and they now stood beside me, waving their hands and cheering Arthur on. I was sorry to see that the robes they'd spent so much time accessorizing were riddled with holes.

You've both done a great job, I thought. You deserve a rest.

Arthur waved a hand at his two adoring fans and wore a twisted smile. For someone claiming to be on the side of justice, he seemed to relish the misery he was about to cause. Come to think of it, he'd used justice as an excuse in *DEC* when he hunted me down, even though I'd never been anything less than an upstanding player.

The ninja tried to force the door open only to note that it wouldn't work and appeared to accept that he'd have to fight... Or so it seemed! But then he dashed toward where I was standing. Arthur had predicted this and fired magical bullets into the ninja's path, stopping him. The ninja had probably wanted to use me and the girls as hostages.

"Okay, here I come!" said Arthur.

Now, the ninja had nowhere to escape and no tricks left. His only path to survival was to destroy the boy in front of him, a kind of monster no adventurer had ever seen before. A solemn look of determination showed in his eyes. He stepped forward, then screamed from the bottom of his soul as he brandished his daggers and charged toward Arthur.

The ninja had staked his life on one final, astonishing attack. His blades sliced through the air toward Arthur's throat—

Kano jumped from the ladder hole in the floor while we threw the tied-up pandas through a gate to get rid of them.

"Ah, here they are! Over here!" Kano called out.

My parents climbed up after her, carrying large leather bags.

"Souta, we've got plenty of worm food today," my mother said.

"Here we go," said my father as he heaved his bag. "Arthur, girls, why don't you join us? There's enough to go around!"

My family's cheerfulness was infectious, lightening the mood that had been grim before their arrival.

By "worm food," my mother meant the rotten meat dropped by undead monsters. Worms loved rotten meat. My family's latest routine was to close our shop early and head out to hunt worms. These daily raids had significantly lifted my parents' levels, and now they were almost level 20. It was about time for them to start thinking about what expert jobs they'd like.

When Arthurs saw Kano, he ran toward her with his arms outstretched for a hug. "My Kano! Did you come all the way here to see me—"

"Big Sis Satsuki! Big Sis Risa! I've missed you!"

However, Kano was faster and jumped out of the way to hug Risa and Satsuki instead, causing Arthur to fall to the ground as he tried to hug thin air.

Kano's eyes narrowed as Risa and Satsuki tousled her hair into ribbons. The three of them had been spending a lot of time together recently, and they got along very well.

"So, bro, who's this guy you've knocked out?" asked Kano once everyone had finished greeting each other. "He seems different to the guys in the black-and-white outfits you were throwing through the gate."

She'd noticed the stranger crumpled up on the ground like a discarded

dishcloth. This was what remained of the ninja after Arthur had finished kicking his ass.

“He’s a heinous villain,” I said. “We just finished beating him senseless, but don’t get too close to him, just to be safe.”



Arthur had been famous for his technique in *DEC* and defeated many of the best players. He was also at least ten levels higher than the ninja. All the assassination techniques the ninja had learned in the underworld hadn't helped him get close to beating Arthur.

Throughout the battle, Arthur had blocked or dodged every attack the ninja had thrown at him. Once the ninja lost the will to fight, Arthur had hit him with rapid punches. The fight had been entirely one-sided; the only question that remained was what we should do with the ninja now.

"I'm scared that he'll go back to his life of awful crime if we just let him go," said Satsuki.

"Should we just put him out of his misery then?" asked Risa.

The ninja belonged to a villainous clan that wouldn't hesitate to harm civilians if it helped them achieve their goals. Plenty of people would die at his hands if the game's storyline came true, and he'd already shown that he was willing to plan to get revenge on us. He was too dangerous to just throw through the gate like we'd done with the pandas.

"I don't know. Killing him would leave a bad taste in my mouth," said Arthur. "How about I leave him on the fortieth floor?"

Kano looked shocked when Arthur mentioned the fortieth floor, and she began counting on her fingers. "Whoa, you can go that deep into the dungeon?!"

"Yeah, it's the deepest floor I can get to at the moment," replied Arthur. "I hope you guys level up soon so we can go together. It's scary going there by myself."

Arthur opened a gate.

"It's dangerous, so don't get too close." He grabbed the ninja with one hand and threw him through the gate.

Despite the terrifying nature of that floor, my parents seemed enthusiastic to visit after Arthur cheerfully expressed his desire to raid there together one day. Kano sounded excited to find out what monsters we'd find there.

"I wonder if we'll be able to level up fast enough to reach that floor by next year," said Risa, staring into the distance.

"W-We'd have to be level 40," faltered Satsuki. "So we'd have to surpass Japan's greatest adventurers..." She glanced at me, looking unsure of herself.

