I'M NOT THE HERO

01



WRITTEN BY
USBER

ILLUSTRATION BY
HANA AMANO

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I'm Not the Hero! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

"Come back again soon!" the chef called after me, his booming voice following me as I stepped outside the ramen shop I always went to after a long day of working overtime. I immediately fell into a brisk walk, my eagerness to return home driving me forward toward the train station.

The sun had long since set and the night sky was full of stars. Despite the late hour, though, the city was still teeming with lights. That being said, this particular ramen shop was quite far from downtown, and there were few people about milling around the streets as I strode along.

There was something liberating about the night, even in the cramped, polluted recesses of a big city like this one. I felt as though the entire world had shrunken down to the distant rumble of car engines and the occasional sounds of other people's footsteps.

A random song popped into my mind, and I started humming it as I speedily made my way through the relative emptiness of the night streets. Along my way, I passed a young white-collar worker who was hurrying home with her head down, and sidestepped a balding old man who was leaning against a telephone pole and vomiting up the contents of his stomach.

The only thing that managed to halt the swiftness of my progress was a red light, which stopped me in my tracks when I was only a few blocks away from the train station.

Man, this light takes forever to change... I thought, clicking my tongue in annoyance.

I glanced to my side and saw that there was someone else waiting at the crosswalk with me—a high school girl with neat, shoulder-length black hair. She was still wearing her school uniform.

I wonder what she's doing out this late... I mused. *Eh, she was probably visiting a friend or something, and is on her way home now. Either way, it's got nothing to do with me—in this day and age, all a guy of my years has to do is*

talk to a school-age kid like her, and then they're in trouble.

I shifted, making sure I was standing a good three paces behind her, before pulling out my phone. Staring at the dull, multicolored light that emitted from its LCD screen on a dark night like this probably wasn't the best for my eyes, but I thumbed it on anyway.

I'd been planning on playing a mobile game I'd downloaded recently to kill some time, but instead my gaze was drawn to a notification that had popped up in the corner of my phone screen.

"Huh..." I muttered, eyes tracing over the text. It read: "*BB*—A Masterpiece Forgotten by Time."

Now that's a clickbait title if I've ever seen one, I thought. Normally I wouldn't have paid an article like that any attention, but I was familiar with the game in this one's title.

BB*, huh...? Now that brings back memories.*

BB was a shortened version of the game's official title, which was *Braves and Blades*. It was a big budget game that the developer had thrown their full weight behind, but had ended up languishing in obscurity due to various factors. Back when it had first released, I'd thought the action-oriented gameplay was quite novel; the game had eaten up tons of my time when I'd been a student.

Maaan, I realized, *now that I think about it,* BB *was the last real video game I played.*

I'd been more of an otaku in the past, but ever since I'd gotten a job, I hadn't had much time to spend on my hobbies. I certainly couldn't afford to forgo sleep for them, like I'd used to. The amount of anime I kept up with had been decreasing with every season, and I didn't have a moment to spare for more time-consuming pursuits like playing games or reading light novels. At this point, *BB* felt like it'd become an important hallmark of my youth, though that might have been a bit of an exaggeration.

It's pretty pathetic, though, I thought, smiling ruefully to myself, *that my youth ended up being spent waving motion controllers around in front of a TV*

screen all day, instead of hanging out with friends or going on dates...

I gave in to curiosity and clicked the link to the article, skimming through its main points as the webpage loaded. “These are the five greatest strengths of *BB*!” it proclaimed. “First, there’s the History Junction System, which lets you spin an age-spanning tale that’s uniquely yours! Next, you’ve got the game’s real-time hack-and-slash combat, which puts both your reflexes and your tactical prowess to the test, and the Fatal Event system, which makes rescuing your favorite characters an enjoyable, fulfilling challenge. There’s also the game’s rich, branching, multi-end story, which initially received a rocky reception, but is now deeply appreciated by fans! And lastly, *BB* has a ton of polished extra and postgame content—100%ing it won’t be easy!”

The sight of all that nostalgic game terminology brought a smile to my face, which only grew wider when I saw the illustration on the article’s second page. The image was of Ain, the Prince of Light, and Rex, the Aloof Adventurer, fist bumping each other. I beamed down at my screen, so charmed that I didn’t even care if anyone saw me grinning at my phone like an idiot.

And then...I realized I’d gotten so into the article that I’d forgotten where I was and what I was doing.

“Whoops,” I huffed, wiping the smile off my face as I glanced up to check if the light had changed.

It had—the schoolgirl who’d been standing in front of me had already made her way halfway across the road. Something was off, though. She was standing stock still, her pretty face frozen in fear.

“Huh?” I mumbled, turning in the direction she was looking. “Wha—?!”

My heart nearly stopped—a truck was barreling towards her at a terrifying speed. The vehicle’s rumbling filled my ears as it grew closer, its bright headlights setting my retinas on fire.

Before I knew it, I’d started running toward the girl. Honestly, I have no idea what drove me to be so reckless. I was no hero—I wasn’t the sort who was capable of sacrificing myself to shove her out of harm’s way. Instead, I reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Th-This way!” I shouted, trying to pull her back to safety.

The world fell into slow-motion as the force of my tug sent the girl’s slender body lurching toward me. My touch must have finally broken her out of her stupor, because she looked up at me then, her expression tearful but relieved. A few long, drawn-out seconds passed as we stared at one another, and then something hit me with bone-shattering force.

Everything went black.

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Huh...? My body...it feels like it’s burning.

I tried to move but failed. It took every ounce of effort I had just to open my heavy eyelids. My vision was blurry, but I could still vaguely make out the white strips of the crosswalk. There was a bunch of red liquid spreading out over them, and the lights of the city seemed brighter than usual.

Oh, I thought blankly. *I got run over. That truck must have hit me before I was able to make it to safety. Guess that’s what I get for actually trying to do something good for once.* I let out a rattling sigh. *I hope that girl’s okay at least.*

Considering how fast that truck had been going, even my accidental bodily protection might not have been enough to keep her alive. Still, I wanted her to survive, even if she hadn’t made it out entirely unscathed.

I’m so...cold... I moaned internally, shivering against the pavement. Even though my body still felt like it was on fire, my core was growing more frigid with every passing second.

Oh, I realized. *I’m dying, aren’t I? I wonder what’s going to become of me...*

My family, my friends, the company I worked at...they all passed through my mind, until eventually my memories of them dissolved into a white nothingness. They were all so important to me—or, *had been* so important to me, I guessed—and yet they slipped away with the same ease as my fading vision.

After that, my mind was mostly blank. Only a single, truly pointless thought

managed to surface, mere seconds from the end. *Man...if this is it for me, I wish I could have at least been able to play* BB *one last time...*

But that idle wish was just as momentary as all the rest of my musings—slowly, slowly, it drifted away.

Death finally closed over me, then, my consciousness plunging into darkness. But I could have sworn, right before I took my final breath, that I heard a voice speaking from just behind my back.

“I will grant that wish of yours,” I thought it had said.

Chapter 1: In Search of a Hero

When I came to, I found myself standing in the middle of a dungeon with a sword and shield in my hands.

"Huh?" I muttered, confused.

I looked down at the weapon I was holding—it was a western-style double-edged sword, the kind you often found in RPGs. The blade was perfectly polished, and the hilt was decorated with a lion motif. All in all, it was a helluva nice sword.

I'm not exactly in a situation where I can sit down and admire it, though, I thought, eyes flickering over my surroundings. *And beyond that, I'm just a normal white-collar office worker. I've never held a sword like this before in my life!*

"I... What the heck's going on?"

My surroundings were as unfamiliar to me as my new sword and shield—as far as I could tell, I was in what appeared to be a natural cavern. Crude murals had been painted on the walls, and some manner of light source had been embedded into the rock at regular intervals. If that was all I could see, I might have believed that I'd just materialized in a set of unexplored ruins in some unknown corner of the world, but the open treasure chest at the end of the corridor swiftly ended that illusion. Wherever I was, it wasn't anywhere on Earth.

"I'm in a friggin' dungeon!" I shouted, mind blown. My voice echoed loudly off the walls of the cramped cavern.

Maaan, I thought, *I've got absolutely no clue what's going on. But, wait, hang on... If I'm remembering things correctly, I... I got run over by a car and died! The whole world faded to black, and then...I think I saw a small flickering flame appear right at the very end. And there was that voice! It was so faint, but I think it said—*

"*Graaaaah!*"

I jumped, the feral scream that had come from over my shoulder snapping me back to the present. I gingerly turned around.

“Wh-What on earth is that?!” I gasped, chilled down to the bone.

A diminutive, green-skinned creature was making its way towards me from the cavern’s depths.

There’s no way that thing’s human!

“It’s...a goblin,” I realized, my legs turning to stone.

In most RPGs, goblins were weak monsters who were typically used to get new players accustomed to a game’s combat system. No matter what video game I’d played, I’d never once felt scared of the creatures. If anything, I’d been glad to fight them, since they were a good source of experience. Not only hadn’t I avoided them, I’d actively gone out of my way to kill piles of them! But now that I was facing one in the flesh...it was different.

I could see the goblin’s sharp, dirty teeth, and the dangerous glint gleaming away in its yellow eyes. I could see the heavy club clenched between its hands.

I...I can’t stop shaking... I thought, terrified. *Why are they so intimidating in person?!*

I gasped for air, my breath caught in my throat. I knew I needed to run, but my legs refused to move. The sword and shield in my hands suddenly felt impossibly heavy.

“Ke ke ke!” the goblin chuckled, sensing my fear. It raised its club high, then launched forward, charging straight toward me.

How is such a tiny creature so fast?!

The goblin’s ugly face contorted with triumph as it drew closer, as if it was certain of its victory. I let out a horrified shriek as it brought its club down, sure that I was dead. But, to my utter surprise, the moment the goblin entered my sword’s range, my body acted on its own.

I stepped forward, moving far more fluidly than I’d have ever thought possible from myself, and ducked under the goblin’s swing. The monster let out a confused, “Gyaaa?” but it was too late—I sliced down with my sword, cutting its

head in half.

The goblin's lifeless body crumpled to the ground, its club rolling across the floor. And I... I just stood there, stunned, my brain unable to process what had just happened.

"H-Huh?" I mumbled through numb lips. "Did I...do that?"

I'd definitely never learned how to use a sword, so the fact that I'd wielded the blade as deftly as I had came as a shock. But the surprises didn't end there—as I stood frozen, the goblin's body began to glow. Seconds later, it disintegrated into a thousand tiny particles of light.

I let out a startled "Wha—?!" as the particles darted toward me, heading straight for my left hand. I watched in confusion as they vanished into the center of my palm, as if sucked into me by some invisible source.

The dungeon fell silent once more. The goblin had completely vanished—if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, I would have never even known it had existed.

"What the heck? It's just like a video game," I said, letting out an incredulous laugh. But then it hit me. "Hang on...is this *Braves and Blades*?"

In *BB*, defeated monsters turned into pure mana and were absorbed into the left hand of whoever defeated them. That piece of lore was how the game had explained the process of gathering experience points.

It's kinda hard to believe, but...this sword does look awfully close to the ones I saw in that game. The goblin looked the same too...

Panicking slightly, I brought the flat of the blade up to my face to examine my reflection. When I saw what I looked like, my eyes nearly popped out of my skull.

"You've *gotta* be kidding me," I muttered in disbelief.

The face reflected in the blade's surface looking absolutely nothing like me. Instead, it looked exactly like Rex Tauren—also known as the Aloof Adventurer, and the video game character who I'd been staring at an illustration of just moments before I'd died.

“No way,” I mumbled to myself. “This can’t be happening.”

But I couldn’t ignore my reality—somehow, after I’d died, I’d ended up in Rex’s body in some unfamiliar location.

Wait, I thought. *Don’t tell me I got reincarnated into the world of* Braves and Blades *because I was thinking about the game right before I died! Th-There’s no way something that insane actually happened.*

And besides, even if I was willing to accept that I’d gone through the cliche light novel trope of reincarnating into my favorite game, there was still one thing that didn’t make any sense.



Why would I get reincarnated as Rex Tauren out of all people?!

Rex was a character who was present quite frequently in the early parts of *BB*. He was quite popular with the game's female fanbase, as was Ain, the Prince of Light. The two of them would pop up together pretty often, their banter showcasing the two character's contrasting personalities. As a result, Ain was known as the Handsome Prince of Light, and Rex was known as the Handsome Prince of Shadow.

I can see how Rex got the moniker, honestly, I thought with a laugh.

In the game, Rex had had a blunt, abrasive personality and hair as black as jet. If you were to ask anyone whether his motif was light or darkness, they'd all come back with the same answer—undoubtedly darkness. And if you were to ask whether he was more yin or yang? Everyone would tell you he was *definitely* yin.

Unfortunately for Rex, he wasn't that important of a character in terms of the game's plot. In fact, unless you picked a certain starting region, he'd never even join your party. This being said, Rex was still a pretty OP character when he was first introduced to the player. His starting level was 50, which was insane for an early-game character. Most *Braves and Blades* players could beat the game's final boss with a party leveled into the 60s, which meant his starting level was practically endgame-tier.

In addition, Rex's stats were well-balanced, and he had a plethora of different skills at his disposal—everything from sword skills to magical abilities. He even had a few more utilitarian skills, like thievery and alchemy.

However, there was one glaring problem about this jack-of-all-trades. His growth rates were abysmal! Compared to other characters around level 50, Rex was far weaker, and he had no special abilities of his own. He was the kind of character who was extremely powerful at the start, but fell off hard by the end. Rex was basically the equivalent of those paladins with silver lances that you got at the start of one of the old *Fire Emblem* games. By the time you got to the endgame, they were completely useless.

This probably isn't the best time to be so stuck on game mechanics, I thought, wincing. *But still, if I was going to be reincarnated as one of the characters I was staring at in the moments right before my death, I would have much preferred if*

it was Ain, the Prince of Light, instead. I sighed, putting my hands on my hips and glancing around the cavern. *A-Anyway, before I start worrying about that, I should at least get somewhere safe.*

I might have managed to defeat a goblin just now, but that had mostly been to do with Rex's stats. At the end of the day, on the inside I was still just a regular old Japanese citizen who'd never experienced actual combat before today. It wasn't a good idea for me to hang around at the bottom of a dungeon filled with monsters.

Judging by the way this area's laid out and the monsters I've seen so far, this is probably the Cavern of Trials, I realized, the familiar scenery finally clicking in my mind now that I'd calmed down and accepted where I was.

The Cavern of Trials was the first dungeon you entered after leaving the city where *BB* started. I felt pretty confident that I could remember how to navigate its paths, which meant that I should be able to get back outside easily enough. Then I could hurry over to a nearby town, and...

Wait a second.

"*Crap*..." I muttered, my face blanching.

The closest city to the Cavern of Trials was Rex's hometown, Ars. However...chances were, it would be a bad idea to go there right now. If I really was in *Braves and Blades*, and the world was following the game's plot, then very soon Ars would... It would...

I plopped my face into my hands. "It'll be attacked by a horde of monsters and destroyed!"

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【Start Selection】

Backstory (1)**:** A young boy from the city who dreams of becoming an adventurer.

Difficulty**:** Easy

Starting Class**:** Young Leo

Starting Party Members**:** Depends on your choices.

Affiliation: N/A

Adventurer's Guild Restrictions: None

In *Braves and Blades*, you could pick different starting locations and conditions for your journey. Depending on which location you chose, you'd get a different story for the early sections of the game, where you had to complete a few tutorial quests. Once you completed that though, the game opened up, and you could adventure wherever you wanted.

If you wanted Rex's character to be a major part of your storyline, you had to choose to play as a young boy from the city who dreamed of becoming an adventurer. Of the 7+ backstories in *BB,* it was one of the easiest you could pick, along with being an apprentice knight. The young boy storyline was typically recommended for beginners to *Braves and Blades,* since the plot was quite orthodox and its tutorial quests were widely believed to be the best integrated with the overarching story of the game.

That being said, the young boy storyline could only be considered easy in comparison to *BB*'s other backstories. If you started off as a noble child kidnapped by monsters, a betrayed orphan from the slums, or a child who'd been sacrificed to the darkness, it only made sense that your entire playthrough was going to be absolutely brutal. But even the so-called "easy" starting scenarios got pretty hardcore toward the end of the game.

From what I recalled, if you started the game as a young boy from the city who dreamed of becoming an adventurer, the game's protagonist ended up in a party with three other fellow adventurers. The four of them would challenge the Cavern of Trials together, working through tutorial quests that taught them how combat worked, as well as how to pick locks and avoid traps.

According to *Braves and Blades* lore, fledgling adventurers would typically complete the dungeon's trial by making their way into the depths of the cavern and touching the ominous patterns carved into the walls of its final room. After that, they'd be officially recognized as proper adventurers.

In the case of the game's protagonist, however, something very different occurred. When *he* touched the wall, he would discover that he actually

possessed the qualifications to unlock the seal that had been placed there. As a result, the protagonist would accidentally end up reviving the demon that had been locked away in the cavern, and it was only with the help of Rex Tauren, who'd just so happened to be in the area conducting an inspection, that the protagonist managed to survive the encounter.

But that wasn't all—just before the demon died, it would utter an ominous declaration. "You may have defeated me," it would boom, "but it's too late. I have already summoned my god to descend upon these lands. Go—return to the surface, and see what has become of your beloved city!"

After that, the protagonist and his party would hurry out of the dungeon, only to find that their home city of Ars has become a smoking ruin drenched in blood. When the protagonist beholds their home once more, it's filled with the screams of innocent citizens, protected only by the few valiant warriors who remained, fighting back with all their might.

"Ah, *shit*!" I cursed under my breath. "This isn't good at all!"

Now I knew why Rex was in this dungeon—I must have been reincarnated into the storyline right at the start of the game, right before Rex ran across the protagonist and saved him from the demon.

A chill went through me. *If I'd just run back to town without considering the consequences...*

From what I recalled, the monster horde that descended upon Ars was made up of level 40 gargoyles and level 55 flying devils. After they attacked, Ars ended up becoming a monster-controlled city, and became a dungeon in all but name. The city was actually one of the harder endgame locations to conquer, since it had level 60 monsters living inside of it.

Rex might start at level 50, but he's no match for a horde of similarly leveled monsters, I thought. *Should I run to a different city then? If I did that, I guess it's possible I'd survive...but that would mean Ars was doomed for sure, and the protagonist of this route would get murdered at the hands of that demon.*

"Goddamnit, what exactly am I supposed to do then?!" I demanded, glaring at the dungeon's walls.

Even if I put aside the moral implications of leaving a party of young adventurers to die when I had the power to save them, the entire world of *Braves and Blades* might collapse if someone as important to the story as the protagonist ended up dying.

There's only one true option open to me, I realized after a while. *I have to stop the protagonist from unsealing the demon.*

I'd visited the Cavern of Trials on multiple occasions when I'd been playing the game, so I still had a pretty good idea of its layout. And...

If I rush straight to the Room of Seals, I might be able to get there just before the protagonist and his party do.

If I did that, there was still a risk that I'd fuck up the story, to be frank, but at this point I didn't care.

Sorry guys, but I'm no hero—I'm just a regular office worker. I'm not cut out for fighting demons or saving the world. But actually...that leads me to a great idea. After I stop the protagonist from breaking the demon's seal, why don't I just teach him everything he needs to know about this world? If I do that, he can save it for me!

Suddenly, things really felt like they were looking up.

First things first, I thought, *I've gotta find the protagonist.*

Fortunately for me, I'd already gleaned my exact location within the Cavern of Trials. The open treasure chest I'd been staring at ever since I'd woken up in this dungeon was the perfect landmark.

There's only a single room in this whole dungeon that has a treasure chest, I thought. *When you first enter the dungeon, the path splits into three different directions, and you reach the treasure chest by going down the center path. Which means...that that little crevice over there is a shortcut that leads directly to the Wyvern's Promenade. And* that *means the shortest route to the protagonist is...that way!*

There wasn't a moment to lose. Trusting my memories, I dashed through the dungeon at top speed.

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“This isn’t good...” I muttered a few minutes later.

I hadn’t run into any traps along the way to the Room of Seals, or any monsters for that matter. Unlike many other games, in *Braves and Blades* monsters didn’t respawn after they were killed. Which meant that the protagonist’s party had already gone through the portion of the dungeon I was traversing.

Are they moving faster than they normally do in the game? I wondered.

I might have been just a regular office worker in my past life, but now that I’d reincarnated into Rex’s body, I was in peak physical condition. And yet, despite the fact that I’d made record time racing through the dungeon, I’d still yet to see hide or hair of the protagonist’s party.

It wasn’t like there weren’t plenty of puzzles and hidden doors in the Cavern of Trials to occupy a player’s time—it might be a tutorial dungeon where the risk of dying was low, but traveling through it could still be a time sink. Knowing this, I’d thought I’d be able to catch up to the protagonist’s party pretty much immediately. I mean, I was already fully aware of all this dungeon’s tricks. But the truth of the matter was that all I’d managed to do so far was pass by room after empty room.

If they’re not in the next room, the only one left is the Room of Seals, I thought.

Doing my best to keep my impatience in check, I flung open the door to the last room in the hall. As I’d expected, it was just as empty as all the others. There *were*, however, traces of combat still lingering in the room, so it was clear the party I was looking for had battled monsters here pretty recently.

“Shit!” I muttered.

They got here way too fast! Could the unleashing of the demon be one of those events that the game forces to happen no matter what?

Hoping against hope that that wasn't the case, I sprinted across the room and into the twisting corridor on the other side. I raced my way down the winding path at such a high speed that the me of my past life would have never been able to even come close. And then, finally, I rounded a corner and reached the open space at the end of the corridor.

There they are! I shrieked internally, my eyes locking on to the two boys and two girls who stood in front of a wall covered with incomprehensible murals. The two boys were standing in front, their hands stretched out in front of them as they reached over to run their fingers over the seal.

"Stooooooooop!" I yelled as loudly as I could.

But unfortunately, my warning came too late. Though my shout startled the boys, their hands still finished the journey toward the seal. The seal that, upon being touched by one who possessed the correct nature, would shatter. I cringed internally. Any moment now, it was going to break, unleashing an ancient demon upon the world. Except...it just didn't.

"H-Huh?" I stammered, my dazed eyes stuck on the sight of the two boys' hands pressed against the seal. "Wh-Why isn't it breaking?"

Naturally, there was no answer. The group of four just stared blankly at me like I was a weirdo.

Wait, I thought, mind spinning. *The seal's supposed to shatter the moment the protagonist touches it! Why isn't anything happening?! One of those boys has to be the one who matches the qualifications to be a hero, which is what triggers the demon to break free!*

And yet, despite the fact that the boys' hands had touched the seal right before my eyes, it remained utterly unchanged.

Did I miss something? Am I forgetting how the event goes?

My eyes scanned over the two girls and two boys in front of me, looking for clues. From what I could tell, the group of adventurers in the Room of Seals were of the exact same number as the protagonist's party, and had the same party composition—there was a female archer, a male mage, a female priest, and a male swordsman, who should be the protagonist himself.

In which case, the moment that young swordsman touched the seal, it should've been all over. Unless...he's not the protagonist?

I hadn't considered that, but it *was* a possibility. The true protagonist of this version of *BB*'s plot might not be the character that started with the backstory of being a young boy who dreamed of being an adventurer. Even though I'd woken up as Rex in a location that matched the progression of that storyline, that didn't mean that this particular boy was the protagonist.

Maybe the protagonist of this particular rendition of Braves and Blades *is from one of the other six possible backstories,* I mused. *Now that I think about it, Rex would still appear in the young boy storyline even if the player didn't choose that backstory for their character. The player might not get to experience it, but Rex and the fledgling adventurer's story arc would still go through the same series of events. They'd just be happening in the background of the main plot.*

The world suddenly felt as if it had righted itself. As long as I operated under the assumption that this boy was just a regular adventurer and not *BB*'s chosen protagonist, everything still made sense. But...it also made things a *lot* more annoying. If this boy wasn't the protagonist, it had to be one of the other six characters, and they all started in completely different locations. Plus, once they finished their introductory stories, there was no way of knowing what any of them would do next. I would literally have to travel around the world looking for someone with protagonist-y traits.

I guess I don't have *to find the protagonist, strictly speaking...* I thought glumly. *But I can't help but feel slightly freaked out that I don't know who they are.*

As I was agonizing over what to do next, one of the adventurers stepped forward and snapped, "Hey, old man!"

"*O-Old man*?!" I exclaimed reflexively.

That damn brat! Maybe back in Japan I'd have accepted it if someone called me old, but I'm in Rex's body now! The guy's a bona-fide hottie that all BB *players love, and that's not even mentioning that he's only twenty-five years old!*

As much as I hated to admit it, though...I could kinda see where the kid was

coming from. Back when I'd been a teenager, I'd thought people in their twenties were old too. But even if I understood his point of view, that wouldn't save him from the hundreds—okay, probably more like dozens—of Rex fans in Japan he'd just offended.

I opened my mouth to shoot back another response, but another one of the adventurers beat me to it.

"D-Don't be rude, Radd!" she shouted.

