

I'M NOT THE HERO!

03

WRITTEN BY
USBER

ILLUSTRATION BY
HANA AMANO



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An anime-style illustration of a young woman with long, dark hair and bangs, smiling warmly. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a large blue bow at the collar, a blue vest with gold buttons, and a pink skirt with a black belt. A black bag is hanging from the belt. In the background, a person in a dark jacket is partially visible, gesturing with their hand. The scene is set in a bright, slightly hazy environment.

〔 Lily Harmonix 〕

“I’m Lily.
It’s nice to
meet you.”



[Rex]

“Well, here we are...”
I said slowly.

Rose and I were standing on a small hill a short distance from Freelea. I shivered a little as I thought about how far from the game I'd deviated to do this while I watched Rose run around excitedly.

I can't believe I was able to take her out of the city so easily...

“Wow, I can see the whole city from here!”

[Rose]



I cursed loudly as
I ran through the city.

**“Fuck!
Why now
of all
times?!”**

But of course,
complaining wouldn't
change anything.

The evening bells continued
ringing in my ears as I ran.

Calm down! Think this through!
I ordered myself, organizing
my thoughts as fast as I could.

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STAGE 3

→ GAME START

Prologue

An Interview with the Leading Experts on the Manual Activation of Arts

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here today, everyone. Let me start by introducing today’s interviewees. First off, we have the man of the hour: Veteram, Guild Master of Freelea’s Adventurers’ Guild.”

Mr. Veteram (henceforth will be denoted as just Veteram): “[sighs deeply] Do you have any idea how busy I am? If it wasn’t you asking, I wouldn’t even have bothered to come to this interview.”

“Ha ha ha, sorry about that! It’s just that right now the entire world’s attention is focused on Freelea’s Adventurers’ Guild. We know your time is precious; we’re grateful you allowed us to interview you at all! The more people we can inform of the truth, the better.”

Veteram: “The truth, you say? I sure hope you plan to *actually* publish the truth and not distort the facts.”

“Oh, but of course! That’s why I’ve brought a Recording Crystal, and we have Erina here to stand witness as a neutral third party. I sincerely wish to have an open dialogue about the nature of manual Arts activation with you.”

Veteram: “Yeah, that just makes me more suspicious.”

“Well regardless, let me introduce the other guest we have here today! This adorable up-and-coming rookie fought his way through to the finals in the coliseum’s most recent tournament to determine the world’s strongest fighter. Let’s all welcome...Radd!”

Mr. Radd (henceforth will be denoted as just Radd): “A-Adorable? Uh, I mean... Never mind. It’s a pleasure to be here! I’m Radd the adventurer!”

“We’re glad to have you both. Now, Radd—I heard that on top of making it to the finals in the last tournament, you also cleared a mid-ranked dungeon just

one month after becoming an adventurer. I have to say, that's quite the accomplishment!"

Radd: "That's right, I did do that! Although that was all thanks to our master's guidance. Oh, and speaking of which, our master is—"

"Sorry to cut you off there. I'm sure your master is a very fascinating person but we can't be getting off-topic. We're here to discuss manual Arts today!"

Radd: "Huh? But..."

"At any rate, I'm proud to say the world's foremost experts on manual Arts are gathered here in this room. Today I'd like to interview you both on what kind of impact the discovery of manual Arts activation will have on the world. I'd also like to pin down just who was responsible for discovering this new technique!"

So, Just How Impressive is Manual Arts Activation?

"All right, let's jump right in. Many people are claiming that this is a monumental discovery that will change the nature of adventuring from here on out, but what do you think, Veteram? I'd like to hear your objective analysis as a veteran adventurer and Guild Master."

Veteram: "Hm? Oh yeah they're absolutely that big of a discovery."

"I-I see you're confident in your assessment. But is activating Arts manually really that different from using them normally?"

Veteram: "At first I wasn't too convinced about the value of manual Arts myself. But after testing it out for a bit, I realized just how huge of a difference manual activation made. It's like night and day compared to automatic activation—for simplicity's sake I'm calling the old way of using Arts automatic activation."

"Could you be a bit more specific? What exactly makes manual activation so special?"

Veteram: "I met a lot of adventurers who were desperate to learn new, more powerful Arts back when I was an active adventurer myself. At the time, I thought they were all fools. After all with automatic activation, once you start

an Art you can't make any other motions, and most Arts have you stand in place for their duration. Even the most basic sword Art, V-Slash, has this drawback. If you use it carelessly you'll get smacked in the face before the skill gets to finish."

"In other words, automatic Art activation is high risk, high reward."

Veteram: "You could say that, but honestly the risks are way too high for the reward. Basic Arts are already pretty slow, and the more advanced ones take even longer to finish. I remember one guy who was over the moon because he'd learned this powerful five-hit Art, but frankly it was suicide to use in actual combat despite how strong it was."

"I see. That does make sense. But there's also Arts that let you move like Gale Slash, aren't there? Are those just as dangerous to activate automatically?"

Veteram: "It's true those Arts let you move faster than you normally could even sprinting at full speed, but they're just as difficult to control as other Arts. Everyone who's tried using Gale Slash on auto mode has had one shared experience. Can you guess what it is?"

"N-No I can't say I'm too familiar with—"

Veteram: "They weren't able to stop themselves and slammed headfirst into their opponent."

"I-I see. That does sound pretty bad."

Veteram: "Right? But manual Art activation doesn't have those drawbacks. You're free to move however you want while you're swinging your sword, and you can control how far you move with mobility Arts as well. Take V-Slash for example. You no longer have to stand around like an idiot while you make the V with your sword. In fact you can purposely make your first slash miss and then close in and land a hit with the second upwards slash to throw your opponent off guard. Or if you're facing multiple weaker foes, take down one with the first slash, then dash forward to take out another with the second."

"Basically you're given a lot more freedom with manual Arts activation?"

Veteram: "That's right. The best part is you can cancel an Art midway if you activate it manually, so if it's a multihit Art you can afford to land just the first

blow then retreat to safety if it looks like you're about to eat a counterattack. I can't overstate how useful that is."

"O-Oh. I see. I suppose that would be quite useful."

Veteram: "This might be an arrogant way of looking at things, but automatic Arts are extremely one-dimensional. It's like a child's idea of what fighting is. You stand in front of an enemy and draw a 2D picture of your attack right in their face. However manual Art activation adds an extra dimension of depth to Arts. I mean it quite literally when I say manual Arts are on a completely different dimension than automatic Arts."

Turns Out, Manual Art Activation is Quite Technical! It's Not at All Easy to Master!

"I can tell you value manual Arts quite highly, Veteram. I suppose as a Guild Master it's only natural to be excited by the possibilities of such a promising new technique. Now I'd like to hear your thoughts as a currently active adventurer, Radd."

Radd: "O-Okay!"

"No need to be so nervous. Since you're an active adventurer I imagine you're using manual Arts daily while out questing. Would you be willing to tell us how they feel to you, compared to automatic Arts? How they're better, how they're worse, if there's any problems with them, and so on."

Radd: "Well, the biggest problem with manual Arts activation is definitely how hard it is I think."

"Fascinating! Do tell me more! In as much detail as possible!"

Radd: "O-Okay... I'm probably the wrong person to ask about this but to break it down, as long as you know the skill and meet the activation conditions for an Art you can activate it automatically without any effort. But manual activation is different. You have to memorize the Art's movement and reproduce it pretty accurately or the Art just won't come out."

"That sounds like a pretty harsh restriction! Does that mean if you mess up in

the middle of a battle...”

Radd: “Y-Yeah you’ll be in a tough spot. Oh but even if you mess up your attack is still a normal attack. It’s not like you end up just standing there.”

“Even so, it clearly puts you at a disadvantage, correct?!”

Radd: “Well...yeah I guess. But if you practice enough and actually learn the motions you’ll pretty much never mess up.”

“I see. But if I’m not mistaken you mentioned that learning manual Arts activation is quite difficult.”

Radd: “Th-That’s right. It’s hard. I can still only use a few Arts manually, and I still can’t do the more advanced techniques with them like changing the trajectory of my attack by adjusting the starting angle and stuff.”

“Ah you’re referring to what the Guild’s guidebook calls Flexing and Sweeping, correct?”*

Radd: “Y-Yeah, that! Also you can chain Arts one after another or redirect them mid-Art if you know the right skills...”

“Double Arts and Switch Turn, if I’m not mistaken.”

Radd: “I’ve been practicing those skills as well but I still can’t get them quite right...”

“It sounds like manual Arts take quite a bit of time to master! In that case I imagine adventurers who haven’t learned how to use them yet should—”

Radd: “Yeah, they should start practicing ASAP!”

“Huh?”

Radd: “Did I say something wrong?”

“Oh no, my apologies. I just thought you might say manual Arts are too difficult so people shouldn’t waste their time on them.”

Radd: “Aha ha ha of course not! Once you see how much better manual Arts are there’s no way you can ever go back to using automatic Arts!”

“I see...”

Radd: “That’s why I recommend checking out the guidebook now, while people still don’t realize how amazing manual Arts are. There’s already a huge waiting list for it, but it’s only going to get bigger as time passes!”

“Err, well I’d heard that adventurers were a studious lot, but I didn’t realize you were all this enthusiastic about picking up new skills. Thank you very much for your input, Radd.”

***Editor’s note:** Flexing is when you adjust the trajectory of your sword swing to activate the Art from a different direction than usual. Sweeping is when you outstretch your arms during an Art just enough that it lengthens the reach of your swing during an Art without going so far that it breaks the motion of the Art entirely, canceling it. Double Arts is when you use the Arts Plus skill to let you chain two Arts together. Switch Turn is when you use Arts Plus in the middle of an Art to give yourself a small window to adjust the direction of your currently active Art. For those of you who wish to learn more, please reference the guidebook in the Guild library titled *Manual Arts for Dummies* written by Rex Tauren.

Will Manual Arts Activation Drive Older Adventurers Out of Business?

“I’ve heard a lot about the merits of manual Arts from both of you, but I want to change gears now and discuss the drawbacks and potential issues that might arise with the discovery of manual Arts.”

Radd: “Hmm... I’m not sure there are any, really. Manual Arts are basically just a better version of automatic Arts.”

“Does nothing come to mind? Nothing at all?”

Radd: “U-Umm, well...”

Veteram: “Well there’s the fact that they’re harder to learn, but as a Guild Master I’ve noticed a much worse problem with them.”

“Oh, do tell!”

Veteram: “If you ask me, the biggest problem with manual Arts is that they’re just too good.”

“Huh? Umm sorry but what do you mean by that?”

Veteram: “Exactly what I said. Manual Arts are way too strong. They’ve basically overturned the combat strategies people devised over the years.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

Veteram: “For example, frontline attackers used to need to have high offensive and defensive capabilities or they wouldn’t be able to do their job. After all, they had to stand still whenever they were using Arts.”

“And you think because people can move around using manual Arts that they won’t need as much defense?”

Veteram: “I’m absolutely sure of it. Lighter, nimbler fighters used to be less valued, but they’re about to get their time in the spotlight. Mid-range classes like Thieves and Monks are going to see a huge upsurge in popularity too. The scariest thing though is it’s not just classes that use Arts themselves that are going to be affected by the discovery of manual Arts.”

“How so?”

Veteram: “Most adventurer parties strike a good balance between offense and defense. But once everyone starts learning manual Arts, melee classes are going to get way stronger offensively. As a result, a lot of other physical classes are going to start falling out of favor. Archers and other ranged classes are going to suffer the most I think.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Veteram: “Archers and people who use throwing weapons fight with skills, not Arts. In the past they used to do about as much damage as close-range physical fighters, but now that manual Arts are here melee classes are going to start outclassing them. Of course, I doubt ranged attackers are going to die out completely, but I guarantee you a bunch of archers will start reclassing into melee or rogue classes pretty soon.”

“I see, so you’re saying the popularity of some classes is going to be hurt by

this discovery.”

Veteram: “Hell it might not even be limited to physical ranged classes. Right now Mages fill a very different niche than close-range fighters, but if all adventurers are able to learn elemental and AoE attacks regardless of their level and class just by mastering the motions for those Arts, mages might start seeing less demand too.”

“The ramifications of this are far greater than I imagined then.”

Veteram: “I did say this was a historic discovery after all. Heh, seeing how panicked some of my fellow veteran adventurers are about these changes, I’m starting to think it’s a good thing I retired when I did. A new age of adventuring is about to start. If you can’t adapt to it, you’re going to get left behind.”

Piecing Together the Truth

“I understand now just how huge of an impact the discovery of manual Arts will have on the adventuring world. Considering how powerful this technique is, I suppose it’s inevitable it would have wide-reaching effects. However, we still don’t know for sure who first discovered this technique, do we?”

Veteram: “Hm? What are you talking about, everyone knows it’s you.”

“It’s true that word on the street is that Rex Tauren was the trailblazer who discovered manual Arts. But are we certain of those rumors’ veracity?”

Veteram: “Give me a break, are you seriously asking that?”

Radd: “What are you trying to imply?”

“It was Nirva the Invincible Blademaster who first showed off manual Arts to the world. Would it not be fair to say he’s the one who’s truly responsible for spreading their knowledge to the greater public?”

Radd: “But...”

“I’ve also heard rumors that Nirva himself was the one who discovered manual Arts...”

Veteram: “Oh please. I can tell what you’re trying to do, and it’s not going to

work.”

“I-I’m not trying to do—”

Veteram: “Fine, I’ll make this clear. First off, I haven’t once heard anyone claim that Nirva invented manual Arts. Plus, he made it abundantly clear that he learned the technique from Rex. So even if someone is spreading those rumors, they pulled that story out of their ass.”

“B-But...”

Radd: “I also don’t think Nirva the Invincible Blademaster could have come up with manual Arts.”

“R-Radd!”

Radd: “The fact that he was able to use Arts with both of his weapons at once was really impressive. He probably taught himself how to do that, and it’s amazing he was able to come up with that at all. But that’s all I can praise him for.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Radd: “Like I said it was impressive he was able to use Arts with both weapons at once, and he’s strong enough that each of those two Arts were super strong. But his actual skill at using manual Arts wasn’t even a tenth as good as yours, Master. There’s no way he could have come up with manual Arts.”

“Urk...”

Radd: “Just give it up, old man. There’s no way you’re gonna be able to hide it. Everyone knows you’re the one who first discovered how to—”

“E-Even if his skill with manual Arts wasn’t as good as mine, technically we can still say he was the one responsible for—”

Miss Recilia (henceforth will be denoted as just Recilia): “I think it’s about time you admitted defeat.”

“Hey, d-don’t just butt in!”

Recilia: “At this point it’s going to be impossible to try and push the credit for

discovering manual Arts onto anyone else, brother. Or should I say, *Special Adventurer Correspondent Rex Tauren?*”

Special Adventurer Correspondent Rex Tauren: *“Y-You promised you wouldn’t say anything during the interview, Recilia!”*

Recilia: “And I intended to remain silent, but you really don’t know when to give up, so I felt I had to step in.”

“Y-You don’t have to put it like that...”

Recilia: “Good grief. I thought you’d lost your mind when you told me you were going to become a reporter and hold an interview, and now look at how it turned out.”

“I-I mean...”

Recilia: “I understand you dislike your newfound fame, and you hate that it’s compounded how much work you have to do. As a result, you haven’t even been able to find time to train me one-on-one recently. I don’t blame you for wanting to push all of that fame onto the Invincible Blademaster instead.”

“Th-That’s not what I was trying to—”

Recilia: “But you should understand by now that it’s impossible to hide your accomplishments from the world. No matter what anyone, including you yourself, says, everyone knows that you’re responsible for discovering manual Arts.”

“[deep sigh] Fine. I get it.”

Veteram: “Heh, good you’re finally giving up.”

“Not yet. I’ve just accepted that everyone I know is going to praise me to high heaven. This whole interview was a waste of time, but I’ll find some other way.”

Veteram: “Ha ha ha ha! As long as you understand the position you’re in, I don’t care.”

“Tch. Screw this, I’m going home.”

Veteram: “Wait, leave the recording crystal here. These things don’t come

cheap, you know.”

“Fine, here.”

Veteram: “Thanks.”

“All right, I’m leaving... Sorry for wasting your time.”

Veteram: “Don’t sweat it. This gave me some good ideas for how to spread the knowledge of manual Arts to people faster. I’ll have Erina edit this into a proper Article and publish it.”

“You sure came prepared. Well as long as you don’t turn it into something weird I’m fine with it. Though I guess I’m not one to talk.”

Veteram: “Don’t worry, I don’t have the skill or the motivation to spread fake propaganda. I’ll just publish what was said in this interview as-is.”

“I can trust you, right?”

Veteram: “Of course. I’ll tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. After all, the truth is already interesting enough as it is!”

Note: This article is an accurately transcribed copy of the interview Special Adventurer Correspondent Rex Tauren conducted at Freelea’s Adventurers’ Guild. The transcription was written by Guild member Erina.

Chapter 1: A Fated Meeting

As I made my way to the Guild's training grounds, I was met with an insanely large crowd.

"Look, he's here! It's Rex!"

"Idiot! Don't just point! You have to treat him with respect!"

"Please! Tutor me!"

I rubbed my forehead in exasperation. *Goddamnit, I knew this would happen!*

Ever since Nirva's statement there had been people lining up here to beg me to teach them, but now the crowd was larger than ever. This was all thanks to the PR article the Adventurers' Guild had published based off of the interview I'd conducted.

I'm gonna get you back for this Veteram, mark my words!

If this was Japan I could have sued him, but sadly this medieval-ass world didn't have nearly as strong personal privacy laws.

I guess this is still better than before, since at least Veteram's making sure people don't follow me around outside of the set hours I'm supposed to be teaching people manual Arts.

Sighing, I steeled myself and walked into the throng of excited adventurers, then gave a quick lecture on the basics of manual Arts activation. After that, me and the Guild members assigned to help me split up and started giving more individualized instruction to the adventurers.

As I was dispensing advice and demonstrating how to use manual Arts I spotted a familiar face among the crowd. "Magey, is that you?"

Magey twitched and looked guiltily up at me, like a child who'd been caught pulling a prank. She was the very first adventurer I'd appraised the growths of. She was best suited to be a Mage, but because of how the game randomly assigned growths and starting classes she'd ended up a Fighter instead. I'd used

Analyze to figure out she was meant to be a Mage, and I'd thought that she'd accepted that and swapped to that class, but now here she was.

"What are you doing here? Don't tell me you ended up hating magic so you —?"

"N-No, that's not it!"

In that case, why are you here?

There was no manual equivalent for magic, and Mages had little aptitude for physical attacks for obvious reasons. They had no reason to learn manual Arts activation.

"I'm just doing this...as a hobby. I plan to stick to Mage for the foreseeable future, and I'm grateful you showed me I have a talent for magic. But even if I have no use for manual Arts, I still want to learn how to use them..."

"So you're learning them for fun?"

Honestly, I couldn't fault her for it. She may have become a Mage now, but she'd lived as a Fighter for most of her adventuring life. Of course she'd want to keep up to date on new close combat fighting tactics.

"S-So do you think you could give me some advice, L-Lord Rex?" Magey asked. As always, she stumbled over the word lord. She wasn't used to polite speech still.

I cocked my head and asked, "Advice for what, specifically? It looks to me like you've got the basics down already."

It was hard to believe this was just a hobby for her considering how proficient she'd already become at manual activation. Then again, maybe she'd gotten this good precisely because it was easier to put in effort for a hobby than your actual job.

"Yes, but I need an outside opinion to know if I'm doing it properly or not."

I stared at her thoughtfully. Before, I'd thought as long as people discovered Arts could be activated manually, they'd figure the rest out on their own, even without a teacher. I still believed that to an extent, but I realized now that manual Arts were more complicated than I'd thought. Furthermore, I'd had the

benefit of being able to master manual Arts in practice mode, where Arts didn't cost MP to use, had no cooldown, and there was a grading system that rated how well you'd traced the motion. In this world people had to expend mana to practice manual Arts activation, wait for their cooldowns, had no way of knowing how well they'd performed when they did succeed, or how closely they needed to follow the correct trajectory for it to technically count. They were playing on hell mode.

"You'll be able to tell if my motions are sloppy, won't you? Also, if you'd be so kind as to show me how you use manual Arts..."

"If you want a model to follow you should just auto activate the Art and try to copy that," I said with a smile, but Magey shook her head.

"I've been coming to your lessons a few times and there's something I've noticed. If you perfectly trace the trajectory you make when you automatically activate an Art it will give you a successful manual activation, but that's not how you do it, Lord Rex. And I get the feeling the way you do it is the *proper* way."

I raised my brows. I was surprised by how perceptive she was.

"I saw how Radd activates his Arts too. It's amazing. He's definitely the best manual Arts user out of everyone here. I bet that's because he learned from your example rather than copying how the Art looks normally. But the way you use Arts is totally different, Lord Rex." Magey looked up at me, absolutely confident in her analysis. "Your movements are a lot more freeform. You mess up some of the more detailed movements sometimes, but you always make sure the core motions are done properly. It's like you have a feel for the proper way to manually activate Arts. That's not something I have, and I don't think it's something anyone else in the world has."

Honestly I had not expected Magey to read me that well. I nodded, accepting that I'd been seen through.

"Well...you're not wrong."

For simplicity's sake I'd been telling people that to manually activate an Art you needed to copy the trajectory your weapon made when you used the Art automatically. That wasn't wrong, but it wasn't completely correct either. The ideal way to manually activate an Art was to swing your weapon like it was a

motion controller roughly tracing the motions of the actual Art. Of course, the only person who knew that was me, because I was the only one who knew this world was based off of a game.

“Are you coming to these training sessions because you want to figure out the secret and tell it to your friends?”

I could see that, since Magey was pretty fond of her comrades. To my surprise though, she shook her head.

“No, like I said... I’m just doing this as a hobby. That really is all there is to it.”

I could tell from the look in her eyes that she wasn’t lying. She really was just practicing manual Arts activations because she enjoyed it.

“I see... You really do love swordplay, Magey.”

She had far more of an attachment to the sword than someone like me who’d become a swordsman a few months ago. But to my surprise, Magey gave me a confused look.

“Huh? I’m not really that interested in swordsmanship though. If anything, I prefer magic because I don’t even have to train to get stronger...”

“B-But didn’t you say this is a hobby for you?”

Realizing the source of my confusion, Magey proudly puffed out her chest. “That’s right! I’m an honorary member of the Rex Fan Club so of course I need to come here to tell everyone else about how awesome you are!” She declared this loudly enough that her words echoed across the training field.

“...Come again?”



“Thank you so much for teaching me!” Magey said with a bow as today’s training session ended.

“I’m glad you enjoyed today’s training session.”

Magey’s unexpected hobby had come as a surprise, but the real problem had been the fact that she’d announced it to the world. While I’d been frozen in shock she’d explained that she was writing down a record of all the amazing

things I'd accomplished and trying to recruit more members into the fan club. Admitting her affiliation to me had seemed to make Magey bolder too, as she'd started preaching about how wonderful I was to everyone. It had taken quite a lot of effort to stop her. The whole ordeal had exhausted me, but Magey looked more energetic than ever now. It was like she'd sucked out my life force.

"It was the best session ever! As thanks I'll work even harder to tell people about how awesome you are!"

"Please don't." I made a shooing motion, chasing her out of the training field. Once it was empty I let out a long sigh. "That was more tiring than it should have been."

While Magey was going a bit overboard, her actions stemmed from her gratitude toward me. If I was being honest, it made me happy when she'd told me she'd been able to get her life back together thanks to my advice. That being said, she really *was* going overboard.

A fan club is just too much!

I couldn't believe a hardened warrior had ended up like this. But while I was mentally drained, I couldn't afford to rest just yet. Manual Arts lessons were done for the day, but I had other work I needed to take care of still.

"Next I need to go appraise people at the coliseum." I said, slowly starting to make my way to the accursed place.

"I see you've been working hard, brother."

"Recilia..."

She must have been waiting for me, since she appeared by my side the moment I left the training grounds. Probably so she could act as my bodyguard, as always. She took that job way too seriously, but I was used to it by now, so I just continued on my way to the arena.

"I'm surprised you're taking the Guild's request so seriously. I thought you would abandon your responsibilities once they became too overbearing."

"Really? I can make money without ever leaving town this way. Sure, the excessive fame sucks, but otherwise this is the ideal lifestyle."

Recilia shook her head in exasperation. “I don’t believe that for a second. You keep saying how you want to avoid danger and live a quiet life, but we both know you’re an adventurer at heart who loves jumping into danger every chance you get.”

“You make it sound like I’m an adrenaline junkie...” I said, frowning.

Recilia gave me an incredulous look. “Do you really think you aren’t?”

I averted my gaze, unable to argue back. “Anyway, like I explained before. I didn’t just take this job because it’s stable, there’s another reason too.” Recilia gave me a quizzical look and I said, “It’s so I can scout people.”

“Next in line!” the Guild attendant said, and a nervous looking adventurer stepped forward.

“Th-Thank you for seeing me!”

I nodded absently to him and quickly cast Analyze. I then wrote down the stats I saw onto a sheet of paper, quickly appraising his capabilities as I wrote.

A total growth of 19, huh? He’s got a Warrior’s growths, but his Mind is pointlessly high. Hmm... Yeah, I’d say he’s average.

You see, *this* was the reason I’d taken on the Guild’s requests. Teaching people manual Arts and checking their stats gave me the opportunity to meet a vast number of adventurers. As a result, I could get a pretty good idea of which adventurers were strong and which weren’t. In retrospect I was the one invading everyone’s personal privacy, but I had no intention of misusing that information so hopefully these guys would forgive me.

I was hoping to find more promising adventurers, but everyone I’ve examined so far has been pretty meh.

Radd and the others were pseudo-unique characters, so they were given a better set of growth rates than the average adventurer, with all of them at a total of +21 or higher. Meanwhile most regular adventurers didn’t get higher than +20. I’d seen a few with +21 or +22, but unfortunately they’d all been higher-level.

Lower-level adventurers were much easier to raise, and since they hadn't been adventuring for as long they'd be easier to recruit. In that sense, Radd and his friends had been the perfect group. But man, I really needed some help here. Of course, I wanted to recruit more strong people to help clear dungeons, but I also needed regular old assistants.

Most importantly, I need some pawns who can move around freely.

The world of *Braves and Blades* was vast, and it took days or even weeks to get from area to area. What I really needed were people willing to go to other areas and gather information for me. Recilia followed me everywhere like a second shadow, and since she was the only one who knew my secret, she was definitely my greatest ally. But she was decidedly not someone who did everything I asked. In fact, when I had asked her to gather information on the neighboring region for me, she'd rejected my request without a second thought. "I get what you're saying," she'd said, "but I won't do it. I have no intention of leaving your side. It's my duty to protect the body you inhabit."

I couldn't really argue with that, so I hadn't pushed her to go. Of course, if it was absolutely essential, Recilia would be willing to act independently. However, as long as it wasn't an emergency, Recilia likely wouldn't leave my side. Or rather, she wouldn't leave Rex's body unsupervised.

Come on... Isn't there anyone out there who conveniently won't ask about my past or my motives, but do exactly as I say? Don't get me wrong—I know I'm asking for something pretty scummy here, but...

Shaking my head, I stopped daydreaming for the impossible and swapped my attention back to the task before me. A pleasant high-pitched voice reached my ears.

"My name is Lily. Thank you for seeing me."

"Wait..."

When I heard that voice, my heart skipped a beat. It was a calming voice, but one that also made you want to instinctively protect its owner.

Don't tell me...

I looked up, and saw the perfect woman. Her features were striking, but in a

way that felt familiar rather than intimidating. Her glossy black hair went down to her waist, and she had an ample bust that was visible even through her clothes. Even the way she stood was beautiful. I didn't need to bother Analyzing her, I already knew what her growths and abilities were like the back of my hand. Our eyes met, and she smiled at me. It was an angelic smile, one that would captivate anyone who saw it.

“O-Oh!”

Oh, yes...

This was perhaps the first time I was truly grateful I'd been sent to this world. I averted my gaze, unwilling to let this person see my expression. After all, I couldn't let her see the wicked grin spreading across my face.

“I've finally found the perfect pawn.”

I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself to look and act normal. I knew Lily's stats and growth rates by heart, so I didn't even need to bother with Analyze.

【Lily Harmonix】

Starting Level: 5

Class: Bard

Age: 19

Birthplace: Rinesta

That was what her profile looked like in the game, but that wasn't all I knew about Lily.

While I pretended to examine her, I desperately thought of how I would recruit her. Since growths never changed, it was likely Lily would only come to get appraised this once. This was likely my only chance to win her over. Doing my best not to let my impatience show on my face, I wrote down Lily's numbers from memory. I then walked over to Lily and held the page out. But then I purposely let the paper slip from my fingers.

“Whoops.”

Lily stared in surprise as the paper slowly fluttered down. A second later she reflexively crouched down to grab it, while I also leaned down at the same time, my face right next to her ear.

“I know your secret,” I whispered to her.



The rest of the appraisal session progressed without incident, and I didn’t meet any other important characters. After my work was done I got rid of Recilia by telling her I wanted to try triggering a certain event which required me to be alone, then made my way to a high-class restaurant on the outskirts of Freelea known as the Wyvern’s Perch. It took me longer than I’d wanted to persuade Recilia to leave me alone, but I still managed to make it before the meeting time I’d written down on the page I’d handed to Lily. Looking around, it seemed she hadn’t arrived yet, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Just then though, I heard a voice call out to me.

“Good evening, Mr. Rex.”

A familiar figure stepped out of the building’s shadow, and even though I’d been expecting her I still gasped in surprise.

“Good evening, Lily Harmonix.”

“Umm... Do you mind telling me what all that was about? What do you mean, you ‘know my secret?’”

“Hm? Oh yeah, sorry I guess that sounded like a threat.”

In my time playing *BB*, Lily had been the character who’d tugged at my heartstrings the most, in both good and bad ways. As I mentally went through what I knew about her from my time playing the game, I glanced over at her. She was clearly uneasy and a little afraid, but she was also tightly clenching her fists as if determined to stand up for herself if need be. She was like a small animal that you instinctively felt like you needed to protect. I even felt that way despite knowing her true nature, which meant whoever had designed her on the *BB* team had done an extremely good job.

“First off, thank you for coming here to meet me. We probably don’t want to talk about this out in the open, so let’s go inside.”

I led Lily to a private booth I’d reserved earlier. I thought she’d be wary of entering an enclosed space with a man she barely knew, but to my surprise she didn’t look the least bit reluctant as she followed me.

Well, I guess it makes sense now that I think about it.

The setting of *Braves and Blades* meant crime basically never paid, and this particular restaurant was used during numerous events with important NPCs, so it had a reputation as being a trustworthy establishment. Or maybe...

I shook my head before I started going down the hypotheticals rabbit hole and turned to face Lily. I did actually know her most important secret, but I needed to be careful about how and when I revealed it. The goal was to recruit her, after all.

“Umm?”

Lily was starting to get worried by my long silence, so I stopped my thoughts there. I was in an advantageous position already, so I didn’t need a perfect plan or anything.

“So, I can see a person’s growth rates with Analyze, but it actually lets me see a lot more than just that.”

“What do you mean?” Lily asked with trepidation.

“Exactly what I said. I can learn a lot about a person just by using Analyze on them. Their name, their class, any special skills they might have or what unique magic they’re capable of using.”

Lily’s shoulders trembled a little at the word “magic,” just as I’d hoped.

“C-Can you really do that?”

I was of course lying through my teeth. But it was true that I knew everything about Lily already.

“What would I gain by lying to you? If you want proof, I can tell you what your specialties are.”

“Uhh...”

I pretended not to notice Lily’s stiff expression and said, “Your name is Lily Harmonix, your class is Bard, and your specialties lie in singing and playing instruments. Most importantly though...you can use dark magic.”

Lily went white as a sheet. After a brief silence, she timidly said, “A-Are you going to report me to the city guard?” She looked like she was terrified of me.

If this is an act, then Lily’s one hell of an actor...

I spread my arms out and smiled reassuringly at her. It wouldn’t do for Lily to guess my true motives.

“Ah, no need to worry on that front. I bear no ill will toward practitioners of dark magic. Besides, even though many other people do consider it evil, learning dark magic in and of itself isn’t illegal. That being said, I’m not sure the guard would approve of casting Sleep or Confusion on people.”

Because crime was harshly punished in *BB*, the cities and towns of this world were even safer than Japan’s. However, there were still drunkards and troublemakers, and I knew Lily had cast sleeping magic on them before in order to avoid having to deal with their unwanted advances. After all, she had told me as much herself in-game.

“I... I know it’s not right, but as a woman traveling alone there are times where I needed to in order to peacefully resolve some situations, so...”

I nodded in understanding. “Of course. Like I said, there’s no need to worry. I don’t blame you. If anything, I’m impressed.”

“Y-You are?” Lily asked, looking shocked.

“I’m not appraising other people just out of the goodness of my heart, you know. The whole reason I agreed to the Guild’s request was to make it easier to find skilled adventurers, or those who have high potential. I invited you here because...”

“You want to recruit me?” Though she looked like she was spacing out half the time, Lily was quite sharp. “B-But I just started adventuring, and I’m not that great at fighting...”

“I know. But I’m looking for people who will help me gather information, not fighters. I need someone who’s sociable, quick-witted, and knows a few tricks to get people to loosen their tongues.”

Lily seemed surprised by my proposal, but not against it as far as I could tell. I just needed one more push.

“I apologize for prying into your private affairs, but I did a little digging on your history. From what I hear, you always help those in trouble, and everyone you meet speaks highly of you. You’re exactly the kind of person I’ve been looking for.”

This too, was bullshit I’d made up on the spot.

“Do they really? I-I’m not that special though. If anything, I just happen to run into a lot of nice people, so...” Lily blushed and covered her face with her hands.

“It’s because I’ve heard so many good things about you that I wanted to recruit you. Would you be willing to help me in my quest to save the world?”

“I...”

Lily looked hesitantly up at me. I knew her facade forced her to act like a good person, so it would be hard for her to refuse my invitation unless she had a very good reason to. However, I decided to lay up on the pressure here.

“Sorry, this must all seem so sudden to you. Don’t worry, you don’t have to decide tonight or anything.”

“Okay...”

“We should start by getting to know each other better. I’m sure you’d also like some time to mull over everything I said. Sorry, I guess I was in too much of a rush to recruit you. Since we’re here, how about we relax over a nice meal and some fine spirits?”

Though I said that, I was relatively certain Lily would decline to drink, though she might order some food. In medieval times, it had been common for people to start drinking alcohol at much younger ages, but the developers of *BB* had likely wanted to avoid depicting minors drinking alcohol, so they’d set the drinking age in the game at 20. I’d been expecting Lily to refuse the offer of

alcohol since she was too young to drink, but to my surprise, she actually took me up on my offer.

“Umm, until now I refused everyone’s invitations to drink because I wasn’t old enough, but I actually just turned twenty a few days ago, so I guess I could try a glass or two...”

“Wow, so this’ll be your first time drinking. I’m honored to be part of such a momentous event.” I smiled cordially, but on the inside I was seething.

You liar! I know you’re still 19!

In fact, you first met Lily in the game by saving her from some unsavory adventurers who were pressuring her to drink. During that event she kept refusing, saying that she wasn’t twenty yet, but they’d keep on pestering her until you stepped in. In the fourth month of the second year of the game that event went away, which meant that Lily was almost certainly 19 until then.

As I ordered some food and drink for the table, I once again reminded myself that I couldn’t afford to let my guard down around her. While I hadn’t been in this restaurant before, a lot of the menu items looked similar to ones you’d find in a modern Japanese restaurant so the stuff I’d ordered would hopefully be fine.

After I’d finished ordering I casually asked, “You’re from Rinesta, right, Lily? Does your family still live there?”

“Yes. My parents used to travel a lot in the past, but after I was born they opened up a shop in Rinesta. I do want to go back and see them, but this journey has just been so fun I can’t seem to find a good time to.”

“I see, I see. Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. He he, I would have liked a kind older brother though.”

The coquettish look she gave me was enough to make my heart start pounding. I surreptitiously dug my nails into my palm to keep myself from getting caught up by her charm.

In a vacuum, there wasn’t anything particularly special about Lily’s appearance. Sure, she was pretty, but in fictional settings basically everyone

was pretty. Compared to the truly exquisite beauties in this world, like the Goddess of Salvation, she looked a little plain even. Her clothes weren't revealing either. Her blouse was buttoned up to the neck, and her long skirt went all the way down to the ankles. But the little gestures she did and the expressions she made were perfectly calculated to captivate your attention. Her movements were refined, and her expressions made her seem at once like a child you wanted to protect, and a mother who'd tell you everything would be all right. Everything she did was calculated to make her popular with specifically men. Furthermore, regrettable though it was, I couldn't stop myself from occasionally shooting glances at her ample bust, which was pronounced even through her modest clothes. She had the kind of boobs only video game characters had. If I let my guard down, I knew I'd be completely at her mercy.

Aware of the effect she was having on me, Lily leaned forward and said, "You're famous even in other cities, Mr. Rex. It's like a dream, getting to meet you in person."

"Oh please. Rumors always get exaggerated. I'm not half as amazing as people say I am."

"He he, well I think you're pretty cool. Rex Tauren, the Father of Manual Arts. I'd like to write a song about you someday."

Hold on, are people actually calling me that?! This is the first I've heard of it!

"Give me a break. I'm not worthy of such a lofty title."

"He he, you're so humble. But I understand how you feel. People teased me about my name when I was a kid too."

"Huh, that's a surprise. You have such a beautiful name."

"Th-Thank you very much. Umm, while those aren't very pleasant memories, I can't deny that I wouldn't be the person I am now if it wasn't for that teasing. So in a way, I guess it's thanks to my bullies that I'm sitting here with you now, Mr. Rex. When I think about it that way, I'm kind of grateful to them."

The two of us were just throwing empty pleasantries at each other. But I couldn't deny I was enjoying the conversation still.

Besides, this is a good sign.

Lily was talking more than she ever had in the game, and as far as I could tell she was in a good mood. Of course, that too could all just be part of an act, but that was fine with me. Especially since there had been a tiny kernel of truth in the last thing she'd said, and she'd touched on a topic she normally refused to discuss in the game. Maybe she'd thought it was fine to let that one morsel slip, or maybe she'd thought she'd worded it in such a way that I'd miss the importance of what she'd said.

Either way, keep on letting your guard down like that. It'll make things easier for me.