If we could reach level 40 and become strong enough to fight monsters on an even footing with Arthur, we could call ourselves the most powerful adventurers in the world.

"We can do it, I'm sure of it," I said, nodding confidently.

Passing through each new dungeon floor would be much more difficult than in the game. The troubles brewing at our school brought various issues, and we couldn't count on Arthur to help because of his fiend's curse. There were a lot of hurdles that we'd have to plan our responses to.

Even so, I had an upbeat family that understood me. I had smart, kind classmates who cared about me. And we had a fiend on our side who would hum to himself without a care in the world while blowing away villains from the game. I couldn't ask for better people by my side, and I knew that we could overcome any challenge together. We'd reach the fortieth floor, no problem.

We were making good progress leveling up. The Eight Dragons, floor bosses... None of them could stop us!

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Akito Narusawa. Barely a year has passed since the release of the first volume, and already we're at the fourth. This time, I decided to switch things up and use vertical text for the title text on the front cover.

Looking back, I started writing this story out of a fascination of wanting to experience what it was like to live in a game world. But the more I wrote, the more the story took shape. Before I knew it, four volumes of the *Finding Avalon* series were on sale. Even I was surprised! Part of me is still stunned that HJ Novels decided to publish a book with numerous details that are tricky to incorporate in print, like the TIPS footnotes that explain game terminology. Still, I'll be eternally grateful that they did. We couldn't have done any of it without your support.

This volume picks up where the last one left off, continuing the story of the Battle of the Classes and showing a fight held in secret during the exam. We saw various heroines and a new character called Arthur play major roles in the story. We also introduced several powerful figures at a clan party, where we got a sense of the political landscape and noble society that Souta will have to contend with through the lens of Haruka Mikami's Red Ninjettes. Risa Nitta hasn't had many opportunities to show off her strength in the web novel, but we finally got to see her go on a rampage for the first time at the very end of this volume. A lot happened in this book! I hope you enjoyed her fight scene.

Souta can't catch a break, can he? All he wants is a peaceful life, but he's dragged from one game event to another.

The second volume of the manga will also be released around the same time as this book. Zero Satou has brought the world of *Finding Avalon* to life through his drawings, reconstructing the characters for the manga adaptation, which is full of heavy drama. He has given the climax scene tremendous energy, and I'd recommend anyone reading this book to check it out. I've also written an exclusive short story to go along with the second volume of the manga, and I

encourage you to check that out too.

There, that's my advertisement. I noticed a huge number of things for the first time when reading the manga, even though I'm the original author. I'm constantly amazed at how scenes are portrayed when converted into drawings and how the world looks. It conveys so much information, but differently from text, showing the expressions on characters' faces, how they move, and all the details in the background. It makes me appreciate how amazing an art form manga is. Of course, none of it would be possible without Zero Satou's incredible drawing skills and composition. I can't wait for each chapter to come out!

I'd like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude and thank KeG for taking my requests and coming back with the best illustrations. His depiction of Arthur is my favorite. I keep finding myself staring at it and grinning! I'd also like to thank Zero Satou from the bottom of my heart for illustrating the manga. I loved the battle scene!

I also want to thank the designers who created the cover and the sleeve, as well as everyone at the printing company. They turned the fourth volume into a beautiful book that's cool to look at. I want to thank the proofreaders, who produced an incredibly easy-to-read document as part of their work. My editor was as helpful as ever as well. I've found it incredibly valuable to have someone to talk to about the writing and my plans for the story.

But most of all, I'd like to express my sincerest gratitude to you for buying this book.

In the next volume, *Adventurers' High* will be shaken to its core as we enter the main thrust of this series's story. I'm putting my heart into writing it, so please be patient for a little longer. As long as I have the ability and people keep reading it, I intend to continue writing *Finding Avalon*. I hope you'll continue to support me.

Akito Narusawa, November 2023

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.

Akagi's Party

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

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.

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

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

Risa Nitta

The intelligent and sly second player to appear.

Team EEE (Triple E)

Isamu Kariya

The leader of Class D and a cunning thug.

Tadashi Manaka

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

Class D

Masakado Takamura

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

Meiko Mononobe

Takamura's retainer, whose bare forehead is cute!

The Masked Man

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

Class C

Kouki Suou

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

Class B

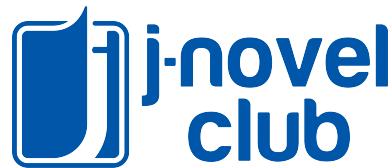
Kikyou Sera

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

Akira Tenma

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

Class A



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Finding Avalon: The Quest of a Chaosbringer Volume 4

by Akito Narusawa

Translated by Tom Harris Edited by Mario Mendez

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