That one'll be the healer of the group, judging by her outfit, I thought as the girl turned toward me and gave me a bashful look.

"U-Umm...you're Master Rex, right?" she stammered. "The A-rank adventurer, Rex Tauren?"

"Y-Yes, that's right," I replied, a bit startled by the "master" bit. "You can just call me Rex, though. That's fine with me."

She seems polite enough, I mused, *but "Master Rex" is* not *a moniker I want catching on.*

The healer girl's face had lit up at my confirmation, and she sprinted across the cavern, skidding to a stop a few feet away from where I stood. "I-It's such an honor to me!" she said in an excited voice. "I'm actually a *huge* fan of yours! C-Could I...shake your hand?"

"Huh?" I said, feeling a bit befuddled. I was taken so off guard by her request that I barely managed to stay in character. "I mean, s-sure..."

The girl closed the last bit of distance between us and grabbed my hand, her eyes gleaming as she shook it.

"What's the big deal?" the boy called Radd snapped, a glower on his face. "It's not like being an A-rank makes you anything special—all that means is you've been adventuring a long time."

The healer girl's face crinkled into a frown. "Being an A-rank absolutely *is* special," she said, launching into another lecture. "Rex became an adventurer when he was only 15, and since then he's completed over a thousand quests! Did you know *that*, Radd?"

The boy shook his head slowly, clearly still irritated.

"Well, that's not all! On top of that, Rex's quest-completion ratio is over ninety-five percent! He did them all solo too, which is *way* harder than completing quests with a party. Doing something like that requires a high amount of versatility, and the only reason Rex can manage it is because he's a master of all disciplines. If that's not amazing, then I don't know what is! And that incredible track record is *exactly* why he was promoted to A-rank just last year. In the entirety of this country's fifty-two-year history, Rex's only the third person to make it to A-rank solo. With how impressive his skills are, he might even end up becoming the first solo adventurer to reach S-rank. If you think about it..."

"Okay, okay, I get it!" Radd said, looking overwhelmed. "*Seriously*, I get it."

Honestly, this girl knows more about Rex than I do, I thought, laughing internally. *She must be an adventurer megafan. It's interesting though, since I never really thought about Rex in that way before...*

From the perspective of a *BB* player, Rex wasn't all that special a character. He was just a decently high-ranked adventurer who happened to be present during one of the potential protagonist's story events. Even the fact that he started off as level 50 didn't seem that awe worthy, since by the endgame the entire protagonist's party would be well over that level. His Guild rank didn't seem that important either, as climbing your way up the ladder wasn't actually that difficult as a player. But, as the healer girl's exuberance proved, in the framework of the game, Rex was pretty famous.

Now that I thought about it, there were barely a handful of people as strong or as highly ranked as Rex within the world of *Braves and Blades.* To those who truly admired adventurers, he'd be a celebrity at the very least.

I looked down at the healer girl, who was still shaking my hand with surprising vigor. I scratched my head awkwardly with my free hand, suddenly feeling overcome with embarrassment.

I mean, it's not like I enjoy *getting insulted, but at least I know how to handle it,* I thought, squirming. *I've got no idea how to react to such effusive praise...*

Thankfully, I was saved when the other male adventurer in the party stepped

forward. “I’m sorry about my party members,” he apologized, cheeks flushed. “I’m Nyuuk. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rex. You did say you were fine with just Rex, right?”

“Cheers,” I said, nodding, and I saw the boy’s shoulders relax a little.

From what I could tell, Nyuuk seemed the most composed of the four young adventurers. He had brown hair and looked more like a merchant than an adventurer. Seeing as he was holding a staff though, I was guessing he was most likely the party’s mage.

Nyuuk gestured to the sulky boy standing next to him. “This is Radd, one of my party mates. He’s our swordsman. The priest gushing over you right now is our healer, Mana. And, last but not least...” Nyuuk turned and smiled at his last party member, who was hanging back from the group and staring at me with wary eyes.

The girl had lovely, luxurious blonde hair and pointed ears; she was your stereotypical elf, the kind that had been inspired by Tolkien’s novels and was in all kinds of RPGs. As I turned toward her, her gaze turned sharp, but she didn’t say a word. I did see her mouth “Rex” to herself, though.

Nyuuk flushed again. “U-Umm, this is our archer, Prana. Don’t mind her, she’s just a little antisocial.”

I nodded, indicating that I wasn’t bothered. *I suppose I should introduce myself too, huh?*

“It seems you already know me,” I said with a slight smile, “but I’d still like to introduce myself—I’m Rex Tauren, an A-rank adventurer. I’d heard that the demon sealed away in this dungeon was about to break free, so I came here to investigate.”

Hopefully that explains my behavior from earlier, I thought hopefully.

“I see, so th-that’s why...” Nyuuk muttered, trailing off.

I sighed in relief. *Judging by that reaction, they believe me. All right! From now on, I’m just going to have to take care to stay in character.*

“It seems like the seal’s still intact,” I told them, “so we should be safe. Still, I

wouldn't recommend coming back here for the time being. I'd at least wait until you've got a lot more experience under your belt."

"O-Okay!" Nyuuk agreed, turning back to his comrades. "Guys, let's get out of here!"

That sounded good to me, but unfortunately it seemed Radd, the red-haired boy, still had a bone to pick.

He clicked his tongue, rolling his eyes. "You're seriously telling me that old geezer is an A-rank adventurer?!" he demanded. "You sure he's not just pretending to be a veteran to trick all of us?"

"Radd!" Nyuuk cut in, voice stern.

The red-haired boy just ignored him. He tapped his sword against his shoulder and gave me a defiant look.

"For such a weak pup, you sure bark loudly," the elf girl said suddenly, her tone mocking.

Oh, great, I thought. *Way to add fuel to the fire.*

Sure enough, Radd whirled toward the blonde elven girl, his animosity towards me completely forgotten. "*What* did you just say, Prana?" he snapped, teeth bared.

"I said to quit your yapping, mutt," she replied with a yawn.

I breathed out a weary sigh, looking away from where the two kids glared angrily at each other, and back to the girl in front of me. This entire time, Mana hadn't once stopped shaking my hand.

Are these four always such an eclectic bunch? I wondered.

Nyuuk, the only one of them who seemed to have any sense, seemed to catch on to what I was thinking. He gave me an apologetic bow.

I gave him a kind look and said, "You must have it rough." Sad as it was, I could do no more for him.

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“I’m sorry for making you guard us on the way out,” Nyuuk said, looking up at me with an apologetic look in his eyes.

“I was about to head back as well, so it’s not at all an inconvenience for me,” I replied, waving off his concern.

To be honest, I’d already decided to escort the party out of the Cavern of Trials even before they’d finally calmed down. Why, you ask? Well, I had an ulterior motive, of course. With Radd as a swordsman, Nyuuk as a mage, Mana as a priest, and Prana as an archer, the four kids had a perfectly balanced party when it came to combat ability. Even though their personalities *were* all over the place...

In *Braves and Blades,* the adventurers who joined the protagonist during the starting quest had randomized names, appearances, and stats, but their classes and unique skills were fixed. Their growth rates were randomized as well, but the RNG was set to trend high, so they usually ended up turning out better than average.

In other words, Prana, Nyuuk, and Mana were the complete opposite of Rex. They would become formidable adventurers before long, and if I was going to be living in this world from now on, it would pay off for me to get close to them while I had the chance.

Radd clicked his tongue, clearly annoyed at my presence, but seeing as he was still a kid his antics didn’t really bother me too much. I ignored him and said, “This way,” guiding the party down the right path to get out of the dungeon.

Most dungeons had shortcuts near the end that allowed you to easily come and go from their deepest section after you’d reached it once. The Cavern of Trials was an exception though—you were only ever supposed to visit it once, so it had no convenient shortcut to and from the endpoint. It wasn’t *that* inconvenient to go back the way they’d come, since the monster’s they’d killed along the way wouldn’t be respawning. Unfortunately though, it seemed they hadn’t gotten them all.

“Looks like you guys missed a few monsters,” I commented, watching as three small figures stepped out of the shadows, blocking the path that led to the

cavern's exit. They were all goblins.

That means they're the weakest monsters in the game, I reminded myself.

Radd's eyes had gone wide. "There's *three* of them?! Nyuuk, you've gotta start casting—"

"It's fine," I said confidently, holding out a hand to stop Radd from stepping forward. I lowered my hand to my hip, drawing my sword. "Leave them to me."

The real question is: can I actually beat them? I wondered. I focused my eyes onto the trio of creatures and tried to use my Analyze skill.

【Goblin】

LV: 3

HP: 61

MP: 13

Attack: 36

Magic Attack: 0

Defense: 27

Magic Defense: 8

Strength: 32

Vitality: 24

Intelligence: 0

Mind: 8

Agility: 16

Focus: 8

Well, that's interesting, I thought.

It was kind of surreal to see a status window pop up in real life. Still, it was reassuring knowing I could use the skills I'd had access to in my old playthroughs of the game.

During that first battle, I was so overwhelmed I didn't even think to fight using the game's mechanics, I realized. *This battle is a good chance for me to get a*

feel for my own strength.

If I was being honest with myself though, that wasn't my only motivation.

I wanna show off a little in front of the arrogant brat, I thought with a grin. *That'll put him in his place.*

"H-Hey, old man, don't go trying to act all tough!" Radd shouted. "You're going up against three at once!"

For all his blustering, it seems he's a pretty good kid at heart, I realized, my irritation with him mostly fading away.

"I'll be fine," I told him with a grin. "You just stand here and watch."

And then, before the goblins had a chance to get into formation, I poured mana into my blade and took off running towards them. I'd never tried manipulating mana that way before, but thankfully the process came naturally to me.

"V-Slash!" I yelled as I drew in close to one of the monsters.

The nature of the mana enveloping my sword changed, and the arm I was using to lift my sword seemed to move on its own. The goblin stared in shock as the first slash of my V-shaped strike sliced its club right in half, then let out an agonized scream as my sword reversed directions and sliced *it* in half instead.

Perfect, I thought, feeling a bit giddy. *Looks like I can use Arts just fine.*

In *BB,* Arts was used as an umbrella term to refer to physical skills that cost MP to use. Back when I'd had to use a controller to play the game, I'd had to press the right trigger in order to inject mana into my weapon, then press a specific set of buttons to activate the Art I'd set to that command. Now that I was in the game, however, it seemed I could activate them mostly by feel.

It was exhilarating to know I had such power at my fingertips, but now really wasn't the time to exult in it. I was reminded forcefully of this when one of the two remaining goblins let out a "*Graaaaaah*!" and came charging toward me. It ducked past its dead comrade, swinging its club right at me.

Unfortunately for the goblin, such a weak attack could never hit me. I raised the shield attached to my left hand, pouring mana into it as well.

In *BB*, shields were technically classified as weapons. Alas, you couldn't use Arts with any weapon you had equipped to your off-hand, even if you poured mana into it. Instead, you could use your off-hand weapon to parry attacks.

I shoved my shield forward right as the goblin's club banging into its surface, sending both the monster and its weapon careening backwards.

I grinned. The timing window for a parry was pretty tight in *BB*, but if you managed to pull it off it was the perfect way to knock your enemy off-balance.

The goblin let out a confused moan, its head still spinning from the parry. I brought my sword down onto its head, hitting its weak point with pinpoint accuracy.

A soft, defeated noise escaped the goblin's mouth, and then it crumpled to the ground, defeated.

Only one left.

The last goblin was holding a short sword and a shield, unlike the others. To my surprise, it didn't flee in terror after seeing its brethren cut down—instead, it glared at me, lifting up its shield in defiance.

Now then, I thought. *What to do with you...*

I licked my lips and considered my options, watching the goblin as it circled around me. It made sure to keep its distance, clearly wary of my strength.

From what I saw with Analyze, all the goblins had pretty unimpressive stats, I mused. *That's to be expected for monsters around their level. Rex is more than strong enough to brute force it and smash right through that goblin's shield, cutting the monster in half with one swing, but...this is kind of the perfect opportunity for me to test how much freedom I have within* Braves and Blades' *systems...* I grinned. *Let's see if this works.*

I let out a grunt as I ducked low, leaning toward the right. As I moved, I poured mana into my sword for a second time, preparing to use the same Art I had just moments before. This time, however, I didn't plan on letting the Art take over my movements once it was activated—I'd be tracing the V-shaped arc in the air myself.

"V-Slash!" I yelled, triggering the Art as my sword whooshed sideways through the air.

I'd angled the initial downward strike differently than usual, and it slid right underneath the goblin's shield, slicing horizontally through its torso. I followed the blow up with an upward slice, grinning in triumph as my sword cut right through the middle of the goblin's body.

Looks like my little experiment worked, I thought with a short, huffing laugh.

In front of me, the bisected body of the goblin tumbled to the ground.

"Rex, what was that you did just now?" I heard Nyuuk ask from behind me, surprise evident in his voice.

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused. Then it hit me—he was referring to how I'd altered the form of V-Slash.

Back when I'd played *Braves and Blades,* there'd been two ways you could

perform an Art: automatically or manually. The automatic version of an Art would be activated when you pressed the button on the gamepad you'd set to trigger that action. If you held the button down, however, you could activate the Art manually by tracing the shape of it in the air with your motion controller.

The fact that you'd been able to use the motion controller like that had actually been one of *BB*'s biggest selling points—it had made it feel like you were swinging around an actual weapon. The developers had added incentives for using the manual activation method as well, since naturally they'd preferred players choose that option over just hitting a button and watching a move play out automatically. These incentives included an extension of an Art's range and the infliction of bonus damage upon its target, and were rewarded to a player if they managed to successfully trace an Art's shape. The automatic method, on the other hand, had no such incentives and existed merely for those who didn't want to mess with the motion controls.

That being said, most players used the manual activation method the majority of the time. NPCs and monsters, however...

I've never seen either group use anything but automatically activated Arts, I realized.

I glanced over my shoulder at the group of kids behind me. Even Radd, the arrogant brat who kept calling me an old geezer, was staring in my direction with his mouth half-open in amazement.

I had to rein in a smirk. *It's probably not very cool of me to act all smug over a power that's not even mine, but I can't deny it feels good to show these kids up.*

"Oh, that?" I asked casually, doing my best to keep myself from grinning like an idiot. "It's just another method of using an Art."

I faced forward once again, leaving the kids gaping as I took the last few steps needed to bring the cavern's exit into view. Once I saw it though, my elation died a quick death.

"The sky's...red?" I asked, the words slow and apprehensive.

It's way too early in the day for it to be evening, I thought, *unless we spent*

way more time in the Cavern of Trials than I realized...

Overcome with worry, I sprinted toward the exit of the cavern as fast as I could. The kids followed behind, close at my heels.

The sight awaiting us outside made all of us freeze, gasping in horror. Far off in the west, the city of Ars was burning.

I stared at the plumes of smoke rising in the distance, struck dumb. *God, I'm such an idiot...* I thought, a wave of regret surging up inside me. *How could I forget that this was going to happen?!*

Even if Radd wasn't the true protagonist of this version of *BB*, and hadn't been able to break the seal on the demon held captive in the Cavern of Trials, that didn't mean that Ars wouldn't be attacked. From what I remembered, the story event that revolved around the destruction of the city would happen regardless of what character you chose to start playing as. Chances were, the event where the demon was unsealed in the dungeon just happened to coincide with Ars's destruction, and the two weren't actually linked.

If I'd even spent five seconds actually thinking about this, I'd have realized that! I thought, grinding my teeth and cursing at my own carelessness.

Just then, a gust of wind blew past, parting the smoke above Ars for a moment even as it assailed us with the scent of charred human flesh. Now that I could see things a little clearer, I saw that the city's assailants were descending from the sky, bypassing the thick, sturdy walls that typically kept Ars protected from monsters.

"This is awful..." I heard one of the kids mutter.

I can't agree more, I thought, chest tightening with apprehension.

Countless gargoyles and flying devils hovered in the air above the city, clouds of them extending so far into the distance they practically blotted out the blueness of the sky. As if that wasn't enough, I saw that some of the gargoyles were carrying flightless monsters in their arms, dropping them into the middle of the city whenever they had the chance.

"Those gargoyles are airdropping the rest of the army in!" I told the kids, my voice tight.

Gargoyles were monsters that appeared toward the middle of the game, meaning that every single one of them should be as strong as a mid-ranked adventurer.

No city could survive an invasion of this scale, I thought sadly, eyes locked onto the harrowing sight of the city's destruction. *I know that from experience, but still...*

"Rex, look!" Radd shouted out of the blue, jolting me back to the present. "Look over there! It's a person!"

"What?!" I turned in Radd's direction, lowering my gaze from the sky above.

A few yards away, a woman was being attacked by a gargoyle. I'd barely begun to process the scene when the monster drove its sword straight through her chest.

Without warning, my blood began to boil. *Goddamnit, why is this event happening* now*?!*

I let out a rough "Tch!" and launched forward, rushing toward the gargoyle before any of the kids had a chance to stop me. I heard one of them scream "Rex?!", but I didn't look back. I had other, more important things to worry about—it was time to fight.

I pushed all other thoughts aside in favor of focusing on channeling mana into my sword, activating an Art that would increase my movement speed considerably.

"Gale Slash!" I shouted, tracing an infinity symbol in the air with my weapon.

In an instant I accelerated to inhuman speeds, nearly tripping over my own legs as I struggled to keep up with the increased pace.

God, I just can't catch a break, can I? I thought, almost laughing at the absurdity of it all. *I literally died like an hour ago because I tried to save that girl, and here I go trying to save someone else! Seems I just can't learn my lesson... At least this time the rescue shouldn't cost me my life.*

"Yeah!" I yelled, bolstering myself. "A single gargoyle's no match for me!"

The monster wasn't exactly making me work for it, either—it was so focused

on its prey that it hadn't bothered to defend itself at all. It had left its rear side wide open.

I pulled my sword back, activating a skill called Divine Thrust with only a thought. Then, once I was finally in range, I plunged the blade into the stone skin covering the gargoyle's spine with all my might.

The monster let out a shrill, pained screech, then vanished into a cloud of small lights that rushed into the palm of my hand.

Interesting, I thought. *Normally, Rex wouldn't be able to take down a gargoyle in a single hit when at base level. The enemy weak-point system and the damage bonus for attacking with a charge must still apply now, even though I'm inside the game. And* that *means... Wait, none of this is important right now!*

I turned away from the gargoyle, flushing with mortification as I ran over to the girl it had stabbed. I knelt at her side, idly noticing that she had emerald-green hair.

"Are you okay?!" I asked her.

She ignored my question, a relieved smile stretching across her lips once she got a good look at my face. "Oh, thank god..." she gasped. "Rex, you're okay..."

"H-Huh?" I managed. For a moment I froze up, unsure of how to react.

"There's...monsters, in the city..." she mumbled weakly, her eyes fluttering. "You...have to *run*..."

And then, before I could think to say anything in return, she fell unconscious. I stared at her, falling deep into thought.

Oh, I realized after a moment. *This girl, she must be Rex's younger sister.*

Now that I thought about it, once you defeated the demon and headed back toward Ars in this storyline, you'd find a girl lying in a field on the outskirts of the city, near dead. Between the dialogue I remembered getting during the event and the girl's earlier words, it was most likely Rex's younger sister, who lived in the city.

What was her name again? I thought, my brow scrunching together. *It was...Recilia, wasn't it?*

From what I recalled, Recilia had died in the original game right after she'd warned Rex that the city of Ars was being attacked and told him to run. It had been an incredibly depressing event to put so early on in the game, but it was obvious the developer's plan had been to use it to instill a sense of urgency in the player.

Well, too bad! I thought, eyes narrowing. *Screw the developer's vision!*

I focused in on my left hand and accessed my Inventory, which was a skill that everyone in *Braves and Blades* possessed. I then began pulling out as many healing items as I could, pouring them over Recilia's injuries as I went. She let out a soft "Nnnngh," as her wounds closed up in record time.

Having used up all the healing potions I had, I leaned over Recilia, assessing her condition. Her injuries appeared completely healed, and a little color had returned to her previously blanched complexion.

She should be good now, right? I thought with a rush of relief.

When I'd played through this event in *BB* before, Recilia was already on the verge of death when the protagonist's party came across her. There'd also been no monsters in sight. Taken together, these facts made me suspect that we'd arrived at the scene earlier than normal, likely because we'd skipped the battle inside the Cavern of Trials with the demon.

In other words, my actions have altered the course of the game's plot, even if it's only slightly, I realized. *I wonder—*

"Hey, old man!" Radd erupted, having run up next to me as I was deep in thought. "What're we gonna do now?! They're coming for us!"

Looks like I'll have to consider the ramifications of that later, unfortunately, I thought with a grimace. I glanced up, quickly catching sight of a contingent of gargoyles flying our direction. *They must have noticed us from that spot where they were hanging around the city walls.*

I reached over, hoisting Recilia's body onto my back, then turned on my heel, leaving the city behind me. "We need to run," I told the kids shortly.

"B-But what about the city?!" they cried in unison.

I sighed. “We can’t do anything.”

The truth was, saving the people of Ars was impossible at this point. The city’s gate had been shut from the inside, and even if we managed to get past it, the army of monsters rampaging behind Ars’s walls was way too strong to defeat. Even for Rex.

“But...that’s Mana’s hometown!” Radd said in a choked voice. “Her family and friends must still be...”

The pain in his words hit me right in the chest. All of a sudden, I realized how coldhearted I must have sounded, making those short, clinical statements. Even if I *had* come to the most logical conclusions. Aghast, I turned toward Mana.

She stared down at the ground for a second, as if to steel herself. “Rex is right,” she said a few moments later. “We need to run.”

“I’m sorry, Mana,” I said softly.

I really did feel guilty about leaving the people of Ars to die, but even if we busted our way in there, we’d only manage to add our own names to the death toll. *We’ve gotta get moving as soon as possible.*

“But, um, Rex?” Mana asked hesitantly. “Which way should we run?”

“Oh... Well, I guess we...” I trailed off.

Mana’s question had reminded me of yet another cruel fact about the storyline tied to the protagonist who was a young boy that dreamed of becoming an adventurer.

If you started *BB* by choosing that backstory, the game would inform you that the makeup of your starting party depended on the choices you made during the story’s initial arc. To get specific, the game was referring to the choice you made here, after Recilia gave you her warning and died. As the player, you’d be given the option of fleeing from Ars to one of two different towns: the tiny fishing village of Umina to the north, or the larger town of Rixia, which lay to the east beyond the Cavern of Trials. Whichever city I chose, it would decide our fate.

From what I remembered, if we went east to Rixia, we’d be ambushed by a

group of gargoyles right before we reached the safety of the town. In the game, I—or rather, *Rex*—fought as hard as he could to protect the newbie adventurers, but ultimately failed due to how badly outnumbered the protagonist's party was. As a result, everyone died except for Rex and the protagonist.

If we went north to Umina, on the other hand, a powerful level 60 doom demon would start chasing us. In the game, Rex opted to stay behind and let the rest of the party flee, protecting them the best he could by fighting off the monster. In that portion of the storyline, the newbie adventurers all survived and safely reached Umina, but Rex ended up dying during his fierce struggle against the doom demon.

It had been a truly difficult choice to make as a player, and was even more difficult now that I was actually inside the game. If I took us east, I'd be consigning three promising youngsters to death, and if I went north, I'd be the one dying instead! No matter what I decided, there was going to be casualties.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I muttered, cold sweat pouring down my forehead.

This is total bullshit! I mean, come on*. I'm just some regular old guy from modern Japan! I lived a life of luxury, with practically no hardships! You can't just ask me to choose who lives and who dies like this...*

"Old man, they're getting closer!" Radd snapped.

I looked up. The gargoyles had indeed closed the distance between us considerably. There was no more time to deliberate. I grit my teeth and inwardly cursed the writer who came up with this story event.

What should I do? I thought desperately. *What's the right choice?*

Everyone looked at me, waiting for me to make the final decision.

If we just stay here, in the field next to Ars, we'll all get killed. And if I choose Rixia, then... I closed my eyes, remembering the last time I'd played through the event.

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“We made it! Look, Rixia’s right there!”

“We’re saved!”

“Let’s hurry! We need to let everyone know about what happened to Ars!”

The party of rookie adventurers had run toward the town, spirits high. I’d watched them sadly, already knowing what was about to happen. From what I’d looked up online, no matter what choice you made during the Sack of Ars event, someone in your party was bound to die. There was no avoiding it, so I’d gone ahead and chosen what I felt was the best choice—to go east, sacrificing the three newbie adventurers in favor of keeping Rex.

“Wait!” Rex had yelled. “Don’t rush ahead like that...”

Unfortunately, the excited youngsters had paid no heed to the senior adventurer’s warning. And in that very moment, the harbingers of their death had descended from above.

“Run! It’s a gargoyle ambush!” my character had screamed as the gargoyles spread their pitch-black wings and shot towards the party.

Rex could easily have taken on the creatures one at a time, since he was an experienced adventurer and the gargoyles were mid-level monsters. The problem was, in order to be able to save the newbie adventurers, he’d have to fight his way through the line of gargoyles blocking his path. It would take time for him to do so, and in that time...the three young kids would die.