Lily was probably confident that her real secret was safe, because she believed the only thing I'd learned about her that she kept hidden was that she was capable of using dark magic. She probably thought for certain I didn't know anything that could truly threaten her, so she was more talkative than she would otherwise have been. It being her first time drinking alcohol probably helped too.

As a waiter came and filled our wineglasses I raised mine with a smile and said, "A toast, to our fortuitous meeting."

Fortunately, I was able to hold my liquor pretty well. While I wasn't as sturdy as the real heavy drinkers, I at least knew when I was nearing my limits. I needed to maintain my facade for as long as I could while looking for cracks in Lily's. Though at this rate, I might be able to settle this sooner than I'd thought.

Doing my best not to let my feelings show on my face, I tapped my glass against Lily's. "To our future," I said boldly.

"Ch-Cheers," Lily responded hesitantly as our glasses clinked. She blushed a little as she took a sip. "W-Wow, this is delicious..."

As I raised my own glass to my lips, I allowed myself a small grin.



My brain was ablaze. A whirlpool of fire was swirling around my mind, burning up my thoughts. Loud rumbling noises hammered away at my eardrums. My consciousness felt like it was floating away into space. The only thing that reminded me I was still in this world was my mouth, which I was

acutely aware of.

“Like I saaaaid! I’m just a normal guuuy! I’m no herooo! Isn’t that right, Lils? Liiils?”

Despite the fire and the noise, I felt very comfortable. The world was space, and space was...also space.

“A-Are you okay, Mr. Rex?”

Oh... There’s a fairy in space.

“You’re so cuuute Lily! The cutest in the wooorld! The cutest in all Japaaan!”

The fairy sat down next to me and rubbed my back. “Th-Thank you. Anyway, can you walk, Mr. Rex?”

“Walk? Of course I can walk.”

I put one foot forward, but then I realized it was a trap! The ground in front of me turned into squishy muck, trying to throw me off-balance. But I was Rex, and Rex knew all about how to deal with traps. So I deftly moved my foot to evade the dangers before me.

“Bwuh?”

My foot slipped, and my head landed in something soft.

Is that a slime?

A flash of understanding passed through me, and I felt my mind grasp a fundamental truth of this world. But even though I knew I’d come to a very important realization, a pink haze covered my mind, and all I could think about was elephants.

“Mr. Rex! What’s the name of the inn you’re staying at?”

My inn?

The elephant turned rainbow-colored, then vanished, only to be replaced by the beautiful fairy I’d seen earlier. I said something to her, but my brain was so foggy... I forgot the words as soon as they left my mouth.

“Rex? Mr. Rex?”

“Hwuh?”

“We’re here. Can you get to bed by yourself?”

“I’m not sleepy... I want to talk more with you, Lily...”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m putting you down now, okay?”

My body started sinking into something. It felt nice and cool.

“Sheesh, you’re such a handful. Goodnight, Rex.”

I felt something warm press against my cheek, but before I could figure out what it was, my consciousness faded to nothing.



Scrape, scrape. Scrape, scrape. Scraaaape, scrape. The rhythmical scraping noise woke me up, and I opened my eyes, but the moment I raised myself up to a sitting position, a dull pain shot through my head and the stench of alcohol filled my nostrils. I grunted in pain.

Oh yeah, I got drunk off of my ass last night and... As memories of the previous night came rushing back, I slapped my forehead. *I fucked up!*

I’d been trying to probe for chinks in Lily’s armor, but I’d ended up exposing my own weaknesses instead. Though I didn’t think I’d made any fatal blunders at least.

Okay, that was a mistake, but in my defense, I had no idea Rex was such a lightweight! Who the heck makes such a cool aloof character a lightweight?!

I’d started getting tipsy after the very first glass. I let out a loud groan, and the rhythmical scraping slowly came to a stop.

Scrape, scrape. Scrape, scrape. Scraaaaaape...

I looked up, trying to locate the source of the sound, and saw a terrifying sight. “Aaaah!”

Recilia was sitting deathly still in the dark room.

“Recilia...?”

She slowly turned to face me, looking like a horror movie monster. It was then that I realized the scraping noise I'd been hearing until now was the sound of Recilia sharpening a knife.



“Oh, you’re finally awake,” Recilia said, smoothly gliding to her feet. The knife gleamed in the room’s dim light.

“R-Recilia? Th-This isn’t what it looks like. I can explain...”

I had no idea what it looked like, or what I was going to explain. But I knew I had to say something. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of what.

“Brother...” Recilia drew closer. Her expression was terrifyingly blank, and her eyes looked like sunken pits. The knife drew ever closer, and Recilia said, “I see you enjoyed yourself last night.”

I screamed bloody murder and rolled off the bed and onto the floor.

Chapter 2: Lily Harmonix

“See you later then,” Lily said with a smile, then turned on her heel and left.
“Lily Harmonix...”

I unconsciously muttered her name as I watched her retreating back. No matter the situation, she made sure to always keep the perfect posture and make the perfect gestures to charm men. Even I couldn’t tell if I was praising her designer or cursing him.

“Goddamnit, her designer really did a good job with her!”

Well, whatever. For now things are going well, and that’s what matters.

My second meeting with Lily had gone more or less as well as I could have hoped. Seeing as she’d been cordial today, I probably hadn’t messed up too bad last night. In fact, it was possible me getting completely wasted had been a positive as far as my relationship with Lily went.

At the very least, I haven’t locked myself out of her events. In which case, I absolutely needed to recruit her to my side. Not because of her looks, but simply because of how useful she’d be.

I glanced down at my notebook, which was open to the page that had all of her growth rate information.

Strength: Normal

Vitality: Normal

Intelligence: Bad

Mind: Good

Agility: Bad

Focus: Amazing

Looking at just her growth rates, she didn't seem like a particularly powerful character. Her total number of stat increases per level came out to just 19, which was higher than the average 18, but still lower than most unique characters, who had 20 or higher. Furthermore, her stat growth distribution wasn't great either. She had high Focus, which was good for the Thief class, but sadly her Agility was too low. Her decently high Mind meant she *could* make for a good healer, but her garbage Intelligence would always hold her back.

There was, however, a singular class that could take full advantage of these particular stat growths, and that class was Bard. Performances required high Focus, and a high Mind raised your aesthetic sensibilities, both of which were things the Bard class needed. They were also the only two stats that were vital to the class.

BB was filled with many unique classes, but Bard was special even among them. It had no combat capabilities of its own, but the music and songs a Bard could perform buffed your entire party and debuffed groups of enemies. The Bard's skills had large areas of effect, and unlike Mages and healer classes, their Class Skills didn't cost MP to use.

While all of that made the Bard class sound amazing, they were incapable of doing anything else while in the middle of a performance, which was a pretty big weakness. Furthermore, it took way more class experience for them to learn their skills than it did for practically any other class. In fact, people had initially thought it was a bug when they'd seen the class experience requirements to learn them. To top it all off, any time you gave a bad performance to a crowd, you got rocks and tomatoes thrown at you, which was unpleasant to say the least. I'd given up on learning Bard's skills from the start, and not even bothered to class change into it.

For that reason, someone who was already a Bard and knew a bunch of the Class's Skills would be a valuable asset to my team. But Lily had even more to offer than just that. If you'd bought the limited edition first press run of *Braves and Blades*, your copy of the game had come with an extremely bulky character guide. And if you happened to peruse Lily's entry in that character guide, you'd happen to learn her ultimate secret—her unique skill, Lorelei Voice!

Lorelei Voice allowed Lily to charm anyone who heard her voice. I had no idea

if it worked on monsters, but it would be extremely useful when it came to negotiating with other people. That was why I absolutely *needed* to convince Lily to join me! With the people I had now, I could probably navigate most combat situations one way or another, but a lot of events required you to negotiate with people who weren't enemies. If I had Lily by my side, I'd be able to leave negotiations to her. Which was why I'd taken action to meet her as soon as I'd escaped Recilia's looming presence in my room at the inn, and why I'd continue on that path until she caved!



From that day on, I made sure to visit Lily as frequently as possible between going around gathering items and farming levels. I gave her small gifts and listened to any requests she had. At first she'd kept her guard up, but after five or so conversations she finally started opening up to me.

"Umm, if it's all right with you, can I just call you by your name? Adding 'Mr.' to it just makes it seem so formal..." she said in an adorable voice.

Oh my god, she's too cuuute!

I agreed to her request without a second thought, of course. And it wasn't because I was letting myself fall prey to her charms, oh no. I just figured she would lower her guard faster if I acted like I was acquiescing to her every whim.

Honestly, who am I even making excuses for...?

Whatever—regardless, around the twentieth conversation with Lily, the chance I was hoping for came. Until now, she hadn't asked for anything despite me constantly telling her she could make whatever requests she wished of me. But this time when I'd asked, she'd finally taken the bait.

"There isn't anything I want, but there *is* a request I'd like to make if that's all right," she'd said in a serious voice, looking up at me. "Would you be willing to go to a dungeon with me? There's something I need to tell you."



"Here I go!" Lily cheered, launching into another song.

The dungeon she'd wanted me to take her to was the Cavern of the Flickering

Moon. It was a special dungeon that was filled with a unique type of mana that rendered regular equipment and spells useless, so you had to go through it using the equipment laid out for you at the entrance.

Despite these special restrictions, the Cavern of the Flickering Moon was an extremely easy dungeon to conquer. The equipment you were forced to use was crappy beginner-tier equipment, but the enemies were also as weak as the monsters you'd find in a beginner dungeon. And while you couldn't use spells or skills, you could still use Arts, and if you had the Motion Controller Z you could use those Arts manually too. Most importantly, Lily's performances were not restricted by the dungeon, and her skills made getting through it that much easier. While she couldn't fight, the many songs she played with her harmonica gave me boundless Strength and weakened the enemies considerably. Her songs were sometimes passionate, sometimes tender, and sometimes mystical, but they were always captivating.

The Bard class was considered to be the equivalent of a tier 2 class by the game, so it was rather impressive that Lily had managed to reach it at the very early level 5. That being said, its growth rate bonuses were lower than most other tier 2 classes, only coming out to a meager +8. It gave 2 bonus points per level to Mind and Focus, and only 1 bonus point per level to all other stats. As a result, even if Lily had equipped a weapon, she wouldn't have the stats to do much damage with it. This was because Bard was a class that was focused on buffing and debuffing to the exclusion of all else.

That said, the abilities of a Bard were such a powerful boon that the class didn't need any further abilities. Sure, Lily couldn't attack during her performances, but with her buffs my damage was more than enough. I plowed through monsters like they were nothing, and her pleasing melodies gave me motivation to fight even harder. Music might provide tangible buffs, but it also offered unquantifiable benefits that couldn't be represented by mere numbers. One of those benefits being that, because of the music, it felt like I could learn the rhythms of enemy attack patterns easier. It was clear that Lily would be a very valuable companion to have permanently.

In the end, not only did the enemies go down easily, we had no trouble with this dungeon's traps or gimmicks either. They were pretty simple, like two

buttons that needed to be pressed at the same time, or one person keeping a switch on the floor pushed while the other opened the door. Basic puzzles that just required two people to cooperate to get through.

Honestly, the whole dungeon was kind of a letdown.

I sighed. *This place isn't challenging in the slightest.*

Besides, since I already knew Lily's secret, I had a pretty good idea of what it was she wanted to tell me here.

I did my best to calm my pounding heart as I walked side by side through the dungeon with Lily, and as we passed through a few more puzzle rooms and entered a long corridor, Lily took the lead.

"When they were younger, my parents traveled around the world," Lily said, her gaze fixed firmly forward as she spoke. "They told me countless stories about the places they visited and the wonderful things they saw."

Though I could only see a small part of Lily's face, what I could see of her expression was dazzling. Even though I knew it was all an act, even though I knew her beautiful smiles were all fake, I was still captivated.

"Of all the places they visited, they said the view at the end of this dungeon was the greatest thing they ever saw."

I looked down and saw that Lily had a Recording Crystal in her hand. They worked basically the same way as video cameras. *BB* was filled with items that served modern functions despite being set in a fantasy world, but this was pretty common for these types of games.

"Apparently, this dungeon was the last stop on their journey, and when the two of them reached the end dad proposed to mom." Lily finally turned back to me, smiling. "Romantic, don't you think? But you know, my parents are meanies. When I asked what kind of breathtaking sight they actually found at the end of the dungeon they just smiled and refused to answer. Instead, they'd always say, You'll need to see it for yourself to find out.'" Lily looked forward once more, her gaze resolute. "That's why I decided..."

Lily trailed off as we reached the end of the corridor. "Is this the end of the dungeon?" she asked, looking confused.

Ahead of us was a small, plain, circular room with rough-hewn rock walls. A far cry from the breathtaking vista she had expected to find. There was a conspicuous stone pedestal in the center of the room though, with two hand-shaped depressions carved into it.

“I guess I’m supposed to put my hands here?” Lily muttered, looking dubiously at the pedestal.

But the moment she stuck her hands into the depression, the floor vanished.

“What?!”

It’s a trap!

Unfortunately, it was too late to do anything about it. The two of us fell into the gaping black void that had suddenly opened beneath us. I instinctively hunched up to try and protect my vitals, but then there was a loud thump, and I suddenly stopped falling.

“Are you okay?” Lily asked quietly, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

It seems she survived the fall as well. I wasn’t expecting another trap so far into the dungeon. I let my guard down.

I looked up, trying to judge how far we’d fallen, but it was too dark to make anything out.

Just as I was about to lower my gaze to Lily, she exclaimed, “Whoa!” She was looking straight ahead, and as I followed her gaze a spectacular sight spread out before me.

“Are those...flowers?”

At the far end of the space we’d been dropped into was a field of pure white flowers that were emitting a faint glow. It was hard to imagine anything could grow down here, but the flowers were plentiful and in full bloom.

“I’d heard that plants with an especially dense concentration of mana emit a glow, but I’d never seen it before now,” I muttered, awed.

These flowers had probably been birthed by the dungeon itself. The dungeon’s dense mana had gathered down here and coalesced into these flowers, whose glow was only as spectacular as it was because of the

surrounding darkness. For a few minutes I just stared silently at the flowers, drinking in the view.

“I see. So this is what my parents were referring to...” Lily muttered softly.

I turned to her and saw that there were tears rolling down her cheeks.

“H-Huh? Wait, why am I crying? Sorry, I...” Lily touched her cheek, surprised by her own tears.

Unable to bear it any longer, I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and hugged her tight. She looked up hesitantly at me. Even tear-stained, her face was beautiful. My heart was racing at a thousand miles a minute. Despite knowing the truth, I still found myself drawn to her. At this moment, there were two choices I could make.

Which one should I pick? Lily’s teary eyes made it hard to concentrate, and my thoughts dulled. I gulped audibly.

The two choices presented to me were “Confess your love to her” or “Console her.” Both seemed like they could be the correct option. At the same time, they both felt like the wrong option too.

Should I go for it, or wait a little bit longer?

If I was being honest with myself, I was scared of coming off too strongly. But if I wanted to recruit her to my party, chances were I’d need to get her to fall for me.

Besides, right now I’m not some creepy otaku playing video games in his room. I’m the protagonist of this game, the hero of this world, and a super hottie to boot! I can do this!

“Lily, I love you.”

I decided to press forward. Empty words of comfort like, “You don’t need to cry, I’m here for you” simply weren’t impactful enough. This was an important place for Lily, the two of us were alone together, and she was crying. If I didn’t take this chance, then I didn’t deserve to call myself a man!

“Huh?” She looked up at me in surprise. “H-Hold on. I-I...”

Now that I’d started down this path, I couldn’t stop midway. I looked at her

long eyelashes and teary eyes, and knew that she was the one for me.

“Ah...” She let out a soft breath and slowly closed her eyes. A second later, there was a loud bang and my vision went blurry.

“Whuh?” My voice came out slurred, and my vision grew even more distorted until eventually it went completely dark. I could tell I was staring at the cave floor, but I still had no idea what had happened.

As I struggled to pick myself up off the floor, a voice as cold as ice reached my ears.

“Oh, you can move already? I was trying to crush your balls with that kick, you know. Blech, you’re even tougher than an orc.”

Once I managed to parse what Lily was saying, my mind went blank. *This has to be some kind of mistake!*

I looked desperately up at Lily, but what I saw plunged me even deeper into despair.

“Phew. Thank god I took you into an equipment-restricted dungeon. You’re one tough cookie, Mr. Hero. Can’t believe you can get up already.” Her sarcastic, condescending tone would make even saints fly into a rage.

I no longer knew who this woman standing before me was. Or perhaps, I was simply averting my eyes from the truth because I couldn’t accept it.

“He he he he he.”

I watched, stunned, as Lily grinned at me and lifted her leg high into the air. There was a *Thud!* as it slammed it down onto my head, and then I once again found myself staring at the ground. It wasn’t until she started speaking again that I realized Lily was stepping on my head.

“God, it pisses me off that you’re acting like you’re the victim here! Do you have any idea what you did? Well, do you?!” Lily snarled, punctuating each word with a stomp.

However, I was the world’s greatest hero. A girl who wasn’t even a combat class was no match for me. I pushed myself off the floor, forcing her to move her foot off of me. As her face came into view, I glared angrily at her.

“Don’t get too cocky, you fucker. I— Oh.” Lily clapped her hands together, as if she’d suddenly realized something. “Let me guess, you think a big strong man like yourself can take on a frail little girl like me as long as your body can still move, don’t you?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. *Well, am I wrong?*

Lily’s lips curled up into a sneer and she started snickering. “Well, sorry to burst your bubble.”

Confused, I watched as she started undoing the buttons of her blouse. With each button undone, her bust became more and more prominent.

“What’re you—?!”

“Unfortunately for you, there’s no way you’ll be able to beat me. Because...” After undoing the last button, Lily spread her blouse wide open.

“Ah!”

My initial instinct was to close my eyes, but it turned out I didn’t need to bother. Because what I saw wasn’t Lily’s bare breasts. Instead, two blue blobs dropped out of her blouse as she spread it open.

“H-Huh...?”

The two blobs hit the ground with a splat, and it slowly dawned on me that they were chest pads made of processed slimes. When I realized that, the truth became clear. Lily...wasn’t a girl after all. She was...

“I’m a guy!”

“What?” I croaked.

Lily’s words had pierced through my very soul. My breath came in short gasps, and my mind was spinning. I wanted to deny what he’d said, shout that it couldn’t possibly be true, but I knew I was deluding myself. Underneath the slime pads, Lily’s chest was undeniably that of a man’s. But I still couldn’t understand why he was doing this.

“The question’s written all over your face. ‘Why? Why would you do this?’ Honestly, it’s kind of a pain to explain but whatever, I’ll tell you. For starters, my real name actually *is* Lily.”

That came as a surprise to me. Analyze let you see someone's stats, but the name it showed was the name they were using for themselves at the moment, not necessarily what their parents had named them. When I'd learned that Lily was a man, I'd thought their real name might be something different. Names in the game were gendered pretty similarly to how they were in real life. So why was a guy like him named Lily?

"Yeah, I figured you'd have that reaction," Lily said with a snarl. He looked dismissively down at me. "Remember how I told you I didn't really like my name before? Well, that's because I was bullied for having a girl's name as a kid. All of the boys in my village made fun of me for it. And whenever I met people for the first time, they'd always be surprised I was a guy despite having a girl's name."

The perverse joy with which Lily recounted his past sent shivers down my spine.

"I always wanted to tell those losers that Lily was a perfectly good boy's name, but I was a weakling back then so I could never argue with my bullies. Back then I actually resented my parents for giving me this name. But then I asked them why, and their answer surprised me." Still grinning, Lily said, "My mom told me that she'd had a miscarriage a few years before I was born. Her first baby had been a girl, and she'd been planning on naming that girl Lily. After telling me the story, mom had hugged me and said, 'I'm sorry you're suffering so much because of your name. The reason we named you Lily isn't because we don't love you. We gave you the name Lily because it's most beautiful name we could think of.'"

At this point I'd forgotten about the dire situation I was in and was engrossed in Lily's story.

"When I heard that, I was at a loss for words. Afterward I went back into my room and stared at myself in the mirror. I wasn't particularly manly, but I wasn't all that girly either. I was far from pretty, and I hated myself for it. But then I realized something. I could just work to make myself pretty."

The tone of Lily's story shifted dramatically from that point on.

"I borrowed my mom's clothes and started dressing up in them. I was smaller than her, so they looked baggy on me, and I didn't know the first thing about

makeup so I looked pretty crappy at first. But even so, when I looked in the mirror, it was a pretty girl that stared back at me.” Lily’s voice grew more passionate. “You have no idea how moved I was at that moment. I was prettier and cuter than any girl my age, and I knew if I put in the effort, I could become even prettier. At that moment I resolved to make myself the prettiest girl in the universe!”

I found myself captivated by Lily’s warped worldview.

“After that, it didn’t take long for me to learn how to apply makeup properly and buy dresses that actually fit me. A few years later, I told my parents I wanted to go on a journey like they did, and they immediately gave me their blessings. On that day I left the town I’d spent all my life in, reborn as a completely new person.”

Holy crap, he’s totally insane. But at the same time...

“My life changed completely after that. Before, boys used to tease me but now they blushed and stumbled over their words as soon as I smiled at them. Even the girls who’d talked shit about me behind my back just gritted their teeth in frustration because I was so much prettier than them. You have no idea how much fun it was to have guys drooling over me everywhere I went. It’s the best feeling in the world.”

The look of ecstasy on Lily’s face was indeed beautiful, in a way.

“But you know...” Lily’s tone suddenly turned angry, and he kicked me again. “Every now and again I run into guys like you, who don’t know their place! You men are tools who only exist to praise me and make me shine brighter!”

My vision started to grow blurry again from the repeated kicks as Lily raged on.

“You guys are disgusting! You all profess your love for me without even realizing that I’m a guy! You worthless horndogs!”

I couldn’t take this anymore. True, I’d confessed to Lily without realizing he was a guy. But that didn’t give him the right to insult me like this. If anything, he was the one who’d tricked me! He was at fault here! All I had to do was spread rumors about the fact that he was really a guy, and he’d be done for.

“Hm?” Lily looked down in mild amusement as I pushed his foot away and glared angrily up at him. Then he pointed to something on the floor, and I froze. “Oh, what’s this?”

“It’s...a recording crystal,” I muttered, stunned.

Lily grinned, savoring my reaction. “Looks like you finally understand the situation you’re in. Everything that’s happened so far has been recorded. Including the moment where you tried to forcibly kiss me after confessing, you pervert.”

I hung my head, defeated.

“Oh, where’d all that righteous anger you had go? Aren’t you supposed to be a hero? Surely you can take care of a weak little Bard like me? Come on, what’s wrong?”

This isn’t fair...

I wanted to scream at him, but I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was huddle up and weather the rain of kicks.

“How do you feel, you scumbag? You let yourself get seduced by a guy, got lured into this trap dungeon, and even left all of your powerful equipment behind! And now you’re being stepped on by a weak Bard! How does it feel, huh?”

Lily sneered as he mocked me. I wanted to shout at him to stop, to stop destroying the image of the pure girl I’d thought Lily to be.

“I can’t believe you fell for it. Do you really think there are women out there who’d say ‘Oh, I don’t need a reward. Just being able to see the place my parents spoke so much about is reward enough on its own’?”

There was nothing I could say, even as Lily brought his face next to mine and whispered, “There aren’t, you stupid virgin. It’s time you faced reality.”

I finally snapped. “Uwaaah!”

Screaming, I tore at my hair and slammed the power button on the game console.



“Uwaaaaaaaah!” Screaming, I tore at my hair.

God, I didn't want to remember that!

A few years ago, back when I'd still been in college, I'd been playing *BB* nonstop. Back then, I'd firmly believed that self-inserting was lame, but despite that I'd ended up completely charmed by the game character Lily Harmonix, and started self-inserting as the main character as I tried to get with her. Unfortunately, there hadn't been a huge amount of information on the game online back then, and I hadn't known that Lily was actually a guy. As a result, I'd gotten tricked by him and lured into that trap dungeon.

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

It had been years since that incident, but I still hadn't forgiven Lily, or the *Braves and Blades* devs who'd designed him, for that incident.

It's just not fair! Not only does Lily look like a girl; his voice actress was a woman too!

I absolutely hated the trend of sticking characters in games that looked and acted and sounded like girls, but then it turned out they were actually guys. Incidentally, I wasn't the only one who'd suffered at Lily's hands. Most *BB* players hated her, and as more information started to pop up online, it quickly became clear that he was the game's least popular character.

For starters, most everyone was bound to run into him during their playthrough. It was rarer to avoid triggering his introductory event. Up until halfway through the game's second year, if you were in the same city as him, just walking into the bar would trigger his event. You'd see him getting heckled by some drunk patrons, and of course 99% of players would help a girl in trouble in that situation. Then once you do rescue Lily, most players would almost certainly want to recruit him into their party, so they'd all start working through Lily's events and eventually get dragged down into hell once they hit the reveal that Lily was actually a guy.

Guys who cross-dressed tended to be pretty popular with the female player base, but characters like Lily were pretty different from the standard there. Lily was basically a girl in all ways, from personality, to voice, to looks, which wasn't how the cross-dressing guys that were popular with women acted or looked

like. As a result, Lily's only fans were a few hardcore ascended players who had an obsession with his exact character archetype. Most people were like me and had been devastated when they'd learned the truth. In fact, quite a few of them had sent the development company angry emails complaining about Lily's arc. Had I been more furious than dejected I might have done the same.

But my sorrow ends here. I finally have a chance to get my revenge. Just you wait, Lily. This time, I'll be the one to cast you down into hell!

I grinned evilly as I continued writing my apology to Recilia, who was standing in front of me and glaring down at me, her arms crossed.

Chapter 3: Rewritten History

“Mr. Rex!”

Lily waved gracefully to me as he watched me walk over, looking genuinely happy to see me. His powers of deception were truly frightening. Had I not known he was actually a guy, and one of the most twisted guys around at that, I might really have fallen for him. However, I managed to avoid being charmed by Lily’s smile, then used Analyze on him instead.

【Lily】

LV: 8

HP: 150

MP: 62

Strength: 39 (D-)

Vitality: 52 (D)

Intelligence: 39 (D-)

Mind: 91 (D+)

Agility: 39 (D-)

Focus: 91 (D+)

I see, so he’s level 8 in this world.

I didn’t know how the exact formula worked, but in *BB*, the level characters were at when they joined your party depended on when you recruited them. In Lily’s case, his starting level was 5, and it went up slowly as time passed in the game. Two months had passed since the goddess’s message, so by a player’s standards Lily’s leveling rate was exceedingly slow. Even compared to other NPCs, his level was going up slowly. That made sense though, considering his

class, Bard, wasn't suited to direct combat. His Mind and Focus were decently high, but even so all of his stats were less than half of Rex's. With a stat difference this huge, I'd be able to handle any surprise attacks Lily threw my way.

"Sorry, did you wait long?" I asked.

"Oh, not at all. I was just so excited that I came a bit early." Lily smiled warmly at me, unaware that I was appraising his combat abilities.

His acting was so perfect I wanted to snap at him, but I kept my expression neutral and said, "I see. I guess that makes sense, since today we're going to..."

"The Cavern of the Flickering Moon! It's the last place my parents visited on their journey before settling down!"



Everything's going smoothly so far... I thought.

We were making swift progress through the Cavern of the Flickering Moon. That was hardly surprising, considering the puzzles were easy and the enemies were weak. Plus, I already knew Lily's ultimate secret, so there was nothing to surprise me this time around. If it came to a fight, I had an overwhelming advantage.

But that was precisely why I couldn't afford to let my guard down for even a second. Overconfidence got you killed. Besides, I was just a normal guy from Japan. Meanwhile Lily was a master trickster who'd lead countless gamers to their worst nightmare. I needed to always keep in mind that I was the underdog here.

I already fucked up more than once with my interactions with Lily, so I know how dangerous he can be.

While I hadn't expected to run into Lily here in Freelea, that didn't change the fact that I'd handled our meetings quite poorly. Especially yesterday when I'd gotten absolutely wasted—though that was Rex's part in fault for not being able to hold his liquor worth a damn. Regardless, not only had I gotten so drunk that my memories of that night were somewhat hazy, I had woken up to find a kiss mark on my cheek. It was somewhat unnerving to know I'd been kissed by a

guy, but that wasn't the real problem here. Because of that, Recilia had thought I'd lied to her about trying to trigger an event, and had actually gone off to the pleasure district to have fun.

"I'm not mad that you went to such an establishment, brother," she'd said. "What saddens me is that you lied to me about what you were doing."

Suffice it to say, Recilia had been in an absolutely foul mood. I had no idea if Lily had kissed my cheek as a harmless little prank, or if he'd seen through my relationship with Recilia and done it to purposely drive a wedge between us. Either way, the results had been disastrous for me. Just thinking back to Recilia's expression back then sent shivers down my spine. It had taken a lot of sincere apologies to get her to believe the truth. However, I had succeeded in the end, which meant if driving us apart had been part of Lily's ploy, he'd failed! B-Besides, I hadn't even really lied when I said I was trying to trigger an event.

I'd done more than just train Radd, Recilia and the others over these past two months. I'd been gathering as much information on the events I knew would occur and how to trigger them, and had also been testing just how similar this world was to the game it was based off of. Unfortunately, due to certain circumstances, and the fact that I'd been swamped with more Guild work than I'd initially planned for, I hadn't been able to test too many things. There was one thing I'd managed to ascertain, however.

Major events that are set to happen in the game world can be triggered in this one too!

More specifically, I'd discovered that as long as you set up the situation to resemble the start of an event, it would progress roughly according to the event's plotline. And right now, I was testing how far from the original event story's plotline you could go to still trigger the same key moments.

"You really surprised me. I never imagined the dungeon you'd suggest we explore together would be this one..." Lily said, smiling happily up at me as we passed yet another puzzle room.

"I'm glad you approve of the choice."

Indeed, it was I who'd suggested we explore this dungeon, not Lily. Under the pretext of wanting to see what kind of adventurer he was, I'd invited Lily to join

me in a dungeon. I'd listed a number of dungeons, saying I needed to check them all out for work. Naturally, the Cavern of the Flickering Moon had been in that list. Unsurprisingly, Lily had taken the bait. He'd immediately agreed to join me in the Cavern of the Flickering Moon.

Normally, you'd have to spend a lot more time with Lily before the event where he invites you to the Cavern of the Flickering Moon happened. If memory served, you needed to talk to her at least twenty times in the game before she brought the dungeon up. However, in this world I'd spoken to Lily just twice. Once when appraising her, and then again when I'd invited her to dinner. We hadn't spent anywhere near enough time together for the event to trigger yet. But if today's dungeon dive went the same way the event was supposed to go, that would prove that you can skip through certain parts of an event's storyline, and trigger flags even if you hadn't met the conditions the game required.

"The truth is, when my parents were younger they traveled around the world," Lily said suddenly, confirming my hypothesis. "When I was growing up, they told me tons of stories about the places they visited."

Lily skipped happily as he spoke, looking as though he was truly enjoying this dungeon dive. I, of course, knew the truth. I smiled back at him, maintaining my own perfect facade.

"Of all the places they visited, they said the view at the end of this dungeon was the greatest thing they ever saw."

Lily took a recording crystal out of his pocket, and it began to glow as he activated it. It was that hateful crystal that had brought me to utter despair back in the game. But right now, I was as calm as could be.

"Apparently this dungeon was the last stop on their journey, and when the two of them reached the end dad proposed to mom." Lily turned back to me, still smiling. "Romantic, don't you think? But you know, my parents are meanies. When I asked what kind of breathtaking sight they actually found at the end of the dungeon they just smiled and refused to answer. Instead, they'd always say, 'You'll need to see it for yourself to find out.'"

Lily looked forward once more, his gaze resolute. "That's why I decided..."

He trailed off as we reached our destination.

“And now, you finally will get to see it for yourself,” I said, and Lily gave me an angelic smile.

“I can’t wait to see what special view they found. But it’s a shame. I was hoping I could adventure with you for a bit longer, Mr. Rex.”

Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt like Lily was acting even more friendly than he had in the game during this event. However, that changed nothing.

“I just have to put my hands here, right?” Lily asked hesitantly.

As he placed his hands on the pedestal, the floor disappeared beneath us, and we fell to the fated final room of the dungeon.

“Ah...”

The room was as dazzlingly beautiful as it had been in the game. A field of pure white flowers blooming in the middle of a dungeon, emitting a faint glow that would be imperceptible if the surroundings weren’t so dark. It seemed this place had remained undisturbed in this world as well.

“I see. So this is what my parents were referring to...” Lily muttered softly, staring out over the field of flowers. Tears began streaming down his cheeks, something he noticed only a few seconds later. “H-Huh? Wait, why am I crying? Sorry, I...”

I grabbed him by the shoulders. As always, his face looked beautiful even when marred by tears.

“Rex?”

Lily looked up at me in surprise, and I was once again struck by just how well he managed to emulate a woman. There were inherent differences between men and women’s skeletal structures and musculature, which led to natural differences in the way they moved. It was easy enough to copy the standing posture of a woman for a single still picture, but copying all of the tiny mannerisms while moving around in real life was nigh-impossible.

Well, in Lily’s case it’s obvious the reason he’s able to act so much like a

woman is because he's been designed from the ground up with a woman's build, I thought.

That being said, it was also true that part of Lily's backstory in the game was the enormous amount of effort he'd put into looking and acting like a woman over the years. In a way his hard work was praiseworthy. However, it was unfortunately time to rip away the facade.



Regardless of his reasons, the fact remained that Lily was tricking people to fulfill his selfish desires.

It's time to bring you to justice! If I can turn the tables on him in the one place where he dragged me down to hell, my victory will be complete!

Honestly, I could have destroyed Lily's reputation from the moment I'd met him if I'd wanted to. In the game, I had been unable to raise a hand against him because he had recorded proof of the fact that I'd confessed to him, but here I hadn't given Lily any ammo to use against me. And while the fact that he'd undoubtedly left a trail of men behind him that he'd fooled before coming to Freelea was bad enough for him, it was also true that everyone in this city trusted and respected me. I could easily wield that influence against him.

The only reason I'd played along with Lily's charade until now and come back to this cursed place was to get back at him for what he'd done to me in the game. Back then, what had pissed me off more than being tricked and insulted was the fact that all I'd been able to do while Lily gloated was cower before him. Had that been happening to me in real life and not a game, the real me would have at least been able to act in some way—argue back, maybe even find a way to fight. But I'd been trapped by the limited nature of the actions allowed to you in *BB*.

This version of *BB* was more than just a game though! My wish from years ago had finally been granted.

I love this world so much!

Whoever had made this world truly got it. They'd kept in the things you can only do in a game, but also made sure it functioned like a real world so you could do all the things you couldn't in a game but should be able to if the game world was real. Which was why I was going to change the ending of this cursed event and overcome the trauma of my past.

It's time to rewrite history!

I stared into Lily's watery eyes and spoke words of condemnation rather than love. "I know what your secret is."

He gave me a confused look. "What?"

Of course, I'd expected that reaction. It was one of the many possibilities I'd predicted when mulling over my revenge plan for hours and hours. Nothing he did would be able to stop me.

"Lily Harmonix. Class: Bard. Starting Level: 5. You're skilled at performing, singing, and dark magic. You also possess the unique skill, Lorelei Voice."

Lily looked visibly shaken as I listed off his traits. "Y-You're mistaken! It's true that my voice has special properties, b-but I've never done anything bad to..."

I ignored Lily's prattling. Nothing he said would save him. "You were born in Rinesta, and are 19 years old. Both of your parents used to travel. Your name, Lily, was the name they originally planned to give their first child, but your mom had a miscarriage. You were bullied for having a girl's name, which was what eventually led you to cross-dressing."

Confusion crumpled Lily's bewildered face as he completely lost his cool. "Cross what? I-I have no idea what—"

"You can drop the act now."

"What act?"

"I know the truth! You're actually a guy!"

Lily looked completely flabbergasted. "Wh-What are you saying? You must be under some misconception! I-I mean just look at me; would a man have breasts this large?"

Lily must have been getting really desperate if he was saying things like that, since they weren't the kinds of things the ideal woman he pretended to act like would ever say. However, that was precisely the defense I'd been waiting for.

"Aha!"

I wordlessly grabbed Lily's "breasts." They were far softer and more voluptuous than any real boobs could possibly be, cementing my suspicions.

"S-Stop! Please!"

You just don't know when to give up, do you?

My eyes narrowed. "I'll prove here and now those boobs of yours are fake!"

Lily let out a shriek as I brought my hands up to his collar and grabbed hold. Undoing the buttons of his blouse one by one would be too much of a pain, so I used Rex's relatively high Strength to just rip it right open. But what I saw then caused me to do a double take.

"Huh...? *What?! How?*"

There were no pads underneath Lily's shirt. As impossible as it was, his unrealistically big and soft boobs appeared to be one hundred percent real.

"You monster..." Lily whimpered, bringing me back to my senses. She was blushing to the tips of her ears as she crossed her arms in front of her to hide her exposed skin.

I stared at her in horror, a low noise of denial tearing from my throat. I had no idea what was going on, but I knew very well what I needed to do next.

"I'm so sorryyy!"

It seemed I'd managed to overcome my trauma of years past only to replace it with an entirely new one.



"So, you're saying you were told by someone that I was actually a man pretending to be the perfect woman and that I was going around deceiving other people for my own benefit, and you actually believed that?"

"Y-Yes!" Lily gave me an incredulous look. I couldn't really blame her; my story sounded ridiculous even to myself. But still...I couldn't believe that Lily really was a girl.

"A-Are you really not a guy, Lily?"

"I'm not!" Lily exclaimed, looking offended.

She definitely seemed like a genuine woman, but...it didn't make any sense. When I'd first met Lily in this world, our initial conversation had convinced me she was a man here as well.

"H-Hold on! Then why did you look so surprised when I said I knew your secret?"

“Because I was hiding the fact that my voice was special and that I could use dark magic.”

I let out a choked noise. *She has me there. In fact, she looked way more shaken when I mentioned her abilities than any of the other subjects we spoke of.*

At first I’d assumed her response was part of the act, but in retrospect I could see she’d probably been truly afraid.

“Th-Then what about your older sister who was never born?”

“I told you before, I don’t have any siblings! And as far as I know, my mom never had a miscarriage. She got pregnant with me around the end of her journey and my parents moved to Rinesta after that.”

“B-But then why did you lie about being old enough to drink?”

Her brow wrinkled. “That wasn’t a lie, though. I turned twenty a month ago.”

“What?!”

All of my arguments are being shot down one after another!

Clinging to my last ray of hope, I said, “W-Wait, but didn’t you say you were bullied because of your name? Wasn’t that because you were given a girl’s name as a guy?”

That had been the main thing that had convinced me Lily was a guy in this world too. Had Lily truly been a girl, then she wouldn’t have been bullied for having a normal girl’s name. So far Lily had been able to provide reasonable explanations for all of her other words and actions, but this wouldn’t be as easy to explain away! However, she just gave me a puzzled look.

“I did? I don’t think I was ever bullied for— Oh!”

Lily nodded, as if suddenly remembering something. Then she took out the instrument that she’d used multiple times during our little dungeon exploration session—her harmonica.

Don’t tell me...

Lily smiled bashfully and said, “I wouldn’t say I was bullied, exactly, but the

other kids did tease me for playing the harmonica when my last name was Harmonix. But it was because of my last name that I started to get interested in music in the first place, so it wasn't all that bad."

The only thing that stopped me from screaming, "Seriously, the punch line was you were teased about your last name?!" was the knowledge that the real Rex would never be so uncool.

I was out of ammo. Everything Lily had said made perfect sense. But it was still so weird! At the very least, the Lily in *BB* had undoubtedly been a man. There was no room for debate there. Both Lily's fans and haters had dug deep to find all the story events related to the character that they could, either because they liked him as-is, or were hoping to find something to support the theory that he was lying about being a guy. However, even if you continued Lily's storyline past the reveal, there was absolutely nothing that suggested it was a double-layered deception and he was actually a girl after all. Furthermore, most of his events had no real branching choices. You couldn't trigger any event where you got back at him for tricking you, and if you wanted him in your party you instead had to shower him with goodwill even after the way he'd treated you. Eventually you'd get a scene where he said, "Ugh, you're a hopeless pervert. Honestly, the thought of traveling with you disgusts me, but I suppose if you really want to serve me that badly, I'll come with you. You'll make for a nice footstool at least." Even after joining your party, Lily's personality never changed, and he didn't really get any other events.

If this world worked the way the game did, Lily would have absolutely been a dude here as well, I thought. But somehow that reality hasn't come to pass.

"I see you still don't believe me. In that case, I have only one thing to say." Lily brought her face closer to mine. She didn't look angry anymore; in fact she looked as though she almost pitied me.

"What?"

"This isn't a story, and the kind of person you described can only exist in fiction, not reality."

I crumbled to my knees. She was absolutely right. Her words finally cleared up my confusion.

I see... It all makes sense now.

I'd still been treating this world as a game, which was why I hadn't thought too deeply about Lily's situation. But if you took a more meta view of this world, and thought of it as a universe that followed consistent rules, you could see the problem with Lily's backstory. In fiction, you occasionally encountered characters who pretended to be the other sex. In games and light novels especially, they were all over the place. But of course, such people typically didn't exist in reality—which was why Lily, who'd mostly lived according to the womanly build and voice she'd been given in the game, had ended up being a woman in this version of *Braves and Blades*.

This world might be based off of the game world of *BB*, but it was still a real, living breathing world. It was just like how in the Maze of the Immortals, the skeletons had only spawned once instead of infinitely. Most things were identical to how they'd been in the game, but anything that was too far removed from reality was adjusted to fall in line with the rules of the world. People who looked and acted and sounded too much like the other sex had simply had their sex swapped. As a result, Lily Harmonix was a woman in this world. Actually, considering her age and the fact that she didn't have an older sister, it was highly likely that in this world she was the older sister the male Lily in the game was supposed to have had. Which meant the person I'd been trying to get revenge on this whole time didn't even exist in this world.

"Do you believe me yet?" Lily asked.

I nodded despondently. "Yes. Sorry, I must not have been in my right mind."

But just as I apologized again, I suddenly realized something. *Hang on, doesn't this mean I'm in a really bad spot?*

Since Lily was really a woman, what I'd done to her was assault. Furthermore, Lily had been recording it all with her crystal, so there was irrevocable proof of my actions.

If she wants, Lily could screw me over just as badly as in the game! It'd probably be even worse this time. Cold sweat started pouring down my back.

"Umm, Rex. I have a request."

“S-Sure, what do you need?” I braced myself, preparing for the worst.

Seeing my terrified expression, Lily chuckled. “Would you be willing to hire me?”

“Huh?”

That was not what I’d been expecting. Seeing my wary expression, she continued, “Don’t worry, I won’t do anything to you,” and gently embraced me, pressing my face into her bosom.

“Uh, Lily?” I had no idea what was going on.

“Poor Rex. You must have been at your wit’s end if you believed such a ridiculous story.”

“Huh? What?”

“Don’t you remember what you told me that evening you got drunk? You hated how people were putting you up on a pedestal, but you couldn’t afford to rely on anyone else for your mission, or go back to your hometown of Japan. You’ve worked so hard all by yourself this whole time.”

My face went pale. *Holy shit, how much did I tell her when I got drunk?!*

“But it’s okay. I’ll support you from here on out.”

“W-Wait, Lily...” I trailed off, my protests dying in my throat.

“I’m not like Recilia, who ties you down and tries to control you; or like Veteram, who works you to the bone; or like Mana, who idolizes you so much she doesn’t see the real you.” Lily looked up at me, her eyes full of kindness. “I and I alone am your one true ally.”

My thoughts were a mess, and the softness of Lily’s boobs wasn’t helping me think any more clearly. However, there was one thing I was certain of.

She’s the kind of girl who gets easily duped by shitty guys, isn’t she?

And so, on that day, I gained the most valuable pawn I could have ever hoped for.

Interlude: The Intersection of Light and Dark

“Where are you escorting me to today, brother?” Recilia asked, her expression as flat as always.

Despite her lack of emotion, I’d spent enough time with her now that I could pick up on the more subtle shifts in her tone to gauge her mood. I could tell she was teasing me with the way she glanced at me, and also that she was in quite a good mood.

Ever since she saw that kiss mark on my cheek she’s been pretty pissed, so this is a nice change of pace, I thought with relief.

I’d been planning on having a longer discussion with her to clear up that misunderstanding, but when I’d told her there was somewhere I wanted to take her, she’d immediately brightened up and given me a warm smile. I felt like I’d wasted my time steeling myself for this confrontation, but at the same time I was ultimately glad she was willing to hear me out properly.

“I’m taking you to a restaurant called the Wyvern’s Perch,” I replied, and Recilia visibly perked up.

“Isn’t that the restaurant famous for its high-class food?!”

“Yeah.”

When *BB* had been a game, it hadn’t particularly mattered whether the food of a particular establishment had been good or not, especially since restaurants didn’t have any real mechanical benefits, and existed mostly to flesh out towns. So I hadn’t really paid too much attention to them. But while I didn’t care that much about restaurants, if this brought a smile to Recilia’s face, it was worth taking her there.

“Th-That’s a surprise. I didn’t think you’d invite me to such a nice place, brother. U-Umm, is it all right for me to go dressed in these clothes?” Recilia asked hesitantly.

“We’re adventurers—I don’t see any problem.”

If I recalled correctly, part of the setting lore was that adventurers' formal wear was just their combat clothes. As a result, a lot of the important characters that showed up in the game wore their armor about town, or when they were giving speeches, and so on. I suspected the real reason things were like this was because it would have taken a lot more time and money to prepare sprites for every character in different outfits, but regardless I was grateful that was how this world worked.

"Umm, I'm pretty sure it's right around this corner... That's it, right?"

"Hmm, it certainly does exude a refined aura. I never imagined I'd visit an establishment like this with you brother, but since we're here, I'd like to—"

Recilia broke off, her smile freezing in place. I followed her gaze and immediately spotted the cause.

"Hello, Rex! And you must be the sister I've heard so much about! It's nice to meet you!"

Standing right outside the restaurant was Lily Harmonix, the other person I'd invited to today's meeting. And she was dressed up even more than usual.

"So, care to explain what's going on here?" Recilia asked, her words dripping with venom.

"Well, like I told you before..." I trailed off at the look on her face.

Recilia's good mood had evaporated instantly when she spotted Lily. She seemed even more put out than she had yesterday morning. I'd assumed the reason Recilia had been in a bad mood was because she'd mistakenly believed I'd gone out to fool around with prostitutes that night. Furthermore, since Recilia had been insistent that I consult with her before doing anything, I'd figured I could introduce her to Lily, who'd agreed to work with me, and clear up the misunderstanding in one fell swoop.

"You shouldn't be so hard on him, sister," Lily said with a smile.

"I don't recall giving you permission to call me 'sister,'" Recilia retorted coldly.

Oh no...

I hadn't expected them to be this incompatible. While Recilia was always like this, Lily was acting more aggressive than usual. She still had the same cheerful smile as always, but she was clearly taunting Recilia on purpose.

"I understand you're afraid someone might steal your beloved brother away from you, but isn't it about time you grew more independent?"

"D-Don't be ridiculous, I'm not afraid! Besides, we're not even..." Recilia suddenly trailed off and glanced back at me. "No, never mind. It's nothing," she finished, calming down.

"Is that so?" Lily cocked her head, looking a bit disappointed that Recilia had backed down so quickly.

I, of course, knew what Recilia had been about to say. Her brother wasn't me, but Rex. However, I had no intention of revealing that to Lily, and it seemed neither did Recilia.

"C-Calm down you two," I interjected. "Now that we've introduced ourselves to each other, let's get down to business."

I'd originally wanted the two of them to get to know each other better before discussing work, but at this rate it looked like their relationship would only deteriorate.

"Like I explained to you before," I continued, "Lily's going to be helping me gather information from here on out."

While I had a lot of game knowledge, I was still just a regular person. In a world without the internet, I had no way to efficiently collect information. Fortunately, Lily did. She wasn't particularly skilled in combat, but she was far more sociable than I was. She was much better suited to this job than Recilia too. However, it seemed Recilia wasn't happy with my decision.



“Will this girl really be able to help? She doesn’t know the first thing about you, brother.”

“Well I do know about ‘Japan.’”

“What?!” Recilia turned back to me in shock, and I furiously shook my head.

“Ehee hee hee,” Lily started giggling as she watched my panicked reaction. “Don’t worry, I simply heard Rex mention it when he was drunk; I don’t know the particulars of his situation.”

Recilia shot me a withering glare, and I silently mouthed an apology. But frankly this was a problem with Rex’s body, and not my fault.

“But...” Lily continued, “even if I don’t know everything, I believe I can still help. Besides, being willing to support someone even without hearing all of their secrets is proof that you truly care about them.”

“I don’t like her,” Recilia said, pouting. But she didn’t protest Lily joining our group any further, which meant she must have accepted her at least. In fact, she looked a little relieved that we’d be getting more help.

“A-Anyway, I was thinking of having you start by gathering intel on a certain person for me, Lily.” I said.

“Who?”

“They live in this city, and I’m trying to compile as much information as I can on them.”

I handed a small sheaf of papers to Lily and Recilia.

“Let’s see...” Lily narrowed her eyes as she flipped through the pages.

There had been four potential candidates for Lily’s first mission, and I’d picked the one that seemed the most practical. The first had been the Hero of Light, the game’s true protagonist. However, the chance that the true protagonist was in this city was quite low, and there was no guarantee they existed at all, so it wasn’t worth asking her to look for them just yet. The second person had been the rambunctious younger brother of Ain, the Prince of Light. The boy had been exiled from the kingdom, but he was a famous brat who had a lot of importance to the game’s story. The third had been the second prince of Ars, who would

eventually go on to become the Prince of Darkness. He always wore a mask, which people claimed was to hide the burn scars on his face, though in truth he was quite a hottie with flawless good looks.

In the game, I'd only ever encountered Ain's younger brother and the second prince of Ars as enemies, but I figured that if I was able to find them early on, there was a chance I could recruit them before they became antagonists. Unfortunately, I had very little information on them, and all I knew from my time playing the game was what they looked like. It would be a hard search, even for someone as resourceful as Lily. Furthermore, even if she did find the second prince of Ars, it was possible meeting him would reopen barely healed wounds for Recilia. As a result, I'd removed these two from consideration as well. The fourth and final candidate was who I'd decided Lily should look into first.

"You want her to investigate...Rose?" Recilia muttered in surprise as she read the name written on the page.

Her shock was understandable, since Rose was someone Recilia and I had "coincidentally" met a few days ago.

Lily also raised an eyebrow as she skimmed the pages. Once she was done she slowly looked up at me and said, "Upon coming to this city I heard quite a bit about you, Rex. You discovered manual Arts, are able to appraise adventurers and let them know where their talents lie, and are also apparently publishing picture books you call manga. But recently it seems you've cut back on your public presence and have been spending most of your time in a mansion on the outskirts of the city."

The depth of her knowledge on my activities caught me by surprise. It seemed I'd made the right choice, recruiting her to be my information gatherer.

Lily gave me a searching look and asked, "Rex, I told you I would support you unconditionally even if you told me nothing, and I intend to stand by that. But there's one thing I would like to ask. What is it you know, and what is it you're trying to do?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Nothing special. I just want to change the fate of this city."

Chapter 4: Signs of Growth

Ten days had passed since the Lily saga. Today, I was taking Radd and the other members of *Braves and Blades* to a new dungeon.

“Flare Enchantment! Melter!” Nyuuk cried.

A scorching blast of flame was released, signaling the start of another fight. In seconds, the rest of the group joined in, filling the before-silent hallway with the sounds of battle.

The first to charge in was Radd. He dashed down the hallway with a roar, raising his beloved Brave Sword high.

“Crimson Crash!”

Flames erupted from Radd’s sword as he slashed through a Greater Mummy. I whistled in admiration as I watched him go.

He’s gotten a lot better.

To tell the truth, Radd’s usage of manual Arts was pretty good, even by my high standards. Ever since his training in the Treasure Hunter’s trial temple, he’d improved considerably. And not only that, but he’d mastered some of the more advanced techniques you could do with manual Arts as well.

“I’m not done yet!”

As the mummy staggered back, Radd ran past it and shouted, “Arts Plus! Flame Slash!”

Radd slashed at the mummy again from behind, and since he’d used Arts Plus to chain the two attacks together, this one was even stronger than the first. He landed a clean hit against the mummy’s unguarded back, dealing a significant amount of damage to it.

Though mummies felt no pain, their weakness was fire, so the combo of fire-aspected Arts was enough to send it crashing to the ground. But it wasn’t dead yet. Even as it fell, the mummy raised its hand up toward Radd, and the flaming

bandages on its arms shot out toward him.

“Radd!” Nyuuk shouted.

“Wh-Whoa!”

Radd clumsily jumped back—a far cry from the polished movements he’d shown a second ago—and barely managed to escape the fiery bandages. But now he was the one on the back foot.

Though Radd had depleted most of the mummy’s health, it felt no pain and calmly got back to its feet and advanced forward once more. Incidentally the Greater Mummy that Radd was fighting was a level 42 monster. Under normal circumstances, Radd would have been overwhelmed, since his level was still in the early 30s. This was also why Radd’s combo attack had only damaged the Greater Mummy instead of killing it outright.

“As simpleminded as always, I see,” Prana said coldly, coming to her party member’s rescue. She hefted her bow and drew back. “Mirage!”

With those words, Prana’s form split into three. She then loosed her bow, and three arrows sped toward the mummy at lightning speed. They shot through the undead monster’s legs, pinning it to the ground.

“Th-Thanks, Prana!”

“Next time you fuck up I’ll shoot you too,” Prana snapped, then glanced over to her side. “Take care of the rest.”

“Got it!” Mana stepped forward, her nun’s robes whipping around her as she gathered her mana. She pointed her staff at the mummy that was on the verge of breaking free of its restraints. “Take this! Holy Pillar!”

A pillar of blinding pure white light appeared around the mummy, burning it to ashes. As the light faded, everyone could see that the mummy was well and truly dead. The battle was over.

“Hell yeah! We got another one!”

Nyuuk shook his head in exasperation as he watched Radd cheer. He lowered his staff and let out a long sigh. “In the end I didn’t need to do much,” he said, half relieved and half disappointed.

“You’re wrong there. The only reason the battle went so smoothly was because of your initial Fire spell. You should be more proud of what you accomplished.”

“I-If you say so.” Nyuuk blushed, surprised by the unexpected praise.

As he bashfully looked away, I used Analyze on him. If we subtracted the bonuses he was getting from his equipment, his current stats were:

【Nyuuk】

LV: 34

HP: 512

MP: 445

Strength: 104 (D+)

Vitality: 207 (C+)

Intelligence: 396 (A-)

Mind: 214 (C+)

Agility: 223 (C+)

Focus: 257 (B-)

Damn, he leveled up again. All of his stats except Strength are higher than mine now.

The new year had come and gone over the past ten days in this world, and Radd and the others had been far from idle. While I’d been inundated with Guild work, the four of them had gotten even stronger. Among them, Nyuuk had been the one to attempt new things the most.

Until now, most of his power had been borrowed from items and other sources, but he’d taken this lull as an opportunity to raise his own personal strength. He’d changed classes to Sorcerer, which was a magician class that specialized in buffing magic and spells that disrupted and displaced enemies. He’d noticed all of his magic was focused on pure offense, and had volunteered

to learn some more utility spells. The rest of his party tended to rush headlong into everything, so I was glad he had the foresight and good sense to see what his teammates needed and actively work to acquire it.

“Rex is right. You’re a far cry better than a certain moron who ran ahead and nearly got himself killed,” Prana said with a small smirk, sidling up to Nyuuk.

Eyeing Prana, I used Analyze to check her stats.

【Prana】

LV: 34

HP: 430

MP: 197

Strength: 280 (B)

Vitality: 166 (C)

Intelligence: 148 (C)

Mind: 136 (C-)

Agility: 284 (B)

Focus: 440 (A-)

Much like Nyuuk, Prana had changed up her fighting style in order to get stronger. She’d class changed to Trickster, which was a unique class just like Treasure Hunter. However the Trickster class was a speedy and acrobatic close-combat class that was an upgrade to rogue classes, instead of one that used bows and fought at range. The Mirage skill she’d used earlier was the Trickster’s signature ability. It cost a lot of MP, but it created two clones that possessed the same stats as you. Furthermore, they copied your actions exactly. Initially you’d be tempted to think that made it an extremely powerful skill since it effectively tripled your damage, but unfortunately Mirage was more suited to misdirection than offense.

The clones inherited your stats, but they had only one HP, meaning they

vanished the moment they were attacked. They also vanished the instant they collided with anything. That meant that even if you weren't getting attacked, the clones would vanish as soon as their weapons came into contact with an enemy. Since they vanished instantly, the damage they would have done with their attack connecting was canceled as well.

However, none of these restrictions applied to ranged attacks where the clones didn't directly come into contact with anything. Though Mirage had been designed with close combat in mind, if someone with a bow or throwing weapons used it they could actually dish out triple their usual damage. It does kinda suck that they can't copy your skills though. The clones copied your movements exactly, but they couldn't copy any magic or skills you used. Technically they could copy manual Arts activation, but that wasn't too helpful as most Arts were melee attacks. If you used a bow skill though, the clones would just launch a regular attack instead. As a result the only people who used Mirage for offense were bow users that stacked a lot of self-buffs, stocked up on a large amount of enchanted arrows with powerful effects, and fought primarily using basic attacks.

"What?" Prana said, turning to me when she noticed I was staring at her.

"Oh, I was just impressed at how perfect your timing was back there." I said. It was the first thing that came to mind, but the praise was genuine.

"It's not that big a deal. Anyone can do it with a bit of practice," Prana replied curtly, tightly clutching the elementally enchanted arrows she'd recovered from the mummy's corpse.

I'd crafted them for her myself, and she was surprisingly fond of them. Though you'd never realize it, with the attitude she normally took with me. I didn't think she disliked me, but somehow our conversations always ended with her making a barbed comment of some kind.

"Don't look so sad. I'm pretty sure Prana was happy to be praised by you," Mana said, walking up to me.

She was the closest to Prana out of everyone in the party, so I was inclined to believe her. Incidentally, though Mana seemed like the most average person in the *Braves and Blades* party, I knew she was actually the most amazing, as

exemplified by her stats.

【Mana】

LV: 34

HP: 464

MP: 391

Strength: 108 (C-)

Vitality: 183 (C+)

Intelligence: 342 (B+)

Mind: 464 (A)

Agility: 169 (C)

Focus: 255 (B-)

Insanity.

While Nyuuk and Prana had opted to diversify their skill set, Mana had focused solely on the one thing she was good at. Her affinity for prayer was ridiculously high, and she spent so much time in the Adventurers' Guild's prayer room that she'd earned the nickname "Little Prayer Saint" among the city's adventurers. Her Mind was so high it was rated A, and she was the only member of the party with any stat rated that high. Her light magic was equivalent to a tactical nuke at this point. Not only was her Mind ridiculously high, she clearly had a high affinity for light magic as well. When it came to fighting undead enemies, Mana was the main damage dealer.

"Look, old man! I leveled up again! You were right; you get stronger so much faster fighting higher level enemies!" Radd exclaimed, running up to me.

Like the others, Analyze showed that he'd gotten much stronger in the past ten days.

【Radd】

LV: 34

HP: 772

MP: 166

Strength: 326 (B)

Vitality: 337 (B+)

Intelligence: 117 (C-)

Mind: 255 (B-)

Agility: 242 (B-)

Focus: 211 (C+)

His highest stats were lower than everyone else's, but his overall stat spread was much more balanced and he served as the party's central pillar. Plus, after overcoming the Treasure Hunter's trial he'd gotten much better at using manual Arts and he had a much better sense of how to position and move around in a battle.

It's almost scary how good these guys are.

Even though I'd trained them myself, I was awed by how powerful they'd gotten.

"Where to next, brother?" Recilia asked from behind me.

Of the people here, she was definitely the one with the most broken stats.

【Recilia】

LV: 34

HP: 694

MP: 203

Strength: 418 (A-)

Vitality: 298 (B)

Intelligence: 154 (C)

Mind: 278 (B)

Agility: 585 (A+)

Focus: 233 (B-)

After class changing to Ninja, her already high Agility had started growing even faster, outpacing even Mana's Mind growth. Her current power level was insane.

Before, I might have lamented how blessed these guys were compared to Rex's shitty stats. However, Radd and the others weren't the only ones who'd grown stronger. I stared at myself in the mirror that was hanging in the hallway.

Rex Tauren, the Aloof Adventurer. He'd been gifted with a high starting level, but in return his growth rates had been handicapped beyond reason. His balanced stat spread of 200 had been made fun of by the community at large. But three months had passed since I'd been transported to this world, and after numerous trials and tribulations, I'd finally managed to tangibly grow in power despite Rex's many handicaps.

I took off my stat-boosting enchanted rings and sized myself up in the mirror. A dour man dressed in all black stared back at me.

"Analyze."

Take a look at this, Rex! This is what three months of nonstop effort has accomplished! This is what you, and I, have become!

【Rex】

LV: 52

HP: 542

MP: 281

Strength: 210 (C+)

Vitality: 204 (C+)

Intelligence: 214 (C+)

Mind: 204 (C+)

Agility: 210 (C+)

Focus: 212 (C+)

God, this sucks... I thought, breathing a heavy sigh as I stared at my stats.

You got basically no experience for killing enemies that were lower level than you in *BB*. And unfortunately, Rex's starting level was 50. Which meant if I wanted any decent amount of experience, I'd need to defeat enemies level 50 or higher, despite the fact that my stats were lower than Radd and the others, who were level 34. Thanks to the Goblin Slaughterers I'd stocked up on I'd managed to defeat the first Demon Lord, Bring, and level up twice. But barring another miraculous situation like that one, there was little chance I'd be gaining new levels.

But while I couldn't rely on leveling up to get stronger, there was one other way to increase my stats, like through training. I could increase my Strength through practice swings, my Intelligence through meditation, and so on, just like I'd had Radd and the others do when I'd first agreed to teach them. They'd all gained around 30 stats total over the course of a month.

Of course, I knew this was a trap. Training worked better the higher your innate growth rate was for a stat, and the lower that current stat was. Radd had only 54 Strength when he'd started training, and he'd been able to raise it by a whopping 22. Recilia, who'd trained for just as long as him, had only risen 4 points in Strength since her starting Strength had been 126. My current Strength was even higher than Recilia's had been back then, and my innate Strength growth rate was way worse. It would take ages to gain even a single stat point. Which was why I'd given up completely on raising stats through training, and only occasionally joined Radd when he was doing practice swings, mostly for fun.

I guess even that small amount of time spent training did at least get my Strength from 209 to 210... I thought.

Still, a single stat point in 3 months was basically nothing. Ultimately, training was too ineffective and time-consuming a method to raise my stats.

Rex really is playing on hard mode, huh?

I frowned at my reflection in the mirror, even though I knew there was no point in grumbling.

“Old man, what’re you staring at the mirror for? Let’s get going,” Radd said in a cheerful voice.

I turned away from the mirror, returning to reality, then put my stat-boosting rings back on and said, “All right. Stay on your toes, though. Don’t forget that these enemies are at significantly higher levels than you.”

“You got it! I’ll make sure to buy enough time for Mana to cast her spells no matter what we run into!”

I could tell my warning had gone in one ear and out the other, but I just sighed and said nothing. At least Radd hadn’t said he’d take them all down himself, so in a sense he had grown a little.

As we walked down the corridor, the air grew chillier, and I honed my senses, alert for the slightest noise.

“I guess this room’s next,” Nyuuk said.

At the end of the stone corridor was an old, worn door. As we drew closer, the rotting door swung open of its own accord. It was nice knowing we didn’t have to pick a lock or watch out for traps, and I nodded to Nyuuk before stepping inside. Pieces of decaying lumber were stacked against the rough stone walls, and there was a wooden coffin situated in the center of the room. Aside from that, the room was empty.

I recognize this room... I stopped in my tracks, trying to bring distant memories into focus.

“Tch, guess this room’s a bust...” Radd said, sounding disappointed. He stepped past me just as I remembered what the room was.

Oh shit! Alarm bells rang out in my head.

“Radd!”

The lid of the coffin blew open, and a torrent of inky blackness surged out of it, rising up to the ceiling. It was hard to describe what exactly the black something was. Though it looked like a single lump, closer inspection showed that it was a mass of many bodies.

As the lump reached the ceiling it split into two, one section going right and the other going left. The many creatures that made up the mass opened their eyes at once, making it look like dozens of red dots had suddenly appeared on the surface of the lump.

“Those are Black Blood Bats! Watch out, they’re among the most dangerous of the vampire bat monsters!” I shouted, grabbing Radd by the shoulder and pulling him behind me.

Black Blood Bats were around the same level as the Greater Mummy we’d killed earlier, but their stats were much lower. In return, they tended to spawn in massive groups like this one. They hadn’t posed much of a threat to me in the game, so I’d forgotten about them.

But we aren’t equipped to handle them right now!

We were pretty heavily understatted for this dungeon, and we were making up the difference with smart tactics and powerful skills. But that was only effective against a few enemies at a time. Fast, numerous swarms like this cloud of Black Blood Bats would overwhelm us with pure numbers. If you were fighting them at the right level the usual strategies to beat these swarms was to either tank through the damage and kill them one by one, or to hold them off long enough for your Mage to get off one powerful fire spell. But at their current level, Radd and the others wouldn’t be able to tank these guys’ hits for long. Unlike the other enemies we’d fought in this dungeon, these enemies weren’t undead either. Mana’s deadly light spells wouldn’t be nearly as effective on them.

“Old man, what are you doing?! You can’t take these many on at—”

Radd hurriedly tried to step forward again but I held a hand out to hold him back. With as much confidence as I could muster, I said, “Don’t underestimate me. Since we’re already here, I’ll take this opportunity to show you just how much I’ve grown as well!”

The bats were flying around too erratically for me to count, but at a glance there appeared to be around a dozen of them. If they all came at me at once, I'd be ripped to shreds in seconds.

“Let's get this party started!” I shouted, throwing a Goblin Slaughterer at the swarm. The dagger pierced through two bats, but it didn't seem to have much effect. Though the bats were staggered for a second, they recovered quickly and I could tell they'd barely taken any damage. “Ha ha. Well, I saw that coming.”



The enemies we're facing are strong enough now that exploiting game knowledge won't get me past them, I guess.

The Goblin Slaughterers I'd gotten from the casino were pretty powerful weapons in the early game. Sure, they had the debilitating drawback of doing heavily reduced damage to anything that wasn't a goblin, but you could circumvent that by using them as throwing weapons instead of equipping them. However, the bats here were high enough level that even the powerful Goblin Slaughterers didn't do much damage to them.

But it's not like I was out of options. I pulled out another Goblin Slaughterer and clutched it in my left hand, then grabbed onto my Metallic King Sword with my right.

Man, this sucks, I thought. I wasn't even planning on fighting in this dungeon. Cold sweat poured down my back. I rhythmically bobbed my left hand up and down, maintaining a beat in my head. *I just...need to make sure I get the timing right.*

The most annoying thing about these bats was how small they were, and how erratic their movements were. Ideally you'd have some kind of big AoE spell or long-range sniping skill to take care of them, but neither Nyuuk nor Prana were high enough level to take them out in one go. Plus, now that we were stuck in this tiny room, we couldn't afford to use big spells or we'd get caught up in the blast.

One of the bats got tired of waiting for me to advance and dived down.

Oh! Here one comes! I thought, jolting into motion. I swung my sword to intercept it, but as expected it deftly dodged out of the way.

This was what made the bats such troublesome opponents. They were nimble enough that unless you knew Arts that could be freely redirected at any time, you'd never hit the buggers. I winced as someone behind me let out a scream, but didn't look back. I wasn't in any danger yet at least.

I stopped my sword mid-swing and stepped forward.

"Not so fast!" I shouted, stopping my sword mid-swing and stepping forward. I changed my swing into a thrust, stabbing through the chest of the bat that was

attacking me. It flapped weakly for a few seconds, trying to escape, but then disintegrated into particles of light.

“That’s one down.”

I then swung my blade in a wide arc, catching the second bat which had tried to circle around to my flank. “Come on, is that the best you’ve got?”

I doubted the bats could understand human speech, but they chose that moment to rush me all at once. But that changed nothing. I was no longer a simple gamer who knew nothing of swordplay and had to rely on Arts. When I’d entered Rex’s body, I’d inherited his swordsmanship skills.

“Four, five, six...”

Once I’d taken down half of the bat swarm, I ramped up the pace of my swings. At times I predicted where a bat would dodge, at times I had to chase after it, but either way I was always able to take advantage of my sword’s speed and reach to bring my quarry down.

“Holy shit...” I muttered.

It looked like there were only two bats left, flying weakly around the center of the room.

An extended engagement will only put me at a disadvantage. I’ll end this now!

I was still waving the dagger in my left hand up and down to keep the rhythm, and the moment the two bats’ flight paths overlapped enough that they were both in a straight line from me, I leaped forward.

There was a good two meters between me and the bats, but I closed the distance in an instant.

“It’s over!” I cried, slashing through the two remaining bats in one fell swoop.

Phew, I managed to make it through that alive. I let out a small sigh of relief.

“Rex!” Mana shouted, and I turned around to see a new monster burst out from under the stack of lumber that had been leaning against the wall, its claws heading straight for me.

Shit, I forgot there was an ambush in this room!

That had been the source of the unease I'd felt upon entering this room, but there was no point in lamenting my carelessness now. This particular monster was a Moon Werewolf, and there was no time to dodge the claws going straight for my throat. Instead, I pulled my sword arm back, then waited for the perfect timing to act.

"Flash Step!" I shouted, and in that instant I teleported behind the werewolf.

This was one of the skills a Blademaster could learn, Flash Step. It was a completely bullshit skill that let you teleport behind an enemy the moment their attack hit you. But thanks to that, I'd come out unharmed, and in a perfect position to counterattack.

"Too bad, you almost got me."

I drew my sword back, preparing to strike at the werewolf's unguarded back.

"Infinity Blade." I sliced straight through the monster, cleaving it cleanly in half.

I breathed another sigh of relief, but this time I was sure there were no surprises left waiting for me. I resheathed my Metallic King Sword, stuck the Goblin Slaughterer back in my Inventory, and waved limply to the others.

"Are you okay, Rex?!" Mana shouted, pushing past Radd and running over to me.

"Don't worry, I'm fine." I forced myself to smile, making it look like this had been a piece of cake.

Seeing that, Mana gave me a relieved look and said, "Th-Thank goodness. When I saw that monster burst out from the wood, I thought I was going to have a heart attack."

"Don't worry, I was ready for a surprise attack," I replied confidently.

That was, of course, a blatant lie. I'd been completely blindsided by the werewolf, and if Mana hadn't warned me I might have been killed.

That scared the shit out of me...

I'd reflexively stepped forward to cover Radd, but I decided next time I wouldn't do anything so reckless. I wasn't a fan of battles that carried too much

risk. My style was to maintain a safe margin of error and only fight when victory was assured. Maybe I was a weak gamer, but I liked it when things were easy like that.

“Wh-What was that thing you did just now, old man?!” Radd exclaimed, coming back to his senses now that the fight was over. He’d been watching me eviscerate the bats with slack-jawed amazement this whole time. “Like, I knew you were strong, but I didn’t know you were *that* strong! I mean, aren’t your stats...” Radd trailed off awkwardly.

“Yep, they’re lower than yours, Radd,” I finished with a gentle smile. “The reason I was able to fight so well was thanks to the skills I was using.”

I had known from the start that neither training nor leveling up were realistic methods of making Rex stronger. But that hadn’t meant I’d given up on getting stronger. So instead I’d turned to skills that didn’t rely on stats.

“For starters, I have better equipment than you guys.”

Radd and the others were wearing crappy armor because it increased their growth rates, but since I wasn’t planning on leveling, I could wear actually useful equipment. I’d given up on raising my Defense and all of my enchanted equipment raised my Strength instead. As a result, I was able to keep up somewhat with Radd and the others in terms of offensive ability. Furthermore, the weapon I’d used was the Metallic King Sword, which was the casino’s top prize. Unlike the Goblin Slaughterers, this weapon was strong enough to be effective even against enemies of this level. In fact, it was powerful enough to be a viable endgame weapon even. But of course I’d had both of those things before.

“What’s changed are the skills I’ve learned. In particular, I’ve picked up a lot of passive skills.”

Instead of training or grinding levels, I’d spent all my time acquiring various Class Skills that would make me stronger. In order to increase your class proficiency, you needed to use a Class’s Skills over and over. The higher tier a class was, the longer it took to gain class proficiency. However, Rex was a weirdo who’d acquired every single skill associated with the lower tier classes, which meant the only skills I needed to learn were ones that belonged to

unique classes like Treasure Hunter, or Trickster, or Blademaster.

The important thing here though was that I needed to be able to grind out class proficiency efficiently in my spare time. The class Prana was using, Trickster, had a few skills that you could grind out pretty easily. The first skill the class got was Fast Swap. It was a simple skill that let you immediately swap out your equipped weapon with anything in your Inventory. Because it was so basic, it was the perfect skill to use for proficiency grinding. Offensive skills required you to actually hit an enemy before they gave any class proficiency, but Fast Swap gave proficiency just by using it. Whenever I'd been listening to someone drone on about whatever I'd been swapping weapons constantly under the table, and since I'd been swapping to the exact same type of weapon no one had even noticed what I'd been doing.

In this way, I'd found various tricks to grind out proficiency while doing other things with my time. In fact, the one Blademaster skill that I'd thought had been somewhat meh—Blademaster's Presence—had proven the most useful for proficiency grinding. The skill unleashed a non-damaging shock wave that woke up any nearby characters afflicted with the sleep or drowsy status. It could be useful in some situations but frankly not that many enemies used sleep, and besides you tended to have a dedicated healer to take care of these things, not a Blademaster.

But now I understand the true value of this skill.

Sure, it was certainly not very useful in combat, but it cost next to no mana to use, and had a very short cooldown. Best of all, it gave class proficiency based on how many people it affected, which meant if you spammed it in a crowd you got a shit ton of class experience all at once. Unfortunately, you couldn't really take advantage of that in the game. For one thing, huge crowds didn't gather in too many places in-game, and furthermore you weren't allowed to activate the skill unless there was at least one sleeping person in its effect radius. But in this world those restrictions were gone, and I'd discovered I could use it even when everyone around me was wide-awake. Furthermore, I myself had created a situation where huge crowds gathered around me once a week when I gave my lectures on manual Arts and when I appraised people. I'd been constantly spamming Blademaster's Presence on them every week, getting rid of any

drowsiness they might have had as a side benefit.

When I explained all of this to Radd, he said, “Old man... I can’t believe you were doing this the whole time you were giving lectures and appraising people... I actually liked some of those speeches, but now I know you weren’t even taking them seriously...”

“O-Oh come on, it’s fine isn’t it? Besides, everyone got their drowsiness blasted away for free.” I stuttered, before quickly regaining my composure and going back to explaining my grinding process.

Thanks to the Blademaster’s Presence spam, I’d managed to quickly get a lot of class experience for Blademaster, which was known to be a notoriously hard class to raise proficiency on. With just normal combat it would have taken a few months to master the class, but I’d managed to do it in a few days while idling in the city. It was honestly hilarious.

My goal had of course been to acquire the Twin Arts skill, which allowed you to copy the effects of a skill you used with one weapon to the weapon in your other hand. But I’d gone even further than that and also acquired the greatest passive skill, Ultimate Sword Mastery. It was entirely possible not even Nirva had this skill yet, considering how little time had passed since the goddess’s message which signaled the “start” of the game.

“What does Ultimate Sword Mastery do?” Radd asked, and I grinned.

“It has a simple but very powerful effect. It doubles all damage you deal with sword-type weapons.”

“...Come again?”

Nirva was stronger than most characters got, even at the endgame. Ultimate Sword Mastery was your reward for beating him, although you’d still also have to spend what the devs probably assumed would take dozens of hours to grind the Blademaster class up. It was an unbelievably powerful, game-breaking skill, but considering the stringent requirements to unlock it, that level of power made sense.

“Ah, by the way, there’s a weaker version of the skill called Sword Proficiency that the Swordmaster class learns which increases your damage with swords by

thirty percent.”

“Really?!”

Sadly, passive buffs of the same type didn’t stack. So there was no point in me getting the skill, though it would be pretty helpful for Radd.

“Now you know there’s more to classes than just the stat growth bonuses they provide. But don’t worry, as long as you guys keep at it you’ll slowly build the foundation you need to—”

As I brought my lesson to a close and moved to pat Radd on the shoulder, Recilia suddenly interrupted me.

“One moment, brother.” She gave me a dubious look and asked, “What happened to the dagger that was in your left hand during the battle?”

“You know how I learned Fast Swap, right? I just put it into my Inventory. See?”