As the protagonist, I’d been safe, so I’d stood watching from a distance, my gaze impassive as the group of young adventurers had been slaughtered.

“S-Stop! I can’t die here, I’m going to become a hero, and—”

“*Nooo*! I don’t wanna die!”

“M-Mommy! It hurts...”

Even after they’d died, the pained screams of the newbie adventurers had echoed in my ears.

Rex had slain the last of the gargoyles near him mere moments later, striding the last few steps to where the young adventurers lay.

“I couldn’t reach them in time...” he’d mumbled, voice tight.

Of the original party, only Rex and I, playing as the protagonist, had been left alive. We’d begun to trudge our way onward toward Rixia, mourning the loss of our companions, all while sad music had slowly faded in from the background.

I remembered feeling sick, and muttering to myself, “Man, this event really leaves a bad taste in your mouth...”

Once we’d reached the town, I’d saved and turned the game off practically right away.

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“*Fuck*...” I muttered, coming back to myself.

Thinking about the events ahead of us really brings back some unpleasant memories.

The first time I’d played *Braves and Blades*, I’d picked the young boy protagonist who dreamed of being an adventurer since he’d been first on the list, and then opted to go east to Rixia during the escape event. That first playthrough I hadn’t known what was coming, so it had hit me pretty hard watching all of my party members die. Afterwards, I’d started the game over and tried to go north, only to discover that Rex wound up dead instead.

At that point, I’d headed online to look up some information. Ultimately, I’d decided that it would be easier to get through the early portions of the game with Rex in my party, so I’d started the game over a third time and gone east again, doing the best I could to not get too upset over the newbie adventurer’s deaths.

If I decided that we should go east now, I suspected that no matter what I did, fate would conspire against me and ensure that portion of the storyline played out as it had been scripted. But of course going north meant that I’d die for

sure, which I definitely didn't want either. In which case...my choice was clear.

"We're going east!" I yelled. "East, but not towards Rixia!"

Radd and the others gave me confused looks. They'd clearly expected me to pick either the north or the east, since there were towns lying in each of those directions, but my decision not to head to Rixia baffled them.

I couldn't explain the reasoning behind my decision to them though, so I just said, in a voice that brooked no disagreement, "We're going back into the cavern."

If both choices lead to casualties, then I just have to find a third option!

"You sure about this, geezer?!" Radd demanded as we ran back into the cavern. "If those monsters block the entrance we'll be trapped in here!"

"Don't worry," I assured him, glancing over my shoulder so I could see his face. "The Cavern of Trials actually has two exits, so we should be fine."

To be honest, though...this was a bit of a gamble. If the cavern didn't actually have an additional exit, then Radd's fears could very well come to pass. But if I was *right*...

I skidded to a stop, eyes locked onto a section of wall that looked pretty much the same as the rest of the corridor. If you bothered to look at the rock around three meters up, however, you'd notice the wall protruded outward at an unnatural angle. It was impossible to tell what was up there from below, but I, of course, already knew.

The question is, I thought, *can I actually manage to climb up there?* I carefully examined the cavern wall, feeling the gazes of the quartet of adventurers behind me on my back. *Fortunately, it looks like it's sloped pretty gently, so as long as I can get a good foothold, I should be able to make it with my current stats.* I grinned. *Plus, I've got a handy tool to help me out.*

With a "Hup!" I thrust my sword into the wall. There was a good deal of resistance, but I was still able to push it a decent way into the rock.

When I'd originally played the game, your weapon would just bounce off if you attacked a wall. Now that I was inside *BB*, however, physics apparently

worked a bit more realistically.

Perfect! I thought, pulling my sword back out of the wall. I reversed my grip on the weapon, then took a few steps back.

You see, when I'd first reincarnated here and seen this particular section of the Cavern of Trials, I'd had a bit of a realization. When playing *BB* as a game, the player could only take actions that had been programmed in by the developers. In other words, no matter how suspicious a particular tome might be, if there was no command to read it, you'd never be able to know what was written inside of it. Likewise, even if there was a tree in front of you that your character could reasonably climb, if the game wasn't coded to let you climb it, you couldn't. That was the natural way of things when you were playing video games, but...what if the video game had turned into reality?

I took a few racing steps, then launched myself off the floor and up the wall. "Come on!" I muttered, grunting with effort as I thrust my sword back into the rock at the apex of my jump.

Using the weapon as a pivot point, I managed to push myself a bit closer to the protrusion in the wall that was my goal.

"Yes!" I gasped, my outstretched left hand reaching just high enough that I could grasp the edge of the portion of the rock that jutted into the corridor. My fingers curling hard over the protrusion's lip, I hauled myself up the last few feet and onto the ledge, collapsing onto the flat ground.

I let out a long sigh of relief, a flicker of a grin crossing my face as my eyes landed on the rope ladder rolled up neatly in the corner, and the proper path that extended past it and unwound deeper into the rock.

Everything's just as I was hoping for, I thought, relaxing a little. *Looks like my memories didn't fail me.*

Back when I'd been trying to think of a third path of escape, I'd remembered that the Cavern of Trials was actually connected to a much higher-level dungeon called the Wyvern's Promenade. Normally, you'd have to make it all the way to the end of the Wyvern's Promenade to use this shortcut, unlocking it permanently by dropping the rope ladder down into the Cavern of Trials.

It was a very video game way of doing shortcuts, to be honest, but it also meant that the height difference between the two paths wasn't that large. I'd figured I might be able to climb up to the ledge even without the ladder, and indeed I had.

"This way, guys," I called back down into the corridor, lowering the rope ladder and gesturing for them to start moving as I spoke. "Use this to climb up."

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A few minutes later, everyone had finally managed to make it up onto the ledge. It had taken a decent amount of effort to get Recilia's unconscious body safely up the ladder, but thankfully, we'd managed it eventually.

"I n-never knew there was a path here..." Mana muttered in surprise.

I briefly glanced over at her, but quickly looked away, focusing on warily scanning my surroundings.

This shortcut wasn't supposed to have any monsters in it, but it did connect three disparate dungeon locations together: the entrance to the Wyvern's Promenade, the deepest section of the Wyvern's Promenade, and the entrance to the Cavern of Trials. I was feeling very aware of the fact that the Wyvern's Promenade was a level 30 dungeon, and that if on the off chance we *did* run across a monster, Radd and his friends wouldn't stand a chance against it. I might even struggle if we encountered several at once.

"Stay on your guard," I warned the kids, keeping my voice down. "There's a wyvern nest up ahead."

"A-A-A *wyve*—?!" Nyuuk almost shouted. He cut his words short by slapping a quick hand over his own mouth.

Even cocky Radd had gone pale. "L-Let's get out of here as fast as possible!" he muttered urgently.

It made sense the kids were so terrified—everyone knew how dangerous wyverns could be. Thankfully, this particular shortcut was too narrow for an

adult wyvern to fit in, but it was possible an adolescent wyvern could show up instead.

At the very least, I thought, *it's best if everyone stays on their guard.*

I gestured for the kids to follow me, whispering, "This way," as I started down the hidden pathway. I was carrying Recilia in my arms, but Rex's stats were high enough that she didn't feel all that heavy.

Behind me, the kids all held their breath. None of them voiced a single complaint—it seemed even Radd had been thoroughly cowed by the mention of wyverns. When I peered back over my shoulder, I saw him glancing back and forth around the corridor with his sword in one hand, constantly on the lookout for potential threats.

Now then, I thought, *this is probably a good time to do a bit of an assessment...* I subtly began double-checking my equipment. When I was finished, I sighed. *As far as I can tell, I've got the same equipment Rex always has when he first joins the protagonist's party. The problem is...it's kinda shitty.*

To be fair, my equipment was still far better than that of an adventurer who was just starting out, like Radd, but it was still pretty weak for a level 50 adventurer. My blade, known as the Brave Sword, was a unique weapon, but if you compared it to other unique equipment it was mediocre at best.

My consumables situation is probably the bigger problem though...

Just like in the version of *BB* I'd played, it seemed that everyone in this world had an Inventory that they could access via their left hand. It appeared to be some sort of interdimensional space that could only be accessed by the person it was tied to. All you had to do to see what items were stored in your particular Inventory was focus on your left hand, and when I focused in on mine...

Yeah, this is not looking good.

As far as I could tell, I was completely out of healing items—I'd used up my entire supply keeping Recilia alive.

Wouldn't a first-rate adventurer like Rex be carrying around a helluva lot more consumables than that? I grumbled internally.

I was aware, obviously, that Rex's starting items were so few because they'd been purposely set that way by the developers in order to keep the game balanced, but that wasn't enough to stop my mental griping.

I focused back on the path in front of me, realizing with a surge of relief that we were close to making our escape from the Wyvern's Promenade.

"The exit's right ahead," I whispered to the kids, "but...wait here just a moment."

"O-Old man?!" Radd exclaimed under his breath. "Hey, wait..."

I ignored him completely, focusing instead on gently setting Recilia's limp body down on a nearby boulder. I drew my sword, preparing myself just in case something happened, and headed to the dungeon's deepest point.

I wasn't going there to fight monsters or anything, but since we were already so close, there was a place I'd decided I'd like to stop by.

If everything's the same as it was when I played the game, then it should be right around here, I thought. I channeled mana into my eyes, then triggered a Scout class ability called Thief's Eye. The world turned monochrome—or *most* of it did. The spot I'd been looking for lit up in front of me, glowing a faint blue.

"Found it!" I whispered triumphantly.

I ran over to the glowy spot, putting my weapon down and raising my left hand. As I did so, the glow flickered in my direction, its light starting to vanish into the palm of my hand.

Seems like gathering items works the same as it did in the game, I thought happily. *Which means that the item I just acquired should have automatically been placed inside my Inventory.*

Before I could check, though, Radd's strained voice came snarling over my shoulder. "What are you *doing*, geezer?!" he snapped.

Looks like the kid couldn't resist chasing after me, I thought, turning to him and raising an eyebrow.

"I'm doing exactly what it looks like," I said patiently. "Gathering items. Also, you should probably watch your step. The water around here is poisonous."

“Wh-What?!” Radd gasped, hurriedly stepping away from the water. Unfortunately, the shock of my statement didn’t also stop him from continuing to pester me. “A-Are you really sure it’s the time to be collecting items?!”

“Absolutely,” I told him, my voice resolute. “In fact, we’re in precisely the sort of situation where you’d want to stock up. The water in this portion of the dungeon—Mystical Brackish Water, it’s called—is hazardous, but it can also give your stats a huge temporary boost. It’ll come in handy if we get into a fight.”

“B-But didn’t you just say it was poisonous?”

I nodded. “Don’t worry, though—that’s why I’m harvesting this Rewind Powder too. I can use it to cancel out the harmful effects of the Mystical Brackish Water.”

“I’ve n-never heard of people using these items like that...” Radd said in a doubtful voice.

“That’s because they’re so valuable,” I reassured him.

Mystical Brackish water was an important alchemical reagent that was used in the crafting of many powerful items, but would unfortunately evaporate within seven days of being harvested. From what I remembered, it could also be used to strengthen the equipment you already had.

Rewind Powder, meanwhile, was known for its potent recovery effects. Since it could only be harvested once every few months, it was in high demand, and adventurers often sold it off for a high price instead of using it for themselves.

“Honestly, I’d prefer to sell these items if I can,” I told Radd, moving on to stocking up on Mystical Brackish Water now that I’d finished harvesting Rewind Powder. “But in a dangerous situation like this it’s better to hang onto them in case we need them.”

“Still...” Radd muttered, “You shouldn’t just let go of your weapon in the middle of a dungeon, old man.”

I looked up, only to find that Radd had snatched my sword from where I’d dropped it and was now holding it out to me. It was an awkward, clumsy gesture, but it still brought a smile to my face. I had a sneaking suspicion that this was his way of apologizing for his rudeness earlier.

“Thanks,” I told him sincerely, gingerly taking the Brave Sword from his hands.

Radd’s gaze, however, remained locked onto my weapon. He only tore his eyes away from it to glance at my sheath, which was when I finally realized what was going through his head.

“You jealous that I’ve got such a cool sword?” I teased him with a smirk.

“Wha—?! *N-No way*!”

I snorted, tension easing out of me as I took in his flustered reaction. Feeling a tad charitable, I told him, “You know what, kid? If I end up biting the dust, you can have it.”

Radd’s whole face scrunched up in horror. “Don’t say things like that, you crazy old geezer! What if you jinx yourself?! Besides, I don’t need your crappy sword!”

For all his protesting, I knew from my experience playing *BB* that the protagonist of this storyline did indeed inherit Rex’s Brave Sword if he died. Radd was the member of the newbie adventurer party that would technically be the protagonist, so if worst came to worst, he’d probably end up with my sword if I...

I cleared my throat. “I was just joking with you. Now, come on, let’s head back to the others.”

I’m not letting that future come to pass, no matter what, I swore.

That decision made, I started trudging my way back to the shortcut where everyone else was waiting, Radd at my side.

⁜⁜⁜

Fortunately, we were able to make it through the rest of the Wyvern’s Promenade without encountering any monsters. The next town wasn’t too far off either, and we only had to walk a short while before its gates came into view.

“Look!” Nyuuk exclaimed, overcome with relief. “I can see the town ahead!”

“We need to hurry up and let them know what happened to Ars!” Prana declared vehemently, showing an emotion for once.

But, unfortunately...

“We’re not out of the woods just yet,” I cautioned the group.

Off in the distance, I could make out a vague shape flying straight toward us. It wasn’t the group of gargoyles that typically attacked the protagonist’s party if the player chose to go to Rixia either—no, this was a lone monster coming our way.

“Wh-What *is* that?” I mumbled through numb lips. I triggered my Analyze skill, using it to examine the monster.

【Doom Demon】

LV: 60

HP: 2278

MP: 356

Attack: 279

Magic Attack: 311

Defense: 426

Magic Defense: 362

Strength: 356

Vitality: 370

Intelligence: 242

Mind: 306

Agility: 228

Focus: 242

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I said, voice trembling.

The thing flying toward us was a doom demon—the monster fated to kill Rex.

Chapter 2: A Duel to the Death

The earth shook as the doom demon landed in front of us. It stood well over seven feet tall, and had tough, pitch-black skin.

Everything's going to be fine, I told myself, feeling a bit hysterical. *It'll all be okay. I even considered that something like this happening might be a possibility.*

When I'd initially decided to take the shortcut through the Wyvern's Promenade, I'd briefly acknowledged the terrifying fact that if the player was destined to be attacked by gargoyles during their journey to Rixia, or a doom demon during their travels to Umina, then something else might attack us if we headed to a different destination.

The appearance of the monster standing before me was confirmation of all my fears.

I guess that means no matter what city you go to, you can't avoid this event, I thought in despair.

Perhaps if we'd gone yet another direction, to another different town or city, we'd have discovered that there was a certain location that wasn't tied to this monster attack event. But at this point? I just couldn't summon the energy to care.

I turned to Radd, carefully depositing Recilia into his arms. "Take care of her for me," I told him, voice serious.

As the kid stared at me, frozen, I pulled the Rewind Powder out of my Inventory and sprinkled it over myself, then swallowed down the Mystical Brackish Water. Warmth spread through my body; I could feel power surging through my limbs.

Hopefully now I'll stand a fighting chance against this thing, I thought, bracing myself against what was to come.

"Get out of here," I told the kids, eyes on the doom demon in front of me. "I need you to run to the town and call for help."

Fortunately, the doom demon had landed in a location which didn't block off the path toward the town. As long as one person kept it occupied, everyone else would be able to flee safely.

"W-Wait!" Radd cried out from behind me.

"I'll keep it busy," I told him, trying to keep my voice calm. "Don't worry."

As soon as I finished speaking, I couldn't help but cringe at myself a little. Left without the proper words to reassure the kids, I'd ended up just spouting the exact same lines Rex said in the game.

Now's definitely not the time to get all embarrassed though, I thought grimly, glaring at the monster slowly drifting toward us. *I've got to focus.*

Prana was the first of the rookie adventurers to act, darting off toward the town even as the others were still debating over what to do. "I'll head to town!" she shouted as she sprinted away. "I'll come back with help, I promise!"

Smart decision, I thought.

Prana was the best of the four kids to take on a mission that required speed, since she was the fastest of the group. That being said...if this event went according to the game's original storyline—which I could remember with jarring clarity—no matter how fast Prana was, she'd never make it back in time to save me. I would die the moment reinforcements arrived, pierced through by a powerful light that the doom demon thrust into my chest. It wouldn't matter how long I drew the confrontation with the doom demon out, the game would adapt to fit the original plotline—meaning that I'd be dead long before I could receive any aid.

It was a possibility, I supposed, that the world of *Braves and Blades* would function differently now that I was inside of it, but I couldn't rely on something so indefinite to keep me alive.

I was knocked out of these grim thoughts by a shuffling sound to my rear, followed up by the appearance of Radd and Mana as they settled in on either side of me.

"I'll f-fight too, old man!" Radd shouted, his face lined with determination.

“M-Me too!” Mana yelled. “At the very least, I can heal you if you get hurt!”

I didn’t even deign to give them a look. “*Get out of here!*” I snapped. “You two can’t handle a monster of this level!”

“B-But!”

“Five minutes!” I snarled as I drew my sword. “Just get back and wait for five minutes, okay?”

At this point, the doom demon was only a few yards away. I clicked my tongue—I didn’t have time to explain my plan to these kids.

Thankfully, they scrambled away, and I braced myself just as the demon’s red eyes glowed crimson and it sprang into action. It drew back the spear in its right hand, then thrust its left hand forward in a motion I’d seen thousands of times before.

That’s Stinger, one of the basic Arts you can use with a spear! I realized, leaping to the right the moment I registered what sort of attack the monster was using. Mere moments later, a gust of wind whistled past my ear.

Shit, that thing’s fast! I thought, gritting my teeth. *If I hadn’t known what attack was coming ahead of time, I’d have gotten hit for sure.*

“Taaaaaake *this*!” I shouted, darting forward. I pushed through my fear as best I could, swinging my sword at the demon’s exposed right arm with all my might.

To my dismay, my sword just bounced off, useless.

Fuck, I cursed internally. *There’s too big a difference in our stats!*

The doom demon was level 60, while I was only level 50. On top of that, Rex’s level was way too high for his middling stats—his abilities were closer to that of a level 30 adventurer than a level 50. Rex’s equipment was in a similar state.

If I think about this situation rationally, there’s no way I can win, I realized. *I acted on my one chance for a clean counterattack, but wasn’t even able to put a scratch on that thing.*

As my mind raced, the doom demon regained the ability to control its arm, its Art completing once it had fully extended into its thrust. It used this new

freedom to swing its spear in a wide vertical arc, its blade slicing through the air right toward me.

My balance was still off because of my failed sword strike, but...that didn't mean I was out of options.

I don't care how outmatched I am, there's no way I'm giving up here! I swore, my eyes narrowing in determination. *That spear sweep isn't an Art, and there's not much power in it either, since the monster's completely extended its arm.*

I poured mana into the shield clenched in my left hand, thinking, *Even if that doom demon's stats are way above mine, the mechanics for this system should cover the deficit.*

Then, with seconds to spare, I jerked my shield forward, parrying the doom demon's strike.

Channeling mana into a weapon in your off-hand triggers a parry rather than an Art! I recited silently, a grim smile on my face.

The timing was tight, but as long as I got it right, I'd be able to repel any attack, regardless of how high the stats of my enemies were.

The doom demon growled in confusion, baffled at how its attack had been rebuffed.

Unfortunately, I no longer had the leeway to counter; I needed to put some distance between the monster and I so I could regain my footing. But the moment I jumped back...

Shit!

The demon had done something completely unexpected—it had dropped its spear low to the ground, swinging it to one side in an exaggerated motion.

That's Wave Thrust! I thought, eyes going wide.

Wave Thrust was another spear Art, but this one wasn't basic at all; it was a powerful AoE Art that fired a shockwave at its target's feet, and which couldn't be parried. Even worse, I was still in mid-air after attempting to leap to safety, and the monster was aiming for the spot where I was going to land.

There's no time for me to dodge, so I'm gonna have to take a gamble! I

thought, too pumped full of adrenaline to be afraid.

I leaned to one side as I fell to the ground, desperately swinging my sword through the air.

Technically speaking, Wave Thrust couldn't be parried no matter what Art you used, but with a little imaginative thinking, and some manual activation...

"Iai Slash!" I shouted, tracing the Art's form in the air.

Due to my odd position, the attack shot straight toward the ground under my feet, colliding with the rush of mana Wave Thrust had shot toward me.

You see, in *Braves and Blades*, it didn't matter whether you automatically activated an Art or did it manually—it would always launch in the direction the character was facing. In other words, if you were to, say, lean to the side when an Art activated, it would also end up tilted. Add to that the high level of freedom manual activation gave you to adjust the angle of your Arts, and you started to understand the method's true power! You could strike from above, below, or to the side; you could even do crazy things like strike right while looking left!

Even with my strategy though, the power of my Iai Slash couldn't match that of the doom demon's Wave Thrust. The collision of the two Arts knocked my weapon back, and I took a bit of damage. Still...I'd pulled through.

"I'm not done yet!" I howled.

The doom demon followed up its Art with another attack, but I parried it easily—it had been half-assed, most likely since the monster hadn't expected me to repel its Wave Thrust.

As a result of my successful parry, I was left with a big opening, though I already knew my regular attacks wouldn't be able to do the monster any damage. Fortunately, I had more than just regular attacks in my arsenal.

"Gale Slash!" I yelled, my sword whipping out in front of me.

The edge of my blade grazed the demon's flank, but didn't fully land. That was just fine with me though, since I'd purposefully aimed my Art so it would miss. Just as I'd planned, the force of my swing spun me around, and as I did a full

rotation I drew another Art's shape in the air with my sword.

I'd activated Gale Slash purely for the momentum I'd known it would provide me; I'd be hitting the doom demon's exposed back, which now hovered right before my eyes, with a different Art.

"Divine Thrust!" I growled, the point of my sword striking home. It slid into the demon's back right where its wing was joined to its body.

The doom demon let out a howl of pain and rage, swinging its free arm in my direction.

I backstepped the blow, putting enough space between us that I could take a second to catch my breath.

Fucking hell, I thought, my heart pounding in my ears and my hands shaking uncontrollably. But, before I knew it...a mad grin had broken out over my face.

I damaged it, I thought with a rough laugh. *Not just a little bit either—Divine Thrust is a powerful Art, and I hit the doom demon's weak point. If I keep it up, I might actually be able to defeat that thing.*

From a few yards behind me, I heard Radd mutter a reverent, "Holy shit..."

I shot a quick glance back at him over my shoulder, my grin growing even wider at the sight of his awestruck expression.

It might be fun, showing off another character's power, I thought, *but it's infinitely more satisfying to see my own hard work bear fruit.*

After all, right now I wasn't fighting just with Rex's stats—I was using all the knowledge I'd accumulated from years of playing *BB* to win.

Besides, who wouldn't get pumped up fighting a duel to the death with a powerful foe? I thought, bouncing on the heels of my feet as I prepared to dive into battle once more.

For, of course, this was only the beginning. I watched as the doom demon's eyes narrowed as it glared in my direction. It dragged the head of its spear roughly over the ground, showing me just how enraged my attacks had made it.

Now that it's learned that I can just parry its regular attacks, it's going to use its strongest Arts to take me down instead, I thought. *But that won't work on*

me either. I've got that monster's number now.

The doom demon swept its spear low across the ground, the pointed head kicking up a clod of earth as it flew in my direction.

That's Low Sweep, a mid-level spear Art! I realized, leaping into motion the second I identified what the monster was doing. I swayed to the right, swinging my sword across my body from the opposite direction as I called out, "Tri-Edge!"

My Art knocked me back, safely out of range of the doom demon's blow, though that meant I was also too far away for my sword to carve into the monster's flesh. I would have found that disappointing, but, truth was...I hadn't needed my Art to strike home in the first place.

Arts Plus! I thought gleefully, the skill bursting to life.

I straightened up, pouring even more mana into my sword as I swung it from my right to my left in a diagonal slice. That one didn't hit the doom demon either, but just as the automated motion of its Low Sweep concluded and it began to pull its arm back for another blow, I added a third Art to my combo.

"V-Slash!" I yelled, triumph filling me when my sword actually connected this time, tearing into the doom demon's arm.

"*Graaaaaah*!" the monster roared, its voice rising in agony.

I grinned. *Looks like I really caused it some damage that time.*

The monster turned and stared down at me in confusion, as if it was struggling to comprehend how such a pitiful creature had managed to hurt it.



That's right, you fiend, I thought, bursting into maniacal laughter. *Don't you look away—*

“Feast your eyes on the full power of manually activated Arts, an ability I paid 23,760 yen for!!!”

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Now, hold on, let me guess—you’re feeling pretty confused right now, aren’t you? Feeling a bit unsure of what exactly I meant by the phrase “the full power of manually activated Arts”? Truly, it’s never fun coming up against the unknown... It’s honestly a bit terrifying, isn’t it? Well, I’ll give you a little hint—the technique I’d just used was one that Rex didn’t have knowledge of, but *I* did. It was a technique that no one who didn’t understand that this world was based off a video game could utilize.