I pulled a new weapon out of my Inventory and dropped it into my left hand.

“That isn’t the Goblin Slaughterer you had earlier,” Recilia said, growing more suspicious. “If you were planning on fighting with just the one sword, you should have kept your left hand free and two-handed your weapon to do more damage. So why did you equip a weapon in your left hand that you never even planned on using?”

Silence fell, before I finally stuttered, “A-As a backup! I didn’t have to use it, but if one of the bats had gotten through, I might have needed it.”

It had taken me a few seconds to come up with that answer, and Recilia narrowed her eyes at me. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Wh-Why not?”

Recilia gave me a sharp look. “It’s true that Ultimate Sword Mastery is a powerful skill, but that alone shouldn’t give you enough damage to defeat level 40 monsters so easily.”

I had no rebuttal to that. Indeed, Ultimate Sword Mastery was a powerful skill, but your base values needed to be high enough that doubling them had meaning. It doubled the damage you dealt, but didn’t impact your Attack stat in

any way. So if you were already doing little to no damage against an enemy it was basically useless. In other words, if I didn't already have some means of doing half of a bat's health in one attack, Ultimate Sword Mastery wouldn't have let me one-shot them. I'd crafted my speech to hopefully distract people from noticing that point, but as always Recilia was too sharp to deceive.

After a brief silence, I finally gave in. "Fine, you win. Since you figured that much out I'll tell you the whole story," I said, averting my gaze.

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Radd asked, confused.

"It wasn't my own abilities that gave me the power to kill those bats. It was thanks to my weapon."

"Your weapon?" Radd parroted, giving me a confused look.

While it was true that I'd acquired a bunch of passive skills to power myself up, I'd known from the start my stats were too low to deal with level 40 monsters. However, I'd already once before come up with a fighting style that didn't rely on having high stats.

"I'll be frank—my Attack power is too low to deal with monsters at this level. But remember how there was just one skill of mine that had worked even against Nirva the Invincible Blademaster?"

"You... Wait, are you talking about Final Break?!"

Final Break unleashed a powerful AoE attack that destroyed your equipped weapon. Goblin Slaughterers weren't good enough to do much damage to the bats when thrown, but Final Break had a much bigger multiplier, so even the Goblin Slaughterer's stats were enough to deal serious damage.

"H-Hold on a second! You couldn't have used such a wide-reaching attack in a small space like this without hitting all of us! Besides, you..."

"That's right, until now I wouldn't have been able to use Final Break in that situation, and if all I'd done is simply use Final Break it would have hurt us more than the bats. But now I have an alternate option available to me." Radd still didn't seem to get it, so I added, "Remember how I told you I leveled up the Blademaster class and learned Twin Arts? Do you recall what Twin Arts's effect is?"

“U-Umm, it lets you copy any skill you use with one weapon to the weapon in your other hand? Wait, hang on...” Radd looked up at me in shock.

“Yep. I used Final Break with the weapon in my left hand, then transferred the effects of that skill onto the sword in my right!”

Honestly, I was surprised the tactic worked as well as it did, since I hadn’t been sure it would do what I’d intended at first. After all, just using Final Break and Twin Arts in conjunction would mean Final Break would still activate from my left hand. So I’d used Fast Swap immediately after activating Final Break to cancel the initial Final Break activation. Normally, you couldn’t unequip a Goblin Slaughterer once you actually equipped it, and you needed a weapon to be equipped to use Final Break. However, the moment you did use Final Break, the weapon was considered broken, which meant Fast Swap let me change it out without having to worry about Goblin Slaughterer’s curse. It was a somewhat unwieldy combo, but it worked better than I’d expected.

The moment I swung my Metallic King Sword with my right hand, I’d used Final Break with my left. I’d then immediately equipped a new Goblin Slaughterer with Fast Swap to cancel the Final Break while still transferring the damaging effects of Final Break to the Metallic King Sword in my right hand. Incidentally, the damage of Final Break didn’t overwrite the base damage of my sword swing, so the two were added together.

That wasn’t all either.

“Since the actual attack is happening with a sword, that means Ultimate Sword Mastery doubles the damage of Final Break plus my sword swing.”

The damage of Final Break plus the damage of my Metallic King Sword doubled was more than enough to one-shot a level 40 bat. The biggest problem had honestly been the Moon Werewolf.

“The Moon Werewolf wasn’t as fast as the bats, but he was a lot tougher, so I needed to combine another Art with Final Break. Oh, also! A good deal of monsters take increased damage when you attack them from behind, so I had that bonus damage going for me too. With all that combined, even the Moon Werewolf died instantly.”

As I finished my explanation, Radd leaned forward excitedly. “Holy crap, that’s

so cool! So if you fight like that even level 40 monsters are nothing to you, huh? In that case...”

I sighed. Radd looked really impressed, but frankly, he shouldn't be. If I could have done this kind of damage without relying on such a risky strategy, I would have. And I would have been more proud of what I'd accomplished too. Sadly, the world wasn't that nice.

“Ten,” I said quietly, interrupting Radd.

“Huh?”

“That's the number of Goblin Slaughterers I had to sacrifice during this fight.”

The sword I'd transferred Final Break's effects on to was undamaged, but I'd still had to lose the initial Goblin Slaughterers to activate Final Break. Furthermore, since I couldn't unequip Goblin Slaughterers normally, I had to literally wait until the exact moment I used Final Break to also use Fast Swap. To top it all off, each Goblin Slaughterer I lost was 5,000,000 wen down the drain since I could use alchemy to transmute them into valuable raw materials.

“The less I have to use this technique the better! It costs me 5,000,000 wen with each attack! I already lost a lot of my Goblin Slaughterers in the fight against Bring, and now I had to sacrifice another ten!”

Of course, we'd been in a real pinch there, so I'd burned the cash without a second thought, but the loss of that much money with each attack had really stung. I'd managed to economize a bit by killing the last two bats in one attack, but that didn't change the fact that I was now 50,000,000 wen poorer. And that had only been thirty seconds of combat!

Aaargh! I shouldn't have tried to look cool in front of everyone and just asked Radd and the others to help me out!

Although, if I'd done that, there was the possibility that someone else would have taken the werewolf's surprise attack. In which case fighting alone may have been the correct choice.

As I was agonizing over whether or not I'd made the right call, Prana walked over to me. “Rex...” she said softly, looking into my eyes.

I couldn't read her expression at all, and I waited with bated breath to hear what she'd say next.

"I dub this technique of yours, Money Torch." "

"Nooo!"

I had an ominous feeling that name was going to stick.

Radd let out a groan as he peeked into the next room. There was another coffin in it, and the room's layout was identical to the one he'd been ambushed by the bats in.

"Nah, this one's probably fine..." I said, stepping forward as I noticed what was inside the coffin.

"Wait, old ma—?!"

Before Radd could stop me, I walked over to the coffin and looked inside. "I knew it."

Unlike the coffin which had held the bats, this one was already open. Lying inside was someone's clothes. They were laid out to make it seem like the person wearing them had simply vanished, leaving just their clothes behind. There was one other thing in the coffin.

"What's that?" Radd asked, walking up and peering inside.

There was something stabbed into the left side of the shirt. I silently reached down and pulled it out.

"That's...a weapon, right, Rex?" Nyuuk asked.

I nodded. "Yep. The Dagger of Regrets. It's a thrusting weapon that's especially effective against certain types of undead."

As I looked down at the dagger, I heard a low rumbling sound from outside the room. It sounded like something heavy was being dragged across the floor. Walking back outside, I found part of the floor in the corridor had slid away to reveal a staircase leading downwards.

"So that dagger was the hidden switch that revealed the next floor?" Mana asked as she peered down the staircase.

“Hell yeah, let’s go!” Radd shouted, excited.

I held out a hand to stop both of them. “Not so fast. It’s getting late, let’s call it here for today. We can come back later.”

We’d accomplished the primary goal we’d come here for, and considering our current level of strength, going in too deep didn’t seem wise.

“Come on, old man! I’ve got plenty of energy left!”

I shook my head firmly. “The farther down you go, the stronger the enemies get. I wouldn’t say the enemies down there are so strong you can’t beat them, but fighting them will be a lot more risky. Remember how we got ambushed in the last room?”

Radd choked, then stammered, “B-But, if we find ourselves in a pinch you can always just fight us out of it, right?”

“I don’t want to waste any more of my stock of rare weapons, and more importantly if I fight with you guys you won’t get any experience. It’ll defeat the purpose of coming here.”

Though the monsters here were stronger than me, they were still technically around level 40. Since I was level 52, me fighting would cut down the experience Radd and the others got to almost nil.

“Well... Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

“For now, just do some basic Guild quests and grind out some class experience. We can come back here once you guys have gotten a bit stronger.”

Though unhappy, Radd looked convinced. I thought that was the end of that, but to my surprise it was Nyuuk—who was always so cautious—who protested next.

“I’m curious as well. Why are the monsters living down here? Is it possible that at the bottom of this dungeon is some terrifyin—”

“Nyuuk!” I interrupted him in a loud voice. “Don’t jinx us, okay? There’s plenty of places that turned into dungeons since monsters just happened to start living there. I’m sure there’s nothing special at the end of this one either.”

“But...”

Nyuuk didn't look convinced so I added, "Besides, we can come back here any time, right?"

"I suppose..." Nyuuk said reluctantly.

I could tell from the look Recilia was giving me that she wanted to say something as well, but I silently started leading the group back.

Because of how *BB* worked, defeated monsters took a decent amount of time to respawn, and we were able to make it back up through the floors we'd already cleared without encountering a single enemy. I opened the secret door that served as the entrance and exit to the dungeon, and the six of us came out into a mansion I knew well. Orange sunlight filtered through the mansion's large windows, dying the furniture a dark crimson.

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to natural light again. "It's already sunset, huh?"

As I'd feared, it was easy to lose track of time when you were underground.

"It looks like a completely different world," Recilia muttered, and I glanced out a window at the city of Freelea. Everyone was going about their peaceful lives, unaware that they were only a short walk away from a den of monsters.

This mansion was known as the Rose Manor, and it was a special dungeon that existed within the city of Freelea, rather than out in the wilderness somewhere.

Chapter 5: The Rose Manor

As we reached the main hall, someone called out to us from a side hallway. “Ah, welcome back everyone. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Rose,” I said, turning to the person who’d greeted us. She had long white hair and gentle eyes. She was also the owner of this mansion. “We cleared out all of the monsters on the first few floors. There shouldn’t be any climbing out now at least.”

Rose gave me a surprised look, then smiled and said, “Thank you very much,” with a small bow. “You adventurers are truly amazing. Not only did you find the hidden door leading to the dungeon immediately, you even defeated all of those terrifying monsters.”

There was a hint of longing in her expression.

“That’s our job, after all,” I replied.

In truth, I’d known where the door was from the start thanks to my game knowledge; I’d just pretended to sleuth it out using reasoning skills. So, it felt kind of bad to be praised for it.



As I awkwardly averted my gaze, Prana puffed her chest out and said, “That’s right, Rex is amazing.”

“But I must say, I’m surprised. I never imagined the mansion I was living in had monsters dwelling in its basement...”

“Do you have any idea why that secret door might have been made, Rose?” Nyuuk asked, his eyes glimmering with curiosity.

But Rose just shook her head and replied, “I inherited this mansion from my uncle, so I don’t know too much about it, unfortunately.”

She didn’t look like she was lying, and Nyuuk nodded and said a despondent, “I see.”

“While it was a shock to learn monsters are living in my basement, I’m glad I was able to meet all of you. As you can see, this mansion is a little too big for just one person,” Rose said, looking a little lonely.

“Oh, Rose...” Mana tried to find some words to comfort her, but couldn’t.

Seeing Mana’s expression, Rose immediately plastered on a smile and said in as cheerful a voice as she could muster, “Why not have some tea before you go, everyone? I’d love to hear stories of your many adventures.” We nodded, unwilling to leave her alone again so soon.



By the time we’d finished our tea and been seen off by a very sad-looking Rose, the sun had completely set.

As we navigated our way back by the light of the streetlamps, Radd stretched and said, “We’ve really gotten a lot stronger, haven’t we? We wouldn’t have stood a chance against those bandaged freaks a few weeks ago!”

“Yeah, and Nyuuk’s support magic has been really helpful!” Mana agreed. “I never knew how powerful adding elemental properties to people’s weapons could be!”

“That’s why I went out of my way to learn this Class’s Skills.” Nyuuk responded. “Though if a certain someone wasn’t so reckless all the time we wouldn’t have had as much trouble with them.”

Radd flushed. “I-I already said I was sorry!”

I smiled as I listened to Nyuuk poke fun at Radd, but after a few seconds I stopped in my tracks and turned back to look at the mansion we’d left. Unlike the rest of the city, which was brightly lit, the area around the Rose Manor was shrouded in darkness.

I’m sorry Nyuuk, but I can’t tell you the truth just yet.

For I, of course, knew exactly what lay at the bottom of that mansion’s basement. One of the six Demon Lords who served the evil god slept down there. And that very Demon Lord was the cause of Freelea’s destruction in *Braves and Blades*.



If the evil god Rasulfi was *Braves and Blades*’s last boss, then the six Demon Lords were the game’s midbosses. I still vividly remembered my duel with the first Demon Lord back when Radd and the others had just cleared the Rainbow Lava Caverns. The Demon Lords were on a completely different level compared to regular dungeon bosses. If I hadn’t won a huge number of Goblin Slaughterers from the casino, Bring would have killed me for sure.

The bosses of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness were also basically like midbosses, but the Demon Lords were on a completely different level. Unlike the Guardians in the Twelve Ruins of Darkness, who only defended the final chambers of their respective dungeons like mechanical dolls, the Demon Lords possessed sentience. They were treated as actual characters by the game, and every one of them had their own goals and reasons for opposing humanity.

Most of the Demon Lords had been pretty popular with the *BB*’s player base too. Personally, I’d hated them because they’d kept getting in my way during the main story, but I’d seen a decent amount of fanart of all of them floating around online.

Well, they are all pretty memorable characters in one way or another, so I can see why they got popular.

According to the lore, they were monsters who’d evolved into greater beings thanks to the evil god’s power, and they led the other monsters of their race.

That meant each Demon Lord had an army of varying sizes at their disposal, and they used actual tactics and strategies to make the most of their army's unique traits when attacking human cities.

The most dangerous followers of all were those of the fourth Demon Lord, who was the one sleeping at the bottom of Rose Manor. This particular Demon Lord was a vampire, a monster who sucked the blood of humans and transformed them into undead monsters. As a result, they'd been given the moniker, "Speaker for the Dead." In the game, they'd slowly started transforming the people of Freelea into their servants by sucking their blood, and after enough time passed, Freelea became completely overrun by vampires. I needed to prevent that event from ever triggering, which was why I'd made contact with Rose.

I cut my thoughts short as I spotted the person I'd been searching for: an old lady standing in front of a small general goods store at the corner of a busy street.

"Do you have a minute? Can you tell me if anything's changed?"

The old lady looked up in surprise, then relaxed and smiled when she saw that it was me. "Well, well, if it isn't you again. Ask all you want, but things don't change that quickly, boy. The world turns slowly, just as the Goddess of Salvation wishes. Ho ho ho ho ho."

"I see. Sorry for wasting your time."

I bowed in thanks then turned away, gritting my teeth in frustration. The old lady I'd spoken to was an unimportant NPC whose main quirk was that her dialogue options reflected the events you'd cleared and the current state of the world. She'd been nicknamed the Hohoho Hag by the game community. What she'd said just now had confirmed that not a single world event had progressed past its starting point yet. Her words had been the exact same words you heard if you ran to her at the start of the game and talked to her. Whenever big world events occurred or enough time passed, she'd say something completely different.

"It's been three months since the start of the game. What the hell is the protagonist doing?!" I exclaimed in frustration.

If things were progressing as they did in the game, then numerous world events should have happened in these three months, and those events should have had an impact on everyone in the world. But if the Hohoho Hag was to be believed, not a single one had triggered.

Goddamnit! There's only two years until the evil god revives! If I was the protagonist, by now I would have... I bit my lip in frustration.

After testing everything I could regarding events, there was one thing I'd learned for certain. Only the true protagonist could trigger world events. That was why I hadn't gone out to try and clear the game's major events myself these past three months. If you set up conditions to match the start of an event, you could generally forcibly trigger any event. However, there were numerous key events where one of the most important starting conditions was that the true protagonist was there. At least, that's what I'd discovered from my testing.

One example that should have been easy to trigger otherwise was the stargazing event that was supposed to play out when the true protagonist first entered Freelea's central plaza. When the true protagonist walks into the plaza, a wrinkled old lady comes up to them and says, "Please! Let me gaze upon your stars!" Then, after looking into the protagonist's face, she says, "Ooooooh! Y-Your stars...they emit such a radiant light! As if you were the chosen of the Goddess of Light..." After that cryptic statement she staggers off, muttering, "Will that light guide the world to salvation or become the star of shining disaster? Ha ha...ha ha ha!"

It was a pretty quick and relatively straightforward event. Since it happened early on in the game it had left a strong impression on me when I'd been playing, to the point where I'd memorized the old lady's lines. However, no matter how many times I'd visited the plaza as Rex, no old lady had come up to me. That made sense, since it was the true protagonist the old lady reacted to in that manner, not just anyone. And the true protagonist was this world's Hero of Light, chosen by the Goddess of Salvation herself. There was no reason for that old lady to react to me, since Rex was just a run-of-the-mill adventurer.

However, that didn't mean every single event could only be triggered by the protagonist. After all, I'd managed to trigger Lily's main story event, and it had gone all according to script even though I wasn't the protagonist. That fit with

my theory though, since that event only required someone Lily was close to to go on an adventure with her. It didn't have to be the actual protagonist. None of the things that made the protagonist special were required to make Lily's event function properly.

Most world events were different, though. The fact that the protagonist was the Goddess of Salvation's chosen hero mattered to the scenarios of most world events. Which meant only the protagonist could trigger those.

This had taken me longer than I would have liked to figure out because Bring's event had happened regardless. In *BB* the game, Bring showed up before the true protagonist because he was searching for the Hero of Light. Because we'd been the ones to trigger that event, I'd originally thought anyone could trigger any event, including ones that required the protagonist, but now I realized I'd been overlooking an alternative explanation. The condition that actually triggered Bring to show up was clearing a dungeon. He was searching for the protagonist, sure, but searching meant he hadn't actually found them. In the game, only the protagonist and their party actually cleared any dungeons, which might have been why Radd and the others clearing the Rainbow Lava Caverns had mistakenly triggered Bring's first appearance.

Well, the specifics don't matter. What does matter is that for the past three months, the protagonist hasn't done anything.

The reason I'd been waiting here in Freelea the past few months hadn't just been to train Radd and the others up as much as possible and recruit who I could. I'd also been waiting to see when the true protagonist would trigger their first world event. Since only the true protagonist could trigger those, that would mean if one happened the protagonist had to be there. Instead of searching blindly for the protagonist, I'd figured it would be smarter to pick a home base and keep an ear out for any rumors that the protagonist was on the move.

But it's starting to look like I can't wait any longer.

In the game, if you ignored a world event for too long, it started progressing on its own. Even with the protagonist absent the event's scenario would play out. For any potential branching paths, the worst one would always be chosen since the protagonist wasn't there, leading to the worst possible resolution for

that event. One of those world events was the ongoing event, “The Vampire of Freelea” which started out at Rose Manor. The reason I’d asked Lily to look into Rose—and the reason I’d started interacting with her myself—was all because of that event.

After what had happened with Lily, I’d been wondering if Rose would also end up different from how she was in the game, but...so far, that hadn’t been the case. Of course, my investigation wasn’t finished, but from what Lily had told me, Rose was exactly the same as she was in the game. Which meant that The Vampire of Freelea event would occur in this world as well. At the very least, I needed to be prepared for it to happen.

Clearing this event isn’t even supposed to be Rex’s job...

Still, I couldn’t just ignore it. The reason this particular event chain was such a pain was it was really easy to not notice this event had started as the protagonist, and then by the time you figured out what was going on it was too late. The exact timing for the start of the event differed based on your level of progress, but generally after about half a year the lord of the mansion, Rose gets attacked. A few months after that, the Demon Lord revives completely, and three months after their revival the vampires hiding in the city rise up, destroying Freelea.

That being said, we should still have a bit of time right now... Because I know how the event’s supposed to go I was able to get into the basement already, even though I shouldn’t be able to at this particular point in time. But that’s precisely why...goddamnit!

I cursed again, this time out loud. If all I wanted to do was stop the revival of the Demon Lord, well that was easy enough. I didn’t need to resort to all of these roundabout methods—all I had to do was sacrifice a single person.

This is exactly why I didn’t want to meet her. I knew if I met her and spoke to her, I’d start sympathizing with her.

Which would mean I’d no longer be able to make the cruel choice of sacrificing her. That was why I’d tried avoiding talking with her as much as possible. I’d avoided meeting her gaze, and kept our interactions as businesslike as possible. Despite that, the sad expression she’d had when she’d told us she

lived in the mansion all alone, the adoration she'd had in her eyes when she'd asked us to tell her stories about her adventures, they were all burned into my mind.

Just as I was having these conflicting thoughts, the very person I was thinking about called out to me from behind.

"Um! Are you one of the adventurers who came to visit me yesterday?"

God, this is actually the worst possible timing. I slowly turned around.

"You are, I knew it!" Rose said, smiling brightly at me.

Oh man... She was the one person I really hadn't wanted to meet right now.

"Rose..."

Only I knew that this girl was fated to die, that she was doomed to be sacrificed.



My main impression of Rose from the game version of *BB* was that of a sickly girl who could barely even get out of bed. Sure, she was healthy right now, but once the Vampire of Freelea event started, she was afflicted by the vampire's curse, which left her bedridden. Because she spent most of her game time under that curse, that was the version of her that had left a stronger impression on me.

Once the event started, you needed to constantly keep an eye on her. The full event chain that was started off by the Vampire of Freelea was an extremely long one, and quite divisive among the player base. When the age marker was still at one—when the world was in its beginning, default state—you couldn't trigger any events by visiting Rose Manor. All you could do was meet the girl living there, Rose, and go through a few dialogue options with her. However, by clearing any of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness or by completing enough events, the game age would advance. Once the game age reached two, a new event would trigger if you visited the Rose Manor.

This time, you'd see Rose's uncle, who'd raised her since she was a child, trying to forcibly drag her somewhere. You could choose to stop him or to

watch on, but regardless of what you picked, things ended up the same way. If you chose to stop him, you'd end up in a fight with her uncle, who was actually the Vampire Lord. Naturally, an early game party stood no chance against him, and even if you did somehow manage to beat him it didn't matter. Because as a vampire, he was immortal. If you chose to watch on, he engraved the Mark of the Curse on Rose and leisurely walked out of the mansion, and if you fought and lost, he did the same thing. And if you fought and won...well, he just revived and then did the same thing.

After the mark was carved onto her chest, nothing changed immediately for Rose. But if you choose to spend the night with her to make sure she's okay, at exactly midnight the mark would start to pulse, and Rose would start screaming in pain. After a few seconds, her eyes turn red, and her teeth elongate into fangs. She then attacks the protagonist, having completely taken leave of her senses.

"Umm... Mr. Adventurer?"

My memory of that attack overlapped with reality, and I reflexively took a step back from Rose. But of course, there was no need to fear. For one thing, there was no mark on Rose's chest, and for another, her eyes weren't red and her teeth were still normal. Besides, the first time she attacks you in the game, you can beat her pretty easily. The meat of the event started after she returned to her senses.

"N-No need to be so formal with me. You can just call me Rex."

I shook my head to clear it, and Rose smiled at me.

"He he, if you say so. Thank you for finally telling me your name, Rex."

I gave her a surprised look. "Wait, did I never tell you my name? But..."

"Of course, I know all about you. You're famous. Even the children in the orphanage know about you."

It was at that point that I remembered part of Rose's background was that she helped out at the local orphanage before getting cursed.

"Everyone loves pretending to be you when they play at being adventurers. They all look so excited when they talk about how amazing and cool you are."

I could tell Rose had that same glimmer of excitement in her eyes when she looked at me. “Do you admire adventurers?” I asked her.

“Huh?” She hadn’t been expecting that question, and she stiffened up a little. But then she relaxed and said, “I might just, now that I think about it.” She looked down at her own slender hand, then up at the distant sky and said, “I’ve always been fragile, even as a child. I imagine I’ll spend my entire life in this city, within the safety of my mansion. Perhaps that’s why I’ve always found the lifestyle of those who get to freely travel between cities and see the world to be dazzling.”

As Rose stared wistfully off into the distance, I used Analyze on her.

【Rose】

LV: 1

HP: 50

MP: 50

Strength: 0

Vitality: 9

Intelligence: 34

Mind: 5

Agility: 5

Focus: 5

You can always tell when a character has story relevance.

Unlike randomly generated characters, important NPCs had their stats custom-crafted to fit their lore and background. You could always tell when that was the case since either their base stat spread was abnormal, or like Nirva they’d been given properly calculated growths and their current stats reflected what they should be at that level. There were also a number of characters who’d been adjusted to be stronger or weaker than they should simply to suit

the needs of certain events. For example, if you had an escort mission, the character you were guarding needed to have at least somewhat decent Defense or the mission would be way too hard. On the other hand, if there was a former general who'd retired due to old age, they needed to have lower stats than a currently active general or it would be inconsistent with the logic of the world. Rex was a victim of this, since all of his stats were set to be 200 at level 50. Regardless, it was very easy to spot abnormalities in someone's stats, which let you know if they were an important character or not.

And Rose's stats? You could easily tell they'd been manually modified. Her HP and MP in particular mattered a lot during the progression of her event. As a result, both had been set to 50, which was an easy number to keep track of. Because of the curse, her remaining HP and MP denoted how much time she had left. If they were any lower she'd succumb too quickly for the event to function as an event. Of course, I always wished it was higher so I could...

Wait. A revelation suddenly hit me. It was a ridiculous thought, but I still felt compelled to try it.

I looked over at the girl staring wistfully at the outside world and said, "Why not experience that life for yourself then?"

"Wow! I can see the whole city from here!"

"Yeah..."

Rose and I were standing on a small hill a short distance from Freelea. I shivered a little as I thought about how far from the game I'd deviated to do this while I watched Rose run around excitedly.

I can't believe I was able to take her out of the city so easily...

In-game Rose's dialogue implied that she'd never once left the city. I'd thought there might be some sort of spell or compulsion forcing her to stay there. But to my surprise she'd been able to pass through the city gates with no problem. The guards knew me so they hadn't even bothered asking what I was doing. I'd told them anyway, saying I was going to show Rose some of the sights outside of the city, and all they'd said was "sounds good," as they waved us

through.

I guess I am an A-rank adventurer, technically. The people of this city probably trusted me more than I realized.

“Look over there! That’s the church I went to this morning! It looks so small from here!”

I looked down at Rose again. She was acting like an excited little child. I’d never seen her like this in the game, and after seeing her expression of pure joy I made up my mind.

In for a penny in for a pound. Now that I’ve come this far I’ll see just how badly I can break this fucked-up event!

I walked over to Rose, who was still enthralled by the view of the city, and took a few items out of my Inventory.

People in this world were divided into two categories. Adventurers who had high base stats and were born with a default class, and civilians, who had low base stats and no class. As far as the game was concerned, adventurers continued adventuring even when they weren’t on-screen, and so their levels steadily rose. On the other hand, civilians stayed at their default level forever. No matter how much time passed, they never got any stronger. That made sense, since unlike adventurers, who had an average of 20 in a stat at level 1, civilians had an average 6 in a stat at level 1. They couldn’t take down even the weakest monster. And the only way to level up was to kill monsters. The gap between adventurers and civilians was huge in this world. Today I was going to try and bridge that huge gap. I had no idea if it would work, but I’d prepared as best as I could.

“Just so you know, this is only the beginning,” I said.

Rose turned to me. “Rex?”

I presented her with a few enchanted rings, some armor, and a magic staff. She reflexively grabbed them, and I grinned.

“It’s time to let you truly experience what it’s like to be an adventurer,” I said.

Let the power leveling begin!

Chapter 6: Civilians and Adventurers

If a weak civilian who'd never fought a monster before had no choice but to kill at least one, which would be the best monster to fight? A slime, the traditionally weakest monster in most RPGs? Unfortunately, that was a terrible choice in *Braves and Blades*. Slimes in *BB* weren't especially strong or anything, but they were far from the weakest monster. They were bigger than the slimes you saw in most RPGs, and more intimidating than the cute little guys that just jumped on your face. Most of them had surprisingly hard to deal with fighting styles, so they weren't a great enemy choice for beginners.

The actual weakest monster in *BB* was a goblin, but they weren't a suitable enemy for beginners either. Sure, they were weak, but they did look vaguely humanoid, so they were psychologically stressful to kill for people not used to violence. I was speaking from experience here. Plus, goblins tended to move in packs and use different weapons and all that. They were a fine choice for someone who was aiming to become an adventurer and had the mental fortitude for it, but they weren't great for power leveling a regular person.

Ideally, you wanted an enemy that was decently weak, didn't fight in packs, and had extremely static attack patterns. Which was why...

"Over there. That's going to be your first target."

"It...is?"

Rose gave me a quizzical look. I was pointing to a spot that looked like it held nothing but trees, so her reaction was understandable.

"It'll be faster if you see for yourself. Fire!"

While I wasn't a particularly strong level 52 character, I was still level 52. My basic Fire spell was a lot stronger than a starting adventurer's Fire. A fireball around ten meters in diameter shot out of my hand and slammed against one of the trees.

"R-Rex?! What are you doing?"

I calmly pointed to the tree I'd hit with my fireball. "Look closely."

"Huh? Oh! Th-The tree is moving..." The burning tree was squirming in pain.

"That's a treant, a monster that camouflages itself to look like a regular tree."

"S-So that's a treant..." Rose gulped.

She must have at least heard about them before, I thought.

I'd never seen anyone look so afraid of a treant before. It was honestly kind of funny to watch.

You see, treants were level 5 monsters who had a nasty habit of ambushing newbie adventurers and feeding on them. They had much better Attack and Defense than most monsters at their level. Most new players—myself included—had experienced running out into the field after the tutorial dungeon and immediately getting one-shot by something they'd thought was just a tree. However, treants were only dangerous if you carelessly approached one. They had high Attack and a powerful camouflage ability, but their mobility was trash. Furthermore, their Defense was high, but their Magic Defense was exceptionally low, and they were of course weak to fire. So, if you just picked them off from a distance with fire-aspected spells, they weren't a threat at all.

"Aaand it's dead."

The treant desperately tried to waddle its way over to us, but it burned to a crisp before it had even gone five meters and disintegrated into shining particles.

All right, this will definitely work.

Because of how slow treants were, and the fact that the lower-tier versions of them had absolutely no ranged attacks to speak of, as long as Rose struck first and kept her distance she wouldn't be in any danger of taking damage. Rose's highest stat was her Intelligence too, so these would be the perfect foes for her.

"Wow..." Rose let out a sigh of admiration. This was likely her first time ever seeing combat.

It's too soon to be amazed, Rose.

"Sorry to interrupt your wide-eyed staring, but you're going to be doing this

next.”

“Huh?”

I nodded toward the remaining treants.

Rose’s jaw dropped open, and she shook her head. “I-I can’t... I mean, I don’t even have a class or anything. I’d never be able to use magic like you...”

“Why do you think I gave you all that equipment? Don’t worry, you can do this.”

While it sounded like I was just trying to psych her up, I knew for a fact she could do it.

Rose still looked shaken, but she’d put on the equipment I’d given her. She’d been wearing a simple dress before, but now she was in a white robe with a matching white witch’s hat. She was also wearing a burnished red ring that looked as if it was made of living flame. Not only did she look like a Mage, she had the stats of one too. All of the equipment I’d given her boosted Intelligence by quite a bit, and right now it was a whopping 150. In terms of magical power, she was much stronger than the average novice adventurer.

Furthermore, the staff she was holding in her right hand was a Fire Rod. Just by using the item itself she could cast Fire, so she didn’t actually need to know any magic at all. She could easily take a treant out in one or two hits, but just in case I’d made sure to get her equipment with high defensive stats as well. I hadn’t been able to give her actual armor with high Defense since those pieces tended to have minimum stat requirements to equip, but all of her accessories gave defensive buffs. For starters, she was wearing a Barrier Ring to keep her safe from any unexpected attacks.

On top of the Barrier Ring, I’d also given Rose an Anti-Burn Ring to make sure she didn’t accidentally hurt herself with her own Fire spells. For her final accessory I’d been debating between the Golden Iron Ring, which heavily increased physical Defense but lowered Magic Defense, and the Bastion Ring, which gave a decent boost to both types of defense. In the end, I’d opted for the Bastion Ring, just in case something unexpected happened and Rose needed to take magical hits.

She was as safe as could be against low level monsters. Plus, I'd be by her side the whole time, so even if something out of the ordinary happened I'd be able to protect her. In all honesty, all these precautions might have been overkill, but I'd figured better safe than sorry.

While I was confident no harm could possibly come to Rose, she still looked a little scared. Since she'd never fought a monster before I couldn't blame her.

"H-How am I supposed to tell a treant apart from a regular tree?" she asked hesitantly.

I gave her a reassuring smile. "No need to worry. Just start blasting away at every tree you see."

"Huh?"

"If it starts squirming once it's on fire it's a treant, and if it just sits there as it burns to ash it's a regular tree. Simple enough, right?"

"B-But...I'd feel bad burning down regular trees for no reason."

Seeing Rose's apologetic expression, I burst out laughing. "Sorry, that was just a joke. I can use Analyze to check whether it's a treant or a regular tree. If it's a treant, I'll get a stat window. I'll let you know which trees are treants, and you can just shoot at those ones."

"D-Don't tease me, Rex!" Rose said, pouting.

Still, I could tell my little joke had helped ease her nerves.

"See that tree, second from the right?" I asked, pointing at one of the trees. "That one's a treant. Ready to fight?"

Rose slowly nodded, then took some deep breaths to steady herself and closed her eyes.

Fortunately, treants didn't move until a target was in close range of them. We could take as much time as we wanted.

After a few seconds, Rose opened her eyes again and shouted, "Fire!" and a fireball about the same size as the one I'd unleashed shot out of her staff and slammed into the treant.

The moment the spell hit, the treant started squirming in pain. It slowly tried to claw its way over to us, but before it could go more than a few steps it staggered and fell. There was a sharp crack, and it made no move to get back up.

“Did I...kill it?”

Rose stared at the dead treant in wonder, and I lightly patted her shoulder.

“Nice job, Rose. And congrats on leveling up.”

“Huh?”

That was how Rose gained her first level with almost disappointing ease.



After killing that first treant, all of Rose’s hesitation vanished. Though she looked like a sheltered girl, she’d spent her days in the mansion longing for adventure.

Thus, I wasn’t too surprised when she immediately mastered the basics of fighting and started throwing out fireballs as fast as I could point treants out.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!” She cried, grinning with childlike glee as she turned the nearby grove into a sea of flame.

“Hold up a sec, Rose!” I shouted suddenly.

“Hwuh?” She turned back to me, looking like a puppy who’d been denied her favorite snack.

Look, I’m glad you’re enjoying this and all, but don’t overdo it, I thought, casting Analyze on her.

【Rose】

LV: 4

HP: 68

MP: 65

Strength: 0

Vitality: 15

Intelligence: 46

Mind: 14

Agility: 5

Focus: 8

Yeah, I may have leveled her a bit too much.

Rose had no starting class, or rather she was probably set to the Novice class. In the game there hadn't been any way to get NPCs to level up, so I wasn't sure, but I'd assumed they were all given the Novice class by default, which had no skills or growth bonuses associated with it. But since I was leveling Rose up anyway, it would be better for her to swap to an actual class that gave her growth bonuses. Obviously, my goal wasn't to minmax her like Radd and the others, so there was no need to make her train until her stats were high enough to swap to a higher tier class. Still, there was no reason not to do some easy optimizations.

Especially since Rose's innate growth rates kind of suck...

I'd wondered if her innate growth rates had been set to something special since she had the blood of a vampire sleeping within her, but at least right now while she was still a normal human, her growth rates were no better than any other non-adventurer.

Some of Rose's current equipment gave boosts to Intelligence and Mind on level up, but if we subtracted those bonuses her growth rates looked like this:

Strength: +0

Vitality: +2

Intelligence: +3

Mind: +2

Agility: +0

Focus: +1

Total: +8

Looks like her total stat increase per level is one lower than mine, and mine is pure ass. Although...I guess Rex is supposed to be an adventurer, while Rose is just a civilian. It would be pretty shitty if his growth rates couldn't even match up to a character not even meant to go into battle.

Honestly, it felt good to finally have better growth rates than someone, but now wasn't the time to relish in my superiority. I was dying to figure out the answer to the question: "Can someone who's not an adventurer even change classes?"

Fortunately, the requirements to pick up first tier classes were quite low. Fighter required you to have 20 Strength and 10 Vitality, Mage needed 20 Intelligence and 10 Mind, and all of the other first tier classes similarly required 20 points in their main stat and 10 points in their secondary stat.

Even better, it turned out that Rose already met the requirements to change into the Mage class. In fact, the reason I'd given her equipment that boosted her Intelligence and Mind growth rates was to get her to the point that she could change into the class as quickly as possible, but I'd let her level a bit too much.

Rose gave me an anxious look, worried her time role-playing as an adventurer was already over.

"Don't worry, the fun is just beginning. Haven't you ever wondered what changing classes feels like?"

Rose's eyes lit up and she started nodding emphatically.

Our trip back into the city was surprisingly uneventful. Rose moved as gracefully as ever, but it was clear she was excited because she was walking twice as fast as usual.

We reached the temple soon enough, and I directed Rose to touch the Mage

statue.

“Ah... I did it, I think. I changed classes.”

Rose had indeed managed to change her class to Mage. It was surprising how smoothly everything was going.

Or at least it was, until I suggested we go ahead and call it for the day.

“Fire!” Rose shouted, destroying yet another treant.

Despite my suggestion we return to our places of rest—the true protagonist didn’t seem to be triggering any events that would advance the world age, so I didn’t think there was any real reason to rush the leveling process—Rose hadn’t been ready to stop just yet. In the end, we’d gone back out to kill some more monsters.

“Next up is...that one,” I said, pointing to another tree.

“Got it! Fire!”

Rose’s movements were much more streamlined than they had been at the start. Thanks to the few levels she’d gained, her Fire spell was stronger too, and it burned the treants to ash before they could move a single step.

“Thank you so much, Rex!” Rose said, turning back to me with a smile.

“Err...”

Without waiting for me to form a full reply, she bowed and added, “You’ve made my greatest dream come true. I always thought I would be trapped in that mansion my whole life, but here I am doing battle with monsters that seemed so terrifying just yesterday.”

“Rose...”

I grimaced. Rose’s story was doomed to end in tragedy no matter what, at least in the game.

“I realize I’m not strong enough to become an adventurer on my own, of course. But it made me so happy to learn there were things even I could do. Thank you so much for staying by my side and granting me the courage to go

out into the world.”

Rose looked up at me, her eyes brimming with joy.

Unable to meet her gaze, I averted my eyes and said, “I just did it on a whim.”

“Even so—”

“Anyway, it looks like you leveled up again. Let’s see just how much changing classes boosted your...growth rates?!”

The moment I cast Analyze I realized what had changed. “It can’t be...” I muttered, shocked.

“Rex?” Rose asked.

I didn’t answer. I’d only used Analyze as a way to try and change the subject, but doing so had revealed a shocking truth.

Did she change into some class other than Mage? No, that’s not possible—I saw her touch the right statue, and I saw her light up! She has to be a Mage right now!

Since Rose’s innate growth rates came out to a total of +8 and the Mage class gave a bonus of another +6, she should have gained 14 stat points after her last level up. And yet, Rose’s status window showed that her total stat points gained were far higher than that!

Strength: +1

Vitality: +3

Intelligence: +6

Mind: +4

Agility: +2

Focus: +4

Total: +20

“How did you get this strong?!”

This means...even Rose has better growth rates than me!!!



After some further investigation, I was able to come up with a plausible theory for why Rose's growth rates had suddenly jumped so high. Since she'd hit level 6, she was able to change into a few different classes, and I'd had her change into all of them and then go into a Spirit Duel ring to calculate her true growth rates. What I learned was that the total number of stat points that Rose gained per level was 14, which was five points higher than the number of stat points I gained.

Her stat points added up to 14 even when she scaled down to level 1 and class changed back to Novice, so there was no doubting it. Which meant the question was: "If Rose's innate growth rates resulted in her gaining 14 points every level up, why had she only gone up by 8 stat points each level in the beginning?"

The most likely explanation was that Rose hadn't been assigned the Novice class at the start like I'd assumed, and she'd had a growth rate penalty since she'd had no class. In order to test that theory, I'd forcibly dragged the Guild receptionist, Erina, out of Freelea and had her level up and change classes as well. She'd been reluctant at first, but when I'd told her this would be important to adventurers everywhere, she'd agreed.

In the end, her situation had turned out the exact same as Rose's. With no class, Erina's innate growth rates were quite low, but as soon as she class changed to Novice, each of her growth rates went up by one. This proved that civilians weren't given the Novice class by default, which I'd initially believed. If we assumed they were classless by default, that meant having no class at all gave a -1 debuff to the growth rate of every stat. In other words, the main reason civilians were so much weaker than adventurers was because they weren't given a starting class.

Actually, wait—maybe I'm thinking about this backwards. Instead of getting a penalty for having no class, maybe what actually happens is that every class gives an additional point of bonus growth than we assumed. Either that, or normal people have their growth rates boosted by 1 in each stat as soon as they

obtain a class for the first time.

There was no way to confirm which hypothesis was true, though ultimately it didn't matter since regardless of which it was the end result was the same. The important thing to know was that civilians got a huge boost to their growth rates the moment they class changed into literally anything.

This is...an even bigger discovery than I thought.

In the world of *BB*, people were grouped up into two categories: adventurers, who had starting classes, and civilians, who didn't. An adventurer's total stat increase per level typically averaged around +18, and if you added in the bonus growths from their starting class, that'd mostly put them at +24. On the other hand, a civilian's total stat increase per level was typically +6, and since they had no starting class, they didn't get any bonuses. Basically, that meant there was a 4 times difference in Strength between adventurers and civilians.

Or at least there had been, until I'd learned what I had. Now, we knew that if you gave a civilian a starting class, the total of their innate growth rates would increase to a whopping +18. That meant even among regular civilians, there were those who could become adventurers if they wanted to.

The really sad thing though...was that Rex's growths were even lower than most civilians.

You see, if we took into account what I'd learned, a civilian's average total stat increase per level was +12. Not quite as high as the average adventurer's +18, but still a good deal higher than Rex's piddling +9.

Did the devs have some grudge against Rex or something? I wondered.

Every time I thought I'd gotten over how shitty Rex's build was, I was reminded in some new form just how bad his raw numbers were.

I wasn't sure if it had been out of consideration for me or what, but after I'd proved my theory, Rose hadn't asked to keep leveling and we'd stopped for the day. Granted the sun was starting to set, so we didn't have much time left to grind anyway.

"Rex, thank you so much for today," Rose said, bowing to me again.

“No problem. You sure you don’t want me to walk you back home?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, I have the equipment you gave me to protect me.”

Rose hefted the Fire Rod I’d given her with a smile. She’d been reluctant to take the equipment I’d given her at first, but I’d prepared all of it expressly for the sole purpose of power leveling her, so there was no point in me hanging on to it. Honestly, I’d been willing to let her keep the equipment forever, but Rose had insisted that she would only hang on to the items I’d given her until our little adventuring journey was over.

“B-By the way, Rex...”

As we were about to part ways, Rose gave me a hesitant look, her Fire Rod clutched tightly against her chest.

“I really had a lot of fun today! So umm...if you’re free, do you think we could...”

I smiled gently at her. “Of course. See you tomorrow.”

“O-Oh, yes! See you tomorrow!”

Beaming, Rose started walking back home. She turned back half a dozen times to wave to me before finally turning a street corner.

Once Rose was out of sight, Erina and I started walking back toward the Guild.

“Sorry for pulling you away from work all of a sudden,” I told her.

“You really need to stop treating me like your personal assistant, Rex,” Erina replied, pouting.

“Like I said, I’m sorry. But this is what you get for making that advertisement poster about me.”

“Urk... F-Fine, let’s just say we’re even now then,” Erina said, folding surprisingly easily.

“Also don’t tell anyone except Veteram about what we learned here today,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. Haaah... I can’t believe you keep making these earth-shattering discoveries one after another, Rex. Think about how

much more work you're making for me," Erina said. "But well, I guess something good came out of it. That girl looked so happy."

I looked down at Erina in surprise. I hadn't expected her to care about Rose.

Erina gave me a frown and said, "Just so you know, I do care about things other than my job. Sure, all the things you do cause more trouble for me since I have to handle most of the Guild's administrative duties, but I know you're trying to do a good thing here." Looking over at the street Rose had walked down, she continued, "Her name's Rose, right? I've seen her before a few times, but she always looked so sad. So I'm glad you were able to lift her spirits."

Erina looked away bashfully as she said that, and I felt a little more reassured that I was doing the right thing.

If the future progressed the same way it did in the game, then Rose would suffer tremendously in the months to come. The same uncle who raised her would reveal himself to be a Vampire Lord and brand her with the Mark of the Curse. That same night, she would transform into a vampire and attack the player. She would return to her senses quickly enough, but her future would remain bleak.

After the attack, the healer who came to treat her would tell the player that the Mark of the Curse was simply a precursor of what was to come. The Mark of the Curse was simply a symbol that let the caster target the victim with the true curse from wherever they were. Furthermore, that curse would trigger every night at midnight without fail. The true curse was harmless to regular humans, but it was poison to people who possessed a certain bloodline—a vampire's bloodline.

Every midnight when the curse hit Rose, her physical and mental energy would be drained—aka her HP and MP. If either of them reached zero, she would be unable to resist the curse any longer, and would be transformed into a vampire. And after that, she'd be unable to defy the orders of higher-ranking vampires, turning her effectively into a slave.

According to what the healer would tell you then, the only way to remove the curse would be to kill the caster. In the game, that was when the player

embarked on a journey to find Rose's uncle and search for a way to alleviate the effects of the curse, which was the start of the Vampire of Freelea quest chain.

Still, regardless of how the quest turned out, Rose would be forever bedridden in the manor after that. The damage inflicted by the curse couldn't be restored with potions or healing magic, and even before she ended up being turned into a vampire, Rose had been forced to go about her life while trapped in an ever-weakening body.

However, I'd come to the conclusion that I might be able to lessen the overall effects of the curse by increasing Rose's level and therefore her max HP and MP. As a result of my training, she might even be able to become strong enough to move around normally despite the curse. There was also the possibility that I might be able to find a proper substitute to bear Rose's curse for her ahead of time as well.

You see, the damage from the curse couldn't be avoided, but there was a way to redirect it. There was an item known as a Ritual Doll that you could make, though it took a lot of time and effort. You needed rare ingredients from all over the world, and you could also only make one at a time. Furthermore, Ritual Dolls burned up after a few uses, so you had to keep making new ones pretty frequently. It was a pain, but it'd be a bigger pain if Rose turned into a vampire and triggered a chain of events that ended with Freelea's destruction. If I could get the ingredients to craft a few Ritual Dolls in advance, that would help a ton.

However, all of these plans were just stopgap measures that didn't address the root of the problem.

If I truly want to help Rose, I need to find some way to make sure she never gets cursed in the first place...

"I can walk the rest of the way myself," Erina said suddenly. "I still have some work to finish up at the Guild."

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

I'd been so lost in my thoughts I hadn't even noticed we'd reached the intersection close to the Guild building. It was a busy intersection, with adventurers heading out to drink and laborers heading home. The Hohoho Hag was scurrying about sweeping up the area in front of her shop too.

“Rex?” I’d been standing stock-still for a while, and Erina gave me an odd look.

“Hey, Erina... About Rose.”

Before I could say anything else, a loud voice interrupted me.

“Ahhh! What are you doing, old man?!”

I choked, then turned and saw Radd and the others just returning from today’s adventuring. Their equipment was in tatters, but they looked unhurt. Recilia was with them as well, and she looked quite displeased.

Crap, this is terrible timing. They must have just finished turning their quests in to the Guild.

Since we’d put exploring the rest of the Rose Manor dungeon on hold, there was little reason for me to join Radd and the others on their dungeon runs. I’d asked Recilia to back them up instead and tasked them with doing a bunch of grindy quests to give the four of them more combat experience.

“I-I can’t believe you were out on a date while we were busting our asses running from dungeon to dungeon!” Radd shouted, loud enough for everyone on the street to hear.

I realized the quest load I’d given him was probably why he was so mad right now. In the game, you could just barely clear that many quests in a day’s worth of adventuring, but in real life that meant you’d likely be dead tired by the end of it.

“C-Calm down, Radd. I wasn’t going on a...d-date with Rex. There was some work he needed my help with and...”

Erina was normally cool and composed, but she couldn’t handle the unexpected. And with how flustered she looked her protests fell on deaf ears.

“If you were working, then why aren’t you wearing your Guild uniform?” Recilia asked coldly as she walked up behind Erina.

“Huh? Oh, umm...”

Erina started panicking.

Of course, the reason I'd had Erina change out of her uniform was because it would be easier to level up with stronger equipment, and when we'd finished she'd changed back to whatever clothes she'd had on hand. Seeing that Erina herself was in no state to explain, I decided to lend her a hand.

"Calm down, you two. You're causing a scene in the middle of the street."

"H-He's right, Radd. I'm sure Rex has his reasons..." Nyuuk said in a placating tone.

"B-But!" Radd appeared unconvinced.

"I-I'd like to hear a proper explanation!" Mana exclaimed.

"Likewise," Prana added.

"It must be nice to be young. Ho ho ho ho."

For some reason the Hohoho Hag also decided to butt in on our conversation. Things were getting far too chaotic.

"L-Let's head back to the inn first, okay?"

"You aren't saying that simply to weasel out of explaining yourself, are you?" Recilia asked.

For some reason her trust in me had been waning in recent days. To my surprise, it was the Hohoho Hag who came to my aid.

"Ho ho ho. I'm sure there's much you wish to discuss, but the streets are dangerous at night. You should do as that youngster says."

Thank you, Hohoho Hag!

"E-Exactly. I promise I'll explain everything, so let's first..."

I trailed off as I realized what had just happened. She'd said it so naturally that it hadn't registered at first, but the Hohoho Hag had finally changed her dialogue. Cold sweat beaded on my forehead, and my throat became dry.

"Old man?"

"Brother?"

Radd and Recilia both gave me concerned looks, but I didn't even hear them.

My heart started to pound and I slowly turned to the Hohoho Hag, who was always standing here at this intersection, a permanent fixture of this street.

“Do you have a minute?” I said, trying to keep my voice even. I needed to make sure the words were the exact same as the dialogue option you had in the game. “Can you tell me if anything’s changed?”

The Hohoho Hag didn’t seem surprised or offended by my question, but her expression turned mechanical, as if somebody had suddenly flipped a switch inside her. She replied, “Well, it isn’t you again. The city’s been quite dangerous recently. I hear there’s monsters who suck people’s blood roaming the streets. They’re just rumors though. Hohoho.”

Right as she finished talking, the evening bells sounded. By the time the first peal faded away, I was sprinting at full speed toward the Rose Manor.

Chapter 7: The March of Time

I cursed loudly as I ran through the city. “Fuck! Why now of all times?!”

But of course, complaining wouldn’t change anything. The evening bells continued ringing in my ears as I ran.

Calm down! Think this through! I ordered myself, organizing my thoughts as fast as I could.

The Hohoho Hag’s words confirmed that the Vampire of Freelea event could now be triggered, and that the world age had advanced to two. However, just because the event could be triggered didn’t mean it would be starting right away. Indeed, it was possible there was no need for this haste and I’d find the Rose Manor completely unchanged. However, I didn’t slow my pace at all.

Rose’s smile flashed through my mind. I had told myself over and over not to get too attached to her. I also knew that there would be an easy way to clear this event, so long as I was willing to sacrifice her. But after spending the day with her, after learning more about her than I ever had in the game and seeing her genuine smile, I couldn’t remain impartial.

As if I could abandon her now! I’ve spent too much time with her to think of her as just some NPC!

A lot of people stared as they watched me sprint full-tilt toward the Rose Manor, but I paid them no mind. All I cared about was reaching Rose as fast as possible.

As I reached for my sword, I suddenly heard Radd’s voice from behind me.

“Holy shit, old man, you’re fast! Slow down a bit!”

I slowed a little and looked over my shoulder. “Radd?!”

He was running as fast as he could, but he was slowly falling behind. He wasn’t the only one there either. Recilia and Prana were a short distance ahead of him, while Nyuuk and Mana were a bit behind.

“Why are you guys—?”

“Isn’t that obvious?!” Radd shouted, cutting me off. “If you’re in that much of a rush, then something serious is happening, isn’t it? Well, we can fight too. So let us help you out, at least a little. We’ve gotta pay you back for all the help you’ve given us.”

“Radd...” I was so surprised by the sudden display of sincerity from Radd that I wasn’t sure what to say. My steps naturally slowed, and Recilia finally caught up to me.

“You’re heading to the Rose Manor, right, brother? What do you think you’ll be able to accomplish without me by your side?” She gave me a pointed stare.

“You’ve...got a point. My bad.”

I really did need to calm down. I waited for the others to catch up as well, then said, “All right guys, follow me. I’m gonna need your help for this one.”

“He he he he. You got it!”



Once everyone was ready, I resumed the mad dash toward the Rose Manor. As we drew near, we spotted Rose standing in her mansion’s front garden.

“Rose!” I shouted.

She jumped in surprise. “Rex? And everyone else as well? Did you need something?”

She was still holding on tightly to the Fire Rod I’d given her. It seemed we’d managed to reach Rose right as she’d returned home. She hadn’t been attacked yet, and the only thing she seemed surprised by was the fact that I’d shown up right after we’d said goodbye for the day.

Guess I was worried for nothing.

The world’s age moving forward had come at such an inauspicious time that I’d jumped to conclusions. I let out a long, relieved sigh. This wasn’t a game, but an actual world. I wasn’t even the true protagonist, so of course I wouldn’t show up just as some critical event was about to occur.

I'm gonna have to apologize to Radd and the others for dragging them all the way here for no reason, I thought. But just as I turned to Radd, Prana pointed behind me and shouted, "Rex!"

I turned back around. "Wha—?!"

Rose was turned toward us so she hadn't noticed it yet, but a large black mass of something was gathering behind her.

"Are those...bats?" Radd muttered.

They were indeed the same jet-black bats we'd encountered in the mansion's basement. They clumped together, forming the outline of a humanoid figure. Then, a second later, the clump of bats transformed into a man in his forties wearing a tuxedo and a stylish cape.

The fluttering of the man's cape alerted Rose to his presence and she turned around. "Uncle?"

The monster Rose believed to be her kind uncle smiled and bowed regally to her. "It's finally time. I've come for you, Rose."

"What do you mean you've come for me, uncle?"

I stepped between the vampire and Rose, holding my hand out to keep her from running to him. "Sorry, but we're not handing her over," I said, glaring at him.

"R-Rex?!" Rose stammered, confused.

The vampire gave me an amused look, and said, "Oho. You may not know this, but she and I are family. Outsiders like you, who know nothing of our deep bond, should—"

"I know all about you." I pulled out a book out of my Inventory and thrust it at him.

"What's this?"

"A diary I found in the mansion's underground library. You wrote down everything from your motives to your goals in it, Vampire Lord Veltar!"

For the first time, the vampire's smile slipped. Rose looked up at him in shock.

“Vampire Lord? Uncle, what is...”

Veltar ignored Rose, his gaze fixed on me. “You little...”

If looks could kill, his would have definitely killed me. But I’d seen my fair share of deadly battlefields, and I wasn’t going to back down that easily.

“You plan on cursing Rose to revive your precious Demon Lord, don’t you? Well, you’ll have to get through me first.”

Veltar’s lips curled up into a grin. “Curse? You think it’s a curse? Bwa ha ha ha ha!” He covered his face with his right hand, laughing maniacally. “Don’t get too cocky, you puny human!” His smile vanished, replaced by a look of pure rage.

“Uncle...” Rose murmured. She had likely never seen Veltar make such an expression.

The Vampire Lord held his hands out, and his nails turned red and began extending, turning into blades that glittered in the moonlight. “Get back, Rose.”

“B-But...”

I drew my sword and said, “This is a job for us adventurers. Hunting monsters is what we do.”



The Vampire of Freelea event chain was long enough that it continued through multiple game ages. You met Rose during age one, Veltar cursed her in age two, and in age three, you finally found a ray of hope if you triggered the right event flags. Basically, you’d start hearing rumors of a powerful exorcist who might be able to remove Rose’s curse, and the true protagonist’s party would then go hunting for this mysterious exorcist.

When you finally found the exorcist, she would use a Purification Doll to trace the curse back to its origins and also teach you the current location of its caster, Veltar.

Ironically, he turned out to be still inside Rose Manor.

Armed with this new information, you were able to choose a new dialogue option with Rose that led to her telling you that she’d seen her uncle heading underground long ago. Then you could search the manor’s library and find the

hidden entrance to the underground dungeon.

It was the kind of story that often got turned into a parable. After looking all over the world for something, you ended up discovering it was right beside you all along.

The diary I'd shown Veltar was something you were normally only supposed to find after completing all of the prerequisite events. In it, he'd written about his unceasing efforts to try and revive his masters, the Demon Lords.

The Demon Lords of this world were monsters who'd been granted extraordinary strength by the evil god. However, that had also inextricably tied them to said god, and they were powerless without him. As a result, when the evil god had been sealed away for the first time, the fourth Demon Lord had entrusted a powerful relic to his followers and gone into a deep slumber beneath Rose Manor. Veltar had transcribed the Demon Lord's last words before he went into hibernation in his diary:

After...light awakens, stand before... Offer...heart...

Because of how much time had passed, the passage where Veltar had written the words down had faded and wasn't fully decipherable. But the gist of it was that after the Goddess of Salvation gave her message to the entire world, someone would need to offer a heart to him and he would be revived. In other words, this particular Demon Lord had already predicted that the evil god's seal would be broken right after the Goddess of Salvation's appearance and had planned ahead. That was also why Veltar had said "It's finally time."

Naturally, *BB*'s protagonist, the Hero of Light, wouldn't just sit back and let a Demon Lord be revived. This meant that after you discovered what Veltar was up to, you'd fight your way down to the bottom of the basement of Rose Manor and confront the Vampire Lord.

One would think just beating Veltar would prevent the revival of the Demon Lord, but *BB* wasn't so nice a game. There was one final twist to this particular scenario—after the fight, as Veltar lay dying, he would laugh triumphantly and tell the player that the Mark of the Curse was actually baked into the Demon Lord's relic, and that he wasn't the caster. Therefore, the only way to free Rose from the curse would be to kill the fourth Demon Lord.

God, what a fucked up event.

The way Veltar had laughed just before he died was identical to the way he was laughing right now, and I still remembered how utterly hopeless the ensuing battle with the fourth Demon Lord had been in the game version. You had to fight him right after beating Veltar, and it had been impossibly hard. I absolutely *did not* want to deal with that guy again.

I need to stop this guy now, while we still have a chance.

I absolutely could not let things happen the way they did in the game. Fortunately, if we were able to kill Veltar here, we'd be able to cut off the entire event chain.

I gripped my sword tight, preparing for battle.

"Old man..." Radd said slowly, walking up beside me.

I glanced over, and the sight of his determined expression helped calm me down a little. Veltar was strong, certainly. After all, he was a boss you fought in the game's third age after fighting your way through a tough dungeon.

But he's still someone we can beat.

Undead monsters had a lot of powerful abilities, but they also had glaring weaknesses. In Veltar's case, both his strengths and weaknesses were taken to the extreme, so it was more of a gimmick event fight than a proper boss battle. Moreover, vampires had a lot of skills that buffed their survivability, but their actual HP was low. If we managed to get clean hits in, we'd be able to kill Veltar pretty quickly.

Plus... I glanced behind me.

While I hadn't expected it to come into play so quickly, I had already handed the right person the right item. It was a piece of equipment with a silly pun of a name, but its effects were outstanding. If used right, it could completely change up the flow of how any given event went.

All right! I sucked in a huge breath, steadying my nerves. Failure was unacceptable, which was precisely why I needed to handle things calmly.

I kept my eyes locked on Veltar as I spoke to the rest of my comrades. I

injected as much confidence as I could into my words, hoping my wording conveyed my intentions to the four of them. “Radd, Nyuuk, Prana, Mana—this guy’s tough, but he’s not unbeatable, and this isn’t your first time dealing with the undead. Remember that Elder Lich we fought, the one with an instant death spell? As long as we’re methodical about our approach, we can beat Veltar just like we did the Elder Lich.”

“Oh!” Nyuuk let out a small gasp, as if he’d completely forgotten he’d killed the Elder Lich.

“He he. Now that’s the kind of speech I want from you, old man.” Radd said, grinning.

At his words, everyone’s nervousness vanished. Nyuuk and the others drew their weapons, quietly waiting for my orders.

“How dare you,” Veltar said, snarling. “Don’t compare me to some second-rate lich!” He stuck his hand out, and black mana started swirling around it.

That’s an AoE attack!

“Scatter!” I shouted.

Everyone dashed in a different direction, and a mere second later, Veltar fired off his spell.

“Blood Bomb!” he cried, a crimson ball shooting out of his hand.

I let out a grunt as it grazed me slightly, then stumbled back a step as it continued forward to slam into the ground.

The ball burst on impact, sending a blast of wind out in every direction. I waved my left arm around to regain my balance, then used the force of the wind to propel me forward toward Veltar.

“Tch! You worms!” He snarled, firing a second and then a third blast at me.

Unfortunately for him, I was ready for his attacks. I could easily read the trajectory of his spells from watching where he aimed his palm, which made them easy enough to dodge.

Too bad; I already know all of your moves! I thought as I ran.

“Square Cross!” I yelled, throwing out my first Art. It slashed through empty air, but I was close enough that the Art I was about to combo it into would hit Veltar. “Arts Plus! Tri—!”

“Know your place, human!” Veltar snarled, finally drawing his weapon. “It’s over!”

Veltar held his thin rapier out to block my slash while he gathered a massive amount of mana in his free left hand.

If that spell hit me at point-blank range, I’d be done for. But I was ready for him.

“You fell for it!” I shouted, thrusting my left hand out at him.

Originally, there was nothing in it, but by using Fast Swap, I was able to teleport a bag filled with white powder into my palm—it was the very same Sacred Ash that we’d used to neutralize the Elder Lich.

The bag flew from my hand, powder scattering.

“Gah, you bastard!”

Unlike the Elder Lich, which hadn’t had any resistance to status ailments, Veltar was late-game boss who had moderate to high resistance against all status ailments. The Sacred Ash barely even stopped him for a second. But that second was all I needed.

“Don’t you think—”

“Get hiiim!” I shouted.

Everyone was already moving. It seemed they had managed to guess my plan from my earlier words, and they’d been waiting for the opening. And so, in the split second that Veltar was paralyzed, Radd, Nyuuk, Prana, and Mana hit him with their strongest attacks.

“Crimson Crash!” Radd cried as he slashed down his weapon, the sword ablaze.

“Flare Cannon!” Nyuuk shouted, this time casting his own spell rather than relying on an item.

“Mirage,” Prana murmured, summoning her clones. Then, she used her strongest arrows to barrage Veltar.

Finally, Mana swung her own staff down and shouted, “Take this! Judgment Ray!”

As always, her light magic was our strongest weapon against undead foes.

Veltar let out a hoarse scream, one you wouldn’t expect from a vampire who looked as suave as him. He fired the spell he’d been readying at the ground, creating a shock wave that blew all of us back.

Radd, who had the highest defenses, was the first to recover. “Did we get him?!” he shouted as he got to his feet.

“You puny humans!!!”

The sound of flapping wings accompanied a wave of pitch black that surged toward us, blotting out the white light Mana had summoned.

“Are those bats?!”

Indeed, it seemed they were—and apparently, Mana’s final spell hadn’t actually hit Veltar. He must have used magic to transform into a cloud of bats and dodge out of the way at the last second.

“Ngh! Arts Plus, Tri-Edge!” I finished my two-Art combo and slashed at the bats, but these were far more agile than the ones I’d fought in the basement.

“Fool! Your sword will never reach me!”

I winced. It was unfortunately true that Arts, which had fixed and relatively simple movement patterns, would be unable to hit the bats.

“Pathetic! Prepare to die, foolish human! You will regret ever baring your fangs at me!”

The swarm of bats rushed toward me.

“I don’t think so,” I said with a grin.

This was in fact precisely what I had been hoping he’d do. Without bothering to pull my sword back, I instead raised my left hand high into the air, equipping a Goblin Slaughterer using Fast Swap.

“Take this!”

In the same way that I could use Final Break with my left-hand weapon and transfer the power over to my right-hand one, I could similarly transfer the power of any Art I used with my right-hand weapon to my left-hand one.

“Final Break!”

There was a burst of light even brighter than the one Mana had called down. For a moment, it looked like the sun had risen again over Rose Manor.

After a few seconds, the light began to dim, revealing a burned and battered swarm of bats that barely resembled their original form.



That was close.

Since this had been a surprise boss encounter, I hadn't been able to swap out to the optimal equipment loadout ahead of time. I had been worried only a single Attack-boosting ring wouldn't be enough, but it looked like things had worked out.

Transforming into a cloud of bats was Veltar's ultimate trump card, since it gave him unparalleled evasion. But at the same time, it heavily lowered his Defense, and also turned him from a single target into multiple targets you could theoretically all hit at once.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I sheathed my weapon. But just then, the voice of the man I'd just killed echoed through the night.

“I admit, I underestimated you.”

“Wha—?! No way!” Nyuuk's jaw dropped open as he watched the various black blobs that had used to be bats begin to crawl toward each other.

Veltar was regenerating. The blobs of black flesh started stitching themselves together, reforming into the shape of a man. In the span of a few seconds, Veltar stood before us, looking no worse for the wear.

“You've gotta be kidding me...” Radd muttered.

“I am a vampire, a ruler of the night. No weapon and no magic can slay me.

No matter how many times you kill me, no matter how many times you burn my body to ash, I will continue to revive over, and—”

“Actually, you’re done for,” I said confidently.

Recilia, who’d been hiding in the shadows and waiting for this exact moment, rushed up and stabbed something through Veltar’s chest before he could react.

“Gah!” He coughed up blood, staring down in disbelief at the object that had been stabbed into his heart. “How did you...”

The object Recilia had stabbed him with was too plain, and in many ways too blunt to be truly called a bladed weapon. In fact, the weapon’s “blade” was made of wood, and though it was classified as a dagger, it looked a lot more like a stake.

“It’s called the Dagger of Regret, apparently,” Recilia said, pushing the “dagger” even deeper into Veltar’s chest.

If you looked at the weapon’s flavor text, you would notice it was described as a “steak knife” which was a dumb pun about how it was actually a stake. It was a weapon with a storied history. Apparently, someone who’d lost their wife and kids to a vampire had crafted it to get his revenge, but then died before he’d been able to, leaving just this weapon behind. This was also the only weapon that could kill Veltar for good. Because, just like in the legends, vampires could only be completely destroyed by driving a wooden stake through their heart.

“Urgh... My body... It’s...”

Veltar’s body was starting to disintegrate, and no amount of regenerative power could help him now. His black hair turned white, and wrinkles started appearing on his skin.

It’s a pretty gruesome way to go, but this is the only way to kill him.

I had, of course, known from the start that Veltar couldn’t be killed through standard means. After all, even if you beat him in the fight where he tried to curse Rose, he’d just regenerate. That was why I’d entered Rose Manor’s basement dungeon earlier than you were supposed to be able to, so I could get the event item you needed to kill Veltar for good before he managed to curse

Rose. The plan had been to kill him once to force his regeneration, and then have Recilia hit him with a surprise attack while he was still in the middle of regenerating and completely defenseless.

And now, I should have successfully changed the future! I should be able to take Rose's event in a new direction the game wouldn't have permitted!

The tension drained from my body, and I nearly slumped to the ground.

"Rex!" Rose exclaimed, running over to where I was.

Despite the shock of learning that her beloved uncle was a monster, and then also seeing him die before her very eyes, she still tried to run over and help me...

But before she could reach me, a red magic circle suddenly appeared underneath her feet.

"Huh?"

Oh no...

It seemed this nightmare of a night wasn't over just yet.

Though he was on the verge of death, Veltar grinned triumphantly and shouted, "I offer the last of my mana to you, my lord!" The Demon Lord's relic was clutched between his two hands, and it was pulsing with an ominous red light.

Chapter 8: The Curse Solidifies

“What is this?!”

As Veltar raised the Demon Lord’s relic up high, it emitted another pulse of red light, and mana began coalescing around Rose.

Everyone let out harsh gasps. The mana was so dense now that we could scarcely breathe.

This was the true strength of a Demon Lord. Just the residual mana left in a relic he’d created ages past was enough to overwhelm all of us. Compared to the Demon Lord, Veltar was a paltry existence.

“Goddamnit!” I cursed under my breath.

This is likely another forced event that’s scripted to go the same way no matter what you do.

The magic circle underneath Rose began to glow brighter.

Everyone knew she was in danger, but none of us moved. Radd had stiffened up, cold sweat pouring down his back, while Mana had been forced to her knees from the pressure of the mana the relic was exerting. She clutched at her chest, clearly in pain, and Recilia was too stunned to act. Hell, I couldn’t even do anything.

“No. Stop. I won’t let you...”

I desperately stretched my hand out, but that was all I could do. The weight of the mana pressing down on me was too great. I gazed on helplessly as things played out as they always did in-game.



The biggest twist in the Vampire of Freelea event chain was what happened right after you killed Veltar. After you stabbed him through the heart with the Dagger of Regret, you headed to the final floor of the underground dungeon, assuming you’d be facing off against the fourth Demon Lord. However, you

actually found nothing upon reaching the final room beyond an extremely ostentatious coffin that had already been opened. There was nothing left inside.

I hadn't lied to Nyuuk when I'd said there was nothing down those stairs back when we'd been exploring for the first time. There had been something there at one point, but it wasn't there now.

When I'd reached that room in-game for the first time, I'd been flabbergasted. However, the empty room had contained one hint as to what was really going on—there was a message carved into the floor in front of the coffin, presumably by the Demon Lord himself.

After the light awakens, stand before me and offer up my heart.

That was the full message left behind by the Demon Lord, including all the parts that had been too faded to read in the diary. However, there had been one part of it that seemed strange to me at first glance.

Why would it say to offer up his heart? I had remembered wondering when I'd read it initially. Naturally, I'd assumed the missing bit would be something like "Offer up *your* heart." That was the whole reason I'd thought Veltar was trying to sacrifice Rose's heart to the Demon Lord to bring him back. Either by dragging her over to the dark side by force, or by turning her into a vampire and robbing her of her free will.

Regardless, before I'd read it, I'd firmly believed that the Demon Lord would be revived by sacrificing Rose. However, this message proved that the only way to bring the Demon Lord back was to offer up his own heart, not just anyone's.

But then, where is his heart? Furthermore, if he's been sleeping in that coffin until now, where has he gone?

The answer to both of those questions had actually been right in front of my eyes. As I'd gotten closer to the Demon Lord's coffin, I'd noticed there was an inscription etched onto its side which made the entire mystery clear.

Here lies Rose, the fourth Demon Lord.



Indeed, the Vampire King—or rather *Queen*—and the fourth Demon Lord were both none other than Rose. She had conquered even the light of day, and the only thing that could pose a threat to her was a stake through her heart. So, just before losing her powers, the fourth Demon Lord had made a bold decision. She'd carved out her own heart, which was both the source of her power and her greatest weakness, and passed it off to one of her trusted retainers. That way, even if someone had found her body at the bottom of Rose Manor's basement, they couldn't kill her. Furthermore, she'd used the last of her strength to cast an enchantment on her heart to make it easier to return to her body. That was what her relic was.

Because her body had been freed from the coffin before her heart had reunited with it, it seemed that Rose had lost her memories of the time she'd been a Demon Lord. That was who the current Rose was—the Demon Lord's body without her heart or memories.

What I'd initially assumed was a curse was not a curse at all. It was more like a form of magical surgery that was slowly but surely fusing the Demon Lord's heart back to her body. When the process was complete, the current Rose who inhabited the Demon Lord's body would be lost forever, but of course the Demon Lord herself didn't care about that. This temporary personality meant nothing to her. Furthermore, this meant that the only way to stop the Mark of the Curse was to kill Rose herself, since she was technically the caster.

As a result, there were only two ways this event could ever end in the game. Either you killed Rose with your own two hands, or you let her revive as a Demon Lord abandoning Freelea to become a den of monsters. There was no way not to engage with this event either—if you ignored it, that simply meant choosing the latter option. Even if you never met Rose, she'd eventually reawaken as a Demon Lord regardless.

To make matters worse, there was no way to delay Rose's resurrection, at least not for long. The “curse” grew stronger with each passing day, and eventually the current Rose became incapable of resisting it. The player was

forced to make this cruel choice sooner or later. Either you killed her and saved the world, or you saved her—though even that couldn't truly be called saving her, since the Rose you'd known was dead—and doomed a city.

This event was scripted to end in tragedy no matter what, and all the player was allowed to choose was how Rose died. Because it had only negative outcomes, the player base had been split on whether they liked it or not. It was an event chain with a lot of emotional moments and a tear-jerking finale, and players who loved a good tragedy were fans of it. The characters and storyline of the event were great too, so some people even considered it *BB's* best event.

Personally, though, I'd always hated it. After multiple playthroughs, the resolution of the event went from being moving to being annoying.

If you wanted to clear the game, you couldn't afford to let Freelea fall. And since Rose was doomed anyway, it didn't matter whether you killed her sooner or later. Thus, on my second playthrough onward, I'd simply granted Rose's request to die after she received the Mark of the Curse. Each time it had been a cold, gameplay-oriented decision, but even so, every time I'd stabbed Rose through the heart, I'd wondered: *What if this wasn't just a game? If I had free rein to do whatever I wished, could I kill Veltar before he ever makes contact with Rose, and save her for good?*

"Fuck!"

That was what I'd tried to do in this world, but right now that chance was about to slip through my fingers. Now that I'd gotten this close to changing Rose's fate, there was no way I was giving up here!

Rose was only a few meters away from me, but the immense pressure the relic was giving off prevented me from taking a single step. Nevertheless, I reached out as far as I could with my hands, trying to grab onto her.

"Aha ha ha! My Lord! Lord Rose! I beseech you, return to us!" Veltar shouted. His right leg and left arm had already crumbled to dust, and he was seconds from disintegrating completely. But the light in his eyes was as vibrant as ever, and he held tightly onto the relic.

The magic circle's light intensified yet again, and the relic flashed once, before swords of blood started rising up out of it. I knew the moment those pierced

Rose's chest, she would be branded forever. Her future would be ripped away from her.

But even so, I couldn't move. She was only a few steps away from me, but I couldn't reach her.

Just before the swords of blood started moving, Rose turned to look at me. "Rex, help m—!"

Before she could finish her sentence the crimson swords shot forward, heading straight for Rose's chest.

"ROSE!!!" I screamed.

But just seconds later, the swords etched the shape of the mark onto their target's chest.



I slumped to my knees. The curse had been cast. Nothing I did now could stop it.

The immense wave of mana that had been bearing down on all of us started to dissipate, but I couldn't muster the energy to get back to my feet. Still, as the accursed crimson light of the magic circle began to fade my vision cleared up, and I was able to get a better look at my surroundings.

"No..." Someone muttered softly, their words getting swallowed up by the night.

As I glanced around, I saw Radd and Nyuuk staring at Rose in shock, while Prana and Mana were still on their knees. Recilia was biting her lip, while Rose looked down at her chest, still not fully grasping what had happened to her.



While everyone continued to watch on in stunned silence, I turned to Veltar. All that was left of him was his torso and head, but he was still clinging feverishly onto life, trying to ascertain whether or not he'd successfully accomplished his task. It reminded me of his final moments in the game. He'd died with a look of satisfaction, knowing that he'd succeeded. But this time around, in this world, there was no smug grin. In fact, he looked confused as he stared at me.

"Why...?" he muttered.

I waved casually at Veltar from where I sat inside the magic circle and said, "Yo." The Mark of the Curse was glowing dully on my chest.

"How are you over there?!"

Veltar screamed in rage and despair as the last of his face crumbled to ash, and he died for good. The Castling Ring I'd equipped on my right hand also broke apart, falling off of my finger.

Chapter 9: The Rosebud Blooms

Everyone nervously watched the clock as it ticked ever closer to midnight. It moved at what seemed like a snail’s pace, but finally the second, minute, and hour hand all pointed straight up.