To explain, I have to go back to the beginning, when *Braves and Blades* first launched. You see, as a big-budget AAA game, the developers had had huge expectations of *BB*—they’d believed the game was going to fly off the shelves. Unfortunately, those expectations had come to naught, and the game had flopped. But why?

To tell the truth, the main reason for *BB*’s failure was infamous; the fault lay at the feet of the Dynamic Motion Z, the controller that the game’s developers had recommended players use. As the name suggested, the Dynamic Motion Z was a motion controller. Using the input of two different sensors—a high-powered gyro sensor installed in the body of the controller, and a light sensor that was meant to be plugged in and placed in front of your TV—the Dynamic Motion Z was able to sense movement accurately enough that whenever a player swung it, the player’s character would swing their own weapon in the exact same way.

Now, to be clear, *Braves and Blades* had been released well after the motion-control-video-game boom had ended. This hadn’t stopped players from hoping that it would herald a revival for the genre though—*especially* after they saw how well motion controls had been implemented into the game. Unfortunately, the game hadn’t sold anywhere near enough to make that future come to pass, since that’s where the issue with the Dynamic Motion Z controller had come into play.

You see, a game called *Super Epic Real Sword-Fighting* had released four

months before *BB* hit the shelves, and the Dynamic Motion Z had been paired with it to showcase its abilities. Unfortunately, both the game and the controller had been faced with lackluster sales, and had practically become ancient relics by the time *Braves and Blades* finally released. They'd even gone ahead and pulled the Dynamic Motion Z from the shelves of most stores.

As a result, most of *BB*'s potential players hadn't owned the Dynamic Motion Z when the game came out, and hadn't been interested in investing in the controller just to use it for a single game. *Especially* when that controller was being sold at a retail price of 7,980 yen. The cost grew even more steep if you wanted to use a shield in your off-hand, or a bow, or anything else that required two hands—you'd need to buy a second controller in order to make it work. That raised the controller's initial retail price to a whopping 16,000 yen, and that wasn't even counting the cost of *Braves and Blades* itself! If you decided to commit and buy all three, you ended up paying something to the tune of 20,000 yen in all. That was nearly enough to buy an *entire console.*

With pricing that high, it wasn't at all surprising that the majority of players turned their noses up at buying the Dynamic Motion Z. Technically, they could have still played *Braves and Blades* without it, but they'd have had to use a conventional controller, and the game's motion controls had been half of its appeal... Suffice it to say, only the most hardcore RPG fans had bothered to give the game a chance.

Perhaps *Braves and Blades* would have sold better if the Dynamic Motion Z had been released around the same time, and they could have boosted each other's sales, but unfortunately the past couldn't be changed. And so, the four-month stretch between the two launches had spelled *BB*'s doom.

Still, there had been a small number of people who had felt compelled to fully invest in *Braves and Blades,* paying the full 23,760 yen required to buy the game and all its peripherals. And *I*...I had been one of them! That's right, I actually spent all that money on the game! I'd suffered through working a shitty part-time job for months, saving up every last yen I earned, until at last I could buy *everything*!

Little had I known that my determination would result in this situation, where I could take advantage of my mastery of manually activated Arts to keep me

alive in a fight to the death against a doom demon!

❊❊❊

The doom demon struck at me again. I dodged, immediately launching into a series of rapid counterattacks. First, I sliced into the monster with a series of lightning-fast blows, then I leaned into a sideways slash, and then I leapt into the air, bringing my sword slamming down into the monster's head. With every blow, I called out the name of my Arts right after the other: "Lightning V-Slash! Cross Raid! *Headsplitter*!"

Needing a bit of a breather, I thrust my sword forward and yelled, "Divine Thrust!", taking advantage of the Art's momentum to leap a short distance backward and build up some breathing room between me and my foe. Then, settling into my stance, I snarled, "Stinger!" and launched forward again, finishing up my array of attacks with a series of quick forward stabs.

By the time I was finished, the doom demon that should have so easily been able to defeat me was covered in wounds. It glared at me with undisguised hate, clearly not used to being on the back foot.

There was, of course, a reason I was doing so much better now than I had been earlier. You see, manually activating an Art had more benefits than just expanding the Art's range and increasing its damage. For one thing, as long as a player knew the proper motion to trace and had the proper amount of MP, they could use advanced Arts even before their character was able to learn them. In addition, if you manually activated an Art, you could use abilities outside of those tied to your weapon class. There were a good number of Arts that absolutely required that you have a specific weapon-type equipped, but even so, this ability expanded a player's repertoire of usable Arts by a significant margin.

Shockingly enough, those abilities were only the very beginning of what manual activation had to offer a player. The method's true strength lay elsewhere, due to a special interaction it had with a thief-class skill called Arts Plus. When used alone, Arts Plus allowed the user to increase the power of any Art they used. To keep things balanced, the skill also doubled the MP cost of said Art. If Arts Plus was used in tandem with manual activation, however, the

skill gained the ability to stack Arts together and multiply their damage.

Now, normally you couldn't activate two Arts at once outside of the set combinations already in *BB*, but if the first Art you activated ended in the same gesture as the second Art began, you could activate the Arts Plus skill in between the two and reset the game's Art parser. This meant that the final move would benefit from both the initial and ending Art's damage multipliers.

For example, you could start off a combo by activating an Art called Cross Slash, which is made up of two gestures—a vertical movement which by itself would activate an Art called Vertical Slash, and a horizontal movement which by itself would activate an Art called Horizontal Slash. You could then follow up Cross Slash with an Art called Bisect, which consisted of the horizontal movement that would activate Horizontal Slash used twice. If you used the Arts Plus skill after Cross Slash's initial vertical gesture but before its final horizontal gesture, you could fool the Art parser into chaining together any second Art as long as it began with the same horizontal movement. As Bisect was made up of two horizontal movements, it would be the perfect Art for this particular combo.

It was only by using this quirk of the game engine to chain together the damage multipliers of several Arts that I was able to damage the doom demon despite its much higher stats. That being said...

I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up.

Chaining Arts together in the way I had had burnt through a great deal of my mana—Arts Plus doubled the MP cost of every individual Art, and since I was using two at once I'd essentially been using four times the MP I would for a regular attack. To make matters worse, all Arts had a cooldown which ranged from a few dozen seconds to a few minutes. If I didn't keep an eye on which Arts I used when, I could end up trying to activate an Art during the set amount of time it was unusable, leaving myself wide open to the doom demon's attacks. A mistake like that could very easily lead to my death.

To be frank, the only reason I'd even managed to make it this far was because I'd buffed myself up with the consumables I'd gathered back in the Wyvern's Promenade. Without them, I'd have already run out of mana and the monster

would have killed me. That said...even with the additional boost, I was starting to run pretty low on MP. It didn't help that this was the first real life-or-death struggle I'd ever been in, and I was starting to struggle to remain focused enough to keep myself out of danger. Every time I dodged an Art by the skin of my teeth, every time I barely managed to parry an attack, I could feel my nerves fraying. The pressure to not make a mistake was overwhelming.

The exhilarated rush I'd felt before as I'd run circles around the doom demon was now starting to wane. Exhaustion swelled in its wake, sending my mind spinning. My limbs felt oddly light and yet incredibly heavy at the same time.

Is any of this even real? I wondered weakly, sweat running into my eyes and blurring my vision. *Regardless, I'm almost at my limit.*

Lightheaded, I looked over at where the doom demon stood. It had been injured badly enough that it didn't attack immediately, as if it feared I'd retaliate with yet another counterattack. For the first time since the battle began, there was a lull.

I'm not in the best shape, but that thing shouldn't be doing much better, I thought. *Its health should be pretty low.*

At a glance, I could tell the demon was feeling just as exhausted as I was, possibly even more so. Its wings had been completely shredded, and there were deep gashes all over its body.

A few good hits might even be enough to kill it at this point...

I couldn't get too cocky, though—the difference between the doom demon's stats and mine still remained, and all it would take was one small misstep to get me instantly killed. The monster wasn't just throwing out attacks willy-nilly anymore either. It was eyeing me warily, looking for a gap in my defenses.

Maybe I should just fight defensively and wait for help to come, I mused.

But the moment the thought passed through my head, the doom demon looked back over its shoulder, looking at where Radd and the others huddled together a few yards away. The three kids were dead silent, their hands clenched together in what could have almost been prayer as they watched the doom demon and I fight it out.

Don't look at me like that, guys, I thought, staring at their pitiful faces. *Everything's gonna be okay. I'm not gonna let this thing hurt you, and I'm not letting it kill me either.*

That reminded me—once this was over, I should probably try and teach Radd and the rest of the kids how to use Arts the same way I could. If their reaction back in the cave had been anything to go by, no one in this world knew how to use manual activation except me, but that didn't mean it was impossible for someone to learn. Hell, once someone realized that it was possible, they might even be able to develop the skill to use it for themselves, with no help from me whatsoever. In which case...I'd probably already had an even greater effect on this world than I'd realized.

Anyways, I thought, pushing that particular line of thinking aside, *teaching them won't be easy, since this world doesn't have a practice mode. I'm sure I can at least manage to teach them how to activate some of the more basic Arts manually though.*

That's when it hit me—

So this is how I'm to leave my mark on the world, huh...?

It was probably a bit cocky of me to assume that my actions were impactful enough to do something so grand, but...in my previous life, I'd never felt like I'd accomplished anything meaningful. The thought that I might be influencing the history of *BB* with my actions was incredibly satisfying.

And this is just the beginning! I thought, fighting to keep my heavy eyelids open. *I'm gonna completely revolutionize this world!*

At this point, I was barely conscious and my thoughts were a jumbled mess. I could barely focus on the doom demon at all. Still, I was overcome with the feeling that if I just managed to beat the challenge currently laid out before me, that it would be the start of something big.

This is no time to be hesitating! If I can't end the battle soon, my five minutes are going to be up, and that item I used at the beginning of the battle is going to activate! And if that happens...we're going to be in some deep shit.

I shook myself, trying to will strength back into my limbs.

Remember, I told myself, *you're not fighting to win—you're fighting to survive!*

It was time to go on the offensive. I swung my sword, beginning the process of activating a powerful Art that I hadn't used even once since I'd been reincarnated as Rex.

The stronger an Art was, the more MP it took, and the harder the motion was to activate it. Normally it would have been a bad idea to try and use such a slow, complicated Art when one clean hit from the doom demon was liable to kill me, especially with how low my MP currently was, but at the moment I had the monster on the defensive. And *that* gave me a chance.

"Seven Soaring Claws!"

As the name of the Art suggested, it was a seven-hit attack. And, like every other Art, each subsequent attack would do more damage than the others if I used my Arts Plus skill. For that reason, I didn't even bother hitting the doom demon with the first few blows, using them solely to power up the Art's last few strikes.

By my fourth swing, the doom demon finally stirred into motion, beginning to raise its spear. That's when I closed the distance between us.

Arts Plus! Square Cross! I cried internally, my sword starting to glow as I stacked Arts together.

The demon swung its spear at me, trying to bat away my sword, but I drew my charge short just as our weapons drew close. My sudden stop meant I wasn't close enough for my blow to land, and my sword just whooshed through empty air.

I backstepped away, narrowly avoiding the doom demon's spear as it swiped by.

That's not enough to stop me! I snarled internally, gritting my teeth. *And, anyway, it's for the best. Even if my attack did overcome the doom demon's, it would have cut my Art short and defeated my whole strategy for this offensive.*

In fact, the whole reason I'd been so aggressive with my attacks was to prepare for my one final blow.

Arts Plus! I thought, activating the skill for a second time and stacking it on top of itself.

The MP cost of my next skill would now be four times the usual number, but doubling Arts Plus up came with an equally impressive advantage—it multiplied the damage of the Art it was applied to by a whopping fifty times.

There's only one more Art left to add, I thought triumphantly.

"Tri-Edge!"

This was the third Art of my combo, and the one I actually planned to hit the doom demon with. As I thrust my sword forward, I could feel the entirety of my remaining mana slip away, but in that moment I didn't care.

I'll end the battle right here and right now, with this attack!

My sword slammed into the doom demon's spear, knocking the weapon right out of the monster's hand with the accumulated force that had been built up in the third Art of my chain attack. With the monster's weapon out of the way, it had nothing left to defend itself with. I dashed into the gap, rushing forward to finally finish it off.

With a ferocious roar, I leaned into the second swing of my Tri-Edge Art; I ripped my blade right up through the doom demon's chest.

I did it!!! A relieved, almost drunken grin broke out on my face. *And I've still got one last slash left before my Art's complete.*

Left severely wounded and bereft of its weapon, the doom demon had no way of defending against me anymore. All I had to do was use this last blow to hit the monster's weak point, and the battle would finally be over.

Relishing in my inevitable victory, I pulled back my sword for the final blow, but then...

The doom demon's body suddenly became enveloped in a crimson aura.

My eyes went wide. "H-Huh?" I gasped.

What came next happened so fast I could barely follow it. I went from swinging my sword in triumph to staring blankly at my chest, watching the doom demon's arm slide back out of my flesh. A few long moments passed

before I realized what had happened—the monster had plunged its arm straight through my body.

My sword dropped from my hand. I gave a choked, “Agh...” and then dropped to the ground. The victory that had felt so within my grasp slipped away, sliding upon the red rivers of my lifeblood.

But...how? I thought hazily. *I should have won. I was literally one hit away from killing that thing! So, how did this...?!*

My limbs went weak as blood continued to pour from the hole in my chest. Using the last of my strength, I raised my head to look up at the doom demon. It was staring disdainfully down at me, still surrounded by that crimson aura.

Oh, wait, I thought, understanding sinking into my bones. *I see how it is...*

The moment I’d seen the doom demon’s face, it had hit me—this scene, with the doom demon staring down at a defeated Rex, it’s body swathed in a red aura...it was an exact recreation of the Rex death scene we’d have triggered if we’d chosen to flee down the path to Umina.

Goddamn it, I snarled internally. *I can’t believe this was a scripted loss.*

I’d come across plenty of events like this in JRPGs before—ones where the same thing happened regardless of whether you won or lost a fight. Basically, if I—meaning *Rex*—was allowed to beat the doom demon, in the future contradictions would start popping up in the story. To avoid such an eventuality, the developers had designed this battle so Rex’s defeat was guaranteed. Even if the RNG gods granted a player a miracle during this battle, they’d still lose—the doom demon would just be granted some sort of power up once its health hit critical levels, and it’d use that additional strength to one-shot Rex.

“Fuck...” I muttered in a hoarse voice as I stared up at the doom demon currently looming above me. The red aura faded, then disappeared before my eyes.

Now that I’m taken care of, I guess the doom demon doesn’t need it anymore. Raising my head had sapped away the last of my strength, and my face hit the dirt. *Is this as far as I go...?*

Vexing as it was, I had to admit this outcome didn't exactly surprise me.

Just as I thought, I'm not cut out to be a protagonist, I thought with a bitter laugh. *I may have gotten reincarnated, but I'm still just a regular person. No matter how much strength I've gained from being in Rex's body, that fact isn't going to change.*

I'd done my best to use my knowledge of *BB* to cheat my way to a win, but I had failed to even accomplish that. However...

The fact that I'm not the protagonist means that my death isn't the end!

In most games, when a protagonist died, that was game over. It made sense, since most of the time their death signaled the destruction of their world. But even if I died here, the world of *Braves and Blades* wouldn't stop—it would keep going. It was precisely because I wasn't the protagonist that I could pass my torch on to others.

This might be where it ends for me, but at least I laid the groundwork for the true protagonist to succeed where I failed. So you better prepare yourself, doom demon—you'll regret...ever...

My thoughts trailed away as the shroud of death fell over me for a second time. The last images that flashed through my head as my life faded away were of Radd, Mana, Nyuuk, and Prana's faces.

The rest is up to you, guys.

My consciousness slipped away into darkness, and this time I heard no voice.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

My whole life, I'd always wanted to be a hero, just like the ones I'd read about in stories. Because of that, I was always getting into fights as a kid, and everyone in my village came to see me as a troublemaker. They had always been comparing me to my smarter, older brother, and that had pissed me off so much I'd started even more fights to vent my frustration. And the longer that had gone on, the deeper I'd fallen into a negative downward spiral.

But one day, I'd encountered this book, and it had changed me. My older brother had brought it back with him as a souvenir for me after one of his trips

to the capital. The book was an illustrated volume meant for children called *Radd, the Hero Adventurer*.

At first, I'd outwardly dismissed my brother's gift, saying it was too childish for me, but before long I'd fallen so in love with the story that I was reading the book cover to cover multiple times every day. It hadn't been the most unique story—it was just the tale of a village boy who overcame many different hardships on his journey to become a hero, meeting close comrades along the way. But still...it had inspired me.

Before long, I'd decided that I, too, would become an adventurer and accomplish legendary deeds. That determination had grown even stronger when I'd discovered that my parents had named me Radd after the protagonist of the book.

After that, for the first time in my life, I'd started using my time wisely. I'd begun training, and even though it had been pretty tough, I hadn't minded. I'd always liked physical activity anyways. Besides, it had felt good to make progress toward a clear goal, and to see the number of skills at my disposal increase day by day.

Before long, the negative attitude the villagers had toward me had started to change. Where they had used to avoid me before, they'd now greeted me whenever they saw me. An old, retired knight who lived in the village had even begun to teach me swordsmanship, and the village hunter had taught me all about the habits of various monsters and their weak points. After three years of such fervent training, I'd found that I'd become the strongest of all the village children of my age. I'd felt really proud of myself then—it'd seemed like I was taking my first steps toward becoming one of the legendary heroes I'd always admired so much.

When my sixteenth birthday had finally come, I'd taken the next step to chase my dream—I'd registered as an adventurer in a nearby town's Adventurers' Guild. By a stroke of luck, there'd been three other newcomers in the building; we'd quickly banded together to form a party. It had felt like a miracle to me that four people had all decided to become adventurers on the same day, like fate had guided us together somehow.

As it turned out, one of my favorite sayings was: “Heroes are eternally loved by fate.” In all the stories I’d read, the protagonists were always blessed by miraculous turns of fate, and even if things went south for them, they always used their hardships as opportunities to better themselves. That said, the thought that the beginning of my journey as a hero could have been blessed by fate as well had made me really happy. I’d been in truly high spirits back then, especially because of how amazing my fellow party members were.

Nyuuk had already been a great mage at the time, and he’d had a level-headedness to him that allowed him to analyze any situation calmly. Prana had been quick to react to even the most unexpected turns of events, and her scouting abilities had been unparalleled. Even if she *had* had a prickly personality and was always butting heads with me. And lastly, there had been Mana—our healer and the final member of our party. I’d thought she was pretty timid and reserved at first glance, but I’d soon realized after our first dungeon dive together that there was a lot more to her than what met the eye. She’d been able to spot traps and solve puzzles better than any of the rest of us, and no matter how much I’d complimented her she’d just remained humble and awkwardly laughed off my praise. And, for some reason...whenever I’d seen her, my heart would skip a beat.

Regardless, I’d thought that everyone in my party was super cool, and I’d been sure our adventures would go smoothly in the future. Or I *had been*, since that’s when I’d met that weird man who’d showed up in the deepest room of the Cavern of Trials.

The guy had been dressed up in all black and had spouted some nonsense at us about a demon that had been sealed away in the dungeon or something. Apparently, his name was Rex, and he was an A-rank adventurer. Even a newbie like me knew adventurers of that high a rank were pretty amazing.

Still, if I was being honest, he hadn’t struck me as a particularly strong guy when I’d first seen him. He’d been kinda thin, and he certainly hadn’t acted how I’d expected someone that powerful to act. Frankly, even the C-rank adventurers I’d seen drinking in the Guild’s common room had looked more tough to me than he did. People of his sort might have been popular with girls, but me? I’d just thought he was a loser.

I mean, even the guy's attitude had been weak—even after I'd insulted him, irritated over how much Mana was gushing over him, he hadn't said a word in response. That had been all I'd needed to know—in my opinion, adventurers who let other people walk all over them like that were worthless. If he couldn't even stick up for himself when I took direct aim at his pride, then to me, he wasn't an adventurer at all.

Maybe he really is *a fraud pretending to be an A-rank adventurer,* I'd thought back then. But, to be honest...the doubts I'd been harboring vanished pretty soon. On the way out of the dungeon, I'd watched him dispatch three goblins with ease, using Arts I'd never even heard of before. After that he'd rescued a girl by killing a gargoyle in one hit. He'd even led us back into the Cavern of Trials in order to prevent the monster's attacking Ars from pursuing us. To tell the truth, I hadn't even thought that was an option.

The more time had passed, the more I'd realized that Rex was way stronger than any of the A-rank adventurers I'd ever made up in my head. Even though I'd kept being rude to him, if I was truly honest with myself, I'd been really impressed.

Then, right as I'd thought we'd reached safety, the embodiment of despair had appeared before us. A powerful doom demon had headed in our direction, shrouded in a menacing aura. It had been stronger than any monster I'd ever seen, stronger than any warrior I'd ever met. Even though I'd lacked the ability to use the Analyze skill and take a look at its stats, I'd known the thing was bad news. I'd been able to feel the pressure its presence exuded even at a distance, and sense the power behind even the most gentle of its spear thrusts. If I had to describe the thing's level of power in my own words...it was like it existed on an entirely different plane than the rest of us. No one could hope to match such power—not even an A-rank adventurer.

Or so I'd thought. Once again, Rex had proved me wrong. He'd countered the doom demon's attacks with a flurry of Arts that transcended all human limits, moving with such precision it was like he could read the monster's moves even before it made them.

Holy shit! I'd thought, watching him go. *Did he just stack Arts together?!*

Everyone knew that Arts were complete, individual skills—they were abilities granted to the mortal race directly from the gods. I'd never heard of anyone using them in the same unorthodox manner that Rex had against the doom demon. And that wasn't even all that Rex had been doing—he'd also been reading the doom demon's tendencies like a book, baiting it into attacking him in ways that gave him an opening to strike. As I'd watched him fight, it was like all the ironclad beliefs I'd clung to through my sixteen years of life melted away to nothing. I'd been so enthralled by the struggle before my eyes that I'd completely forgotten about the fact that I'd said I'd help him.

As attentively as I'd been watching, it hadn't taken me much longer after that to realize that Rex was barely treading water. The only reason he'd been able to fight the doom demon on even footing thus far was because of his insane skills and unique Art usage. Although his movements and his technique had been perfect, the fact that he'd not gained much ground against the monster he faced meant that even his prodigious abilities couldn't overwhelm his foe.

If he makes even one mistake, the doom demon'll destroy him with its far superior stats, I'd realized with horror. *How can he just fight on like that, knowing that a single error means certain death?!*

Shivers had gone down my spine as I'd listened to the doom demon's enraged roars. Each time its attacks had failed to hit Rex, the monster's spear would hit the ground with almighty force, leaving deep gashes in the earth.

Rex'll be cleaved in two if one of those hits him... I'd thought, filled with apprehension.

Rex's attacks, on the other hand, had barely even left scratches on the doom demon. By all rights, he should have been overwhelmed by the monster ages ago. And yet, when I'd looked at his expression, I'd known for complete certain that he was determined to fight his way to the end. He hadn't let the battle get to him—he hadn't been trembling in fear, and he hadn't allowed the stress to send him into a berserker rage either. He'd been fighting his desperate battle against the doom demon just as himself. Just as Rex. And all to protect my party, a bunch of kids he'd only met a few hours before!

Watching him fight, I'd felt something stir inside of me. *If this world was a*

story, a guy like him would definitely be its protagonist.

Bolstered by my thoughts, I'd silently cheered Rex on as the battle between him and the doom demon had continued to rage. It brought me back to when I was just a child, when I'd used to root for the protagonist to win as I read the same story over and over. Perhaps it was because of those stories that I'd had no doubt that Rex was going to succeed in the end. After all, good always triumphed over evil, and the heroes always won.

At least, that's what I'd always thought.

I stared on in shock as the doom demon suddenly glowed crimson. Its arm swept forward, its hand plunging right into Rex's chest.

"H-Huh...?" I said through numb lips. My mind had gone blank.

Did evil...triumph? I thought incredulously as I watched Rex's body slump to the ground. *Is the hero I was rooting for...really never going to get up again?*

I let out a choked noise of fear as the doom demon turned in our direction, its eyes locking with mine. I started trembling.

Rex isn't here to protect us anymore. We're going to have to face down this thing by ourselves now.

"N-No..." I moaned, my legs giving out as the doom demon drew closer. Now that the thing was done with Rex, it was obvious that we'd be its next prey. I knew I had to stand and fight, I really did, but I just couldn't get my body to move.

"It'll be okay, Radd," Mana murmured from her spot next to me.

Then, just seconds later, an arrow thudded into the ground at the doom demon's feet.