“It’s time!”

“Rex!” Rose, who was sitting next to me, squeezed my hand, a worried look on her face.

Black haze erupted from the brand on my chest, then split into multiple different streams, like a many-headed hydra searching for prey, before sinking back underneath my skin. That was exactly how the curse had looked when it activated on Rose in the game. When it hit her, she’d started writhing in pain and lost some of her health and mana.

“Well, that was anticlimactic...” I said as the black mist slammed back into me.

I did feel a light impact, but as far as I could tell, no actual harm had been done. Just to be sure, I looked in the mirror and used Analyze on myself.

【Rex】

LV: 52

HP: 542

MP: 281

Strength: 210 (C+)

Vitality: 204 (C+)

Intelligence: 214 (C+)

Mind: 204 (C+)

Agility: 210 (C+)

Focus: 212 (C+)

Neither my HP nor my MP had gone down, and my stats were all the same. I'd practically spent more time staring at my stats than I had my own face, so I definitely would have noticed if any of them had changed by even a single point.

"Everything looks fine," I said with a satisfied nod.

Thank the lord...

Rose ran up and hugged me.

"Thank goodness! I'm so glad you're all right!"

"I *did* say there was nothing to worry about," I replied with a small smile.

But while I put on a confident front, I'd actually been quite worried myself. In fact, I'd probably been more worried than Rose. Of course, I knew logically there shouldn't be any problems since the Mark of the Curse was only supposed to work on vampires, and more specifically only supposed to work on Rose due to her status as the Demon Lord. It shouldn't have had any effects on Rex, who was just a normal adventurer.

Even in the game, when you took Rose to see the healer, they mentioned that the black fog was harmless to regular humans after they'd examined it. At the same time, I'd learned that while my game knowledge did come in handy, this world wasn't a one-to-one replica of the game. It was entirely possible that either the Mark of the Curse would have worked on me, slowly transforming me into a new Demon Lord, or that the black fog would come out and attack Rose despite the brand being carved into me. That was why I hadn't wanted to go with this method if I didn't have to.

When I'd outfitted Rose for her leveling expedition, I'd handed her the Castling Ring just in case she found herself in actual danger. I hadn't expected to use it to stop Veltar's plot, but it turned out to be a very effective last resort.

The Castling Ring had a very simple effect—it let you swap places with someone wearing another Castling Ring. The name probably came from castling in chess, which was a move that let the king and rook swap places. As someone who actually knew the rules of chess, I knew that the king and rook didn't

technically swap places so much as move closer to each other's starting spots, but the Castling Ring actually did let you swap places exactly. Its effective range wasn't all that high, and the ring broke after a single use, so it wasn't a particularly great accessory. However, it was the only thing I'd been able to think of that would let me interfere with the way this event was meant to go.

And lo and behold, I'd needed to use it to save Rose. I hadn't thought Veltar would still be able to activate the Mark of the Curse even after being stabbed by the Dagger of Regret. Though it was hard to say whether that had been due to Veltar's own tenacity or the world's tendency to try and force things down the storylines predetermined by the game. Either way, the Castling Ring had let me rewrite the outcome of this event, which proved that even forced event scenes could be overcome with enough preparation. This was a huge discovery.

"Don't think I've forgiven you, brother," Recilia whispered quietly into my ear.

A shiver ran down my spine. I'd told Recilia my entire plan beforehand, but I'd neglected to mention the Castling Rings. Mostly because I knew she would have been opposed to the idea and would have insisted that she wear the paired ring instead.

After the battle I'd also had Recilia hang on to the Dagger of Regret just in case the curse had turned me into a vampire. The fact that I'd wanted her to kill me if the worst happened had not put her in a good mood.

"Umm, Rex. Are you okay? You look rather pale."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine."

I stopped worrying about how I was going to pacify Recilia and smiled reassuringly at Rose. But as I did so, her expression clouded over.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It's nothing. I'm happy everyone's safe, but...now I've lost my uncle, and all of you will be returning to your adventures. I was just thinking it's going to be lonely here again. Sorry for saying something so selfish." Rose looked away, a sad smile on her face. "I know what uncle was trying to do was terrible, and that he had to be stopped. But he was...kind to me." Rose looked over at the book she'd been reading, then reached over and

stroked the open pages. "Uncle bought this book for me when I was a child. He also...used to make me caramel candy from scratch."

Rose looked wistfully off into the distance, and I felt a pang of pain in my heart.

"Whenever I asked him why he was so nice to me he'd always smile and say, 'Because you're special.' Thinking back on it now, he was probably referring to the Demon Lord within me instead of me."

Rose smiled sadly, and it suddenly hit me that even though I'd taken the Mark of the Curse in her stead, she was still a vampire and the fourth Demon Lord. Her original persona was still sleeping, that was all. She must be terrified that at any point the other part of her might awaken and she'd transform into an evil monster. Not only that, she knew she was destined to spend the rest of her days alone in the manor.

"Rose," I said, making up my mind before I could start having second thoughts.

"Yes, Rex?" She gave me a fearful look.

"We stopped the Vampire Lord who was trying to resurrect the Demon Lord within you, but that doesn't mean everything's over. We don't know what latent effects the curse might have on me, and there's always still the possibility that you'll awaken as a Demon Lord anyway eventually."

"I... I know..." Rose said, nodding and hanging her head.

"Since we don't know what might happen in the future..."

I trailed off, looking around at the spacious living room. This mansion was too large for one person to live here all alone. Rose waited with bated breath for my next words, looking like a criminal awaiting her sentence.

"Would it be all right if I kept visiting you every now and then?"

Rose looked up at me in surprise. She saw from my expression that I was sincere, and tears of joy welled up in her eyes. "Please do!"

Her beaming smile reminded me of a blooming rose.

Epilogue

“Visibility here is even worse than I thought...” I muttered as I walked through a dense forest with Recilia. I hadn’t planned on bringing her with me today, but as always she’d insisted on coming. Today’s task would have gone by much faster if I’d been able to handle it alone, especially since I would have left at dusk and returned before anyone woke up, but it wasn’t meant to be.

That being said... Now that I was here, I was glad for the company. This forest was too dreary to trudge through alone.

“Are you sure this is the right place, brother? I’m pretty sure the only thing farther ahead is a lake.”

I turned back to Recilia, who was giving me a dubious look. “That lake is in fact our destination.”

“Liru Lake? But there’s nothing there...”

“Look, you can see it now.”

The forest suddenly opened up and we squinted as the red light of the setting sun shone into our eyes.

“What on...” Recilia’s jaw dropped open. Her reaction was understandable, considering the view before us.

“Just as I thought; it’s already appeared.”

In the early stages of *BB* the game, Liru Lake was just a sightseeing spot. There was no treasure here, and you couldn’t even find any monsters. But as the game age progressed, the lake’s true nature was revealed to the player.

“What in the world is that? Why is there a castle in the lake?”

The castle Recilia was referring to was Andaril, the Sunken Fortress. It was another special dungeon. As the game’s age progressed the lake’s water level got lower and lower, allowing you to access more of the fortress. Right now, only the highest towers were poking out of the water, but the bit of it you could

see just under the surface hinted at how massive the structure was.

“Don’t tell me this is the dungeon we’re exploring next?” Recilia exclaimed, turning back to me.

I shook my head to the contrary. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to go through Andaril, but it would be more efficient to explore it when more of it was actually accessible.

“Nope, I just came here to make sure it was here today.”

It was a rather annoying trek to come all the way out here, but seeing how much of this dungeon was above the water was the best way to track the passage of ages in *BB*.

There’s no doubt about it, we’re in the second age now.

I had assumed as much the moment Rose’s event had started progressing, but seeing these underwater ruins really made it sink in.

“Things are about to get real interesting.”

There weren’t many important world events in age one. It was mostly an introductory period to let the player explore the world and meet the important NPCs that would play a large part in future story events. Furthermore, you could control how long it lasted by manipulating a few key flags. But as soon as you reached age two, things got a lot more hectic. Events became bigger and more important, and the more of them you cleared the faster the ages advanced. The fact that we were in age two now meant that I was out of prep time.

The clock’s finally started ticking, and the world’s begun its slow, inexorable march toward destruction. Fortunately, I managed to stop the resurrection of Demon Lord Rose, but...

Now that the age had advanced, a lot more actors than just Rose would have begun to make their move. The various Demon Lords would be getting a lot more active, and we’d have to deal with disaster after disaster.

I guess that guy’s attack is probably going to be first, huh? I need to craft as many useful items as I can, and probably discuss countermeasures with

Veteram... Shit, this is going to suck.

Despite my vast amount of game knowledge, I was just a regular adventurer, not the protagonist, nor even a hero. The most I could manage was mitigating the damage the coming disasters would cause. In order to actually overcome the trials the world was about to face we needed a true hero, a true protagonist to show up.

“Just where the hell are you hiding, protagonist?” I muttered quietly into the dark of the night, knowing there would be no response.

Side Story: The Cat and the Hounds

When I was a kid, I used to love this story called *Warrior Urashima and the Seven Giant Turtles*. I'd read the book so much the ink started to fade. Now, after returning to Freelea for the first time in a few months, I understood how Urashima must have felt after coming out of the Ryuuguu dungeon for the first time in decades and marveling at how the world had changed.

Did I accidentally come to the wrong city? I rubbed my eyes, but the scenery before me remained unchanged. *And why's the Guild so busy? It doesn't look like there was an emergency summons.*

Freelea was known as the city of adventurers because of how many adventurers used it as a base of operations. The Guild tended to be busy most days, but today it was exceptionally crowded. The building was packed to the brim. Me and my mates were used to rough work, but even we flinched at the prospect of wading into that crowd.

I recognize a few faces here and there, but how come there's so many newcomers here?!

Adventurers were a free-spirited lot. They came in all kinds from all sorts of backgrounds, but at the same time, there weren't a huge number of them. If you spent a decent amount of time in a city you got to know all the other adventurers in it, or at the very least knew one person from each of the parties operating in that city. But I didn't know even half the people in this crowd. Something weird was going on. *Especially* considering the average age of these adventurers.

Why are they all so young?

I'd heard that a bunch of people had signed up to become adventurers after hearing the goddess's oracle, but even so these numbers were abnormal. There were more youngsters in the Guild than I'd ever seen in my life, and furthermore their eyes all seemed to be glowing with hope.

As I stood stunned outside the front door, another group strode past me and walked inside.

“Oh shit, the Pretty Cats are back, guys!” someone yelled as the new group entered the building.

I turned to the newcomers and my shock doubled. *Those guys are still kids!*

The party of girls that had walked into the Adventurers' Guild were holding up a bunch of items that the Guild had presumably requested. The surprising thing though was that they couldn't have been any older than thirteen. Young adventurers weren't a new sight, but I'd never seen adventurers quite this young.

What the heck happened to this city?!



It had all started when we'd received a letter while staying in the small village we used as our forward base. Our party, the Hounds, was a special group of adventurers who went out and investigated unexplored regions of the world. We had our martial-minded but surprisingly humorous monk, Baltore Gold; our timid but reliable shielder, Geeko Walsh; and me, the party's Scout and leader, Dax Find.

There were only three of us even though the recommended party size for people going through unexplored regions was six. We'd achieved exemplary results over and over, however, and our party was already A-rank. The problem was, the farther you got from human settlements, the stronger the monsters got. The dungeons around Freelea were much too easy for veteran A-rank adventurers like us.

Hence why we'd struck out into the unknown to find new dungeons no one had discovered yet. As a result, we'd come to be known as the Special Scouting Team of Freelea's Adventurers' Guild. However, even if we spent most of our time touring the unexplored frontiers, we had to go back to civilization every now and then—no matter how much you stuffed your Inventory before an expedition, you always ran out of something or the other after some time passed, and every once in a while you needed time to rest and recover after weeks in the wilderness.

We tended to go back to the nearest village once or twice a month to resupply and take a break, so anyone who wanted to reach us usually sent a letter to that village. And this time when we'd returned, the letter waiting for us turned out to be far more important than we'd realized.

It had been sent by Old Man Eld. He'd been our mentor when we'd been brats just starting out as adventurers, and he was also Freelea's Guild Master. Though according to the letter we'd just gotten, it seemed he'd retired and Veteram had stepped up to take over his duties.

Are you serious...?

Needless to say, the three of us were shocked when we read the letter. Not because Veteram had become Guild Master, though. We were familiar with Veteram, since he was quite famous in Freelea. Plus, we knew that Eld had actually been asking Veteram to take over for him for a while now.

Honestly, we'd also thought Veteram would make for a suitable successor. As adventurers we were about as skilled as Veteram, but we lacked the charisma he did. That man drew people to him in a way we never could. Besides, he was the kind of person who gave it his all not for himself, but for the sake of others. He was a far cry from us brats who'd only gotten stronger for ourselves.

Still, it's too soon.

While we had no qualms with Veteram being the next Guild Master, the thing that bothered us was why he'd succeeded the position now of all times. Eld was old, no doubt, but he was healthy enough that he could easily keep going for another 20 years if he wanted to. More importantly, Veteram himself had said he would rather stay an active adventurer for another decade or so. That was in fact why he'd initially rejected Eld's request to succeed him.

If Veteram had retired from adventuring, then something serious must have happened. Either he'd gotten injured so badly he couldn't keep adventuring, or something unexpected had happened to Eld or the city that had led to Veteram taking up the post earlier than intended.

However, Eld's letter made no mention of why he'd retired. Instead he'd written: "The world has changed greatly. You should return to Freelea; I promise you won't regret it!"

His handwriting had been as steady as always, proving that he was still as energetic as he used to be. And so we'd made our way back to Freelea, more confused than worried really.



I know you said the world had changed, but this is too much change! I thought to myself as I stared at the completely transformed Guild building.

It had been only been a few months since we'd last been in Freelea, but Eld had greeted us with a smile at the front gates, looking more lively than ever now that he'd been freed from the burdens and responsibilities of being Guild Master. We'd asked him repeatedly what he'd meant in his letter, but he'd just grinned and said nothing. The whole time he'd just asked us about what we'd been up to, until we'd gotten fed up and demanded he let us know what was going on. To which he'd replied, "It'll be faster if you guys see it for yourselves. Go check out the Adventurers' Guild."

"What the heck happened?" I muttered.

The city streets had seemed normal enough. Freelea had been bustling like usual, and we'd let the nostalgia of human civilization sink in for a while as we'd leisurely made our way to the Guild. The only difference from the Freelea we'd remembered was that there had been cloth-covered barrels set up on every street corner, but we'd figured that was just preparations for a festival of some sort or the other. Honestly, our steps had started to grow heavy with how similar Freelea seemed.

"I hope that old man hasn't gone senile," I'd muttered after we'd parted ways with him. Eld had just handed us a gift, saying, "Sorry it's a hand-me-down, but I hope you find it useful."

Despite his words, the gift the old man had given us had just been a plain old Anti-paralysis Ring.

Maybe it was one he used while still active as a Guild Master or something, I thought.

The only thing special about it was that the number S-91 had been engraved into it. Of course, a ring like this was quite useful for newbie adventurers, but

you found tons of them while exploring dungeons and we already had a stock ourselves. I didn't wear them normally, since that would mean losing the effects of one of my currently equipped rings. The one I could most afford to remove would be my Strength Ring, but as the party's attacker and scout I needed to boost my Attack power as much as possible. Plus, high offense matched my fighting style.

Eld used to be an adventurer himself, surely he knows all of that.

Difficult though it was to believe, perhaps Veteram had taken over for Eld because Eld had lost his marbles. But then we'd reached the Adventurers' Guild and all of our doubts had been blown away.

"Dax," Geeko said, and I turned to him. "What the flying fuck is going on here?"

I just shook my head at his flabbergasted voice. Eld clearly hadn't gone senile. Something truly monumental must have happened to the Guild. The question was what.

Baltore, my other party member, suddenly piped up. "Dax, Geeko. Look at the seat over there."

Though Baltore looked like an overly cautious bodybuilder, the truth was he was the brains of our group. We looked in the direction he was pointing, and saw a man whose presence was so overwhelming he was distinctly noticeable even in the crowd.

"That man's wearing desert tribe garb. Also, I've seen that face somewhere before. I'm pretty sure that's the A-rank adventurer, Dean the Sand Lord."

"He came all the way here from the desert?!"

Most desert dwellers were insular folk who rarely interacted with outsiders or left their home region. Desert tribe adventurers were a bit more sociable than most, but it was still rare to see a desert tribe adventurer in a big city like this. *Especially* an A-rank one.

Someone like Dean the Sand Lord showing up would certainly cause a stir in the city, but it seemed there were more surprises yet to come. Baltore pointed to another person close to Dean.

“He’s not the only one here. Look at that group staring at the quest board. They’re a famous party from the empire. And the woman sitting on the table over there is from the Republic.”

“Are you saying people from all around the world came specifically here to Freelea for something?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it’s a possibility,” Baltore said, looking more happy than shaken. He was a man who hated stagnation and loved change, so it made sense that he was enjoying this.

Just then, a bell rang out in a familiar pattern, and I felt a bit of relief at hearing something I recognized.

“Congratulations! Pretty Cats, your party has advanced to D-rank!”

All of the adventurers in the room clapped and cheered as the receptionist announced the promotion.

Man, that takes me back. I guess even when the world changes there are still some things that don’t.

I clapped along with everyone else, finally feeling like I’d come back home. But then, as I applauded, I realized I recognized the party name.

Isn’t that the...? It is!

It was the name of the party of young girls who’d passed me on the way in.

We were in their shoes once long ago.

D-rank was still a beginner rank, but if you could advance to D-rank it meant you were a real adventurer now. Putting aside a few special exceptions, adventurers always started at Rank E, so the promotion from E to D was the first real hurdle an adventurer faced. There was no age requirement to rank up, and promotions were based solely on skill. Still, if you didn’t learn how to fight monsters efficiently and grow stronger, you could be stuck at E rank forever.

Everyone in the Guild had congratulated us brats when we’d gone from Rank E to D as well. That had been the moment where we’d gone from nobodies to adventurers people actually recognized and respected. It had been a defining moment in my life. I figured these girls were probably overjoyed too, since they

were even younger than I'd been when I'd first ranked up.

"We're prodigies, so of course we'd rank up this quickly! Anyway, let us rent out that equipment again!"

To my surprise, the girls seemed completely unmoved by the fact that they were D-rank now and apparently were already looking to go on their next quest.

Wh-What's with those girls? I thought incredulously.

The receptionist seemed used to their attitude, and she just let out a resigned sigh as she started fishing for the equipment they requested. "Don't worry, we haven't forgotten about your reservation. Oh, and also..." The receptionist lowered her voice to a whisper, but thanks to my sharpened senses as our party's Scout, I was still able to hear her. "That ring you wanted was returned yesterday. You can borrow it now if you'd like."

"Yaaay!" Cried one of the girls. She grabbed her comrades' hands and started jumping up and down, far more excited about the ring than she had been about her promotion.

As I watched, the receptionist waved the girl forward, and the two vanished deeper into the Guild hall. I was completely lost.

"Did our Guild have an equipment rental service?" Geeko asked, looking confused.

"Hmm. Maybe the reason there's so many newbies at the Guild is because a service like that started up recently," Baltore mused.

If the Guild was lending out powerful equipment to newbie adventurers, that would explain why there were so many of them here, and why they all looked so hopeful.

"I can't say I like it myself," I muttered.

It was true that newbies would have an easier time clearing dungeons if they had stronger equipment, but if they grew to rely on equipment for everything they wouldn't become strong enough to handle the truly difficult dungeons. Besides, you needed to be decently strong yourself to effectively use strong

equipment. Honestly, I felt like an equipment rental system like this did more harm than good.

“Oh, looks like they’re back,” Geeko said as the girls returned from whatever room they’d gone into.

Let’s see what they got. Is the Guild handing out mythril equipment, or orichalcum?

I looked on, half-jealous and half-curious. But then we saw what equipment the girls were carrying in their arms and our jaws dropped open.

“What?!”



“Hold on!” I shouted, calling out to the Pretty Cats party.

I’d followed them out of the Guild and waited until we were on a deserted street to talk to them.

The three of them jumped in surprise, then warily turned to me. “What do you want? We need to tweak the equipment we borrowed so we can’t stay and chat.”

The girl tried to keep her voice even, but I could sense the slight nervousness in her tone.

Little girl or not, she’s still an adventurer it seems, I mused. Her reaction was appropriate for someone who fought deadly monsters on a day to day basis. Which was precisely why I’d wanted to warn her.

“Your equipment is exactly what I wanna talk about.”

“Huh. Don’t tell me you’re trying to steal it from us, old timer. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“O-Old timer?!” Geeko shouted, looking mildly offended.

I held out a hand to stop him. From their perspective, we certainly *were* old, considering they were twelve or thirteen at most. Plus, even though we were A-rank adventurers, we weren’t famous the way Veteram was.

Also, though I didn’t want to admit it, I knew we looked pretty scary. Anna

from the bar had said I looked rugged and cool, but I didn't expect little girls to share that sentiment. The Pretty Cats had every reason to be wary of us based on first impressions, so I didn't want to make things any worse.

"No, no, that's not it. Umm, miss..."

I plastered on my best smile, but that only made the girls even warier of me. They huddled closer together and glared at me.

Why, I'm trying to be polite here!

Unable to bear watching us flounder any longer, Baltore stepped forward and explained, "Trust me, that's not why we're here. It's just that we recognize that equipment that you rented, so we thought we'd warn you."

This was why he was the talker of the party. Upon hearing what he said, the girls let go of each other and relaxed slightly.

Baltore nodded his head to me and I picked up from where he left off.

"Look, I dunno what the guys at the Guild told you, but that equipment's garbage."

The girls gave me a confused look. However, what I'd told them was the unvarnished truth. When they'd come out of the Guild room carrying their equipment we'd been surprised not because it was powerful but rather because it was so garbage we'd been left speechless.

Did Old Man Eld send us here because he wanted us to take a look at what was going on? I wondered.

Though we'd butted heads with the Adventurers' Guild a few times in the past, we still trusted them a decent amount. But if they were renting out equipment this shitty, it made me wonder if the Guild's new management was trying to prey on newbies or something.

It's not really my style to tell people what to do, but I might need to knock some sense into Veteram.

It was the least we could do for the city of Freelea. True, we'd abandoned it to go exploring the unknown, but we still felt some attachment to our old roost.

"Huh? What do you mean it's garbage?!"

Naturally, the girls didn't believe us immediately. I met the leader's gaze, noting her sharp scowl. "Sorry, let me explain from the beginning." I pointed to the gauntlet the strong-willed girl to the right of the leader was cradling so preciously. "That gauntlet may look novel and shiny, but it's made of basic bronze. In fact, it's worse than the steel equipment you have on you right now."

You could get a decent idea of how strong equipment was based on the material used to craft it. Bronze was the weakest metal, iron was stronger than bronze, steel was stronger than iron, mythril was stronger than steel, and orichalcum was stronger than mythril. To give you an idea of how weak it was, bronze equipment was so shitty even beginners didn't use it. Stores didn't even stock bronze equipment because there was no point. The only way most people got their hands on it was from low-tier dungeon drops. The main use for bronze equipment was more senior adventurers scamming newbies who didn't know any better. Embarrassing though it was to admit, I myself had fallen to prey to one such scam when I'd been starting out.

"U-Uh-huh..."

The girls looked taken aback by what I'd said. Encouraged, I next pointed to the equipment the girl to the left of the leader was holding.

"Let me tell you about that ring. It's called the Pretty Ring. It doesn't do anything when equipped. All it's good for is selling to shops for an okay price."

At this point, the girls were speechless. Though it hurt my conscience a little to dash their hopes, this was for their own good.

"Finally, we have the last thing you borrowed."

I pointed to the wristband the leader—who had her hair up in pigtails—was holding.

"That wristband is even worse than bronze equipment. It actually makes you weaker when you equip it."

I recognized the wristband since it occasionally dropped in beginner dungeons, and for some reason it dropped with even more frequency in mid-tier dungeons. Though it was a trap item that lowered your stats, it could at least be sold for a decent amount. Whenever one of them dropped, I'd throw it

in my Inventory and sell them in bulk next time I stopped by a city. I hadn't done that yet this time around because our return to Freelea had been so hectic from the get-go.

Man, you never know what experiences might come in handy in the future.

I took a wristband out of my Inventory that looked just like the girl's, as well as another trap item that I happened to have on hand.

"As you can see, we've picked up a few similar items during our own dungeon dives. I promise you the only use for these things is to sell them. Trust me, you guys should give this crappy equipment back to the Guild and..." I trailed off, noticing that the girls had exchanged glances and were now grinning at us like they'd found a fun new toy to play with. "Wh-What is it?" I asked, surprised by the sudden change.

These girls might be young enough to be our daughters, but the predatory look they gave us scared me a little still.

"Sorry, give us a sec to talk this out!" the leader said, holding up a hand to stall me. She then took her comrades off to a corner of the street and they started whispering to each other. But of course as a Scout, my ears were sharp enough to pick up at least half of what they were saying.

"Yikes! That's just mean, Chisha!"

"Oh come on, everyone does it! It's fine!"

"In that case, how about we..."

Even if I could hear the words though, I had no idea what they were talking about.

I really don't get kids these days.

Granted I'd been bad at figuring out what girls were thinking even when I'd been younger. Now that I was a geezer it was even harder to understand young girls. And frankly I didn't care enough to try.

"All right we're back, old timers!" the girls suddenly said, running back.

"O-Okay..."

They were still smiling at us, but there was something about those smiles that unnerved me.

The leader stepped forward and asked, “You guys just got to this city recently, right?”

“Actually, I...” I’d been adventuring in this city since before this girl had been born. But I suspected that wasn’t quite what the girl was asking about. “Yeah, you could say that I guess,” I replied with a nod.

“I knew it!” the strong-willed girl, who I believed was called Ai, snickered.

Meanwhile, the most mature of the trio looked up at us and said, “In that case, we have a suggestion. If you old ti—I mean, *fine gentlemen*—don’t need that ‘crappy equipment,’ how about you give it to us?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, it doesn’t sell for much, but still...”

I was surprised by the sudden question, but held my ground in the end. The girls’ “suggestion” was basically asking us to give them stuff for free. Sure, these trap items didn’t sell for much, but they were still worth *some* money.

Before I could actually refuse though, the girl added, “Of course, we won’t ask you to give them to us for free.” She held my gaze, and I found myself unable to look away. “In return, we’ll give you a special lecture on how to adventure efficiently!”

“Huh?”

These girls who couldn’t have been adventuring for more than a few weeks seemed to think they could teach us, veterans who’d been adventuring for well over a decade, something new.



“All right, let’s introduce ourselves first! I’m Ai, leader of the Pretty Cats, and super Mage in the making!” The girl with flaming red hair and a wide forehead puffed out her chest as she spoke. She seemed the most strong-willed of the three, so it made sense that she was the party leader.

“Okay, me next! I’m Mia, the healer of the party!” the youngest, and most energetic, of the three said. She was clearly a free spirit, but with a

simpleminded nature that would make her easy to deal with.

“Seriously, you guys are giving them our names? What if they turn out to be stalkers or something? I don’t want these old geezers knowing who I am,” the final girl said. She was the one who’d roped us into this mess, and also the one who seemed the craftiest of the three. “Okay fine, I’ll introduce myself too. I’m Chisha, a swordswoman. I doubt we’ll ever see each other again after today, so no need to remember my name.”

“N-Nice to meet you all.”

I did my best to smile politely, but it was getting harder and harder to keep my anger in check.

Their leader, Ai, seemed like she was quite the stubborn one, while Mia didn’t seem like she was thinking about anything at all. And Chisha just pissed me off. At least the three of them were distinctive enough that I doubted I’d be forgetting their names anytime soon.

“Oh yeah, I guess we’ll introduce ourselves too. Our party is the Hounds, and —”

“Meh, don’t bother. Not like there’s any point in remembering your guys’ names.”

I could feel my smile slipping, but these brats didn’t seem to care at all that they were being rude.

“Hmph! You better be grateful that future superstars like us are willing to teach you about the new wave of adventuring! Normally you’d never get a chance like this!”

“Yeah, thank your lucky stars you old geezers!”

They were brimming with so much confidence I couldn’t even find the energy to get mad. Sighing, I watched as Ai put her hands on her hips and started her lecture.

“First things first, we already know this bronze armor is super weak!”

“Wait, you do?” I gave them a stunned look, and Chisha started snickering.

“I mean you can tell just by looking at it that this equipment is garbage. Only a

moron would let themselves get swindled into thinking it's strong."

"Th-That's a bit harsh..."

I tried not to let it show on my face that I was one of those morons who'd been swindled in the past. Meanwhile, Mia started humming "Sucky, sucky, sucky, sucky aaarmor!" to herself. I knew they weren't making fun of me in particular, but it was still annoying.

As I was trying to stitch my tattered pride together, Ai continued her explanation.

"We spent a lot of time thinking about what equipment we wanted to rent, you know! We stared at the catalog for days so we knew exactly how weak and strong each piece was."

Well, how was I supposed to know that? I thought, but I kept my words to myself. Since I'd already agreed to listen to her lecture, I figured I may as well see if I could glean anything useful from it.

"Then why the hell did you rent such shitty equipment?" Geeko asked, and Chisha grinned, as if she'd been waiting for that exact question.

"It's easier to show you guys than explain. Ai!"

"Time to show you what a super wiz—I mean Mage like myself can do!" Ai stepped forward and puffed her chest out proudly. "Watch this. Fire!"

She launched a fireball at an empty patch of land in the distance, and the three of us whistled in admiration.

"Whoa."

"Oho."

"Impressive..."

Looks like she's not just all talk.

Of course, her Fire spell didn't compare to an A-rank mage's, but it was far stronger than you'd expect from an adventurer who just got promoted to D-rank. I could see why she called herself a prodigy.

"What are you getting all impressed for? The real show starts now," Chisha

said with an impish grin.

“Huh?” I turned back to her, confused.

Ai took off the steel bracer she was currently wearing and handed it to Chisha. She then took the rental bronze gauntlet and equipped it.

What’s the big idea? I wondered, confused.

The bronze gauntlet was clearly weaker than the steel one. Not only that, a gauntlet was much heavier than a bracer, and not really suited for mages. Ai, however, raised her staff high, the bronze gauntlets looking somewhat comical on her, and shouted, “Watch this! Fire!”

When we saw the size of the fireball she unleashed, our jaws dropped open. It was so massive that it beggared belief that a newbie adventurer like her had been able to conjure it. No matter how gifted you were, you couldn’t cast magic of that caliber as a beginner. I mean, her first fireball had already been pretty impressive for a newbie, but this one was as big as the ones cast by veteran adventurers!

“H-How did you do that?” I muttered.

I’d never heard of bronze equipment that raised someone’s magical capabilities. And yet, by swapping out to the gauntlet, Ai’s magic had grown exponentially stronger.

Grinning, Ai answered my question. “That’s because all of the pieces of equipment we borrowed have really powerful enchantments on them!”

“Really?” The three of us exchanged glances.

We knew what enchantments were. Very rarely, you’d find equipment in a dungeon that raised some of your stats when worn. But it was impossible to tell what stat it raised until you equipped it, and you couldn’t go out of your way to try and farm equipment that raised specific stats. Honestly, relying on enchantments to raise your stats was a waste of time.

“Look, here! See how the gauntlet has I-78 written on it?!”

I took a closer look at the gauntlet and indeed saw I-78 carved into the side.

“That means this gauntlet is enchanted to boost Intelligence by 78 points! My

current Intelligence is 49, so the gauntlet more than doubles my Intelligence!”

“Wh-What?!”

I had never heard of equipment that more than doubled an adventurer’s stats. Not even a newbie adventurer’s. On top of that, Ai had mentioned her Intelligence was 49, so that meant she must have some way of knowing just how high her magical power was as a numerical value.

“Wait, hold on! Then what about that ring?!”

“Of course, that’s enchanted too. Look, it says M-49.”

I leaned forward to examine the ring and once again saw the letters Ai mentioned.

“Don’t get so close, old geezer! You’re scaring Mia!” Ai shouted.

“Oh, m-my bad.”

I was still stunned by Ai’s earlier display of power, so I meekly let her push me away. I had thought the Pretty Ring that Mia was holding was completely useless, but it seemed it was actually immensely powerful.

“I guess if ‘I’ stands for Intelligence, then ‘M’ must be Mind, right? So I take it this ring raises Mind by 49? Well, compared to the gauntlets I guess it’s a little weak,” I muttered, talking more to myself than anything.

However Chisha heard my musings and shouted, “That’s because everyone’s after the good enchanted rings! Do you have any idea how long we had to wait to get our hands on this?!”

Upon hearing that, I suddenly remembered something. “I get it now—so that’s why Eld gave us that ring!”

With trembling fingers, I took the Anti-paralysis Ring he’d given me out of my Inventory. Just like the Pretty Ring, this ring also had a letter and numbers carved into it.

“Hey, I actually got a similar ring from an acquaintance of mine. It says ‘S-91,’ so does that mean—”

“Let me see!”

Ai bolted forward, eyes gleaming, and snatched the ring out of my hands before I could even react.

“Holy crap. How did you...”

Ai trailed off, staring at the engraving in wonder.

“Is this thing really that rare?”

“R-Rarer than rare! You can’t rent anything that gives a bigger stat boost than 80, and there’s barely any rings that go over 50!”

Seeing them overawed for once brought a satisfied smile to my face. True, it had been old man Eld who’d given this to us, so it wasn’t like we’d obtained this ring ourselves, but I was still proud of it nevertheless.

Guess he’s not going senile after all.

Chances were he had connections with whoever had obtained such a large amount of enchanted equipment. And he’d probably negotiated for one of the higher-tier ones to give to us.

“I don’t believe it. Why does a scruffy old geezer like you have this ring?” Ai grumbled, reluctantly handing the ring back to me.

Honestly, I didn’t even care that she was acting like she was superior to us anymore.

“Oh yeah, so what does S stand for here? What stat does this ring raise?”

“Hmph, why don’t you try it on and find out?” Ai retorted, pouting.

Sighing, I equipped the ring. The moment I did, I felt a tangible surge of power flow through me. “Wh-What the hell...? This...raises your Strength, doesn’t it? L-Let me try something real quick.”

The difference was stark. I had to see how much stronger this had made me.

I took a few steps away from the group and drew my sword. It was a longsword, which was perhaps too big a weapon for a hybrid Scout-attacker like me, but I was fond of it. That being said, because of how low my Strength was, I’d had a lot of trouble using it effectively. It felt like the sword was swinging me around more often than it felt like I was swinging it around. But now it felt

perfectly comfortable in my hands.

“Holy shit! This is amazing!”

The long blade which had always felt so heavy before was now as light as a feather. It was unbelievable that a single ring could create such a huge difference.

The Strength Ring I've been using until now is practically worthless compared to this guy!

Going off of how it felt, it seemed as though this ring increased my Strength by four times as much as the Strength Ring had.

“Hey, you done yet? My lecture's not over, you know.”

Chisha's words snapped me back to my senses, and I awkwardly scratched my head as I sheathed my sword and returned to the group.

“Wait, hang on, so you guys can rent things like this? That's insane...”

“Didn't you hear what I said? That ring's super strong! As strong as two rental equipment pieces combined!” Ai said hotly.

On the flip side though, that meant literally anyone could rent a ring that gave half as strong a boost as this. And that was still a much bigger boost than the Strength Ring.

“Aha ha ha, I can tell exactly what you're thinking, geezer! But just so you know, the rental system isn't as convenient as you think.”

Chisha handed me a page on which she'd written down how the rental system worked. Despite how tough she acted, her handwriting was surprisingly girly. She'd put hearts for dots and in various places she'd underlined sentences with side notes like “Pay attention to this bit!” and “Look at how cool this is!” and “Kya ha ha ha ha!” It took me a while to decipher everything she'd written, and by the time I was done I had a headache. But to sum it up, it appeared only adventurers based in Freelea who were between ranks D-C could rent equipment. Furthermore, each adventurer could only rent a single piece at a time. Adventurers weren't allowed to sell the equipment they borrowed or lend it out to other people, and there were harsh penalties for those who broke the

rules.

“Since each person can only rent one piece, it’s not like you can just get super strong off of equipment alone. Plus, all of the equipment you can rent is crappy bronze stuff, so aside from the enchant boost all of their defensive stats are garbage.”

“I see. So if you wear nothing but enchanted equipment your defenses would be paper thin.”

I could see why the Guild had limited it to one piece per person, and also why they were restricting it by rank. A single piece of weak equipment wouldn’t lower your defensive stats enough to cause too much harm, and frankly it was only weaker and mid-tier adventurers who could really get a lot of value out of enchanted equipment like this. Hence why you needed to return the equipment once you reached B-rank. Whoever had come up with this system had put a lot of thought into it. It prevented adventurers from relying too much on enchanted equipment, but still gave them a significant enough power boost that they could take on tougher foes. This undoubtedly made it safer for newbie adventurers to go out and explore.

Baltore stepped forward and said, “I see. I understand just how strong enchanted equipment can be now. But what about that wristband? That Power Band doesn’t seem to have an engraving, so it’s not enchanted, right?”

“Ah.”

I turned to look at the Power Band Chisha was holding and saw that Baltore was right. It was the only piece of equipment with no engraving on it, which meant no enchantment.

“Wait, you don’t know?” A wicked grin spread across Chisha’s face.

“Yeah, we don’t,” I said, figuring there was no point in hiding it.

“Would you mind telling us?” Geeko asked. His interest had been well and truly piqued now.

“He he he. Well, I suppose we could. But you better keep your promise then.”

“Hm? Yeah of course.”

I'd almost forgotten, but we had indeed promised to give Ai and the others all of the junk items we'd collected in return for the information they were giving us. Thinking back on it now, that was probably because those pieces of equipment actually had some hidden value to them, but since I'd already given my word it was too late to change my mind now.

Satisfied by my reply, Chisha nodded and said, "Heh. All right then, I guess I can tell you! Behold, this equipment that seems pointless is actually..." Chisha raised her Power Band high into the air and struck a dramatic pose. "One of the pieces of equipment that raises Strength growth rates according Rex's List!" Chisha exclaimed.

"Growth rates? Rex's List? What do those words mean?"

I had no idea what Chisha had just said, so it didn't sound as impressive as she'd probably intended it to.

"Whaaat?! You don't even know about Rex's List?! Okay, but surely you've heard of Rex, right?"

"Rex? I think I've heard the name before but..."

I couldn't recall where. As I wracked my brain, the three girls looked at me as if I'd come from a different universe.