"I recognize that arrow!" I shouted, relief jolting me back into motion. I looked over my shoulder, seeing that Prana had returned from town, reinforcements at her side. She and the twenty soldiers of the city guard that had accompanied her kept the doom demon pinned down with arrows as they galloped toward us on their horses. They fanned out once they drew close enough, surrounding the monster.

The doom demon might be strong, I thought, *but considering how weak it is now, there should be more than enough of us here to take it down.*

However...none of the soldiers moved to attack. They all just stared up at the monster. “H-Holy shit,” one of them muttered in a choked voice.

C’mon! I thought, exasperated. *That doom demon’s on death’s door! Now that that strange red aura is gone, those soldiers should be able to take it down for sure if they just charge it together.*

Unfortunately, however, it seemed the sheer strength of the monster was enough to keep the soldiers rooted in place. Looking at them, I could tell they were thinking stuff like, “What if that thing comes after me in its death throes?” or “What if it’s still got some type of trump card up its sleeve?”

Both sides glared at each other, no one daring to make a move. And then, after a brief stand-off that felt like an eternity, the demon spread its wings.

“Is it running away?” one of the soldiers whispered.

The doom demon’s expression contorted with contempt as it flapped its wings. Its thoughts were crystal clear upon its face: *As if these puny human soldiers are worth my time.*

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to take down a powerful, dangerous monster! I screamed internally. *If we let it escape now, it’s just going to heal its wounds and come back even stronger! If that happens, it’ll probably kill even more people...*

And yet, not one person made a move to stop the monster from fleeing. No one could bring themselves to take action.

I can’t just let it end like this!

As the realization that no one else was going to act settled, I launched forward. “I’ll create an opening!” I shouted, causing both the soldiers and my fellow party members to turn and stare at me in shock.

What I was proposing was reckless, of course. Hell, it was probably impossible for someone as weak as me to even create an opening. Everyone else was probably thinking much the same.

I know, I thought. *I know this is reckless. I'm no hero—compared to Rex, who seems like he's truly been blessed by fate, I'm just a nobody. I'm nothing like the heroes I've always read about in the stories.*

Still...the hero we'd been relying on was dead, and only normal people remained. If this was one of my stories, Rex's death would have marked the end of it. But this *wasn't* a story—the world would keep on turning, even with the hero dead and the protagonist gone.

I can't back down, not after seeing what Rex did for us, I thought, determined.

I'd seen what a true hero was capable of with my own eyes; even though he'd been hopelessly outclassed, he'd never backed down.

I might die doing this, I thought. *I know how foolish it is for a normal person like me to play at being a hero. But still...after seeing a real hero's courage, I can't just run away.*

Even beyond that, I couldn't forgive the doom demon for what it had done. If I let it escape here, that would mean Rex's sacrifice had been for nothing. I couldn't let the vibrant spark of hope he'd shown us die out here—watching him fight had truly inspired me. He'd proven that even a weak human could prove a match for a powerful monster. And now...now it was *my* turn to inspire others.

I'll pass the torch on to these guys, just like you did for me, Rex! I may be just a normal guy, and far from what a hero should be, but for this one moment, I'll act as the protagonist!

I charged toward the doom demon, courage welling up from within me.

If I can dodge even one of its attacks, I'll be able to win!

It sounded like a simple enough thing to do, after watching Rex dodge dozens of them, but I knew that even that basic of a challenge would be nigh-impossible for me. Even so, I had no intention of giving up.

The doom demon roared, raising its spear and bracing itself to rebuff my attack.

I didn't flinch for even a second, ducking low as I drew closer and closer to the

monster.

I've gotta bet everything on this one attack! If I can get close enough, the doom demon shouldn't be able to swing its spear effectively!

But, the moment I went to sink my blade into the monster...a sword sprouted from its throat.

Everyone froze, unable to comprehend what had just happened. As we watched, stunned, the sword was yanked from the doom demon's neck, and its body swayed and crumpled to the ground.

And standing behind the demon was the very hero I'd thought had died.

"*That's* why you always want to gather items and prepare before a fight," Rex said casually, patting down his clothes and knocking off the Rewind Powder that had been clinging to them. He turned to me and flashed me a cocky smile.

Tears welled up in my eyes. "You're late, hero…"

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"I actually did it," I said with a sigh of relief as I watched the doom demon's body turn into particles of light.

I never thought I'd die twice in such quick succession. I really could do with a little less excitement in my life...

"Rex!" I heard someone shout. I glanced up and saw the healer girl, Mana, running toward me. "Oh, thank goodness you're okay!"

When she drew up at my side, Mana patted me down, like she wanted to ensure I was actually real. Once she realized what she was doing, though, her cheeks flushed, and she bashfully stepped away.

"S-Sorry about that," she mumbled, looking up at me with tears in her eyes. "But, um, if you don't mind, could you explain how you...?"

Ah, I realized, *it must seem quite strange to her that I came back to life, especially if she doesn't know the trick I used. It's not like I did anything particularly special though.*

After thinking about it for a few seconds, I decided to keep the explanation

short and sweet. “It’s all thanks to the Rewind Powder I used,” I told her.

You see, before the battle had started I’d used two items: Rewind Powder and Mystical Brackish Water. The Mystical Brackish Water had buffed all of my stats and given me HP and MP regen for ten minutes, but after it wore off, I’d known I’d have to deal with a series of debilitating stat debuffs. Used alone it would have been a risky gamble, but once I’d combined it with the Rewind Powder, I’d no longer had to worry about its drawbacks. The reason being: Rewind Powder quite literally rewinded you to a previous state.

If you didn’t understand how it worked, you might be tempted to think that Rewind Powder was just a high-powered healing item, but in reality it restored your character to the state they’d been in when they’d first used it. The powder would initially have no effect, with its powers kicking in five minutes after it was used. At that time, the target’s HP, MP, buffs, debuffs, stats, and more would be restored to exactly how they’d been at the moment of use. Thus, if used properly, Rewind Powder would allow you to nullify the side effects of Mystical Brackish Water by resetting your character to a time before you’d even used the item. Furthermore, Rewind Powder could even reverse death, like it had for me. Looking at it from a meta standpoint, you could describe the powder as an item which allowed you to quick save, and then load that quick save a predetermined time later.

“I...I never knew there was an item like that…” Mana said once I’d finished explaining.

She seemed quite impressed with the Rewind Powder, but from my memory it hadn’t been a very useful item in-game. The reason being: when *Braves and Blades* had just been a game, Rewind Powder’s most useful power, the ability to reverse death, had been useless on the protagonist. You see, once the protagonist died, you’d be instantly hit with a game over. Even if you’d used Rewind Powder on them ahead of time, its effects were canceled out by the *BB*’s game-over state.

Truthfully, I’d had no idea if this version of *BB* functioned on that same logic when I’d used the Rewind Powder before my battle with the doom demon. I’d been pretty confident I’d be all right though, since I was only a minor character. That’s why I hadn’t had any regrets when I’d ended up dying.

I guess being a minor character does have some benefits, I thought with a grin.

I was in a pretty damn good mood, despite how shitty dying had felt. I'd even been able to retain all of my memories from the five minutes that had been rewound. And, most importantly, I'd gotten myself through a certain death event without actually dying.

Feeling quite accomplished, I swaggered my way over to where Radd and the others were waiting for me.

And *that's* when the next big event triggered.

"Whoa, look at that!" Radd exclaimed, his eyes going wide. He pointed up at a huge image that was being projected onto the western sky.

Everyone looked up in surprise at the image of the solemn woman whose face hovered among the clouds. Looking at her, I got a little teary-eyed myself.

This was an important world event—no matter what protagonist you started off with, this same scene would trigger once you completed your tutorial mission. It signaled the end of the initial part of the game, and the beginning of your freeform adventure.

"Can you hear me?" the woman in the sky called. "Can you hear me, my beloved children? Is my voice reaching you? The great seal, which has held strong for a thousand years, has finally broken, and the evil god who once tried to conquer the world, Rasulfi, is on the cusp of being revived. If Rasulfi manages to regain all their power, this world is doomed. My children, I beg of you—please lend me your aid in defeating this god of darkness. Without your help, his plans will undoubtedly succeed. Within three years, you must find the twelve dungeons of darkness and cut down the evil that sleeps in their hearts. Please, my children—you are this world's only hope. Help me save it from its destruction..."

With that, the image of the woman vanished.

"That was...the goddess of salvation," someone in the crowd murmured in shock.

Her sudden appearance and subsequent request for aid had taken everyone

by surprise. Some of the soldiers had dropped to their knees in rapturous prayer. I glanced over at Radd and his friends. Radd himself looked stunned, while Nyuuk looked quietly thoughtful. Mana seemed to be steeling herself for the mission the goddess had bestowed upon everyone, and Prana...well, she just looked bored.

I wonder what the true protagonist of this world is thinking right now, after hearing that message, I thought. *Are they feeling filled with a sense of purpose? Do they feel determined to save the goddess and the rest of the world?*

I had no way of knowing, so I focused on quietly firming my own resolve. The battle with the doom demon had shown me in no uncertain terms how weak I really was. It might have been a high-level monster, but I knew enough about *BB* to be keenly aware that there were much stronger monsters out there. In order to prevent the evil god's resurrection, I would need to cut down scores of those insanely strong monsters and trigger a slew of different events.

Which is exactly why...I'm going to let the game's protagonist handle all that hard shit, and take it easy!

I mean, come on, someone who'd lived a peaceful, normal life in Japan didn't have what it took to fight life-and-death duels with powerful monsters over and over! Besides, relying on brute strength was a barbaric way of doing things. There was a far smarter solution here.

I've had my fill of epic adventure now, I thought resolutely. *I've already died twice! That's enough, I think.*

Sure, I'd done some protagonist-y things just now, but that was because the situation had forced my hand! It wasn't like I actually had any obligation to save this world. I mean, of course if there were people I could rescue I'd go and save them, and naturally I didn't want this world to get destroyed, so I'd do my part there too...but all the other heavy lifting? *That* I was leaving for the protagonist to handle.

I've been given a second chance at life! It would be a waste not to spend it doing the things I want to.

And with that, I was decided—from here on out, I'd take a step back from fighting and use my vast game knowledge to live it up in this world.

First things first, though...I need to make myself some money! You can solve most problems as long as you've got enough funds, after all. Oh, and I should also use my game knowledge to put some key characters in my debt, and take advantage of all their resources and connections...

I felt a frisson of excitement go through me as I started to plan out my next steps. It was invigorating, knowing I could do whatever I wanted in this vast, wonderful world. Who cared about beating the last boss and saving the world? I'd carve out my own path in life.

After all, I'm not the protagonist!

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【October 10th, 664 - Blade Emperor Calendar】

On this day, everyone was witness to the goddess of salvation's message. Soon after, news of the attack on Ars spread, shocking nations worldwide. The centuries of peace the world had enjoyed came to an abrupt end, and the curtains opened on a new era of conflict and legends—a new era of braves and blades.

Chapter 3: Casino Rondo

At least the whole situation with Ars is over now, one way or another, I thought, sighing.

With everything that had happened with Rex, and the town, and the goddess of salvation...it felt like yesterday had been the longest day of my life. Even once the city guard had escorted us to safety, I hadn't been able to relax—since I'd been a witness to the attack on Ars, both the city guard and the Adventurers' Guild had asked me to tell them everything I knew.

At least I learned a few things about Ars' fate in return, I thought with a sigh.

The city guard had sent some scouts to Ars after hearing all that Rex, I, and my party had had to tell them, and when they returned they'd confirmed that the city had been overrun by monsters. After that, the leaders of the city had ended up having a long meeting. Ultimately, they'd decided that retaking Ars was a suicide mission.

From what they said, this is the first time in living memory that a city fell to a monster invasion. A trickle of unease ran through me.

It was easy to realize, the day after everything had happened, that the destruction of Ars was an event that would go down in history, leaving shockwaves for decades to come. We'd been so exhausted by the time we'd been freed from the Adventurers' Guild last night, though, that none of that had gone through any of our minds. It had all still felt too surreal. Instead of dwelling on things, we'd just shambled our way to the nearest inn like zombies and collapsed into our newly rented beds—we'd even slept like the dead.

By the time I'd woken up this morning, it'd already been midday. I'd eaten a light lunch at the inn and then made my way outside, intent on wandering around this new city I'd found myself in.

"Oh, guess this city's Freelea," I mumbled to myself, eyes on the sign that was hung up in front of me. The words *Welcome to the city of Freelea, where freedom thrives and gladiators abide!* were written on its surface.

It's kind of a cool coincidence that we ended up here, of all places, I mused. *I've always wanted to stop by Freelea and visit the coliseum. The city seems pretty big and bustling too—it's probably about the same size as Ars, though I doubt it's as old, with Ars being the capital and all.*

When I started walking again though, it wasn't towards the coliseum—it was to the Adventurers' Guild. Despite everything that had happened the day before, or perhaps *because* of it, I felt compelled to join the ranks of the other adventurers who were hanging around inside.

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Technically, you didn't really have to join the Guild to be an adventurer—by definition, the title belonged to any person who was willing to brave danger and fight monsters. That said, the Freelea Guild's common room was a perfect example of the universal nature of the term. People from all sorts of races and walks of life filled the space to the brim.

Normally, I would have beelined toward the bulletin board where requests were pinned, but I wasn't really in the mood to take on a job today. And besides, I'd come to the Guild alone today—I'd need my party mates' help for most any request.

After a brief moment of thought, I decided to make use of the Guild's training grounds instead. I headed over to the Guild receptionist and paid the fee required for the area's use, then quickly went on my way. When I reached my destination, I stopped a moment to take a good look around—the grounds weren't too busy, but they didn't appear to be deserted either.

I should be able to get some good training in here today, I thought, pulling out my sword.

But before I could start my practice swings, something caught my eye.

"Blegh," I muttered, and the elf standing a few feet away, who'd been shooting at a far-off target with her bow, turned around and gave me a look of mock surprise.

"Wooow..." Prana drawled, voice filled with disdain. "I didn't think you were the type to train. You strike me as the kind of guy who wants to get all his

experience from *real* combat."

"Oh, shut it!" I snapped. "Sometimes I feel like training too, okay?"

I gestured for her to get back to her own practicing, and was both relieved and surprised when she didn't tease me any further. I relaxed as she prepared to shoot another arrow, dropping into a familiar stance myself.

I'll start off with V-Slash, I decided.

It *was* one of the most basic sword Arts, after all.

I called out, "V-Slash!" and the Art activated easily, my arm moving without any input from me. It traced a V-shape in the air, slicing through an imaginary foe.

I clicked my tongue, my brow furrowing. *It's not the same.*

When I'd used V-Slash in the past, it'd always made me feel like a real swordsman—I'd been so proud of how far my skills had progressed. But now... All I could think of was the godlike way that Rex had strung his Arts together, activating them at speeds I hadn't believed possible.

I sighed. *Compared to him, my V-Slash is nothing. It's all sluggish and weak.*

The thought of Rex made me shift on my feet, a weird, itchy feeling in my heart. We'd parted ways with him last night, since naturally the type of inn newbie adventurers like my party stayed in were quite different from the upscale places a famous A-rank adventurer like Rex typically patronized.

He couldn't have stayed at our inn anyways, I snapped at myself. *He needed somewhere safer since he had that unconscious girl with him. It makes total sense he didn't stick around with us! But, still...*

For some reason I couldn't quite explain, the fact that he'd left still completely pissed me off.

"Aaaaaargh!" I roared, channeling all my frustration into my sword. I devoted myself wholeheartedly to my training, refusing to think of anything else. But, only a few moments later, I paused.

Something's off here, I thought, my brow furrowing. *Why was Rex's version of this Art so much better than mine...?*

Arts were said to be skills passed down to humans from the gods—that's why once someone was able to learn one, all they had to do was envision it in their mind, and the Art would activate. The appropriate amount of mana would exit the user's body and enter their weapon, and from there the Art would automatically guide their movements.

That was how everyone had taught me Arts had worked, at least. But even after a few short minutes of practice, it was clear to me that I'd never be able to match the sheer speed and sharpness of Rex's Arts using my current method, no matter how much I practiced.

What if...there's more than one way to activate an Art? Could I get one to work if I manually pour mana into my sword and trace the arc of the Art myself, rather than letting the Art move my arm for me?

It was an absurd idea—I knew that from the moment I thought it. But...I still felt like I had to try.

I raised my sword high, slowly starting to channel my own mana into it. Then, instead of tracing the shape of the Art in my mind and letting it activate by itself, I swung it down with my own might.

I leaned into the strike so intensely a roar of effort left my lungs. "*Huuuaaah*!"

The resulting combination of swings was sloppy—you could hardly call whatever I'd just done an Art at all, let alone V-Slash. But...

Huh? W-Wait a second...

"That sensation just now…" I stared at my sword in amazement.

My attempt to activate V-Slash without automatically triggering it had undoubtedly ended in failure. But, just for a momentary instant during the midpoint of my swing...I'd gotten the same feeling I normally did when I was using an Art. There'd been one difference though—I'd had complete control of my own arm.

A wild laugh burst from my lips. "Ha...ha ha...ha ha ha!"

I did it. I'm one step closer to reaching Rex's level—one step closer to becoming a hero! I grinned hugely. *Just you wait, Rex! I'm gonna snatch away*

the protagonist's role from you before you know it!

I launched immediately back into my training, determination filling my veins. Soon my smile had vanished, replaced by a look of complete and utter concentration.

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"Yo. You're really going at it today," said a voice from behind my shoulder.

I turned around to see who it was, and came face-to-face with my party's strategist and mage, Nyuuk. "You're here too, huh?" I asked him. "Didn't we decide to take a break for today? I never thought I'd see you training on your day off."

"Says the guy who's been training here since he woke up," Nyuuk shot back, rolling his eyes.

I had no rebuttal for that, so I just stood there in sheepish silence.

Nyuuk gave me a wan smile. "Well, I know how you feel though," he added. "That battle yesterday was awe-inspiring."

"Yeah, I guess..." I muttered.

It wasn't that I disagreed—the day before had had more of an influence on me than everything else I'd experienced in my life combined. I'd just never admit it out loud.

"I'm an adventurer too, you know," Nyuuk reminded me. "How could I not get pumped up, watching a display like that? And, seeing that you're here, I don't think you're any different."

I clicked my tongue, irritatedly sheathing my sword. "Think whatever you want," I scoffed.

I hated that Nyuuk could read me so easily, but I couldn't deny that he was right.

There's no way I can beat him in an argument, I thought with an inward sigh. *Time to change the subject.*

"Anyways...how's Mana doing?" I asked him. "Ars was her hometown, right?"

Nyuuk nodded. “Yeah, it was. If you’re looking for her, she’s...” He trailed off, pointing to a spot a short distance away.

Mana must have just come into the area, because she was standing right inside the entrance of the training grounds. She paused for a moment, then seemed to catch sight of Prana, and started walking over in the other girl’s direction.

She doesn’t look like she’s feeling too broken up over Ars’ destruction, I thought, puzzled. *Maybe she’s just putting up a front...?*

There was only one way to find out.

I jolted into motion, sprinting in her direction. “Mana!” I called out.

“Oh, hello, Radd,” Mana said, flashing me a small smile. “Good afternoon.”

Just that small quirk of her lips had my heart pumping in my chest. “U-Umm... Are you okay?” I asked, desperately trying to hide how flustered I was. “You can always come to one of us if you’re hurting, you know. You don’t have to hold it in.”

“I’m fine,” Mana said simply. “No one I cared about lived in that city.”

Curiosity flickered through me. “Does that mean—”

“Could you *be* anymore tactless?” Prana broke in. Her eyes were hard as ice chips as they bore into my face.

I winced at her tone, then full-on cringed when she turned in my direction, the arrow nocked in her bow pointing uncomfortably close to my chest. “You’re no better than a stray dog, barking its head off when everyone else wants peace and quiet,” Prana continued in a low, stern voice.

“Hey!” I snapped. “A-And cut it out! Don’t point that at me, Prana!”

A long, exasperated sigh froze both of us in our tracks. “When are you two going to grow up?” Nyuuk asked tiredly. He stepped between us, pushing Prana’s arrow to the side.

“W-Well, but Prana, she—”

Nyuuk’s eyes narrowed. “That’s enough, Radd—I was watching the whole

thing. This one's your bad." He sighed. "Anyways, don't forget that we're supposed to be meeting up with Rex again tomorrow. Shouldn't you be training as much as you can until then instead of fighting with Prana? You wouldn't want to disappoint him, would you...?"

"Tch..." I grit my teeth in frustration.

Nyuuk's right. Again.

Before we'd parted ways last night, Rex had told us to meet up with him at the Adventurers' Guild in two days. It was possible, I supposed, that he was planning on teaching us how to use the strange Arts he'd utilized in the battle against the doom demon.

He might even teach us how to stack them together! I thought, excitement running through me. *If that's the case, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I need to make as much progress as I can so I can get the most out of his mentorship.*

"Sorry, Mana," I said, abashed.

"It's fine," she said kindly. "I don't mind at all."

That done, I turned reluctantly to Prana. "S-Sorry," I muttered in a much less contrite voice. "My bad."

"Yeah," Prana replied gruffly, immediately going back to her training.

Would it kill her to be anywhere near as nice as Mana? I grumbled internally, gritting my teeth in annoyance. *Whatever, I need to get back to my training.*

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"Damnit..." I muttered under my breath.

I'd kept training long after my other party members had left, but even despite my best efforts, I couldn't get a feel for how to use Arts without using my typical method. Swinging a sword when it was filled with mana was harder than I'd thought, and you had to be so damn accurate when tracing the shape of the Art! Which meant...

If I've stumbled across how to use the same method that Rex was using during that battle, he's even more amazing than I thought! If he wasn't letting the skill

automatically shape the Arts for him, that means he was able to perfectly mimic their forms on his own!

From what I remembered, most of the Arts Rex had used during the battle had been way more complicated than V-Slash too.

Goddamnit! I cursed, both awestruck and despairing. *Just how huge is the gap between us?!*

At that point, I really had to stop for the night. I wasn't making any progress, and the level of discouragement I was feeling wasn't helping at all.

And so, pouting, I headed back to the inn. I ate a quiet dinner, then went to my room to get ready for bed. Before I got too far, however...I heard someone knocking on my bedroom door.

Who could it be this late at night? I wondered.

I warily got to my feet and headed toward the sound. All the rooms from the inn might be able to be locked from the inside, but that didn't mean they provided the people staying in them much safety—anyone truly dangerous would bust their way inside in no time.

"Wh-Who's there?" I stammered nervously.

"It's me, Rex!" came a surprisingly familiar voice. "Can you, uh, let me in? I have a favor to ask."

I relaxed a little, but not entirely. I was still worried that all this could be a trap. I cracked the door slowly and peeked outside, and felt a wave of relief at the sight of Rex's familiar form, clad in his usual black clothes.

I can't let him see how rattled I was, I thought as I fully relaxed.

So, instead of welcoming him...

"What is it, you old geezer?" I snapped. "I thought we weren't meeting up until tomorrow. What could've possibly made you want to visit me in my room in the middle of the night?"

Geez, I thought, *I can never tell what this guy's thinking.*

Though I *had* heard that heroes were unpredictable and free-spirited and all,

so I guessed my inability to understand him made sense.

I'm sure not all heroes are like that, I mused, *but Rex sure fits the bill.*

Regardless, I didn't really mind. I was just excited to see what sort of grand adventure he was going to rope me into next.

"So, uh, the thing is..." Rex trailed off, looking uncharacteristically hesitant.

Something serious must have happened if a decisive dude like him is acting this way, I thought. I mentally steeled myself, waiting on tenterhooks for his next words.

A long pause stretched between us.

Finally, he said, "Radd, I... Well, I need to borrow some money..."

"*What*?!" For a second I doubted my ears.

"Like I said, I need to borrow some money!" Rex repeated, shouting now.

Unfortunately, looks like I heard right the first time...

I hesitated, not sure how I wanted to answer, but Rex didn't give me the chance to say yes or no.

"I-It's not much, I swear!" he pleaded. "Just a thousand wen! I'll pay it back threefold, I promise. Hell, I'll pay it back tenfold or even a hundredfold if you want!"

"H-Hold on!" I shouted, putting an end to his string of promises.

What the heck's going on here?!

I ran a hand over my face. "Old man, you're an A-rank adventurer aren't you? You should have way more money than me! What the hell happened?"

"Well, you see..." Once again, Rex trailed off.

"Is it something you can't talk about?" I demanded.

"No, nothing like that," Rex said with a shake of his head. He paused again, like he was debating over whether or not to tell me whatever had happened. At last, he said: "It's a long story."

I couldn't help it—I snorted. "Spit it out, old geezer. I won't be able to sleep

now that you've got my curiosity piqued anyway."

Rex paused *again,* the silence dragging on longer than it ever had before. But my words seemed to have given him that last, final push he needed, because he opened his mouth and said, "It all started a few hours ago when I was walking around town..."

Rex looked off into the distance, as if reminiscing over some ancient, bygone past. "I found this casino, you see, and I just thought I'd take a quick look insi—"

My door gave a loud click as I slammed it shut. I sighed, locked it once more, and headed back to bed.