"What, you don't even know Rex?! Did you guys live under a rock or something? Were you raised by monsters in the forest?!" Ai shouted.

"Even toddlers know who Rex is!" Mia said, joining in on the teasing.

"Y-You brats..."

"C-Calm down, Geeko!"

Honestly, I sympathized with him, but it would be pretty immature of us to get worked up over what some preteens were saying.

"By Rex, do you mean that famous solo A-rank adventurer? I can't say I've ever met him, but I have heard of the famous Aloof Adventurer's exploits."

Thankfully Baltore and his repository of knowledge had come to the rescue once again.

“Blegh, your info’s so outdated!” Ai said, sticking her tongue out.

“Wow, you guys really don’t know anything! Poor souls...” Mia said, giving us a pitying look.

It seemed Baltore’s information was not enough to satisfy the girls, and he frowned slightly. Even his vast temper did have its limits, it seemed. However, it seemed this Rex was quite famous in Freelea.

Chisha shook her head in exasperation and said, “Ugh, you guys really were living under a rock, weren’t you? Listen up, Rex is...”



The stories Chisha and the others told about Rex were hard to believe. Supposedly he’d rescued an adventurer party from Ars before it was conquered. After that he’d dueled a powerful demi-fiend in order to protect that party and slain it despite sustaining grievous wounds. Then he’d trained that same newbie party up to an insane level of strength in just one month, so much so that they’d been able to clear the Rainbow Lava Caverns. Next, with the help of his comrades, he’d slain one of the Demon Lords that had revived. Craziest of all though, he’d apparently defeated Nirva the Invincible Blademaster in a one-on-one duel.

There was no way a single person could accomplish that much in just a few months, unless they were some legendary hero or something. But perhaps the most unbelievable thing about his string of exploits was that he’d accomplished them all in the three months since the goddess’s oracle.

“Are you sure you guys are talking about a real person and not the protagonist of some novel?”

“Of course we are! If you don’t believe us, just check out the Guild training grounds. He shows up there at least once every two days,” Ai said confidently.

It didn’t seem like she was lying to us.

“Ai’s always hanging around the training grounds, so she knows his schedule like the back of her hand. Since she’s got a crush on him and all!” Chisha said with a grin.

“H-Hey, don’t tell these guys that!”

“Aha ha ha!”

We watched on as the two girls fooled around. It was clear from their attitude that they considered Rex an established part of Freelea’s landscape.

“By the way, if you think all of that is impressive you’ll shit bricks when you hear what else he’s done!” Ai said, and my expression stiffened.

“Hang on, there’s more to this Rex guy’s achievements?” I asked.

“The next part is the one that matters the most, at least to us.”

Chisha once again started listing Rex’s accomplishments, and as Ai had predicted, we did indeed shit bricks. Apparently, all of the recent changes in the Guild were thanks to the information Rex had provided everyone. He’d discovered that Arts could be activated by hand, shown everyone that stats could be displayed as numerical values, had proven that everyone had innate growth values for each stat, and had even listed the requirements to class change into any of the classes in the class change temple. Any single one of these discoveries would have been revolutionary, so the fact that one person had found them all was mind-boggling. Rex was also the one who’d started up the equipment rental system in collaboration with the Guild. All of the equipment that was rented out was enchanted equipment that Rex had found, or special equipment that was on Rex’s List.

“So, getting back on topic, what exactly is Rex’s List?”

“That’s not it’s actual name, it’s just what we all call it, but basically...”

It seemed that the information Rex had given the world was wide-ranging, and there were a few pages in a notebook that had a list of uncommon items that initially seemed useless but had important purposes, along with explanations of what they were used for. The most important among them were a number of items that Rex had actually commissioned the Guild to find for him. Two months ago, he’d offered a total reward of 300 million wen to adventurers who could gather him a bunch of equipment that at the time was all considered worthless. At first, everyone had thought he was an idiot. But then his achievements started racking up and his fame began to spread, and

soon enough people began to realize those worthless items were actually priceless.

“Anyway, all of the items that were on the list he gave the Guild when he commissioned that request are what we all call Rex’s List. Naturally, all of those pieces of equipment sell for super high prices now, and even 300 million wen wouldn’t be enough to get all the things he got back then.”

“I-I see...”

I felt as though I’d heard about what should have been centuries of progress for mankind happening in the span of a few months. It turned out comparing myself to Urashima from that story had been a more apt analogy than I’d realized. The scary thing was that the entire city of Freelea had progressed so much in this short period of time. It wasn’t just one small enclave somewhere that had become technologically advanced or something.

“Hang on, if that’s the case, then don’t the adventurers Rex commissioned to get him all that equipment for cheap resent him now?”

I knew I’d be pissed if someone bought stuff I thought was worthless off of me for cheap then suddenly made it into a super valuable commodity.

Chisha chuckled and replied, “I mean, yeah, some of them do. But they’re the ones at fault.”

“Huh? Why?”

“‘Cause Rex even mentioned in the request that the equipment he was searching for was really valuable. If those adventurers went out and still sold them to Rex for his asking price, then they’re to blame. If they want to complain that they didn’t realize what they were selling was supposed to be valuable, that’s basically like admitting they can’t read. Some of the smarter adventurers actually did realize what was going on and hung on to the items they farmed instead of turning them in for the quest.”

“I-I see.”

It seemed this Rex was quite an honorable fellow. Either that or he was extremely crafty.

“Do you get what kind of person the great Rex is now?”

“Y-Yeah. For the most part anyway, I think.”

Honestly, everything Ai and Chisha had told me sounded so crazy it still didn’t feel real.

Chisha seemed to read my thoughts, as she smiled and said, “Don’t worry. Since we promised to teach you, we’ll stick with you until you actually get it.” She walked up to me before adding, “We’ll take you to a place that’ll teach you stubborn old fossils what the future looks like.”

I felt a shiver run down my spine.



“Wait, this is just the Guild library!” I shouted as the girls led us back into the Adventurers’ Guild.

A few people turned and gave me sour looks.

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to be quiet in a library?! You really are a barbarian,” Ai whispered furiously to me.

While I didn’t like being called a barbarian, in this case I was definitely the one in the wrong.

“S-Sorry.”

I was just so shocked that after hyping it up so much, the place Chisha had led me to was the library on the second floor of the Adventurers’ Guild. In the past, the only books that could have been found here were old reference materials and adverts no one gave a shit about. Could you blame me for being surprised? Though I had to say, the place was pretty packed right now.

Adventurers typically overwhelmingly preferred going out and getting hands-on experience over book learning. Reading didn’t make you any stronger, after all. Maybe all of the newbies who’d recently joined the Adventurers’ Guild thought reading might actually help them.

I glanced around the room and saw a group of adventurers all huddling over a single book.

God, they look like kids getting all excited over finding their first porn mag.

Although...I had to admit I was curious what kind of book was holding their attention.

Using my scout skills I hid my presence, walked up behind the group, and peered over their shoulders.

“Manual Arts for Dummies? What kinda book is that?”

I spoke aloud, ruining my stealth. The adventurers, who’d obviously heard since I was right next to them, turned and gave me annoyed looks.

“Hey, don’t try and sneak a peek. We’ve been waiting all day for a chance to — Gah! It’s the Hounds!”

It seemed this party had at least heard of us. They jumped to their feet and one of them bowed to me. He then pushed the *Manual Arts for Dummies* book into my hand and ran off.

“M-My apologies, sir!”

That was the kind of reaction we usually got. Though we’d shifted our base of operations to one of the towns on the frontier, we *were* still A-rank adventurers. The name “Hounds” struck fear in the hearts of adventurers all over the world. But then I turned around and saw the Pretty Cats staring coldly at me.

“Ugh. I can’t believe you’re the kind of people to mug kids,” Ai said with a shake of her head.

“That’s not mugging, Ai, that’s called extortion! I read about this!” Mia replied.

“I hope you guys know this, but adults that bully kids are super lame,” Chisha added.

I couldn’t really argue back since ultimately, I had basically ended up threatening that kid to give the book to me.

These girls really know how to twist the knife!

I resolved to eventually get them back for all the abuse they’d piled on us,

then cracked open *Manual Arts for Dummies*.

Man, when was the last time I even read a book? Well, whatever, I'll just skim for a bit until they stop glaring at me.

But once I started reading, I was sucked in.

I was wondering what manual Arts were, but it's that special way of activating Arts Chisha mentioned before!

As a hybrid scout-attacker, Arts made up the core of my skills. And now that I knew this book was a book on Arts, my interest was piqued. I couldn't afford to just skim this book.

I see. So even if you don't say the skill name, as long as you imbue your weapon with mana and...

The book was written in very simple language, probably because the author knew the primary audience would be adventurers. There was no complex vocabulary or sentence structures, and each page was punctuated with annotated illustrations that made it easy for even the illiterate to understand.

Whoever wrote this book really gets adventurers, I thought.

The author clearly had a lot of experience adventuring themselves, and had focused on conveying information that had practical utility.

Before I knew it, I'd forgotten all about my original objective and had become engrossed in the book. After a few minutes I came back to my senses and realized I'd been ignoring everyone else.

Man, I really did something terrible to those kids, huh?

I had thought books were just boring things people read to kill time, which was why I hadn't really felt that guilty about taking this book from those kids. But now I realized just how important this book was. Anyone who used Arts would become much stronger after reading this book. *Manual Arts for Dummies* was worth a fortune. Every warrior in the world would be willing to give up their entire life savings to read this book if they knew what it contained. I could see now why those kids had waited in the library all day for a chance to read it.

"All right, all right," I muttered, clicking my tongue. I turned to Ai and Mia.

“What?”

“You want something, old ma—?”

As the two of them cautiously approached me, I handed *Manual Arts for Dummies* over to them. “Hand this back to the kids cowering in the corner over there,” I said with a sigh.

The two girls gave me surprised looks. “Are you sure? You looked like you were really into it.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve read enough. Now hurry up before they run away.”

I shooed them off, and Mia ran over to the other adventurers with a smile on her face.

“W-Wait for me!” Ai shouted, running after her.

As I watched them return the book to the other kids, Chisha strode over to me and said, “You’re nicer than you look.”

“Meh, not really. Also, I don’t look that mean, do I?”

Chisha snickered and said, “You look like a bloodthirsty goblin, but at least you’re nicer than one.”

“I do not look like a goblin!”

And here I thought Chisha was finally starting to act nicer toward me. I’m gonna get you back for those insults someday, mark my words!

“See, look,” Chisha said, interrupting my admittedly bloodthirsty thoughts.

I looked up and saw Ai holding a book out toward me. “Huh?”

She muttered something I didn’t quite catch, then tried to push the book into my hands.

“What’s going on?”

“I returned the book for you, so I came back with a replacement! This is actually the book we’d borrowed for today, but we’ll let you read it first just this once!”

After shoving the book into my hands Ai ran off.

Wow, I guess she's nicer than she looks too.

Smiling, I looked down at the book she'd handed me. The title read: *A Guide to the Dungeons Around Freelea*.

I opened the book and the first thing I saw was a two-page spread showing a map of Freelea and the surrounding region.

Oh yeah, I guess newbies like them could learn a lot from this book. But for guys like us...

The Freelea region was practically our backyard at this point. We knew where all the dungeons were, what their gimmicks were, and what monsters you could find in them. There wasn't much a book like this would be able to offer us.

Or so I thought, because when I took a closer look at the map I realized it was far more detailed than I'd given it credit for. For one thing, there were numbers written down next to each dungeon. Presumably, information on the respective dungeons could be found on those pages, which was all well and good. But there was also something called a "level" written next to each dungeon.

Wait, is this a numerical representation of a dungeon's difficulty?!

Indeed, as I pored over the map, I saw dungeons we'd thought were easy had low "level" numbers and the ones we'd found hard had much higher ones.

I always thought it was dumb to try and think of strength in terms of numbers, but seeing it all laid out like this makes me realize numbers are a pretty good guideline.

Of course, a number alone couldn't convey the intricacies of just how difficult or easy a dungeon was, and if you relied solely on this level number to decide which dungeons to explore, you'd be in for a rude awakening. But it was still a useful thing to reference.

Until that moment I'd only been mildly impressed by the book, but very soon I realized it was far greater than I'd realized. As I scanned all of the dungeons on the map, I noticed something earth-shattering.

This map includes dungeons we never found!

In fact there were so many of them I was shocked it had taken me this long to

notice. There were three times as many dungeons we hadn't discovered than ones we knew about on this map.

H-Hold on a sec! Doesn't this mean... Cold sweat started pouring down my back.

The implications of what was written on this map were huge. It wasn't just that it contained dungeons we weren't aware of—some of those dungeons would give even us a struggle. This was something my party mates needed to see.

"Geeko, Baltore, get a load of this!" I called them over, and we started poring over the map together.

"My god..." Baltore muttered, immediately understanding the significance of what he was seeing. There was a reason he was the brains of our operation.

You've gotta be fucking kidding me!

I didn't know what my own level was, so I didn't have a good grasp for just how level corresponded to strength, or what was average or high or low. However, I knew that the monsters you faced in a dungeon got stronger the higher that level number grew.

And I know exactly how strong the monsters in the Cliffside Castle are!

With the exception of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness, which were on a whole different level of difficulty compared to normal dungeons, the Cliffside Castle was the most dangerous dungeon we'd ever encountered before heading off to explore the frontier. Even as strong as we were now, we'd have a bit of difficulty going through it again, and we'd honestly thought it was the hardest dungeon you could find in the Freelea area. However, this map depicted multiple dungeons that had a higher level than the Cliffside Castle.

Does this mean there wasn't even any point in us going to explore the frontier regions?

Thanks to the map, we now knew the precise location of these harder dungeons, and they were all at an easily accessible distance from Freelea. Anyone who used this map as a reference for their dungeon delving could get stronger way faster than normal.

Thanks to this one book, people can achieve the strength it took us years to build up in just a few months!

It was a terrifying thought, but also an exciting one. After all, we could use this map to get stronger as well.

After a few minutes we finally turned the page, only to be bombarded with even more shocking information.

“Holy shit, this book has detailed information on monsters too!”

The early parts of the book were a monster compendium, and the amount of detail they went into was staggering. For example, the Killer Ant entry included not only all of the weak points and special traits of the Killer Ant, but also had illustrations and diagrams.

In the level section, there was a little disclaimer that read “The level here gives a rough idea of how strong a monster is. Keep in mind that if you kill a monster that’s a lower level than you, you won’t get much experience!” Sadly, we didn’t know what our levels were, so that information wasn’t too useful for us. The rest, however, was.

We learned that the Killer Ant was level 12, which apparently was relatively low. We also learned that it had more Defense than Attack, which was something we vaguely recalled from when we’d been fighting those guys. But what was really eye-opening was the weaknesses and special traits section.

“Holy shit, look at this! Apparently insect-type monsters don’t take any damage from cold-type attacks, but if you keep hitting them with enough cold spells it’ll actually stop them from moving!”

“Hmm, it seems the ants’ acid spit counts as a magic attack, so Defense won’t help you much. I see, that makes sense.”

“How the hell did the author figure out that ants have a keen sense of smell and that if you apply specific scents you can control their actions?!”

Some things written about the various monsters we were familiar with, but the vast majority was brand new information.

“Hey, wait, don’t turn the page yet!”

“Gah I can’t read! Move your thumb, Baltore!”

And so, we also started acting like little kids who’d found their first porn mag.

“Ngh...” I rubbed my tired eyes. I hadn’t read this much at once in ages.

Baltore noticed my exhaustion and said, “If you two are tired, you can rest for a bit. I can read through the rest and tell you guys all of the important bits.”

Honestly, I wanted to keep going, but I really did need the rest.

“Thanks. I guess I’ll take a break.”

“You’re welcome. There were a few sections I wanted to scour through on my own anyway.”

Baltore grinned, and I got the feeling I should make my break a long one. I waved casually to him, got to my feet, and started walking around the library to stretch my limbs.

Walking around, you could tell which sections were popular and which ones weren’t. The library hadn’t become popular because people realized how valuable the existing literature was; the business was clearly just due to the new dungeon guides and books on manual Arts that people were coming here for.

As I was walking around the library, Mia suddenly called out to me: “Ah, old geezer!” I turned around and saw that she was with Ai, who had a book in her arms.

“You were drooling all over that dungeon guide a second ago. Why’d you stop reading it?”

“I was *not* drooling. Anyway, I’m just taking a quick break. Besides, detailed analysis is Baltore’s specialty, so I’m leaving it to him.”

“Uh-huh,” Ai said, looking bored. But then her expression brightened up and she held the book she was holding out to me. “In that case, I guess I’ll let you read my favorite book!”

It seemed Ai enjoyed recommending books to people. However, I could tell from the title alone that this book would be too complex for me. It was called

Character Building Theory: The Best Way to Reach the Higher Tier Classes for Each Build and What Skills You Should Focus on Developing. Thankfully, Mia spoke up and saved me from my predicament. Though with how casually rude she ended up being, maybe it would have been better if she'd remained quiet...

"W-Wait, Ai! He can't handle a book that difficult. You need to recommend him children's books first!"

I glanced around the room, searching desperately for someone who could help me, and locked eyes with Baltore.

"Personally, I think you should read a bit more too, Dax."

"S-Screw you! As long as I can read the request board that's good enough, isn't it?!"

Ugh, even Baltore is taking the girls' side here.

"Here you go, old geezer!" Mia said, handing a much smaller book over to me.

"What's this? *A Serious Consultation?*"

"Yep! It's a manga! I bet even you'll be able to read this!"

"Ugh... Th-Thanks."

I knew Mia wasn't purposely trying to insult me, but honestly that just made it worse.

Still, no matter how easy a read this is, I feel like I've used up all my reading brainpower for today. In my current condition, even that super easy to understand manual Arts book I returned to the kids would be a challenge. Well, I guess this will still be easier than going through that character building theory book or whatever.

Somewhat reluctantly, I cracked open the book Mia had called a "manga." Before I knew it I'd read all the way to the final page.

"Good for you, Gray! You did it!"

The story had been so moving I was tearing up a little at the end, and I sniffled pitifully. Ai gave me a disgusted look, but I didn't care. Gray's bonds with his party members had been truly wonderful. There was nothing embarrassing

about crying over such a beautiful story.

Holy shit. That was so good I totally lost track of time. I never thought a book would be able to draw me in like that.

Also, though I hadn't consciously paid attention to it while reading, thinking back on it now the comic had taught me a lot about the importance of choosing the right class and how to make tactical decisions about what equipment I should use. Not only had the story been good, it had been educational as well. Whoever had written it was a genius.

"See, it was good, right? I love that manga," Mia said with a knowing smirk.

That smirk pissed me off, but she was right.

"Yeah, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I really loved that comic!"

"He he he! It's super good!"

Mia's smile proved infectious and I found myself smiling as well.

"Are there any other... Uh, what'd you call it again? Oh yeah, manga. Are there any other manga like this? This thing was clearly made to advertise the class consultation corner the Guild's doing, but I feel like whoever made this could write regular stories too and they'd all be huge hits."

The only thing I had to read was dialogue, and the pictures added a sense of immersion you didn't get from just plain books. Plus the writing was simple so both kids and adults like me without much of an education could enjoy it still.

Chisha frowned and said, "Yeah, I think so too, but...manga is a very new art form and no one else has tried emulating it yet. The person who made the one you just read is really busy, so I don't think he'll write any more anytime soon."

"Oh, is that how it is? Well, if he can write something this good, I imagine he's super famous."

"He is, but not because of the manga. In fact, he's someone you know." Chisha pointed to the corner of the cover.

I hadn't noticed it when Mia had initially handed the manga to me, but written in small print was:

“Author and Artist: Rex Tauren”

“Wait, Rex is behind this too?!” I shouted.

The girls all stared pointedly at me.

“I can’t believe you read it without even knowing that.”

“Manual Arts for Dummies and A Guide to the Dungeons Around Freelea were written by him too. Did you really not notice?”

“N-No way...”

Just how many different talents did that guy have? Even a complete amateur like me could tell it must have taken ages for Rex to draw all the pictures for the manga I’d just read. Despite the fact that he must be busy with all of his other obligations, he’d gone out of his way to draw three whole volumes of this manga and then donated it to the library instead of profiting off of it.

What in the world drove him to make something like this? I looked down at the manga with newfound admiration.

“But...”

Everything new I’d found in Freelea seemed to originate from Rex Tauren. At this point even I could tell he was an amazing guy who’d revolutionized not only Freelea’s Adventurers’ Guild, but likely adventuring as a whole. But there was one thing I didn’t get.

“How come Rex is sharing his knowledge and items with everyone for free like this?”

For adventurers, knowledge was power. Maybe I was just old-fashioned, but I couldn’t understand why Rex was freely giving away that power without asking for anything in return.

Ai squared her shoulders and looked sternly up at me. “That’s because Ars was Mr. Rex’s hometown! He doesn’t want that tragedy to happen to any other city, so he’s been trying to make all the world’s adventurers stronger!”

“I...see?”

That was a valid reason, but it was clear to me that Ai was a Rex fan through and through. It was best to take anything she said about him with a grain of salt.

“Ai’s right, but if you ask me, that’s not the only reason,” Chisha said.

Honestly, I was with Chisha there. Considering Rex had made a list of items he’d wanted adventurers to gather for him and offered a huge reward for them, it was clear every move he made was calculated and had a greater purpose to it. Unless he was a literal saint he wouldn’t hand out so many powerful items for free, nor would he just disseminate all the valuable information he found.

Noticing my thoughtful expression, Chisha gave me a surprisingly mature smile and said, “Think about it this way. When you guys conquer a super hard dungeon, you keep all of the best equipment, but you give away or sell the rest, right? I think that’s probably what Rex is doing here too.”

Chisha said the words so casually that it took a second for the enormity of her words to sink in.

“You mean...”

All of this godlike rental equipment, all of this dungeon knowledge even we didn’t gather despite our years of adventuring, all of that is just extra leftovers to this Rex guy? He has even better equipment and knows even more secrets about this world and he’s keeping the best stuff for himself still?

Chills ran down my spine. If that really was true, then Rex, a guy I’d barely even heard of until today, was a more terrifying man than I’d ever realized.

Though...now that I think about it, these girls are teaching all this stuff to us for free too. I glanced over at them.

“How come you girls, and you in particular Chisha, are also willing to teach us all of this stuff for free too?”

“We just felt like it, I guess. Besides you’re the one who asked, and we’re not really doing it for free. You promised to give us your stuff, remember?”

“Liar. You could have just told us about the rental equipment and that would have been enough to uphold your end of the bargain. We would’ve given you the equipment then and there, but you even brought us here and let us read

the books you borrowed.”

This party of newbie adventurers knew more about fighting, dungeons, and monsters than we A-rank adventurers did. In other words, the knowledge they possessed was extremely valuable. Surely they were aware of that.

Chisha looked away awkwardly. “It’s nothing special, really. For one thing, it’s uncool to act like you’re smarter than everyone just because you know some things they don’t, and also...” Chisha hesitated a bit, then finally took a piece of paper out of her pocket.

Strength: 6 (Godlike)

Vitality: 5 (Amazing)

Intelligence: 1 (Horrible)

Mind: 5 (Amazing)

Agility: 5 (Amazing)

Focus: 2 (Bad)

Total: 24

“Are those...?”

I suspected the numbers written on that page were Chisha’s innate growth rates. Though I was unfamiliar with the new Freelea, even I could tell they weren’t something you showed other people lightly. Furthermore, it was clear from Chisha’s rates that she really was a prodigy.

Chisha seemed unfazed by the fact that she’d divulged such a personal secret. “As you can see,” she said, “I’m a super prodigy with almost perfect growth rates, but...” She pointed to her Intelligence growth rate. “My Intelligence growth rate is really low. Problem is, every class needs at least a little bit of mana.”

“So that’s why you’ve been hunting for items on Rex’s List,” I replied.

Chisha nodded. “That’s right! Do you get it now? I really need that hat you

said was garbage. As long as I level up while wearing that, my Intelligence growth rate will be doubled. Now do you get why we're working so hard to get that stuff from you?"

Thinking back on it, Chisha's eyes had lit up the moment I'd taken the Pointy Hat and the Power Band out of my Inventory when I'd tried to explain how the items were trash. Since I hadn't been part of this environment where people quantified their stats with numerical values, it was hard for me to visualize the difference between her original stats and her boosted ones, but if I thought of it as letting Chisha use twice as many Arts in one fight before running out of mana, I could see why she was getting so serious about helping us.

I see, so that's why her attitude changed so suddenly. Now that I knew what was motivating her, I felt relieved.

"What's with that look? You're thinking something super rude right now, aren't you?" Chisha asked with a scowl.

I waved her off. "Nah. I thought you girls were just a bunch of cheeky brats, but you're a lot smarter than you look."

"Excuse me?!" Chisha pursed her lips.

"That being said, let me give you three a piece of advice."

While it was true these girls knew more about adventuring than we did, and were using that information effectively, the fact remained that they were all quite young. Too young to be going into battle.

"You're still kids; there's no need to rush things. You don't have to become adventurers right now. You can wait a few years until—"

"No, it has to be now!" Ai shouted.

I stiffened up in surprise, then turned to her and saw that she was looking up at me with a grave expression on her face.

"Wh-What do you mean? Even if you don't rush, eventually—"

"You don't get it! We—"

Chisha held out a hand to calm Ai down, then started explaining. "Listen up. This equipment rental program is only going to keep working for another month

at most.”

I gave her a confused look. “Huh? But didn’t you say it was a good system? Why would it...”

“Because it’s such a good system.” Chisha said, decisively cutting down my argument. “As it is, half of the items are already booked out for a month in advance. And adventurers are only going to keep on pouring into Freelea. Everyone wants to know what their growth rates look like and what class they should be, and this is the only place you can learn any of that. And I don’t know how they’re going to change the rental system when demand gets too high, but I guarantee you we won’t be able to borrow equipment this good anymore.”

She had a point. In the few months we’d been gone, the city had already transformed completely. There would undoubtedly be even more people here in a month’s time, and the more people there were vying for the same equipment, the less likely it was that any one person would be able to get it. That much was obvious.

“But I’m sure in another year or two, even if Freelea gets a huge influx of adventurers, the Guild will have managed to—”

“Oh, don’t tell me you already forgot what the goddess said, old geezer! If the legends are true, that means monsters are going to start getting stronger now, right?” Mia exclaimed.

“Oh yeah...”

Mia had seemed like quite the airhead to me, so I was surprised she’d made such an insightful comment. She was right though—from what the goddess had said, just as her blessing let humanity grow stronger faster, the Evil God’s power strengthened his minions, the monsters. Even the weakest monsters would be beyond a starting adventurer’s ability to defeat if they grew much stronger, which would make it impossible for beginner’s to defeat them and develop their skills.

Ai stepped forward, put her hands on her hips, and said, “There’s no way I’m going to end up a powerless wimp who can only cower when monsters come to attack my city! That’s why we need to get stronger *now*! So that we can decide our own fate!” Her eyes gleamed with determination. “That’s why we’re in such

a rush. Right now is the only time when a great hero like Rex is in our city and the whole world doesn't know about it yet. This is our one chance to get stronger before it's too late."

I had no argument against that, and despite her frivolous tone, it was clear from Ai's expression that she'd spent a lot of time thinking about her choices, steeling her resolve for the hardships to come.

These girls really are something else...

Though I'd accepted they were more than just cheeky brats, I'd still been underestimating them far too much.

I scratched my head awkwardly and said, "Chisha."

"Yeah?"

I bashfully averted my gaze. "I'm sorry—I had the wrong idea about you. You three are truly splendid adventurers."

Chisha gave me a surprised look, then smiled. "You need to be ten times hotter if you want to say such clichéd lines, you geezer."

Never mind, they're just a bunch of cheeky brats after all!

"Whooo! It feels like it's been ages since I saw the sun!" I said as I stretched a few hours. We'd just left the Guild, and I was basking in the waning sunlight.

"God, you even act like an old geezer."

"Shut it! I'm not that old!" I paused, suddenly remembering something. "Oh yeah, I should hand these over to you guys before I forget."

I pulled out all the trap equipment that was a part of Rex's List and had turned out to actually be really valuable, then held it out to Ai.

"Y-You're really giving all of these to us?!" she asked, surprisingly meek all of a sudden.

"Yeah. I get how valuable this stuff is now, but we're all too high level to make good use of it. Besides, you girls really did teach us a lot."

Ai still looked a bit hesitant, but then Chisha piped up.

“It’s fine, these old geezers are head over heels in love with us—that’s why they’re giving us so much good stuff. It’d be rude not to accept their gifts.”

“I-I see, they’re in love with us... F-Fine, I guess we can take it then!”

It seemed Chisha’s words had convinced Ai to accept the equipment. Her words were more fiction than fact, but when she gave me a knowing wink, I decided it would just cause more trouble than it was worth to argue with her.

God, these girls have us wrapped around their little fingers. They’re far craftier than they look. Honestly, even though when we were newbies people had high hopes for us, these girls have way more potential than we ever did.

Feeling oddly proud of these girls, I turned to Chisha. But before I could say anything, someone screamed, “Ant attack!” Their voice carried rather far down the street.

“What’s going on? Is someone drunk?” Geeko asked, wrinkling his nose.

I wasn’t so sure myself, but that scream had sounded far too panicked to have been coming from a mere drunkard.

“Tch! We’ll go see what’s going on! Chisha, you guys—”

As I turned around, my words died in my throat. Chisha was giving me a puzzled look, completely oblivious to the fact that there was something burrowing out from the ground behind her.

Is that a Killer Ant?!

By chance, it happened to be the very same monster we’d read about in the dungeon guide. If you included its feelers, the ant was a full one meter in length. It opened its mandibles wide and launched itself at Chisha.

“Watch out!” I pushed Chisha out of the way, taking its bite head-on. “Ngh!”

“Old geezer!” Chisha shouted.

I smiled back at her. “Hah! An ant like this can’t even scratch me!”

I lifted up the leg the ant had bitten me and then brought it down, hard. There was a loud squish as I crushed it under my heel, and the ant disintegrated into particles of light.

“W-Wow...” Ai’s eyes widened as she watched me kill the ant in one hit.

“Please, these trash monsters are nothing to us. You might not know this, but we’re—”

“The A-rank adventuring party, the Hounds, right?” Chisha asked, interrupting me.

“Wait, you knew?”

“I’ve researched the names and reputations of all the famous adventurers in the area,” she replied nonchalantly.

The fact that she tried to negotiate with us despite knowing we were A-rank adventurers means she has real guts, I realized.

“Wh-Whaaat?! I didn’t know that! That means you old geezers are amazing!” Mia exclaimed.

“H-Hmph! I-I guess b-b-b-being A-rank is pretty impressive!” Ai said, trying to put on a tough facade and failing spectacularly.

It was enough to bring a smile to my face, but sadly the situation was too dire for levity.

“Dax,” Baltore said in a low voice.

I looked around. There were droves of Killer Ants crawling out of the ground in places all over the street.

“Shit! Geeko, Baltore!” I shouted, running forward.

They immediately understood what I was trying to do and matched my timing.

“Devastator!”

“Flare Lance!”

I lopped off the head of the ant closest to me while Geeko’s hammer and Baltore’s magic obliterated the ones on either side at the same time. However, there were more ants than we could deal with at once.

“Aaah!”

“Mia! Y-You little—”

The moment we’d left the girls’ side, a new hole had opened up behind Mia and an ant had jumped at her. Ai, Chisha, and Baltore were all close by, so they’d managed to take it out before she was seriously hurt, but it was only a matter of time before we were overwhelmed with sheer numbers.

“This...is bad. Watch out!”

Killer Ants were weak monsters that even D-rank adventurers could defeat. In a one-on-one fight I’d never lose—in fact, I could even take on dozens of them at once if I had to. But I couldn’t do that while also protecting other people.

Furthermore, these ants possessed another dangerous ability aside from just being able to burrow around. Many of the ants that made it to the surface pointed their asses at people and buildings and then bent their torsos, shooting out a viscous yellow liquid from their behinds.

“What the heck is that?! Some kind of bodily fluid?”

“Waaah! It’s aciid!” civilians started screaming as the ants sprayed them.

“Shit! I knew this would happen!”

Biting wasn’t the ants’ only means of attack; they could shoot acid as well. Sure, the three of us were veteran adventurers, but we couldn’t take all the ants out before they killed some of Freelea’s residents.

If these things are popping up all over the city, then...

I shot a quick glance at a few other streets and saw people running around in a panic. The city of Freelea had turned into hell, and strong as we were, we couldn’t save the whole city.

Damnit, at this rate they’ll overrun the place! I thought. And that wasn’t the worst of it either.

“Is that...no way!”

A new ant that was much bigger than the others and that had a glowing carapace had crawled out of one of the holes.

“That’s a Commander Ant!”

The Commander Ant's listing had been the page after the Killer Ant in the guide book, so I remembered its traits quite well. Though it looked like just a bigger Killer Ant, it was far more dangerous than it seemed. Unlike the Killer Ant, which was rated as a D-rank monster, the Commander Ant was B-rank. In the guidebook it had mentioned that the Commander Ant's "level" or whatever was double that of a Killer Ant's too, which meant they were around 20 or so.

If those things start attacking too, then...

The situation had been bad enough to begin with, but it was downright hopeless now. At this rate, Freelea might get destroyed. But before the citizens' panic reached a fever pitch, someone appeared to take control of the situation.

"Listen up everyone! This is Veteram from the Adventurers' Guild! Us adventurers will engage the ants! In the meantime, citizens—please run to safety!"

Veteram's gruff voice resounded throughout the city, and when a second later adventurers charged toward the four corners of Freelea, the residents started to calm down a little.

Still, in my opinion...

That's far too reckless! Those Killer Ants are D-rank monsters! The newbie adventurers won't be able to handle them!

It seemed Veteram had a plan in mind, however.

"Now! Let's open those barrels!"

At Veteram's command, the lids of all the barrels lining the city streets flew open. They must have been rigged to open at a signal.

Inside each barrel was a ton of small, palm-sized bags. I had no idea what was going on, but the moment those sacks were revealed Chisha, who'd been guarding my back, started running toward a barrel.

"Wait, don't run off alone!"

Chisha ignored my warning and kept running, and as soon as she reached the barrel she grabbed a sack and threw it at the Commander Ant.

"Wha—?!"

Chisha's aim was true, and the bag burst apart as it hit the Commander Ant's carapace. Brown powder spilled out, filling the air around the Commander Ant. A second later, its movements dulled and it started staggering about, as if confused.

"Dax!" Baltore shouted, and I snapped back to my senses.

I dashed toward the Commander Ant and stabbed it in the head.

"This smell...was that bag a bag of Smelling Salts?" As the Commander Ant slowly turned into particles of light, I suddenly remembered what I'd read in the dungeon guide about the ants. "'You can control their actions by using certain scents on them.'"

It seemed that information was true, but sadly I didn't have the time to leisurely analyze what I'd learned, as there were still more holes appearing all over the place.

"There's more over here!"

"I-I can help too!"

This time Ai grabbed a few bags and threw them at the new batch of ants, stopping them in their tracks. That gave Baltore enough time to finish casting a powerful spell to blast them all to pieces.

Everyone else seemed to have picked up on this strategy as well, as all of the other adventurers were also throwing bags at the ants, from veteran adventurers like us to newbies who probably hadn't even reached D-rank yet. Even the regular citizens had started grabbing bags and throwing them at the ants. The bags didn't do any damage, but stopping their movements was still plenty helpful.

"We can do it, guys!"

"F-Fuck! Fine, I'll go too!"

"Take that you shitty bugs!"

"Ha ha ha! Nice going, Veteram!" I shouted, grinning.

Strength alone wasn't enough to protect the city, but now that the civilians we would otherwise have to protect were capable of contributing to the battle,

we could wipe this infestation out with casualties. This also meant we had the advantage in numbers and not the ants.

It was the ants who were being hunted now, and us veteran adventurers started dispatching them with ease. Before long we'd annihilated every last ant in the city, and there seemed to be no signs of more appearing.



That went a lot more smoothly than I expected, I thought.

Now that the battle was over, I was taking a look around the city. It seemed Freelea had suffered basically no casualties, which was a shock even despite how much having those barrels full of bags of Smelling Salts had helped.

This is probably all thanks to that guy.

The Freelea of a few months ago would definitely have not managed to handle the situation as cleanly. I could no longer ignore the evidence staring me in the face. Freelea's adventurers were changing, and mostly for the better. That wasn't all either.

"Heh. That Veteram did a pretty good job this time around."

I'd always thought of him as an upstart who'd reached A-rank after us, but I had to admit he'd grown quite a bit.

"This is far more than just doing a good job, Dax," Baltore said with a conflicted expression.

"Hm?" I gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Just think about it. The perfect items to deal with a sudden ant attack were placed all over the city ahead of time. It's one thing to be well prepared, but this is something else entirely." Baltore pointed to one of the barrels. "Besides, these Smelling Salts worked far better than they should have. Have you forgotten why the Smelling Salts item is so rarely used?"

"Isn't that because..."

Smelling Salts were an item that needed to be crafted via alchemy, and they're quality depended on the skill of the Alchemist crafting them. However, Alchemist was a rather unpopular class. In order to make high quality items, an

Alchemist needed to be quite skilled, and have high stats to boot. However, Alchemist was a class that was wholly unsuited to fighting. Most adventurer parties were focused on combat so they were dead weight, and even if you decided to take an Alchemist along to raise their stats, if they spent all their time fighting they wouldn't have any time to hone their skills as an actual Alchemist. Occasionally some mages decided to dabble in alchemy when they got older and retired from active adventuring, but there were very few truly skilled Alchemists out there.

“These Smelling Salts even worked on the Commander Ants, which means each one of these bags was really high quality.”

The reason Smelling Salts weren't often used by adventurers was because there were only some monsters that they worked on, and of the categories of monster they did work on they tended to only be effective on the weaker ones. Since the efficacy of the item was dependent on the crafter, it meant that the Alchemist who'd made these needed to at least have stats higher than the B-rank Commander Ants on top of having a lot of alchemy experience.

“Now that you mention it, I don't think I've heard of Freelea having any skilled Alchemists. Just who could have...”

Mia suddenly raised her hand. “Oh, I know who made these bags!”

“Really?! Who is it?”

Mia smiled and replied, “Well, you see... The one who made all these bags is Rex!”

“Huh?”

I'd heard that name what felt like a dozen times now since coming to Freelea.

So does that mean that not only is Rex a godlike adventurer, a pioneer who discovered new fighting tactics, and sage who knows everything about the dungeons and monsters around here, but he's also a skilled Alchemist?! What is he, some kind of god?