⁜⁜⁜

A short while earlier...

The longest day of my life was now long over, and dawn had risen on a new day. The good night's rest I'd gotten the night before had gone a long way toward healing the trauma of being run over, reincarnated, murdered by a monster, and then reviving yet again. As a lovely bonus, it had restored my health as well.

I never want to end up in such a deadly situation again, I thought determinedly. *From here on out, I'm playing it as safe as possible. No more taking risks.*

With this in mind, I turned my brain toward planning out a safe, secure future for myself. But, well...that's when a certain building located in the city's outskirts caught my eye, upending all my half-formed machinations. I knew that building even at a glance—it housed the Grand Lilim Casino.

The Grand Lilim was a special casino that had a chance of randomly spawning outside of any of the cities in *Braves and Blades*. It was impossible to predict when and where the place would show up, beyond the fact that at least a year would pass between appearances, and it only ever stayed in the same location a few days at a time.

Wait... I thought, pausing as a piece of long discarded info floated to the surface of my brain. *Didn't that one walkthrough I read say that you should*

spend all your money at the casino if you come across it early on in your playthrough? A wide grin stretched across my lips. *Who am I to ignore such wisdom?*

I had enough money on hand that I could probably make myself a decent profit if I went ahead and walked through the casino's doors, but I knew I could do better than just *decent*. I just needed to make some money to boost my starting capital—*then* I could rake in the big bucks.

The casino doesn't open until the evening, anyways, I thought. *That's plenty of time for me to go and build myself up a war chest.*

And so, I headed off, journeying back to the Wyvern's Promenade. I harvested a bunch of Mystical Brackish water while I was there, then hauled it back into town and sold off as much as I could. At the same time, I went ahead and sold off all the other items Rex had in his inventory that I didn't have any use for.

By the time I was done, I had a nice solid 2,100,000 wen tucked away in my pockets. It was a little daunting, thinking about putting it all on the line in the casino—if I lost it all, I'd be penniless since I'd sold off all the sellable items to my name.

Come on, Rex, it'll be fine, I chided myself. *Gambling at the Grand Lilim's a surefire way to make money! There's a reason this casino is always recommended for beginners in the walkthroughs.*

Thankfully, I just so happened to know that reason—as long as you knew the secret rules that governed how the Grand Lilim functioned, you couldn't lose a bet.

"This is perfect!" I said with a grin, having made my way back to the establishment's front doors. "Now that I've got all the money I need, this is gonna be child's play."

I gave a jaunty wave to the glowing sign that read "Grand Lilim Casino" hanging outside—it looked very out of place with the rest of Freelea's rather medieval trappings—and then stepped right through the casino's doors.

"Huh..." I murmured, pausing a moment to take in the Grand Lilim's interior.

The main room was filled with tons of flashy lights, but at the same time was

oddly dim and dark. I'd seen the place in-game before, but, as was obvious to me now, you couldn't really get a feel for the atmosphere of the place unless you visited in the flesh.

My contemplation of the casino was interrupted by a young woman, who slunk over to me in a tight-fitting bunny suit. "Welcome, sir," she purred, running a hand along her voluptuous blonde hair.

If the Grand Lilim's the same as it was in-game, she should be the only receptionist here, I remembered.

I'd been prepared to see her when I walked through the front doors, but the sheer sex appeal she exuded was still overwhelming. Her boobs especially were distracting—they bounced all over the place with every step she took. It was only the special bit of information I held about her that stopped my mind from seeing her in a sexual light.

"Behold the Grand Lilim," the young girl said, giggling, "the home of desires and dreams. I am Sacula, and I will be your guide through this land of wonder." Sacula drew even closer to me, smiling as she noticed my eyes flickering downward. "Is this your first time at the casino? If so, I can explain how the various games work."

God, she even smells nice, I thought, dazed.

I had to shake myself to get my brain to refocus. "Yes, I'd appreciate that," I finally managed to tell Sacula.

She nodded, turning to walk over to two machines that were set up in the center of the main room. Her hips swayed with each long stride she took.

Those machines look totally out of place with BB*'s primarily fantasy aesthetic,* I thought, forcing my eyes to stay on them instead of Sacula's body. *Almost like...vending machines?*

"These machines are called token vending machines," Sacula explained, shortly. "I'm afraid you cannot use wen here at the Grand Lilim—you'll need to buy tokens instead. Once you've got some in hand, you can use them to place bets and play the various games we have in the casino. That said, each token costs 1,000 wen. Do you have enough money to play?"

“Why, of course, I do,” I drawled.

A slight grin curled over Sacula’s lips at that. “Splendid,” she purred. “In that case, let me continue. Please keep in mind that while you can buy tokens with wen, you cannot convert those tokens back into currency. Instead, you can exchange the tokens you earn here for prizes.” Sacula gestured next to her. “This is the prize vending machine right here. I can assure you that the rewards stored inside are all pieces of the *highest* quality.”

I nodded. *So, just like I remembered,* BB*’s casinos work the same way that most other RPG casinos do.*

“Also, please be aware,” she continued, “that you cannot sell any of the prizes you win here at regular vendors.” She gave me a jaunty wink. “This is a world of dreams, after all. We ask that our patrons forget about making money and instead focus on enjoying themselves for the entirety of their experience here.”

With this speech complete, Sacula turned and looked around the casino in front of her, her eyes bouncing over the four major zones the room was divided into. “At the Grand Lilim, you can choose to play poker, roulette, slots, or blackjack. All of these games are played alone, rather than against other people. Would you like an explanation of the rules for any of the games?”

“No, thanks,” I told her.

I almost wanted to say yes, faced with her smile, but I knew the rules of the casino well enough already. Plus, my ironclad resolve to use this place in order to make money was still very much intact—I just needed to use the special knowledge I’d learned about the casino to do it.

“Ah, I see,” she replied. “In that case, I have nothing more to say. Although...actually, I’m sorry—there’s one last thing.” Her tone was masterful, making her final addition sound like it was truly an afterthought, even though I knew it wasn’t. “In order to prevent cheating, we ask that patrons not use any sort of magic, Arts, or items while inside the Grand Lilim. I thank you for your understanding, and hope you have a wonderful time in this land of dreams.”

Sacula gave me a playful wink, then walked back over to the counter. I watched her go, then turned my attention back to the floor of the casino.

First things first, I need to see what prizes they have, I thought.

From what I knew of the casino, the prizes were randomized, just like the location—they changed daily, in fact. Aside from certain unique items that could only be won at the Grand Lilim, the rest of the prizes were random dungeon drops, and as Sacula had mentioned, none of them could be resold at regular shops. This meant that 90% of the lineup tended to be cursed goods and other items that merchants were reluctant to buy. Still, regardless of which prizes were available, they always cost the same amount of tokens. The grand prize always cost 1,000,000 tokens, and the tier of prizes below it always cost 500,000 tokens.

I leaned forward, scanning over the prizes up for grabs for today. My eyes went wide. “Whoa...”

It seemed I’d gotten lucky this time around—the grand prize was a Metallic King Sword, and the 500,000 token prizes were a Shooting-Star Ring, a Pirate Hat, and a Barrier Ring, no less!

I’ve hit the jackpot! I screeched internally, bouncing excitedly on my heels. *Looks like my luck is finally improving—I’d take any of those items,* gladly!

Just in case, I scanned over the lowest tier of items as well, curious as to what the 10,000 token prizes were.

Let’s see here...we’ve got a Weakness Ring, a Steel Blade, and...a Goblin Slaughterer?! I couldn’t help it—I pumped my fist into the air. *Holy shit! I’m in heaven!*

Literally every single item I could have hoped for was in today’s lineup. Forget *improving*, my luck had shot up into the stratosphere!

All I need to do now is make sure I win whatever games I choose to play—once I get my hands on enough tokens, this entire treasure trove of goodies’ll be mine.

Fortunately for me, winning was the easy part.

Time to hit it big! I cheered internally, dropping my first 10,000 wen into the vending machine with an elated smile.

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A short while later, I stalked into the center of the casino, my pockets and hands bulging with chips. I decided to head to the roulette table first—it had been my game of choice when I'd visited the casino before.

"Oh, you're starting with the roulette?" Sacula asked cheerfully from behind the receptionist's desk. "In that case, please place the amount of chips you'd like to bet onto the table, then touch the crystal over there. That will start the roulette wheel."

I gave her an absent nod before turning back to the roulette table.

Now, roulette was a simple game. A player was placed in front of a special wheel called a roulette wheel, which was split into a bunch of distinct slices with numbers on them. The main objective was to guess which of the slices the ball that was placed inside the roulette wheel would land in. Players would make their guesses before the wheel was spun, putting down however many chips they wanted to bet on a certain result.

In a real game of roulette, you could do more complex bets, like betting on black or red, or picking specific number ranges, with each of those bets having different payouts. In *BB,* however, roulette wasn't nearly that complicated. A player could only bet on the ball falling on a specific number, or that the ball would fall on an even or odd number.

All right, let's go ahead and give this thing a spin, I thought eagerly.

I started by making an evens-or-odds bet, since I had a higher base probability of winning the game that way. I decided to start slow, so I just placed a single token in the section on the table labeled "Odds" for now.

With that done, I placed my hand over the crystal situated on the corner of the table—a strange sensation tickled at my hand as the roulette table began to glow. Seconds later, the roulette wheel sputtered to life, a ball shooting into it out of nowhere.

"Wh-Whoa..." I stammered, watching in fascination as the roulette table slid open and my token was sucked inside. It was a challenge to force my eyes back to the spinning wheel—I was rather curious where the token had been sent.

After a few seconds of waiting, the roulette wheel spun to a stop. The ball kept going for a brief moment, then finally settled in the pocket of the wheel that was marked “11.”

I grinned. Eleven was, of course, an odd number. Which meant I’d won.

My winnings shot out of a hole on the side of the roulette table a few seconds later—I’d gotten two tokens back in total.

You see, odds-or-evens bets like the one I’d made doubled the amount of tokens you’d decided to wager. Leaning into bets of that type seemed pretty decent, probability-wise, but they weren’t quite as fair as they seemed. Zero wasn’t counted as either an even or an odd number, so the house always had an advantage, if a slight one.

The house advantage grew significantly with more risky bets, like if a player decided to bet on the roulette ball falling on a particular number. There were still benefits to taking your chances though—the higher the risk, the greater the rewards. In the Grand Lilim’s case, if you accurately guessed the number the roulette ball landed on, your initial wager would be given back to you thirteen fold.

For now, I’ll just keep betting on odd, I decided.

I plopped a few tokens onto the odd section of the roulette table, then placed my hand over the crystal once again.

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“Wow, that’s your fourth win in a row!” Sacula exclaimed from beside me.

So far I’d bet on odd seven times, and the results had been even, odd, even, odd, odd, odd, and odd. If we included my very first win, I’d guessed right six times and wrong only twice. It was an *overwhelmingly* good ratio.

“I guess first-rate adventurers have first-rate luck too,” Sacula purred into my ear. She flashed me a seductive smile as she leaned into me and patted my shoulder.

You can’t fool me, though, I thought. *I know your smile and that sexy demeanor are just a façade.*

The truth was, the Grand Lilim's roulette game was rigged. Sacula wasn't just any receptionist either—she was a demon who lured adventurers into her casino and robbed them of their mana before killing them.

Sorry, love, I've been spoiled on everything, I thought with an inward shrug. *That charming smile, those seductive mannerisms, and all that flattery you're piling on me? They're useless.*

Unfortunately for her, I'd already read the cursed tome that revealed all the truths of *Braves and Blades'* world to me, the book that contained piles of forbidden knowledge that most players would never learn!

...I was referring to the unbelievably thick lore guide that came with the limited edition of *BB*, of course.

I could remember snatching up that guide like it was yesterday—I'd gone to the store to pick up my limited-edition version of the game, and the lore guide had been sitting right there in front of me in the shop front window. It had been *way* too big to feasibly store anywhere, but I hadn't been able to tell the shopkeeper I didn't want it, so I'd ended up taking it home and leaving it on my coffee table. At some point I'd even spilled tea on it and gotten the pages all messed up.

But then, one day, I'd decided to read that lore guide instead of letting it languish on my table forever. And, to my surprise, its contents had been infinitely more interesting than I'd expected. It was through reading that tome of a guide that I'd learned all the details of how the Grand Lilim worked, and found out how all the games were rigged. Even now, all that information was perfectly preserved in my mind, just like the memory of how the tea-splattered pages of the guide had crackled every time I'd turned them.

The long and short of it was, every time you played one of the casino's games, a little bit of your life force was sucked away. This meant that Sacula allowed newbie adventurers who didn't have much money to their name to keep on winning, since she didn't want them to stop playing.

The Grand Lilim's version of roulette was a perfect example—as long as you bet on evens or odds, the game was rigged in favor of the player, and you'd end up winning around 80% of the time. Naturally, any adventurer who started

winning that much would find it hard to quit while they were ahead. They'd keep going, inching toward their doom.

The casino's rule that you couldn't use any items or magic while you were inside was very purposeful as well—without the help of additional tools to discover something fishy was going on, most adventurers wouldn't be able to figure out their predicament until it was already too late. Once a patron of the casino was drained of all their mana, Sacula would proceed to devour their soul.

To be honest, the first time I'd played *BB*, I'd gotten tricked by the casino's trap and been killed without even realizing what had happened. I still remembered the confusion I'd felt back then. However...tricks like Sacula's only worked the very first time someone encountered them. As soon as you learned how the system worked, you could easily use it to your advantage. Case in point: taking advantage of the appearance of the Grand Lilim was the best way you could get your protagonist some endgame equipment during the earlier portions of the game.

Now that I'd been reincarnated as Rex, I had an even better advantage than I had when I'd played *BB* back in the day—my stats were higher than they would have been if I'd come to the Grand Lilim as a low-leveled protagonist, and I had a ton more starting cash than I'd normally have access to. Which meant...I could easily pull off a plan here that I'd never have been capable of back then.

I made a few quick calculations, then grinned to myself. *The games I've played here so far have proved that things are still rigged in my favor, and Rex clearly has enough HP to handle the weakening effects of playing them. So...looks like it's time to move onto the next phase of my plan. If this next attempt goes well, then I'll start betting big.*

I gave Sacula a dark smile. *The poor thing probably thinks everything is going according to her plan. Sorry, honey, but you're not the only one who can take advantage of others' greed. I'm going to beat you at your own game! Good luck evading the trap I've set!*

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"Welcome, sir," Sacula said, eyeing the man in all black who'd just walked into her casino.

Her interest was immediately piqued—from the look of the worn sword at his waist, he looked like a veteran adventurer, but the way he carried himself was a little strange.

"Behold the Grand Lilim, the home of desires and dreams," Sacula said with a giggle. "I am Sacula, and I will be your guide through this land of wonder."

She smiled seductively at the man, but beneath her expression laid the ice-cold heart of a schemer. *If I had to guess,* she thought, sizing the man up, *that guy's a third-rate adventurer trying to pretend to be more experienced than he is. He's doing his best to sound all cool and aloof, but his persona is full of cracks.*

The man's façade was so easy to see through, in fact, that Sacula was confident that it'd be effortless to swindle him. The way he kept staring at her boobs only cemented that evaluation.

Of course, all her conclusions about the man were still only conjecture, but in Sacula's experience, the *truly* first-rate adventurers either had no interest in places like these, or were completely open about their desires and didn't bother trying to act cool.

I guess that means this guy is probably a bust, she thought with an inward sigh. *I was hoping to feed off a powerful adventurer, but this guy's a total poser. What a disappointment.*

In the end, Sacula had to comfort herself with the thought of slowly torturing the man. The young, inexperienced adventurers were a personal favorite of hers—to be honest, she might've enjoyed breaking them down more than she enjoyed snacking on the higher-level humans...

"Is this your first time at the casino?" Sacula asked the man, feigning kindness even as she laughed internally. "If so, I can explain how the various games work."

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The first game the man chose was roulette.

"Oh, you're starting with the roulette?" Sacula asked cheerfully. "In that case, please place the amount of chips you'd like to bet onto the table, then touch

the crystal over there. That will start the roulette wheel."

And soon enough, your eyes'll be spinning too, Sacula added in her head. She smiled to herself as she watched the man bet on odds and start up the roulette wheel.

He he he he. What a cute little thing he is. He doesn't even know he's killing himself with that wheel.

As was probably obvious by this point, the roulette wheel was a trap. Every time someone touched the crystal on the table to trigger the wheel to spin, a little bit of their life force would be absorbed into it. That stolen life force was what sustained Sacula, and her greatest joy in life was siphoning from the foolish people who walked into her casino.

However...she could never quite escape the lingering worry that one of her guests might notice the trap she'd set. And so, she'd prepared some mesmerizing bait to keep them distracted—she'd rigged all the games within the Grand Lilim to play out in her customers' favor. As long as they were hooked on winning, they never noticed that she was draining them dry.

The rigging of the roulette table was done via a relatively simple system—whenever someone touched the crystal, the table would glow as it read their bet. The roulette wheel would then be given that information as it started spinning, and suction magic would be cast on the pockets that the adventurer had bet on. This increased the odds of the adventurer winning, since it made it more likely that the ball would land on the numbers the adventurer had placed their bets on. If an adventurer bet that the roulette ball would land on an odd number, for example, all of the spots on the wheel that had odd numbers would have suction magic turned on for that turn.

The suction magic wasn't infallible, of course, but it was good enough that anyone playing would win far more often than not.

And the more people win, the more they get hooked on my games, Sacula thought, cackling internally. *As long as I keep them between the golden mean of losing so much they leave and winning so much they buy all my prizes, it's the perfect system.*

Pulling herself from her thoughts, Sacula focused back in on the man at the

roulette table, eyes intent. *Dance for me, my little adventurer,* she thought hungrily. *I need you to get hooked on that game so you don't realize you're becoming my dinner.*

Luckily for her, it didn't seem like this particular adventurer would cause her any problems. He appeared completely oblivious—her ideal prey. Every time he spun the roulette wheel, she got another delicious sip of his high-quality mana, and to her delight he didn't seem like he was going to stop anytime soon. He was betting such small amounts each time that even though he was consistently winning, his token amount hadn't seen much of an increase at all.

It is pretty surprising, though, that I've drained him of his mana eight times and he isn't even tired, Sacula thought. *Maybe he's a better adventurer than I thought. Which means...I'll get to drag this out and enjoy it for a nice, good long time.*

Sacula mentally upgraded her mental image of the man from total loser to obliviously powerful man as she drew closer, her eyes locked on him as if she was a snake and he were her prey.

"Wow, that's your fourth win in a row!" she crooned in an attempt to butter him up. "I guess first-rate adventurers have first-rate luck too."

Hmm... Sacula thought. *Why is his reaction so lukewarm...? I wonder...*

It wasn't that he was immune to her charms—that was abundantly clear. After all, the man had been ogling her breasts since the moment he walked in. So why the lackluster response to her praise all of a sudden?

As Sacula sunk deep into thought, trying to figure out the reason behind the paradox, the man once again reached into his pockets to pull out some tokens to place a bet. He only used low-value tokens, as he had from the beginning.

You see, there were different types of tokens, all worth different amounts based off their rankings. The lowest value token was bronze, followed by silver, gold, mythril, anodized titanium, orichalcum, and adamantite. Sacula had never seen any guest bet a mythril or higher token, granted, but she'd never seen someone stick solely to bronze value tokens after a streak of wins either.

Odds again, huh? Sacula thought with a huff, watching as he touched the

crystal again. *But, wait, why does he look so conflicted?*

As she watched, the man paused and pulled back from the crystal, quickly adding two more tokens to the pile he'd placed on the odds section of the roulette table.

Oh my... she thought, internally raising her brows. *Changing bets last second isn't very good manners.*

If she was being honest, though, Sacula didn't mind—it wasn't like she was expecting decent manners from *adventurers* of all people. What she found more important about the man's behavior was that it signaled a change of heart. Until now, he'd only ever bet one token at a time, but now he'd suddenly tripled his bet.

What does it mean? Sacula wondered. *I'll have to keep an eye on his reaction to the outcome of this spin—my chance to understand what's going on in his head rests entirely on that!*

With this in mind, Sacula watched the roulette wheel with as much intensity as the adventurer this time around. Fortunately the suction magic worked, and the ball safely landed in an odd-numbered pocket. There was jingling noise as the table spat out the man's winnings—since he'd bet three tokens this time, he won six.

"In that case…" the man muttered as he collected his tokens.

This is my chance to flatter him more! Sacula thought, surging forward and grabbing the man's arm. To her shock, she was immediately shaken off.

"Sorry, but could you move back a little?" the man muttered. "I want to concentrate."

"Oh my, you're so *cold*," Sacula said, giving him a pouty look. "Fine, very well, I'll leave you to your fun."

While she sounded calm on the surface, inwardly Sacula was reeling. *Has he figured out my trick?!* she thought incredulously. *The way he's been playing so far has definitely been strange, almost like he's been testing my roulette wheel. And, now that I think about it, he's been pretty wary of me this whole time, always checking to see where I'm standing when he triggers the wheel to spin.*

Sacula's eyes narrowed as she stared at the man's back. *He sounded like he felt he'd confirmed something important with that last bet, when he used the three tokens. And if he suspected everything was rigged from the start...*

Suddenly, everything fell into place for Sacula. The reasons for the man's actions suddenly became crystal clear.

You see, the method that Sacula had used to rig the roulette wheel operated automatically. She didn't have to do anything herself when the player placed a bet—the entire game was already set up to move the ball to spots that were in the player's favor. It wasn't like the method didn't carry a level of risk—the fact that she wasn't able to alter the way her own games functioned if someone caught on to her tactics opened her up to some rather large problems.

If a player realized she was draining their lifeforce but also that the game was rigged in their favor in a way that Sacula couldn't manage freely, they'd know immediately that they could cheat the system. All they had to do was bet a huge amount of chips on each spin until they won enough to purchase all the items they were after. Then, as long as they were careful not to let her drain them all the way, they could escape with their life.

Despite the fact that Sacula had created the whole casino as a trap to lure people in, the prizes she put up for sale were real. Furthermore, she'd used a great deal of her mana to craft them. If someone actually managed to purchase a whole lot of them, it would be a huge blow to her.

If...if he's figured out what's going on, then...that means he's going to bet everything he has on one roll! There's just one problem for him—that's exactly *what I want him to do!*

Sacula's expression turned ecstatic as she watched the man head over to the token vending machine. Though she couldn't see exactly how much he'd bought, she could feel mana flowing into her with every coin he spent.

Oh, this is wonderful! she thought, filled with glee. *The greed packed into human currency is no match for the lifeforce I can drain straight from a human's body, but it's still quite a nice meal!*

Judging from the sheer amount of mana she'd just received, the man had likely spent more than a million wen on tokens. He might have even purchased

a *gold* token.

Forgive me, Sacula thought. *I can't believe I thought you were a small fry. You're actually the best prey I could have asked for, my darling, crafty little adventurer! I've preyed on countless humans, and only a handful have gotten as far as you have. But...oh, sweetheart, I bet you think you've outsmarted me, don't you? Alas...*

While Sacula was legitimately impressed that he'd figured out the roulette trick and the fact that it was stealing his lifeforce, she wasn't about to let go of him now.

Sacura grinned widely from behind her counter. *Brace yourself, adventurer, for my casino exists to show people like you true despair!*

It was true that the whole reason that Sacula had rigged the game's in the Grand Lilim was so that she could draw in poorer, less-skilled adventurers to be her prey, but...that didn't mean that she hadn't set up a second, deadlier trap to ensnare smarter, richer catches.

Unbeknownst to her poor, crafty adventurer, he'd triggered the second layer of her system when he'd withdrawn that golden token from the vending machine. Now, whenever he placed that golden token onto the roulette table, the wheel would sense it and cast a repelling spell on the pockets he'd bet on instead of a suction spell. There was no chance in hell that the ball would enter any of those pockets, meaning...the adventurer was going to lose everything.

Internally, Sacula tilted her head back and cackled with glee. She loved nothing more than watching the hopeful expressions on adventurers who thought they'd outsmarted her transform into masks of utter despair.

It's my motto, you see, Sacula thought with a grin. *I can't let adventurers lose too much* or *win too much.*

Finally, the man turned from the vending machine and headed back to the roulette table. Sacula frantically suppressed her excitement as she saw the pile of new tokens in his hands—one of them being gold.

Sensing her glee, the man's sharp gaze fell on her face.

"O-Oh!" Sacula peeped, lowering her gaze abruptly to the floor. She tried to

look as contrite as possible, but she didn't know if it worked, as she could still sense the man's assessing gaze running over her.

Careful, she admonished herself. *Stay calm. If I put his guard up, he won't bet that token, and that'll defeat the purpose of this whole enterprise.*

As long as he bet that gold coin, Sacula was in the clear—it didn't matter what he bet it on, since the table would make sure the roulette ball never came near the correct pocket.

Come on! Sacula willed the man, eagerly licking her lips. *Hurry up! Do it already!*

A few seconds passed, and she heard the sound of the roulette wheel beginning to spin. Ecstasy filled her—this was it, the moment she enjoyed the most. The moment where she cornered her prey.

Sacula's hands shook with adrenaline as she stared at the ground, listening intently to the roulette wheels rotations. Even though she couldn't see anything, she could tell exactly how badly the spin was going for the man. The wheel turned and turned, but the ball seemingly kept getting knocked out of the pocket it was meant to go in, until the wheel finally stopped spinning, and the ball came to rest in what Sacula knew was a losing position.

Yes! Sacula thought. *Victory is mine!* Her gaze darted to the man the moment the roulette wheel stopped. Except...the expression on his face was *not* one of complete and utter anguish.

"H-Huh?!" She stammered, her vision blurring. All of a sudden, she felt dizzy.

It's...not really that important in the grand scheme of things, but how did I miss the moment he crumbled to despair? Confused, she snuck another glance at the man's expression. *Why does he look like that?* she wondered. *He doesn't look like he's lost his life savings in one big bet at all! He barely even looks nervous!*

Then it hit her. *Wait...did he even spend one of his gold tokens on that last spin?*

With how cautious he'd been being up until then, it was certainly possible that he hadn't. Sacula breathed a sigh of relief.

I didn't miss his moment of loss, it just hasn't happened yet, she reassured herself. *But then...what was that moment of dizziness?*

Still a little confused, Sacula once again heard the roulette wheel begin to spin. The ball jumped around the spinning wheel once, twice, and then fell into a pocket with a thunk. Sacula felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her, and this time she knew it wasn't just her imagining things.

What on earth is going on? It's almost as if I'm *the one being drained...* A shiver ran down Sacula's spine.

No longer caring whether or not the man got suspicious of her, Sacula looked over at the roulette table. As she'd hoped, there were gold coins resting on the velvet. But that wasn't all.

What the hell is that betting spread?!

The man had placed a single golden coin on both the odds and evens portions of the roulette table.

With a spread like that he'll just go even regardless of where the ball lands! Hell, if it lands on zero then instead, he'll—

"Oh…" Sacula said, her head spinning in more ways than one.

I get it now...

There was a clunk, and the roulette wheel started spinning once more. The man's hand reached out toward the zero on the betting table, and a wave of dread washed over Sacula.

"It can't be…" she moaned.

Sacula stared at the roulette table in horror. *He's found a loophole in how the table is rigged!*

Any number a gold token was bet on was a number the roulette ball would never land in. Thus, as long as the man kept placing gold tokens on the evens and odds section of the betting table, Sacula's spell would force the ball to go into the only pocket that counted as neither—the zero pocket—every time! Furthermore, the man had figured out that her spell only scanned the table once—the second the player touched the crystal. He was taking advantage of that knowledge to place massive bets on zero in the few seconds after the crystal had been pressed but before the tokens were sucked into the table, knowing that he could throw down as many tokens as he wanted without the spell punishing him. In simple terms, he could be completely assured of his win!

That means every time he spins that wheel, he's getting 36 times the return on his bet! Sacula wavered on her feet, her knees going weak. *But...how? How did he learn the one surefire way to beat the spell I placed on the roulette table?! He'd never even bet a high-value token before a few moments ago!*

It wasn't like he could have learned from an outside source—the only people who had ever discovered Sacula's trick had died in *this* very casino!

No one's supposed to know how to game my system like this except me! This can't be possible! Unless he has some sort of demonic power that allows him to see through—

"Gaaah!" Sacula staggered, her lips parted in shock as a powerful impact reverberated through her body.

The roulette wheel had stopped once again.

Oh... Sacula thought, dazed. *That's right—every time a high-value token is paid out to a player, it drains* my *mana instead.*

This was, of course, because the entire casino—including all the things inside—were crafted from her mana. This meant that whenever a player won a game, Sacula had to expend some of her mana to create the tokens that person had won. Commonplace metals like bronze and silver didn't take much mana for her to produce, but the higher-value tokens that were made of precious metals like

gold and mythril were a whole different story.

Suddenly, Sacula was hit with a horrible realization. *Just producing enough mana to craft that man's winnings was enough to make me nearly pass out! If he...if he exchanges all those tokens for prizes...the resulting mana drain might even kill me!*

Sacula's terrified eyes darted to the adventurer. He'd already left the roulette table, and was casually strolling over to the vending machine full of prizes. She tried to chase after him, but her legs dragged against the floor, heavier than lead.

"W-Wait!" the demon shouted in a hoarse voice, casting her sexy older lady persona aside as she pleaded desperately for mercy. "Stop, *please!* Don't—*Aaaaaaaaaaah*!!!"

Sacula dropped to the ground, writhing in agony. It felt as if her soul was being sucked straight out of her body. The adventurer had unfortunately *not* been the merciful kind—he'd dropped his tokens into the prize vending machine without a second of hesitation.

H-How can this be happening...? I've been luring foolish humans to their deaths for centuries! This isn't how things are supposed to—

"*AAAAAAH!!!*"

Another wave of pain washed over Sacula as the adventurer pulled his second prize from the vending machine. He tucked it away, then reached for another set of tokens.

At the sight, Sacula felt true fear. *H-He's going to kill me! But...I don't want to die here! Not like* this*!!!*

The demon dug her hands into the casino floor, crawling painstakingly over to where the adventurer was standing at the prize vending machine. There was a token of anodized titanium in his hands—Sacula had never even seen one of those herself.

If he puts that token into the machine, I'm dead. Sacula thought in despair. *I can't imagine I'd survive being drained of the enormous amount of mana needed to turn a high-value token like that into a prize. But...what should I do?*

What can *I do?*

It was clear that this adventurer wouldn't be moved by pity, and Sacula couldn't eject him from the building by force either. She was bound by the very rules she herself had placed over the casino—the operative one being, violence was forbidden within its doors. Plus, even if she *did* start a fight, there was no way Sacula could win against the adventurer in her current body. Even if she transformed into her true, demon form, victory was unlikely, and Sacula had long sealed that part of her away.

Just as the demon was about to give into despair, an idea burst into her mind. *Wait—if I go about it that way, I just might be able to survive!*

A fierce battle cry burst from Sacula's lips as she used the last of her strength to transform into her original form. Her beautiful, supple human skin peeled away, leaving sturdy iron flesh in its place, and a pair of horns grew out of her head, parting the supple blonde waves of her gorgeous hair.

Bring it on, you crafty bastard! Sacula screamed internally, baring her teeth in a snarl.

She still couldn't actually attack the man—even in her demon form, the rules she'd placed upon the casino bound her hands. Still...if seeing Sacula like this was enough to panic him into attacking...there'd be nothing holding her back from ejecting the adventurer from the casino for breaking the rules!

This...is my final gamble, Sacula thought. *I'm pinning all my hopes on this. If you attack me, I win. If you ignore me and redeem another prize...I'm done for.*

Sacula let out another feral scream, bloodlust dripping from every note.

The adventurer paused at the sound, turning from the vending machine to give Sacula a confused look. At the sight of her, his hand retracted, carrying the token he'd about to place in the slot with it.

I did it! Sacula thought, elation filling her. *I've won!*

However, unfortunately for her...that joy was to be short-lived.

"You're holding up better than I thought," the adventurer said thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his lips. "Guess I can keep going for a bit longer then."

At first, Sacula didn't understand what the man had meant. She stared after him as he strode past her, the token made of anodized titanium still in his hand. It was only when she heard the ominous clunk of the roulette wheel spinning to life that she realized what was going on.

"N-No..." Sacula's hands began to shake.

The demon could feel her final moments drawing near—they would have been happier, perhaps, if she had not realized what the adventurer was doing.

I...I can't believe this. He's not going to exchange that token after all. He's not going to attack me either. Instead... Tears filled the demon's eyes. *Instead, he's opted to keep racking up winnings at the roulette table until he drains me of every drop of mana I have.*

Sacula's final gamble...had failed utterly.

"NOOOOOO!!!" the demon screamed, a wave of anguish unfolding over her.

She knew instinctively that begging wouldn't change a thing. She was going to die, and there was no way for her to save herself from that fate. The only thing she had left was the ability to scream out her grief and despair.

Before Sacula's welling eyes, the roulette ball plunked to a stop once more. It was in the zero pocket, just as she'd known it would be.

Sacula's body went limp as her consciousness began to fade. Her mana had been emptied out so completely that there was barely enough left to even craft the tokens needed to pay out the adventurer's winning bet.

How many prizes will my body be able to craft before it gives out completely, Sacula wondered idly, her mind drifting. *Ah, well...it's not like I'll be waking up again to find out.*

By the time the adventurer was done, Sacula would be nothing more than a husk—her body and soul drained to fulfill his desires. Left in such a state, death would not be long in claiming her.

I underestimated him, Sacula thought as her vision grew dim. *I can't believe I ever thought that man was a third-rate adventurer. Now, I can see him for what he truly is...*

“That man...is a *monster*...” she gasped.

But alas, her last words fell on deaf ears.

It was in this way that Sacula, the great demon of the Grand Lilim who had terrorized humans for centuries, died an ignoble death.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Mere moments after Sacula’s demise, the door to the Grand Lilim swung open. The adventurer stepped outside, and behind him the casino vanished without a trace. It was as if it had never existed in the first place.

The adventurer stared for a few seconds at the place where the building had once stood, then let out a long sigh.

“Shit,” he said in a somber voice. “I forgot to leave myself with any cash.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

“Okay,” I said, completely exasperated, “let me get this straight—you’re telling me you made such a huge killing gambling that you exchanged all of your money for prizes?”

Rex gave me a sheepish smile. “Yup, basically.”

We were sitting in my hotel room together at the moment—Rex had refused to stop telling his story even after I’d closed my door in his face, so eventually I’d given up and let him in. Some of the stuff he’d mentioned had been too complicated for me to follow, but at this point I felt like I’d gotten the gist of it.

“Like I said,” Rex continued, “that’s why I need to borrow some money. I promise I’ll pay you back right away.”

I narrowed my eyes. *He sounds sincere, but frankly, after what he just told me? Yeah, I don’t trust him one bit. I mean, he’s reliable enough when it comes to adventuring, but he doesn’t sound like he can handle his money* at all.

“If I help you out,” I said slowly, “you really are gonna pay me back, right, old geezer?”

Rex nodded. “Absolutely—I’ll swear on it. Have I ever lied to you before?”

“No,” I said, rolling my eyes, “but I literally met you yesterday, so that’s not

saying much."

I was feeling more and more skeptical as the conversation went on—Rex's constant assurances had left me suspicious of his intentions.

"Radd, *come on*," he muttered. "I've got a plan and everything! Hell, if you're that mistrustful of me, I'll make sure I get your money back to you before the night's over."

"Please tell me that this plan doesn't involve more gambling," I moaned.

It didn't seem too outlandish a question, from what I'd learned of him so far.

The truly scary thing, I thought, doing my best to picture Rex at the tables, *is that it's just as easy to imagine him losing everything as it is to imagine him hitting the jackpot and coming back with millions.*

I still must have had a distinctly doubtful look on my face, because Rex let out a long sigh and said, "All right, fine. I wasn't planning on showing anyone this, but if you don't trust me to use your money properly I've got no other choice. How about you come with me and I'll show you what I'm planning on doing?"

"H-Huh...?"

Rex sent me a mischievous grin. "Come on—I'll show you what *real* alchemy is like."

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

"Man, how much farther do we have to walk?!" I demanded crankily.

I was feeling heartily pissed at myself at the moment—how could I have so easily let myself be taken in by Rex's promises? I also might have been, just the teeniest bit, excited to see what my hero was going to do next...but I hated that, so no way was I going to admit it. I'd just stick to complaini—

"Don't worry," Rex said. "We're here."

"Huh?" I looked up in surprise. Before me was the very same place I'd been training earlier in the afternoon. "You took me to the Adventurers' Guild?"

What does he think he's gonna do here? I wondered.

Rex ignored my question and walked up to the reception desk. He placed the

1,000 wen he'd borrowed from me on the counter.

"What're you gonna do *here* with my 1,000 wen?" I asked, puzzled.

"Exactly what I said," Rex explained as he began to walk toward the back of the Guild hall. "Alchemy."

I shuffled after him, my eye quickly falling on a huge cauldron resting in front of the Guild's back wall.

"That's...an alchemy crucible, right?" I asked.

Most Adventurers' Guilds had a bunch of facilities available that any adventurer could use, so long as they paid the fee. If the cauldron in front of us *was* an alchemy crucible, it would count as one of those facilities, just like the training ground I'd visited earlier in the day.

I wasn't an alchemist myself, but I knew the basics of how the science worked—if you put multiple items together into an alchemy crucible and mixed them together with your mana, it would create a new item.

That's when it hit me.

"Hold up—you're an alchemist too, old man?!"

"I only know the basics," Rex said absently. "But yeah."

He raised his hand over a metal tray next to the crucible; seconds later, two daggers plopped onto it.

"Wh-What are those?" I asked.

It was obvious they were no normal daggers. Their design was rather ominous, and they were wreathed in a crimson aura.

"These're some of the prizes I got from the casino I told you about earlier," Rex explained. "They're called Goblin Slaughterers. You normally only find them in chests in mid-level dungeons, but honestly they're probably the worst reward you can get from them."

"Mm-hmm...?"

"That being said, they're still magically enchanted weapons, so they've got five times as much attack power as your sword."

“F-Five times?!” I looked down at the daggers, speechless. “Can I...t-touch one?”

Rex shrugged. “You can if you really want to, but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Why not?”

Rex frowned at me in annoyance, then pulled a pen and paper out of his Inventory. Once properly situated, he started scribbling something down.

“Here,” he finally said when he was done writing. He shoved the paper into my hand.

【Goblin Slaughterer】

An orichalcum dagger originally created by a man who was forced to retire as an adventurer after losing a fight against a group of goblins. A curse against the monsters has been placed on the blade, making it 3x as effective when used against goblins and a third less effective when used against all other races.

In addition to these effects, any goblin damaged by the weapon will have their stats reduced by 10% (this effect will last until the end of a battle, and can only be activated once per enemy for each Goblin Slaughterer equipped).

The strength of the curse on this dagger is so strong that once equipped, this weapon cannot be removed.

“Holy shit, how much did this weapon’s creator hate goblins?!” I shouted after reading the explanation Rex had written. “You gotta be some kinda crazy to go this far just because you lost to a group of them in the past!”

I mean, holding onto a grudge that deep is just unnatural!

Goblins were the weakest species of monster; no truly powerful foes had ever spawned from their race, though stronger variants *did* exist. That being said, equipping a dagger that was highly effective against goblins but that did a third less damage to all enemy types just wasn’t worth it. Especially since the curse prevented you from swapping your weapon out against other enemies.

It doesn’t matter if that dagger is five times stronger than my sword or not, I thought. *It’s not worth using.*

“Yeah, I can totally see why people would rather get anything other than this

from a chest," I said, scoffing. "Not to mention, isn't dropping a goblin's stats by only 10% a pretty garbage effect?"

I mean, if the daggers stunned them or something that would be a useful secondary effect, but a 10% stat decrease just feels kinda unnecessary.

Rex gave me a stern look. "Hey, don't underestimate the power of debuffs. Plus, the effects on the Goblin Slaughterer are stackable—if I dual wielded these two daggers, I'd be able to cut a goblin's stats by around 20% instead."

I gave him a dubious look. "I'm pretty sure it would still be faster to just do a bunch of damage and forget the debuffs."

Rex let out a small laugh. "True that," he agreed. "These might come in handy if you were planning on spending ages in the Goblin Caves down west of Rixia, though—the only monsters in that dungeon are those of the goblin race. The Sage's Staff that you can find at the end is a pretty good item, too..."

My eyes glazed over as Rex listed some of the virtues of the weapon, but I jolted back to attention when his face turned serious.

"Regardless," he continued, "I'm not planning on using these Goblin Slaughterers as weapons." Rex picked up the tray in front of him and tilted it towards the crucible, causing the two daggers to slide into it.

"H-Hey!" I gasped, reaching out to stop him.

But I was too late.

Why would he do that?! I wondered. *I thought alchemy crucibles were meant to make consumable items. You're supposed to put in medical ingredients to create potions, or multiple potions to strengthen their effects and stuff!*

"Just watch, Radd," Rex murmured.

A shiver ran down my spine. "Wait, don't tell me you... You're going to synthesize equipment using alchemy?!"

I'd never heard of someone doing such a thing in my life, but Rex seemed so confident it almost seemed like he'd tried it before.

If it's really possible to combine equipment together in an alchemy crucible...that would revolutionize the world! I gulped.

Rex raised his hand over the crucible and started pouring mana into it; the cauldron began to vibrate as it stirred to life.

“Can you seriously craft weapons with alchemy?” I asked sullenly.

Rex cackled. “Yeah, no way—that’s completely impossible. Sorry.”

“Wait, what?” I turned and gave him a confused look, but ended up turning back to the cauldron as a small puff of black smoke came flooding out from inside.

That’s the sign that an alchemy attempt failed, isn’t it? I thought, scurrying over to the cauldron. *That’s what’s supposed to happen when someone tries to craft an item they aren’t skilled enough to make, or if someone mixes up some ingredients.*

Regardless of why the cauldron was behaving as it was, the outcome should be the same—the two daggers Rex had placed inside should have been turned into useless garbage.

“Wh-What happened to the daggers?!” I yelled.

I peered over the edge of the cauldron and was horrified to see that the Goblin Slaughterers were now no more than two misshapen lumps of metal. My stomach dropped.

“H-Hey!” I whirled to face Rex. “Your daggers! They...they got turned into scrap metal!”

Sure, they’re cursed weapons, but even items like them deserve better than this kind of treatment!

I narrowed my eyes at Rex, feeling indignant at the wastefulness of what he’d just done, but he just gave me a confused look.

“Scrap metal...?” he asked, letting out a long-suffering sigh. “What are you talking about? Something wrong with your eyes?”

“H-Huh...?”

Rex reached forward, nonchalantly scooping up the two lumps of metal. He brushed his hand over the surface of them, casting the soot from the cauldron aside.

W-Wait... Why're they glowing like that?!

⁜⁜⁜

"Th-Thank you very much," the weapon-shop owner stammered in a timid voice as he took the metal Rex had just sold him.

After that first, failed alchemy attempt I'd witnessed, Rex had taken more and more Goblin Slaughterers out of his Inventory, tossing two of them into the crucible at a time. Once he'd finished converting them all to metal, he'd taken his spoils over to the weapon shop—which had just been about to close—and sold every bit of it to the shop owner.

As it turned out, if you failed to combine two Goblin Slaughterers with alchemy, the resulting reaction would turn them into lumps of orichalcum ore. Even unprocessed, the metal was incredibly valuable—it was worth more than gold! As such, Rex had been able to sell the lumps off for 5,000,000 wen apiece.

Rex had sold the shop owner lump after lump of ore without a moment's hesitation—meanwhile, I'd been standing beside him with my eyes practically popping out of my skull. By the twentieth sale, the poor weapon-shop owner had almost been in tears. He'd told us mournfully that he'd bought all he could afford, and so we'd left after handing over the last piece of ore.

Still...Rex had made 100,000,000 wen in the span of an hour! It was mind-boggling.

Th-This is insane, I thought, dazed. *When he came to my room an hour ago he was penniless and begging to borrow a measly 1,000 wen! And now...* My head spun as we walked out the weapon shop's doors.

Rex had been walking on ahead of me, but he suddenly stopped. "Oh, yeah," he said, turning back around. "I almost forgot."

He tossed something my way, and I reflexively caught it. Looking down, I saw a bag filled with 100,000 wen. It took a few seconds for me to realize that that was exactly a hundred times the amount that he'd borrowed.

Feeling flustered, I stared up at Rex, speechless.

He shot me a grin. "See, I kept my promise didn't I?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but he stalked off before I got the chance.

I crossed my arms over my chest as I watched his back recede into the distance. “That’s not what alchemy’s designed for, old man...”

Chapter 4: Siblings

In the beginning, the ultimate God created people to populate his empty lands. However, these mortals were weak, and died far too easily. Feeling sympathy for their plight, God sliced away a portion of his body and split it sixfold. And so, born from the pieces of God's body, rose six familiars.

These loyal familiars were incapable of lying, or of breaking their promises. God commanded them to lead the mortals to prosperity, and thus each of the six bestowed their knowledge among those who followed them. Alas, they all had different teachings, and the division that developed between their peoples led to the formation of the six races.

Physical changes altered the mortal's forms, for their adoration made them reflections of the demi-gods they followed. Those led by the incarnation of strength grew to revere power, and became ogres. Those led by the incarnation of vitality grew to revere toughness, and became dwarves. Those led by the incarnation of agility grew to revere swiftness, and became fairies. Those led by the incarnation of wisdom grew to revere knowledge, and became elves. Those led by the incarnation of love grew to revere kindness, and become gnomes. And, finally, those who followed the incarnation of omnipotence grew to revere all, and became humans.

Thus were the six races born, and thus were they banded together. And, in the wake of their creation, a golden age of mortals unfolded.

During this new era of history, now known as the Age of Harmony, there was no conflict to be found. Mortals lived long lives, dying only when their natural lifespan had run its course. This prosperity, however, caused God's children to grow overly complacent. They began to stagnate, their once endless ambition lying fallow.

God, having grown bored with his children's idleness, created monsters to stir them to motion once more. Alas, the mortals were not in possession of the knowledge they needed to defend themselves from this new threat—and so, they were slaughtered in droves.

To level the playing field once more, God granted his familiars' followers with the ability to grow—a phenomenon that would one day be called "leveling up." In addition, God granted them with something called an Inventory, which could be accessed via their left hands. Within this otherworldly space, items harvested from defeated monsters could be stored.

Armed with these newfound powers, the six races gained new confidence. They returned to the same battlefields where so many of their brethren had fallen, taking up arms against the monsters once more. This time, they found their strength nearly matched their foe's.

God was pleased—the boredom He had once felt so keenly was now a distant thing. His demi-god children, however, were struck by sadness. They could no more stop themselves from lamenting what had become of the world, then they could stymie their feelings of rage and fury towards God for tormenting the mortal races they had grown so fond of.

Determined to give succor to those who looked to them for aid, the six familiars implored God to eradicate the monsters He had set loose on the world. Alas, He refused. Driven by rage, the six familiars broke the pledges of loyalty they had made to their creator, and struck Him dead.

Upon the destruction of God, six powers emerged from His battered corpse—that of fire, water, wind, earth, light, and dark. The six familiars split these powers among themselves, and thus became gods in their own right. Freshly ascended, these new gods turned to their people, the beleaguered six races they had led for so long, and promised to act as their protectors evermore. In return, the six races pledged to act as blades for their benevolent gods. They swore to become their heroes.

Thus rose the curtain on the Age of Heroes. It was a time of what felt like endless blood and war, a time where the gods and their people fought together, desperate to repel the monstrous horde.

As the years passed, the six races gained more and more ground upon their foes, until at last they reached their final destination—the abode of the Origin of Evil. Alas, before the gods could destroy the item that had brought about so much grief and destruction, the god of omnipotence, who led the human race,

stole it for himself. He absorbed the Origin of Evil into his own body, gaining untold power.

Thus, another army of monsters was born, this time under the control of the humans and their god. The horde ravaged the earth once more as the humans conquered the other mortal races which they had once called their brethren.

Unable to match the might of the god of omnipotence and the humans that followed him, the other gods fell one by one. Soon, only the god of wisdom, who led the elves, remained. Good and evil, light and dark—the two gods clashed in an epic battle that stretched on for seven days and seven nights. The seas raged, the earth ruptured, and the skies sundered from the force of their blows.

It was a cataclysmic battle, but in the end...good won out. The god of wisdom sealed the evil god of omnipotence away, deep within the earth, and left bereft of their god's guidance, most of the human race soon perished. The war came to an end and the world settled into a new rhythm.

Alas, it had taken every ounce of power the god of wisdom possessed to win the final battle against darkness—her strength exhausted, she soon plunged into a deep slumber. The mortal races were left alone upon the earth, much weakened by the long war and the loss of their gods' protections. Mercifully, the monsters who remained had been weakened as well, and so the six races were able to maintain a state of equilibrium.

This time came to be known as the Age of Tranquility, and has persisted even until the current day. But now, with...

"...the evil god's resurrection drawing near, and the god of wisdom, now known as the goddess of salvation, newly woken, it appears a new era is upon us once more. The Age of Heroes has come again."

I breathed out a sigh, snapping the book in my hand shut once I'd read the final sentence.

Looks like this world's setting is the exact same as it was in Braves and Blades*,* I thought.

The book I'd been reading was considered holy scripture; it outlined this

world's creation myth. Honestly, the background lore concerning how this particular story had become *BB*'s official religion was kind of half-baked. It was pretty obvious that the developers had just thrown the doctrine in to explain the lore behind *BB*'s setting. To be honest, though, the fact that most of the gods were assholes made it a pretty believable religion to me. Though it was kind of sad to read the flavor text that had been written at the start of the game's manual in what amounted to a bible...