“When I was exploring the Guild the other day, I saw him making a bunch of bags. He looked like he was getting tired, so I helped him out a bit! He even thanked me and gave me some candy after we were done.” Mia giggled as she

thought back to that event.

“H-Hey! If you were helping him, why didn’t you call me over? I wanted to help Rex too!” Ai shouted, shaking Mia by the shoulders.

“But you’re the one who said you didn’t want to be bothered because you were doing magic training, Ai!” Mia protested.

“This does explain a lot about Veteram’s sudden competence,” Baltore muttered.

I gave him an incredulous look. “Wait, you think this Rex guy predicted the ant attack?! No fucking way! Unless he’s actually a god, then—”

“No, it’s definitely possible that Rex predicted this,” Chisha, who’d been quiet until now, muttered softly.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

However, Chisha’s words held weight. She wasn’t like Mia, who didn’t grasp the full enormity of this feat, or like Ai, who blindly worshipped Rex. No, it was clear from her expression she was thinking about this very seriously.

“I mean, think about it—until now Rex has done a bunch of crazy stuff no one expected. Isn’t it a bit too much of a coincidence that the first monster used as an example to explain how the bestiary works is a Killer Ant?”

“Oh...”

In retrospect, it was indeed strange that the Killer Ant of all monsters had been chosen as the first example. It wasn’t a particularly famous monster, and you only really saw it in the Ants’ Nest dungeon around Freelea. If there was a reason Rex put that in the most prominent section of the bestiary, then...

“You mean Rex actually knew this ant attack would happen?”

Chisha turned back to where the Adventurers’ Guild was. “I don’t know, but I get the feeling we’re going to find out very soon.”

A second later, a messenger ran up saying that the Adventurers’ Guild had sent out an emergency summons and all adventurers were required to attend.



“I’m Freelea’s Guild Master, Veteram,” Veteram announced. He was standing in front of a large blackboard, his loud voice booming across the packed training grounds. “Since we’re low on time, I’ll cut right to the chase and explain the emergency quest we’ve just issued! First off, we’ve learned that it wasn’t just Freelea that was attacked by Killer Ants. It seems both the capital and Nivar were attacked by ants at almost the exact same time we were.”

Upon hearing Veteram’s words, the adventurers crowded together in the Guild started muttering worriedly to each other. Veteram’s loud voice cut through the chatter again however, quieting everyone.

“In a more fortunate turn of events, thanks to the multiple attack locations, we were able to discern where the enemy is coming from! Freelea, the capital, and Nivar are all located in different regions, and there’s only one location that has easy access to all three—the Tempest Mountains!”

Veteram drew a simple map onto the blackboard and drew a big circle around the mountains in the center.

“The ants dug underground tunnels from the Tempest Mountains to all three cities and attacked them simultaneously. We’ve decided to call these tunnels the Great Caverns, and we’ve joined forces with the capital’s and Nivar’s Adventurers’ Guilds to issue an Ant Queen extermination quest!”

The other adventurers started cheering, but me and my companions didn’t share in their joy.

Reason being: *If all three Guilds have issued the same quest, that means it’ll be a joint operation.*

I had no objections to Veteram’s decision to work together with the other two Guilds—the decision made sense, and in fact was probably the best way to deal with the threat we were facing. But still...I wasn’t happy about it.

Freelea had no heroes. That was something everyone knew. Whereas other big cities like the capital had exceptionally powerful heroes attached to their cities like Ain, the Prince of Light, no real adventurers of note called Freelea home despite its title as the City of Adventurers. The closest thing we had was Nirva the Invincible Blademaster, and while he did technically live in Freelea, he only ever showed up for the big tournaments and was otherwise absent. As a

result, whenever multiple Guilds came together to do big joint operations, it was always Freelea that had the poorest showing. Part of the reason the guys and I had chosen to go to explore the frontiers was because we'd wanted to become strong enough to show the rest of the world that Freelea had badasses too.

The adventurers in this city have definitely gotten stronger in the months we were gone, but...

My thoughts trailed off. I already knew the truth: we still didn't have anyone who was at the level where they could compete with heroes like Ain or the knights that served under him. And if guys like that were planning on participating in this operation... Well, it was likely they'd get to the queen first and win all the glory. I was sure Veteram was aware of that as well, and yet he seemed a lot more composed than I expected him to be. He waited patiently for the adventurers to calm down before continuing his explanation.

"The Tempest Mountains serve as the boundary between our three regions, and it'll take a full three days by carriage to get there. Normally, we wouldn't even take the carriages and work our way backwards from the tunnels to make sure no more ants pop up in Freelea, which would take an even longer ten days, but..." Veteram looked off to the side as he trailed off, but before I could turn to see what he was staring at he said, "A certain adventurer I'm sure you're all familiar with taught me a route to the mountains that'll take less than a day. With it, we should be able to reach the Ants' Nest before tomorrow."

The adventurers started cheering again, and Veteram grinned.

"What do you say, boys? Ready to show those slowpokes in the capital and Nivar what Freelea's adventurers are made of? Let's take out that Ant Queen bitch before they even get to the mountains!"



The plan Veteram had laid out had sounded utterly insane, but if the black-clad adventurer Veteram had looked at earlier was the same person I thought he was, then I wasn't too surprised he'd come up with it.

"So what are we gonna do, leader?" Geeko asked.

“We’re going, obviously.”

It pissed me off that we were following this Rex guy’s strategy, but still, this was a once in a lifetime chance. Until now we’d always lagged behind the adventurers of the other major cities, but if this plan worked, we’d be able to reach the Ant Queen way before the guys from the capital or Nivar. We could finally show them Freelea had skilled adventurers too. There was no way I was gonna sit this one out.

“I guess we won’t be able to join this one, huh?” Chisha muttered with a pained look.

“Chisha...”

I sighed. Only adventurers who were B-rank or higher were allowed to participate in this quest, and the Pretty Cats were all newbie adventurers who sadly did not make the cut. The Ants’ Nest would be filled with both Killer Ants and the B-rank Commander Ants, and the Ant Queen would be even stronger, so it was likely that lower-ranked adventurers would end up dead if they came on this extermination quest.

“Hmph! I realize we’re not strong enough yet, but since you’re going in our stead, you better rack up some big achievements!” Ai said, trying to sound haughty to hide her frustration.

“We’ll keep the city safe, so you take care of the queen for us, okay?” Mia said, as cheerful as always. It was honestly impressive how she managed to stay positive no matter the situation.

Chisha also perked up thanks to that and said, “Don’t worry, you geezers. We’re gonna work our way up to S-rank and surpass you before long, just you watch! Which is why...” She grinned and leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “You better not die until then. Or else I’ll kill you myself.”

I couldn’t tell if she was encouraging us or threatening us.



An hour after we said our goodbyes to the Pretty Cats, we found ourselves at the base of the Tempest Mountains.

“I can’t believe we really made it here in just an hour,” I muttered in amazement.

After the briefing was over and everyone had finished up their preparations, we’d all headed into the Great Caverns through one of the entrances that had opened up in Freelea. Then, once inside, we’d all followed the instructions we’d been given and used Recall Wings.

Recall Wings were an item that brought you back to the start of a dungeon, so normally using them right as we’d gone inside of one would have accomplished nothing. The Great Caverns were special, however—they’d been formed when the ants in the Tempest Mountains had expanded their nest in all directions. In other words, the actual entrance of the dungeon was at the foot of the Tempest Mountains, and using a set of Recall Wings would take you all the way there.

When I’d first heard Veteram explain the plan, I’d thought he was crazy. But after trying it for myself and seeing that it worked, I had no choice but to believe.

But what kind of person manages to figure this out within an hour of a freak ant attack? I wondered. *Unless he knew about all of this beforehand...*

“Hey, Dax!” Geeko shouted.

“On it,” I said, cutting my musings short. I could worry about all of that later. “This way.”

We snuck away from Veteram—who was currently briefing everyone on how to deal with the various ant species we would be encountering and handing out equipment that was effective against their attacks—and stepped outside the nest.

It would definitely be safer if we hung around and headed out with everyone else, since we’d be advancing along the same path and it would allow us to conserve more of our energy for the fight against the queen. However, while this was a quest that called for cooperation, it was also a competition where the person who killed the most ants got the greatest rewards. Working together with everyone and singing kumbaya just wasn’t our style.

Sorry about this, Veteram, but we’re going to get a head start!

We obviously had no intention of doing anything heinous, like killing the other adventurers or stealing their equipment, but taking advantage of things by doing stuff like sneaking off ahead of everyone was just par for the course when it came to adventuring.

I guess it's because we're like this that the old man picked Veteram as his successor instead of us, huh?

Regardless, we had no intentions of changing. We were proud of the kind of adventurers we'd become, and anyways, there were situations that called for skill sets like ours. Besides, this was our way of rebelling against Rex Tauren, the man who'd transformed our city. The things Rex had done for Freelea's Adventurers' Guild were huge—his knowledge had already revolutionized the world of adventurers, and would probably continue doing so for the foreseeable future. Even I had to admit he was one hell of a guy, since all of the things I'd learned from him were things I'd definitely be making use of myself.

But there's more to adventuring than just numbers! Studying up on monsters' weaknesses and getting stronger as efficiently as possible using boring, highly technical methods isn't the kind of adventuring lifestyle we admired as kids! The people who do that aren't true adventurers! Or maybe...maybe I'm just old and out of touch.

Certainly, I would come across that way if I told any of the younger generation what I was thinking right now. But even so, I still believed what adventurers truly needed was the courage to face the unknown, the unyielding determination to never give up no matter how bad the odds, and more than anything, a hot, burning passion for adventure.

I guess I'm not one to talk, since I'm also benefiting from Rex's plan, I mused.

Even so, it would mean something if us hardliner old-timers managed to beat the Ant Queen before that upstart Rex did. It would prove to the world that the old adventuring spirit wasn't dead just yet. That was why we were sneaking ahead of everyone else to rush to the queen.

"Hmm, I recognize this terrain," I realized aloud. "I'm pretty sure there's a hidden entrance behind that boulder."

Fortunately, we'd been through the original dungeon once before, and while

we didn't remember the layout perfectly, we still had a good grasp on the overall design of the place. It would be faster to go through this hidden smaller route than through the big passage everyone else would be taking.

"Found it," Baltore said, his memory as sharp as always.

Though I was our scout, even I hadn't remembered the exact location of the hidden entrance. Baltore, however, hadn't forgotten even a single detail.

As we stood before the entrance I took a few deep breaths to prepare myself. Once we went in, we'd be fighting nonstop until we defeated the Ant Queen. It would be a headlong rush that could only end with the queen's death or ours.

"Everyone ready?" I asked, turning to my comrades.

"Do you even need to ask?!" Geeko demanded, smashing his fists together. "Let's squash that Ant Queen!"

"There's certainly no way I'm running from such a fun challenge," Baltore said with a nod.

I grinned and shouted, "Then let's go!"

I jumped through the entrance to the dungeon, and my comrades followed behind me. It was time to start the most dangerous speedrun we'd ever done!



"More coming from the front! Three Armor Ants and one Knight Ant!"

I clicked my tongue in frustration as another swarm of ants headed toward us. The enemies near the entrance had mostly consisted of Soldier Ants, which were only a little stronger than the Killer Ants, but as we'd proceeded deeper into the nest we'd started running into more dangerous varieties like the Armor and Hunter Ants. Battling them wasted precious time, and more importantly drained our mana. The Knight Ants that showed up in the center of the nest were the most dangerous by far, and we'd had to pull out all of our strongest moves to take them down quickly. We had no other choice—if we were stingy and tried to conserve our mana, we wouldn't be able to defeat them fast enough to reach the Ant Queen first.

"We'll run right through them! Scatter when I throw the smoke bomb!"

“Got it!”

“Roger!”

If we were advancing together with everyone else I wouldn't have dared to run past enemies like this, but the three of us had spent enough time together that I didn't need to explain the plan in detail for the two of them to understand what I was getting at. It was a dangerous strategy—it was possible that it would lead to us getting pincered if we ended up spending too much time on the next group we ran into. Not to mention that avoiding enemies like this meant the people coming behind us would have to deal with them. However, since we'd snuck away, we had no one immediately behind us to worry about, and the three of us could cut down enemies fast enough we didn't have to worry about them catching up too much. We could fully lean into our goal, the only thing that mattered—we must reach the queen as fast as possible.

“Three, two, one... Now!”

I'd waited until right before the ants started attacking us to throw a smoke bomb at them. As soon as it hit, the three of us scattered in different directions, weaving our way between the confused ants. Unfortunately, one of the Armor Ants was outside the range of the smoke bomb, and it started chasing after us as we ran.

I clicked my tongue, then snarled, “Fine, how about this?!” before throwing a bag at the ant following us. It stopped in its tracks.

Thanks, Chisha, you're a lifesaver.

Right before we'd left, Chisha had given us a bunch of bags of Smelling Salts.

“I nabbed some of the leftover ones,” she'd said nonchalantly as she'd handed the bags to us. “You never know when it'll come in handy.”

Despite her casual words, Chisha had been slightly out of breath, and it had been clear from looking at her that she'd run all over the city scouring barrels for extra bags for us. Considering the effort she'd gone through, it would have been rude to refuse her gift, so I'd taken the bags with a stiff smile that I was sure hadn't fooled her at all. Still, it had turned out those bags were effective even here, deep in the Ants' Nest, and I was now glad that Chisha had gone to

all the trouble of collecting them for us.

Just how skilled an alchemist is Rex if his Smelling Salts even work on the ants here? I wondered.

While it was reassuring to have him as an ally, right now we were trying to one-up him, so I was slightly worried that if he was this good, he might be able to reach the queen before us anyway. That being said, we'd left before the appointed time and used a hidden shortcut. On top of that, we'd snuck or run past most enemies, so the only way he'd be able to outpace us was if he was a god of some kind.

"All right, I think we lost them," I said, coming to a stop once I was certain there were no more ants following us or lurking nearby. "Let's take a quick break."

I leaned against the wall. We were still in the middle of enemy territory, and our strict time limit meant we couldn't take a proper rest, but we could still at least stop and catch our breath for a bit. It was important to stay in top condition, especially considering how much harder things would get from here.

I stared at the unchanging bland scenery of the Ants' Nest as I steadied my breathing. *Man, this place is so depressing.*

Every now and then you could see holes dotting the otherwise plain and nondescript walls. Those holes were side passages for ants to transport food through. If they managed to defeat us, they'd take us through one of those too. They wouldn't kill us right away either. They'd use a special poison to paralyze us, then eventually feed us to their young. At least, that's what I'd heard from an old adventurer years ago.

That sounds like an awful way to go, I thought with a shiver.

The grim reminder of what fate awaited us if we lost kept me from letting my guard down, and as soon as we'd recovered enough I started running down the passage again. We ran past as many ants as we could, stuck some of them in traps so they couldn't chase us, and defeated the ones we couldn't shake. By the time we reached our destination we'd run out of smoke bombs and Smelling Salts bags, and our mana was starting to run low as well.

“We made it...” I muttered as we stopped before the entrance to the Ant Queen’s lair.



“Holy shit, she’s huge.”

The Ant Queen was over ten meters long, with a massive, swollen abdomen. Still, we’d fought big enemies before, so we knew how to deal with them. I knew from experience regardless of how big or strong an enemy was, when it was three against one we had the advantage. As long as we could analyze and react to the monster’s attack patterns, we’d win. Honestly, this would probably be easier than dealing with the hordes of ants we’d had to fight our way past.

“Everyone ready? Let’s show those bastards from Nivar and the capital where the best adventurers really come from!”

Grinning, I stepped into the room where the Ant Queen was waiting. “Baltore, let’s hit her with a preemptive attack! Match my— Huh?”

Before we could start our assault the Ant Queen had pointed her ass toward us, looking as though she was about to shoot acid in our direction.

“Tch! Evasive action!”

Though we’d had the initiative stolen from us, it was nothing we couldn’t handle. But it was only as we’d started to scatter that I realized something was off. The objects coming out of her behind were covered in slime, but they were most definitely solid. It was only after they started wriggling that I realized she was giving birth to more ants.

“She’s not shooting acid? Oh. Oh no... You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Naturally, a monster’s children were all monsters as well, and the ten ants the Ant Queen had given birth to quickly moved to surround us.

“Keep it together, Dax! You’re supposed to be the leader of the Hounds!” Geeko shouted, snapping me out of my panic.

“All right, ignore the queen for now!” I yelled back. “We need to thin these guys’ numbers!”

From the looks of it, the ants were all different varieties. There were a few

dangerous Knight and Armor Ants, but most of them were the much weaker Soldier Ants. We'd be able to chew our way through them quickly enough.

Or so I'd thought.

"Gah! These guys are tough!"

It seemed the ants the queen had given birth to were special. Even the normally weak Soldier Ants were able to shrug off all but my strongest attacks. Baltore let out a scream as one bit through his shoulder.

"Baltore!"

"Don't worry, I'm fine! Heal!"

Normally the ants' attacks shouldn't have been able to pierce through our armor, but it was clear they hit harder than regular ants as well. That wasn't the worst of it either. The moment we managed to cull the ants' numbers, the Ant Queen once again pointed her ass at us and gave birth to yet more of them.

"No way, she's birthing even more!"

"Fuck! There's no end to them!"

Geeko, Baltore, and I were fighting with everything we had, but we couldn't overcome the massive difference in numbers. The Ant Queen was creating ants faster than we could kill them. We were backed into a corner.

"Dax!" Geeko shouted.

I'd let myself get distracted by despair. I shook my head, getting control of myself again, but the second I came back to myself my longsword was ripped out of my hands by a Knight Ant. That was bad enough on its own, but it was also impossible to pierce through the ants' tough carapaces without my weapon, which meant there was literally nothing I could do now.

Looks like this is the end of the line for me.

The last thing that flashed into my mind was Old Man Eld's kind face, as well as the three girls I'd just met today.

"Sorry for breaking our promise, girls."

It was strange to think those cheeky grins would be the last thing I saw before

I died. But while I knew there was no getting out of this for us, I decided I still wanted to go out like an adventurer. I clenched my fist, ready to punch the Knight Ant in the face, but just then, a black-clad figure dashed past me, quick as lightning.

“Arts Plus! Quickdraw!”

“Huh?”

I watched in awe as the figure flitted from target to target, a black streak moving too fast for the eye to follow. Each stroke of its sword decapitated an ant, and within the span of a few seconds, it'd annihilated the swarm of ants that had been giving us so much trouble. Soon, the only enemy that remained was the Ant Queen, and the black-clad figure calmly stared her down.

“Rex Tauren...” I muttered, awed.

Though I'd never met him, I'd heard so much about Freelea's strongest adventurer that I recognized him immediately.



“Thank god I made it in time,” Rex said as he turned from the Ant Queen to us. The three of us were still in shock from his sudden appearance.

“Th-Thanks, you really saved us! B-But how did you get here so fast?” I stuttered. “Even if you ran through that big passage at top speed you shouldn't have gotten here this quickly.”

Rex just shrugged his shoulders and said, “Following the main path would have taken forever, so we used a more direct route.”

“By direct route, do you mean those side paths the ants use to carry food?!”

Since the ants carried their food to the young via the passages we'd seen in the walls earlier, they led directly to the Ant Queen, who birthed those young. It was true that those smaller passages were the most direct route here, but I would have never imagined someone would try going through them.

Does that mean he purposely let himself be treated as ant food? I wondered, slightly horrified.

But while I was extremely curious as to what methods he'd used, now wasn't

the time to discuss that.

“W-Wait, that queen keeps spawning more baby ants! You need to take her out fast, or—”

“Yeah I know, don’t worry. That’s why I’m waiting.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I asked.

I got my answer soon enough.

“Brother, please don’t run so far ahead of us!” came a voice from outside the room. A young woman with greenish-blue hair ran inside immediately after, followed by a group of four kids. While these four weren’t quite as young as Chisha and her friends, they couldn’t have been any older than fifteen or sixteen. Either way, it was clear that they were also newbie adventurers.

“Old man, how the hell are you so fast?!” snapped one of them.

“C-Could you wait for us? Please?” pleaded another.

“Y-You idiots,” I sputtered. “What are greenhorns like you doing here?!”

Just then, the Ant Queen started spawning more ants. In seconds, the kids were surrounded by another dozen or so of them.

“Shit, I still can’t move...” I muttered, trying to stand up and protect the kids. Alas, my legs refused to work. It seemed as though we were the only ones worried by this situation, however.

“Urgh... I really don’t like ants,” the girl in priest robes said, looking like she might throw up.

“Stop complaining. We’ve got a lot to kill,” the elf girl said in response.

Moments later, the four kids drew their weapons, and as they launched themselves into battle, I realized very quickly they didn’t need my help.

“Crimson Crash!”

“Flare Cannon!”

Those kids are strong, stronger even than us, I thought. They’re mowing down the ants much faster than we did. S-Still, that isn’t important right now! They might be strong enough to battle these ants, but the truly terrifying thing about

that Ant Queen is that she spawns more indefinitely! Regardless of how well they're faring right now, unless they're able to kill her, they'll eventually be overwhelmed just like us!

As soon as my strength returned to me I got to my feet and turned to my comrades. "Geeko! Baltore! We need to—"

"Don't interfere."

Before I'd realized it, Rex had walked over to us and blocked our path. That was extreme enough on its own, but he also had his sword drawn, as if to say he would actually attack us if we went to help those kids.

Wh-What the hell is he doing? I thought, my mind spinning.

I couldn't understand what was going on. The earlier conversation had made it clear those kids were Rex's comrades.

Why's he stopping us from helping them? Hell, why isn't he helping them?

Still, even though I had no idea why he was acting this way, I could muse over the mystery later. Regardless of what Rex's reasons might be, I couldn't just sit back and watch as those youngsters lost their lives.

I glared at Rex, and he gave me an exasperated look.

"Okay, look," the black-clad adventurer said with a sigh. "The Ant Queen can only spawn a maximum of one hundred and fifty-one ants. Furthermore, they're a higher level than all the other ants in this dungeon."

I nodded. I'd seen the word "level" multiple times before in the books Rex had written. At this point even I could tell it was a numerical representation of something's strength.

"So, if they're high level that means they're strong right?" I asked in return. "That's exactly why we need to kill the queen as fast as possible, or—"

Rex sighed and shook his head, looking at us like we were the strange ones. "Wrong. You really don't get it, do you? They're a higher level than all the other ants here. That means it'd be a waste not to farm every last one of them for experience."

"Huh?"

I'd understood exactly what he was saying this time, which was precisely why I was so confused. This man was purposely going easy on a powerful monster that had nearly wiped out an entire city so that she could spawn more monsters for his comrades to kill just to get stronger. It was insane.

This guy's lost his marbles, I thought. There was no other way to describe his current behavior.

I continued to watch the battle playing out behind Rex, and saw that while the four kids were still managing to keep up with the never-ending swarm of ants, it was by no means an easy feat for them. They were slowly accruing more and more injuries, and there were a few close calls every now and then.

It doesn't matter what this crazy guy says, we need to get past him and go help those kids! I decided. But just as I resolved to fight Rex, I noticed something strange.

Are those kids...smiling?

It was clear the battle was close enough that a single misstep would cost them their lives, but those brats were actually grinning as they fought. They could have easily ignored some of the weaker ants and focused the queen down if they wanted to; they were definitely strong enough. But it was clear they were willingly going along with Rex's crazy idea. They were actually trying to exterminate every last one of the ants the queen could birth before taking her down. Their eyes were shining with confidence, as well as a burning desire to grow stronger.

"Twenty seconds until the next wave!"

"All right, stop using AoE attacks! We don't want to hurt the queen too much by mistake!"

Before I knew it, I'd burst out laughing. I'd thought Rex and all the new adventurers he had influenced were all book-smart bozos who cared too much about theory and lacked the passion a true adventurer needed. But I couldn't have been more wrong. Those four kids were adventurers in every sense of the word. Sure, the way they expressed their passion was different, but ultimately they were still the same selfish, reckless lot who loved adventure more than anything.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“D-Dax?!”

I kept on laughing as I watched the kids slaughter every last one of the Ant Queen’s one hundred and fifty-one children, then finish off the Ant Queen herself.



I sighed. “Man, we really fucked up this time.”

While we’d been able to warp all the way to the Tempest Mountains with Recall Wings, we weren’t able to return to Freelea so easily. In fact, between the rush of adventurers trying to return, all of the carriages getting booked, us needing to take some time to fully heal from our wounds, two entire weeks had passed before we managed to get back to Freelea.

Our first stop back in the city was the Adventurers’ Guild to meet up with the Pretty Cats, but our steps were heavy.

Shit. We weren’t able to accomplish anything during this quest.

After the queen had been defeated, Rex had offered to split the credit of beating it with us, but we’d had too much pride to accept. As a result, our overall contribution toward the extermination quest had been the lowest of all the parties. We’d rushed to the queen as fast as possible while only killing the ants we absolutely had to, after all. Even the parties who were way weaker than us had racked up a bigger kill count than we had.

God, we are so uncool... I thought, cringing inside.

We were an A-rank party, which meant by all rights we should have contributed the most to this extermination quest. We’d set off so confidently, telling the Pretty Cats that we’d come back with the biggest accomplishments of all, and now we’d ranked the lowest among all participating parties.

Before I even had time to steel myself for the upcoming meeting, I heard Mia shout: “Ah, I found them! Heeeeey, old timers!” She started running over, Ai and Chisha following close behind. Chisha stopped right in front of me, and I awkwardly averted my gaze.

“U-Uh... Chisha, you see...”

I knew the Guild had posted the quest rankings right next to the task board ages ago, so she probably already knew how badly we’d done. I fell silent, waiting with bated breath for her to insult me. But instead...

Chisha gave me a warm smile. “Welcome back, old geezer.”

“Huh?”

“Ha ha. Don’t worry, I know how hard you guys tried. So let me just say...” Chisha reached up on her tiptoes and gently patted my shoulder, grinning mercilessly. “You suuuck! What a looser! You guys call yourselves the Hounds? More like puppy dogs, amirite?!”

I gave Chisha a stunned look, completely blindsided, but before I could respond, she added, “Aren’t you guys supposed to be super veteran A-rank adventurers? What happened? How did you end up in last place? Come on, guys, you’re supposed to be better than this. Maybe you really should change your party name to Puppy Dogs.”

“Y-Y-You little...”

Now that’s just going too far. I’ll teach you what happens when you mess with adults, you little brat!

“Well, you did come back safe and sound like you promised, so I guess I can forgive you,” Chisha said, blushing slightly.

All the horrible things I was about to say vanished from my mind. Instead, I muttered a weak, “Thanks,” and looked away bashfully.

“Umm, old geezer?” Chisha gave me a worried look and leaned in closer, as if she didn’t want to say the next part out too loudly.

“Hm?”

After a brief moment’s hesitation, she whispered, “Just making sure, but you guys aren’t going to retire from adventuring or anything just because you messed up this one time, right?”

I smiled.

“Wh-Why are you grinning? I’m seriously worried about you here!”

My smile widened, which only served to spur on Chisha’s anger. It was really quite a surprise that she’d been the most worried for us out of everyone here.

I guess thinking back on it, it makes sense, I thought.

Considering how badly we’d fucked up this time around, it would make sense if we’d become too dejected to keep going. Especially after witnessing how much stronger the newbie party Rex had trained was than us. However, there was no need to worry.

“Don’t worry, we don’t plan on quitting anytime soon,” I told Chisha confidently.

The more I’d learned, the more I’d realized we’d been going about our adventuring the wrong way. It’s true that I’d really wished we’d learned this sooner so we could have taken advantage of a lot of the information we now had, but that was river under the bridge now. Chances were the little girls in front of me would surpass us before long.

But even so... I glanced over at the training grounds, where I spotted Rex lecturing a bunch of newbies.

Initially, I’d thought the guy was just some upstart who didn’t understand the true adventurer spirit, but it turned out he had more courage and grit than any of us. I still didn’t really get his obsession with trying to quantify everything with numbers, and I probably never would. But I could tell he was serious about what he was doing. That was probably why he was so much stronger than me. However, I didn’t want to lose to him in spirit as well.

I really am a stubborn bastard through and through, I thought with a grin.

If Rex was the protagonist of this world, then we were nothing more than side characters at best. I was certain no matter how far we got, he’d always be miles ahead of us. But so what? Sure, maybe I wouldn’t get to be the protagonist. I wouldn’t change the world or become a hero like Rex, no matter how hard I tried. But even so...I was still the protagonist of my own life!

We’re the Hounds, goddamnit! We’re going to keep hounding after our dreams until the day we die!

With this decided, we turned our backs on Rex, the protagonist of this world, and started walking down our own path. And by our sides were a few cheeky little brats who were just as passionate about adventuring as we were.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Usber here! I've been playing a bunch of PC games off of Steam, Freem, and DLsite recently these days, and I've gotta say I've noticed a lot of differences between the indie and doujin games compared to the big budget titles I used to play in the past.

As an example, let's talk about one of the games I've been playing recently: *Dungeon Wars*. It's the newest game by the same circle that put out *Mad Princess*—The Grand Warriors—which incidentally is one of the games the setting of *BB* is based off of. I was really looking forward to its release, and now that it's finally out, I've been enjoying it quite a bit. But because it's a doujin game, there's unfortunately no walk-throughs or wikis or really any information of any kind about the game online.

At any rate, *Dungeon Wars* is a game where you play as the Demon Lord and need to manage all of your dungeons. You have to explore the world to gather materials to craft and upgrade your dungeons, which is the sim part of the game, and then you have to actually battle against heroes inside those dungeons, which is the RPG part. You need a lot of different materials to build out your dungeons, and some of them are only available in certain areas. For example, if you want a larger room you need the Empty Pail material, but you can only ever buy that in the Verdant Plains, which is one of the early game areas. If, like me, you just skipped right past it, then you'll end up screwed further down the road. To make matters worse, you don't know what materials you might need to build higher-tier rooms until you actually unlock them, so you often run into the situation where you don't buy something, only to discover later that you actually needed it and you'll have to waste time making another trip to get it.

I really would like to have a wiki of some kind for games like these, but at the same time, I have to admit it's pretty fun going through the game blind. Of course, optimal strats only arise when multiple people discuss their playstyles and compare them, so it's entirely possible the way I'm doing things is

inefficient. That being said, I'm the kind of player who'll savescum to get the right randomly generated skill sets for the monsters I choose, and will also abuse any broken mechanics I can to make the game easier for myself. On my run on the hardest difficulty, which is called God, I only took out the fortresses that had story events I wanted to hit, then flew straight to the last boss with an airship. I used a bunch of items to avoid the battles with all of the high level mobs in the last boss's dungeon, and then avoided fighting the last boss too by choosing to side with them.

Obviously, this is not the route you would normally want to choose! But even after doing all that, the game was difficult enough that I really felt accomplished when the credits started rolling. And knowing I'd done it all without the help of a wiki or walk-through made it feel all the more amazing, since I knew I'd gotten here with my own strength and was possibly the first person to beat the game on that high of a difficulty. When I checked online, I didn't see any tweets or posts on other social media about people saying they'd beaten the final difficulty, so it is actually possible I was the first. You can only get that sense of accomplishment with doujin games, really.

Best of all, I found this awesome bug! On the version of the game I played, which was 1.0.8, the dev had already fixed all of the softlocks, but there were still really funny bugs you could only replicate under extremely unique conditions. As a bug fan myself, I loved that I could still find a few! For example, when you go from the menu to the field map, there's a transition screen, and if you spam the forward direction while on that screen you can run right past enemies you'd normally have to fight. Also, I haven't confirmed this one myself, but I heard there's a bug where if you use a mouse and a controller at the same time, you can bug out your skills so that even the strongest skills only cost as much SP to use as the weakest ones.

I also discovered that when you're harvesting ingredients on the map, the amount you can harvest from each node is once for however many real time hours that node has existed for. It turns out enemy corpses are also treated as ingredient nodes, so what I did was collect all of them, stick them in my airship, and then waited a day to farm a bunch of dope items from them. I call this the Corpse Tour exploit! It's stuff like this that makes me keep coming back to video

games, I tell you.

Oh, but while this is technically the most efficient way to grind, it makes the entire game a cakewalk, so I don't recommend doing it if you want a challenge. Actually, I reported all these bugs to the dev so they've all been patched now anyway. That being said, I really love the rough feel of doujin games. Indeed, part of the appeal of *BB* is meant to be that it had so few players that a full walk-through doesn't exist, and that even in its final version it still has a lot of bugs left in it. Some people really like that stuff, okay!

But that's enough gushing—it's time for the acknowledgments.

First off, I'd like to thank my editors, Fda-san and Yguchi-san. I'm sorry for working you hard this time around! I think this volume came out a lot better for it though, so thank you very much!

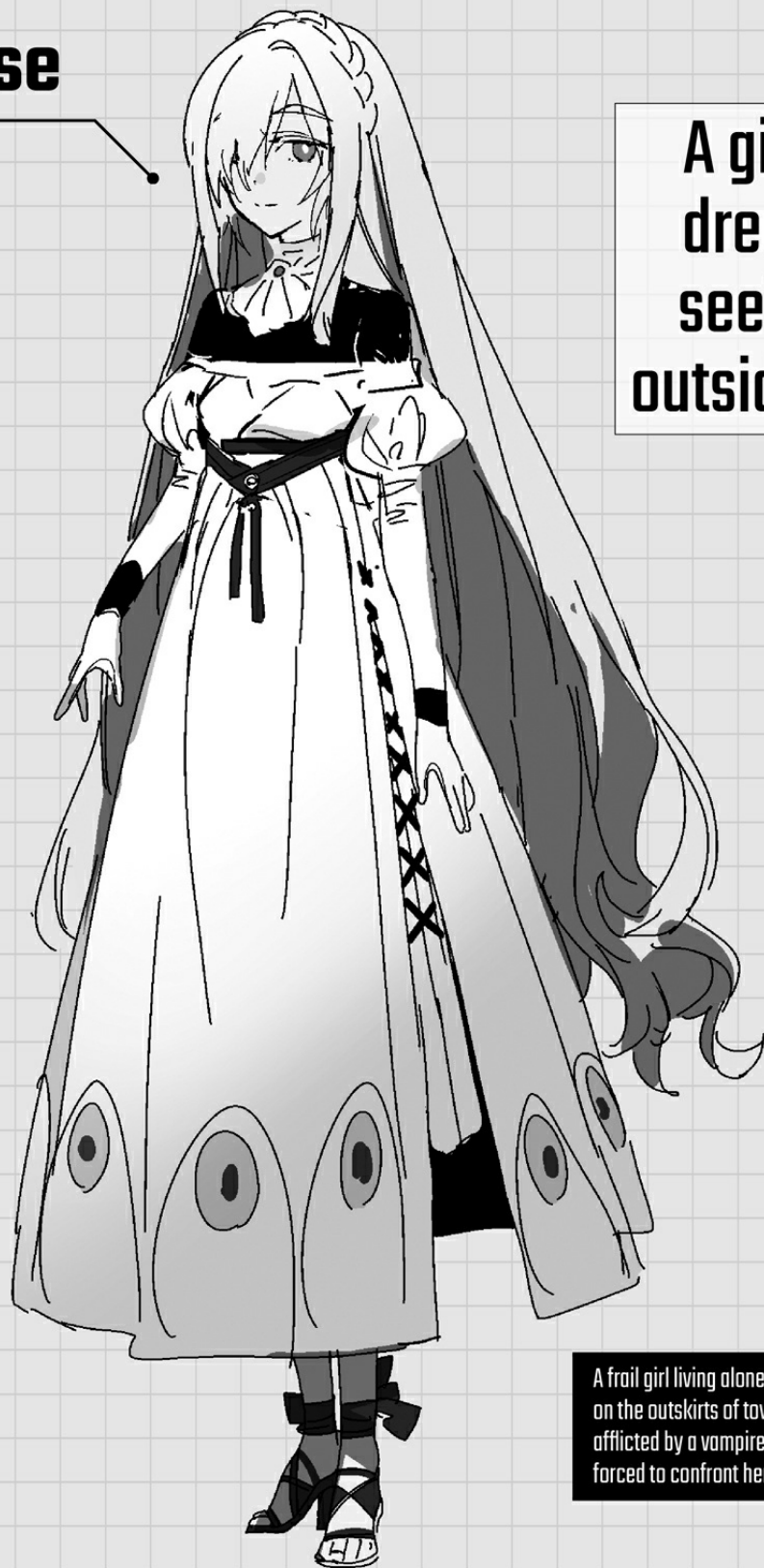
I'd also like to thank my illustrator, Amano-san. Your illustrations really capture the atmosphere of *I'm Not The Hero!*, and you drew Lily and Rose just how I imagined them to be. Thank you so much!

A big thank you to my designer Kiba-san as well, who made such a great obi for this volume. And also thank you to my proofreader, who patiently worked through my typo-riddled prose.

Last but not least, thank you dear readers for supporting me all this way! May we meet again in the next volume!

Character Introductions

Rose



**A girl who
dreams of
seeing the
outside world.**

**A frail girl living alone in a mansion
on the outskirts of town. After being
afflicted by a vampire's curse, she's
forced to confront her destiny.**

A beautiful, caring, and demure woman with large breasts. In other words, the kind of woman every man desires. But while she seems perfect at first glance, she's actually hiding a dark secret.

Every man's
ideal woman.



Lily Harmonix

I'M ^{NOT} THE HERO!

03

WRITTEN BY
USBER
ILLUSTRATION BY
HANA AMANO





〔 Lily Harmonix 〕

“I’m Lily.
It’s nice to
meet you.”



[Rex]

“Well, here we are...”
I said slowly.

Rose and I were standing on a small hill a short distance from Freelea. I shivered a little as I thought about how far from the game I'd deviated to do this while I watched Rose run around excitedly.

I can't believe I was able to take her out of the city so easily...

“Wow, I can see the whole city from here!”

[Rose]

A character with dark hair and a determined, slightly angry expression is running through a city at night. They are wearing a dark, hooded cloak and a dark tunic. A sword with a gold hilt and a dark blade is strapped to their back. The background is a blurred cityscape with warm lights from buildings and a bright light source on the left, possibly the setting or rising sun. The character's mouth is open as if shouting or cursing.

I cursed loudly as
I ran through the city.

“Fuck!
Why now
of all
times?!”

But of course,
complaining wouldn't
change anything.

The evening bells continued
ringing in my ears as I ran.

Calm down! Think this through!
I ordered myself, organizing
my thoughts as fast as I could.



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I'm Not the Hero! Volume 3

by Usber

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SHUJINKO JANAI! Vol.3

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