I shook my head, casting that thought aside with a laugh. *Anyway, assuming this world's story plays out the same as the game, the goddess that appeared in the sky is the same god who led the elves in this creation myth and who fought against the god of omnipotence.*

If I recalled correctly, her name was...Finales. Finales, the Goddess of Light. Throughout *Braves and Blades*, she would offer the game's protagonist her help, while the god of omnipotence, now known as Rasulfi, God of Darkness, served as the game's final boss.

Now that I've got this much evidence, there's no denying it, I thought. *Even just two days into living in this world, and I think I've got a pretty good grasp of it. Enough, at least, to say with confidence that this place really is based off the world of* Braves and Blades.

I'd read enough stories of people who'd been reincarnated into game worlds before to know that there were a handful of recurring reasons as to why such worlds existed. The two most common explanations were: the universe is made up of an infinite number of parallel worlds, and the one in which the main character was reincarnated just happened to be exactly like the game they'd once played; or, a world like the one in the game the main character had played had always existed, and the game had in fact been based off of this alternate reality.

Neither of those explanations work here, though, I mused. *For one thing, the events in the game happen here as well, even if I try to avoid them. Plus, everyone here speaks Japanese, and uses the same sorts of weights and measurements that are used in Japan, like meters.*

The culture of this world felt too nonsensical as well—everyone wore clothes

that wouldn't have been out of place in medieval Europe, but there were tons of different amenities and services around that had clearly come from the mind of a modern Japanese person. I mean, on the way back from the weapon shop, I'd stopped by a general store and bought a pen enchanted to have limited ink! I'd bought a couple notebooks too, thinking I'd use them in order to jot down my future plans.

Those items would make sense if they existed in a game world, but considering the supposedly low technological level of this place? They were *totally* out of place.

Which means that the game version of Braves and Blades *was created first, and this world was made based off of it,* I decided. *But if that's true, something else just doesn't add up—why was the world made in the first place?*

The implication was clearly that it had been made for me, but I couldn't help but find that dubious. I mean, sure, if I'd been some hero who'd saved my old world, or was some person who'd been in possession of some random ancient Egyptian artifact, or was even someone who just happened to be friends with a god, *then* I would've understood. But I was just a normal guy with no special accomplishments to my name! I had no such impressive background to speak of.

I did *sacrifice my life for that girl, I guess, but I doubt that gave me enough good karma to make me worthy of my own game world...*

I sighed. "I guess there's no point dwelling on it, huh?" I asked myself.

Still, I couldn't help but remember the voice I'd heard after that truck had hit me, and right before I'd died for the first time. "I will grant that wish of yours," it had said.

I had no way of knowing whether that voice had belonged to a god, the buddha, or even the devil, though it had certainly sounded majestic enough to belong to a being who was capable of creating entire worlds.

It's pointless for me to try and guess at the intentions of such a powerful being, anyway, I thought with a sigh. *I'd be better off spending my time figuring out what I should do next.*

I pulled the notebook I'd bought from the general store earlier out of my Inventory and set it on my desk.

"First things first," I said, speaking aloud since it helped me organize my thoughts, "I need a goal. What should I do from here on out?"

I flipped the notebook open and stared at the swathe of empty white pages that laid before my eyes. They symbolized both the endless possibilities that existed for my future, and the emptiness I currently felt.

"Most people would immediately start looking for a way back to their own world," I murmured.

I put my pen to the notebook's paper, meaning to write "I need to find a way back to my original world," but my hand stuttered as I scribbled down the words.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss Japan, I thought sadly. *I had so many things I wanted to accomplish in my life, and I left all my work half-complete. Plus, I miss my friends and family... I want to see them again.*

My chest went tight thinking of my parents, who were probably besides themselves with grief. Still, even with all the things I'd lost hanging over me...I found I didn't feel compelled to seek a way back to my original world.

I mean, there's no doubt about it—I died back there, I thought, the distinctive feeling of getting run over playing out in my head again and making me shiver. *If it wasn't for whatever mysterious power brought me here, I'd still be stuck in that body, a bloody corpse lying along the side of the road.*

The reality was, my funeral had probably already happened. The me in that world was most likely presumed dead. The people close to me were probably sad, and my death had probably caused a few problems at work, but...ultimately, my loss really didn't amount to much.

Depressing as it was, that world was going to keep turning with or without me in it. My position at work had been somewhat important, but the company would likely replace me in the span of a few weeks. Once that happened, they'd just keep trucking on, not even noticing my absence. As for my parents, they still had my much more reliable older brother to lean on. He'd help them get

past the trauma of my passing.

Besides, I'm not that person anymore—I'm Rex now.

Even if I returned to Japan, my appearance had changed completely. I highly doubted I'd be able to get by in my old country as an unregistered person who looked as flashy as Rex. But, most importantly to me...if I returned to Japan, that meant I'd go back to being just another regular person. Rex may be the Jagen of this world, but he was still an A-ranked adventurer of some renown.

I know it's selfish of me, but I want to take advantage of that. I want to live a life where I have some level of importance in the world.

"All right!" I said in a rush, a weight lifting off of my shoulders.

My choice was now clear—it was obvious what I'd rather do.

There's a chance I'll regret this down the line, of course, I thought, *but for now at the very least, in this moment, I don't want to go back home.*

I picked my pen back up and wrote: "I've gotta figure out how to make a new life in this world!"

In-game, *BB's* opening played after the goddess appeared in the sky above and proclaimed her message to the world, but for me, the words on the paper before me were the real beginning.

This was the true start of my adventure.

I stretched languidly, peace settling over me as my decision settled into my bones. Still...I had one more problem on my hands.

I glanced over my shoulder, sneaking a glance at one of the beds behind me. The room held two, one of which was mine, and the other of which held the sleeping form of the emerald-haired girl I'd rescued outside of Ars.

What am I going to do about her? I wondered.

I knew that most likely she was Rex's younger sister, Recilia, but beyond that she was a mystery. I hadn't even gotten the chance to talk to her yet, as she still hadn't woken up in the day since I'd snatched her from the gargoyle's clutches.

I'd taken her to a healer the day before, once we'd finally gotten to Freelea,

but they'd just told me she was fully healed and would wake up sooner or later. That meant she was fine *physically*, but since she was a character who'd died in the original game, I'd still felt a bit worried.

In the end, I'd taken her to the inn with me. It wasn't like I could abandon her or foist her off onto anyone else. The problem was...I had no idea what to do with her when she woke up.

Recilia was Rex's sister by blood—it was highly likely she knew him well. The fact that I'd never once spoken to her once was definitely not going to go in my favor.

This would be so much easier if Recilia had been a sibling who was separated from Rex since birth, I thought with a sigh. *Too bad the developers didn't decide to go that route.*

I didn't have any information to go on with her either—since she was guaranteed to die in the game, the developers hadn't bothered to build out her background.

To be honest...it's possible she's not even actually Rex's sister, I realized suddenly. *I just assumed she was based on his reaction when he found her dead. She* is *pretty similar to him in appearance, though...*

I turned fully around, examining her closer.

She's got the same striking good looks as Rex, that's for sure. And with that green hair, she's probably skilled with wind magic. I sighed. *I guess my best bet is to hide the fact that I'm not the real Rex from her, and go from there.*

I felt guilty for lying, at least for now, but I had no other choice in order to keep my secrets safe and to avoid causing her unnecessary grief. Ars had already been conquered by monsters, so it was likely everyone else Recilia knew was dead. Telling her that her last living relative had actually had his body hijacked by someone else would be *way* too much for her right now.

Man, things are already looking pretty tough... I ran a stressed hand through my hair. *I definitely need to get some more concrete plans in place if I want everything to go well.*

If I'd been the protagonist of some light novel or manga, I'd be able to pull

through based on my innate talents and some plot armor, but I was decidedly *not* the protagonist of this game. On top of that, the world of *Braves and Blades* was none too kind. I wasn't going to be able to just wing my way through everything.

Good thing entering the workforce taught me the importance of planning things out in advance, I thought, grinning. *The only thing more important is knowing how to bullshit anytime someone asks you for a progress update.*

I turned back to my notebook, suddenly feeling infinitely more motivated.

Even if things don't go according to plan, a thorough roadmap will let me know how far behind I am in reaching my goals, and will lay out for me how to get back on track. And, happily for me, I already know what my first goal is going to be.

I scribbled "Survive for three years!" onto the notebook's still mostly pristine page.

The goal sounded simple enough, but in reality it was going to be anything but. If I just kept going with the general flow of the game, there was a hundred percent chance I was going to die. Sure, I'd managed to survive a certain death event during the opening of the game, but that didn't mean I could just relax now that it was over. For one thing, this whole world would be toast if the evil god ended up being resurrected. That's why I'd written down three years specifically—if I survived that long, technically I would have beaten the game.

To my mind, there were four main things I'd need to accomplish to reach this first goal: number one, find the true protagonist; number two, learn more about this world; number three, make sure to clear all of the important story events; and number four, get stronger. The first of these four bullet points was of course the most important—without the true protagonist, my hopes of clearing *BB* were nil.

In *Braves and Blades,* the protagonist was the most important person in the world. They were known as the Child of Fate, as the One Chosen by Light. Without them, certain key events couldn't even be triggered, and their strength would of course be indispensable in defeating Rasulfi, the evil god. The protagonist would have unique abilities that were extremely effective against

monsters, like Sword of Light and Wings of Light, and beyond that, their stats were outstanding. To top it off, they had a passive skill called Blessing of Light which supposedly increased the amount of experience they and all of their party members gained from battle.

The "supposedly" was important—since you could only play as the protagonist in *Braves and Blades,* you could never take them out of your party and see how big of a difference Blessing of Light actually made. In more simple terms, I had no idea how much of an impact the skill had on EXP gain compared to the baseline.

One thing's for sure, I thought. *None of the kids in Radd's party are the true protagonist, and neither is he.*

Radd would have been the one to watch, since he had all the qualities required to be the protagonist that was a young boy that dreamed of becoming an adventurer, but the seal on the demon in the Cavern of Trials hadn't broken when he touched it. That meant he definitely couldn't be the true protagonist.

With that backstory out of the way, there were still six more potential protagonists to find. Although, if the eighth player character the developers of *BB* had announced as DLC had been implemented in this world, that would bring my count up to seven.

I blew out a moody breath. *So I'm going to have to find the true protagonist, armed only with vague knowledge of the backstories of the potential player characters. And that's ignoring the worst-case scenario—that this world might not have a true protagonist at all.*

I cast that ugly thought from my mind. There was no use worrying over it now; if that was the case, there wouldn't be much I could do anyway.

Onto the second point, I thought. *I need to learn more about this world.*

This point was only slightly less important than the first—there were a lot of game mechanics I'd grown comfortable with using in-game, but that didn't mean they worked in this new version of the world. I'd need to test and see if everything functioned how I thought it should, and make note of anything I discovered that was present exclusively in this world.

I've already made some progress on this front, at least, I thought. *Now that I've tested alchemy, I know it works just like it did in-game.*

Namely, this meant that if you put items into the alchemy crucible that couldn't be combined into something else, the resulting failure reduced the two items into their base components. If that wasn't game logic, I didn't know what was. It certainly wouldn't be the same result I'd get if this world properly followed its own set of rules for alchemy.

The way I'd outsmarted Sacula, the demon at the Grand Lilim, on the other hand...*that* was something I couldn't have done in the game. *BB*'s systems would have never let me add an additional bet onto the table after the roulette wheel had started spinning. In fact, once you hit the button to start the wheel, you'd completely lose control of your character until it came to a stop.

That told me that there were definitely things in this world that I could do that I hadn't been able to do in the game, and vice versa. I was sure I could use that knowledge to my advantage depending on the sort of situations I found myself in. I'd still have to keep testing different mechanics in order to learn specifically what they could and couldn't do, however.

Knowledge is going to be my greatest weapon in this world, I thought. *And in that case...I really wanna visit the Monument of Heroes.*

The Monument of Heroes was a large monument located in the Water Metropolis. It had the names of all the past heroes who'd done something great for the world of *Braves and Blades* carved into it. Or, at least that was what was *supposed* to be carved into it, setting-wise. In reality, when I'd checked it out in-game, the carvings had just turned out to be the staff credits.

Maybe it's different now, though, I thought. *I highly doubt this world has a monument carved with stuff like, "Programmer: Yamada Tarou."* I snorted just thinking about it. *Well, if it does, then that'll be the last confirmation I need that this world is based off the game.*

I flipped the page in my notebook, bracing myself to start writing on the fresh paper.

Next up, point number three: I've gotta make sure I clear all of the game's important story events.

Personally speaking, this was a duty I'd prefer to hand over to the true protagonist of the game, rather than do it myself. Living a peaceful life sounded much more pleasant than plunging into dangerous quests, but unfortunately there was no guarantee I'd find the true protagonist anytime soon.

If I avoided the key story events and for whatever reason they didn't get done, things could get ugly fast in this world. Most named characters in *BB* had at least one Fatal Event associated with them, if not two, three, or even four. And if you didn't complete a Fatal Event...well, the character involved in it would die. Hell, the character could still die even if you did participate—a single wrong choice on the player's part would be enough to send the character to their death. Even Ain, the Prince of Light, could get killed if the right events didn't get triggered. I'd heard if you didn't play things right, he got assassinated by his own brother at the start of year three.

There were also more major versions of Fatal Events, which were called History Junctions. If you made the wrong choice during one of those, you could start a rebellion, cause a city to devolve into a slum, get yourself washed away in a flood or crushed by an earthquake, or, at the most basic level, end up slaughtered by a horde of monsters. Your choices could also cause certain characters to have a grudge against you, transforming them into permanent antagonists. They could also just become inaccessible to add to your party because the sections of the world you needed to traverse to meet them were destroyed.

I wasn't looking forward to any of these History Junction events, but I couldn't ignore them, even to prioritize my life. The world would fall into chaos.

If I can, I want to set them all off and steer them to the best possible conclusions, I decided. *That's going to be a helluva task, though, with all of the ridiculously complex trigger conditions they have. From what I remember, practically everything about the player's in-game actions affects whether or not a History Junction event will happen. I'll have to keep an eye on how far in the story I've progressed, how much time has passed since I've been in this world, what characters I've recruited to be in my party, and what other events have already been completed.*

I sighed, scrubbing my hand through my hair again.

As always, my game knowledge is going to serve as my greatest weapon—I should start off by writing down everything I remember.

I knew I'd long since forgotten some of the specifics, like when certain events needed to be triggered. Still, getting down everything I would be to my advantage. Besides, the brain was an imperfect storage structure—with time, I'd probably forget even the information that came so easily to me now.

All right, I thought. *Let's get to work.*

I took out a second notebook and started writing down everything I could remember about Fatal Events and History Junctions into it, listing out the trigger conditions for each one and how best to clear them.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

A few hours later, I looked down at my notebook with raised brows. *Damn, I wrote a ton!*

Amazement filled me as I flipped through page after page of filled out paper—I'd managed to remember quite a lot. Granted, there *were* some things I'd written down that I wasn't entirely sure of, but considering that years had passed since I'd last played *BB*, I still thought the extent of the information was pretty impressive.

There's enough in here that someone could use this as a guide to what'll happen in the future, I realized. *I better be careful it doesn't get into the hands of the wrong person—that would cause all kinds of trouble.*

Now that I thought of it, if this was a light novel, this notebook would absolutely be the kind of thing that the bad guys would steal in the latter half of the story. I'd read plots like that a thousand times.

Seriously, I need to be careful to make sure no one else ever reads this. I've gotta be really, really carefu—

"Huh?"

There was a shadow over my notebook.

My heart leapt into my throat, and I broke out into a cold sweat. *Shit! I completely forgot that there was someone else in this room!*

My hands shook, and I forced myself to take a deep breath.

Get ahold of yourself. There's no way she woke up now, *of all times. I mean, that would be the worst timing possible! That stuff only happens in stories.*

Holding this thought close to my heart, I slowly turned around.

"Brother...?"

I recoiled, horrified at the sight of Recilia standing behind me, a ghastly look on her face.

My prayers have gone unanswered! I wailed internally.

"U-Uh..."

I had no idea what to say—I just stared at her blankly. I glanced down at the notebook, my stomach dropping even further when I saw what was written on the page Recilia was currently looking at. Right there in front of me was the heading "The Rebellion of Freelea," and, even worse, "The Assassination of Ain, the Prince of Light."

It's totally obvious I'm writing down future events in here, isn't it? I thought in dismay.

That wasn't even the worst of it, either—my first notebook was still open to the page where I'd written "I need to find a way back to my original world" at the top, then crossed it out and written "I've gotta figure out how to make a new life in this world!"

When Recilia saw where my eyes had gone, hers soon followed, and her expression stiffened. She drew her sword, pointing it at me.

"R-Rex...?" she stammered in a trembling voice. "*No*, you're not my brother. So who are you?! *Answer me!* Who the hell are you?!"

The point of Recilia's sword slid forward, pressing against my forehead. The tension in the air was palpable.

"I...don't know what you're talking about..." I said weakly.

"Don't you try and play dumb!" she snapped, a mixture of anger and fear in her voice. "Did you seriously think I wouldn't notice that you aren't my real

brother?!”

Yeah, it doesn’t matter what excuse I tell her now, I realized. *There’s no way she’ll believe me.*

“Well, umm, you see...” I said hesitantly.

Recilia’s grip tightened on her sword.

Great, now I’m being so wishy-washy I’ve only confirmed her suspicions, I thought with an inward sigh. *Looks like it’s time to completely ditch the façade.*

I didn’t make the decision just because I was desperate, though—I might have intended to hide the truth from her at first, but I hadn’t planned on hiding it forever. I wasn’t exactly a saint, but I wasn’t enough of a scumbag to fool someone into believing that their last living blood relative was alive when they weren’t, either.

“Fine,” I finally said. “I’ll tell you everything.”

I hope you’re ready for this, Recilia. Now that it’s come to this, you’re going to have to bear the weight of this secret with me. Once I tell you everything, we’re destined to share the same fate...

“First off, let me start by saying that I *am* Rex Tauren, but at the same time I’m not,” I told her. “I was born in a completely different world than this one and…”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

In the end, I told Recilia everything. Sure, there were some things I could have easily hidden, but I didn’t see the need. So I told her about my reincarnation, about the evil god on the verge of resurrecting and destroying the world, and that those scribbles she’d seen in my notebook was the start of me trying to plan out what I was going to do about it. I even told her about Ars, and the army of monsters that had invaded it, killing all those who hadn’t managed to escape.

When at last I stopped talking, a thoughtful look came over her face. “I see…” she muttered.



That's...her reaction? I thought, baffled. *No sorrow or anger? I mean, this is all probably a huge shock to her, but even so, that reaction seems a bit too muted.*

“You don’t think I’m lying?” I asked her, unable to bear the silence permeating the room.

Recilia shook her head, satisfaction wending its way over her face. “If you were, you wouldn’t have said that,” she said simply.

I gave her a confused look and she added, “If we went to any church and asked them to conduct a Trial of Truth, I’d be able to know at once whether you were lying or not. Anyone truly of this world would know that lying is pointless when there’s such a convenient verification method nearby.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant,” I said thoughtfully.

Recilia was right, of course—no liar would ever dare to bring up the subject of how trustworthy they were when there was such a simple method of verifying the truth of what they said. Therefore, pretty much the only reason I would ask such a question was that I actually was from another world and didn’t know about the Trial of Truth, or if I was for some reason feigning ignorance of it.

In reality, though, neither of those options were true. I’d known about the Trial of Truth all along since I’d read *Braves and Blades’* lore guidebook. I just hadn’t imagined it could be used in such a way.

I might have been a master of *BB*, but that didn’t mean my knowledge of the game’s background lore was perfect—I really only knew about the things that directly pertained to beating the game.

“Besides,” Recilia said, breaking into my thoughts, “it’s pretty clear by now that you don’t know anything about my real brother.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

Recilia looked out the window and said bluntly, “It’s been a decade since I last saw Rex.”

My eyebrows winged up. “Oh...” I said slowly.

“Oh, indeed,” Recilia said sarcastically. “Long story short, Rex ran away ten years ago to become an adventurer. The incident caused quite a stir. I’d only just heard that he’d returned home to Ars when the monsters attacked. I had to ask around before learning that he’d left from the eastern gate that morning.”

“H-Hold on a second,” I stammered. “Does that mean when you said there was no way you wouldn’t recognize your own brother—”

“I was lying, yes,” Recilia cut in, not even a hint of remorse in her voice. “Fortunately, you were dumb enough to believe me.” She looked me up and down, her eyes cutting. “Honestly, I don’t know how to feel yet about another person being in my brother’s body. It’s not as if I really knew him all that well, but still…”

Recilia trailed off, and I sat there frozen, unsure of what to say next. I couldn’t

exactly fill her in on Rex's backstory—despite his popularity among *BB* fans, his character was still mostly a mystery. There was one primary reason behind that, but— "There's something I want to ask you," Recilia suddenly burst out. "In your world, how does my brother's story—how does *Rex's* story—conclude?"

I hesitated for a moment, but in the end I decided it would be best to tell Recilia everything. There was no point in hiding the truth from her. Still, I'd have to carefully organize my thoughts before opening my mouth.

In *BB*, Rex was primarily an early game character. He was strong at first, but by the midway point of the game he got outpaced by basically everyone else. But, more importantly when it came to Recilia's question, he was destined to eventually leave the protagonist's party for good.

"Once the story reaches a certain point, Rex tells the protagonist he needs to take care of something," I explained. "He leaves your party after that."

From what I remembered, Rex's departure was triggered either by letting an entire year pass in the game, or by completing the subjugation of one of the twelve Ruins of Darkness. It was impossible to beat the game without doing one of those two things, so Rex was fated to leave the protagonist's party no matter what. And, after he did...

"Rex never appears in the main story after that, but..." I trailed off, looking up at Recilia.

Her gaze was unwavering, her eyes locked on mine. "But what?" she demanded.

"But...if you visit Ars at any point after he takes off, there's a corpse wearing all black inside the castle."

The prevailing theory among the fandom was that Rex left the protagonist's party to try and liberate Ars by himself, but in the end, he failed and was killed by the monsters inside the city. It was a poignant end for *BB*'s aloof adventurer—if it was true, he'd died as he lived, proud and alone.

"I see," Recilia said, her voice flat. She retreated into her thoughts for a brief time, then suddenly said, "You know, all this talking has made me thirsty."

"H-Huh?"

I looked up in surprise, only to see Recilia pouring herself a glass of water from a nearby pitcher. When it was full, she tipped her head back and downed the thing in a single gulp. Dumbfounded, I could only stare as she refilled the glass and then handed it over to me.

“Here,” she said, in a tone that didn’t brook no for an answer. “Have some.”

“U-Umm…” I muttered hesitantly, trying to think of how best to refuse her.

Recilia just pressed the glass more firmly into my hands. “Don’t worry,” she said, a smirk quirking at her lips. “I haven’t poisoned it.”

Timidly, I raised the glass to my lips, my eyes on Recilia the whole time. I took a swig, then relaxed. It really *was* just water.

“Perfect,” Recilia purred, a wide smile spreading across her face as I swallowed a second mouthful. “That was holy water you just drank.”

“Wh-What?!” I choked, slamming the glass down on the nearest surface. “Why did you—?”

“I heard once that there are demons out there that can possess people,” she calmly explained.

“So, that means...” I trailed off.

That means she was testing whether I was a demon that had possessed her brother’s body.

“I just wanted to be sure,” she said, shrugging at my gaping face. “It seemed easy enough to test considering how trusting you are.”

How can she say all this so casually?! I thought, appalled but also a bit intrigued. *It’s honestly scary.*

Back when I’d played *BB*, the only impression that I’d gotten of Recilia was that she seemed like a dignified noble lady, but clearly she was a lot craftier than she first appeared.

Recilia crossed her arms and stared at me for a few seconds, making me more nervous with each passing moment. Finally, she nodded. “All right, I’ve decided,” she said. “I’ll be traveling with you for now.”

“What?!” I shouted.

I had *not* been expecting that.

Recilia just shrugged. “It’s simple, really. Regardless of who you actually are, you’re inside my brother’s body. I’ve got no choice but to keep an eye on you.”

“Y-You’ve got a point there,” I stammered weakly, “but—”

“Plus, you seem to be lacking a lot of common-sense information from this world. I imagine it’ll be beneficial for you to have me around. Besides, I’m a member of the Tauren family. I can hold my own in a fight.”

I stared at Recilia, at a loss. There was a determined glint in her eye that told me loud and clear she wasn’t going to be dissuaded. Still, I couldn’t let her join my party just like that...

“Hold on a minute!” I said, holding up a hand. “You might have trained, but until I see for myself just how strong you are, I can’t agree to letting you join me.”

Recilia was only an event NPC, after all—one that had been destined to die. At the very least, I could be sure that she was weak enough that she couldn’t beat a gargoyle 1-on-1. To be honest, the developers might not have even bothered to give her a proper level or stats, since she only appeared in a single scene.

I’ve got no intention of abandoning Rex’s sister to the wolves, I thought with a sigh, *but if she’s as weak as I suspect, I certainly can’t take her out onto the battlefield.*

“How about you start by telling me your level, and, more importantly, your stats?” I asked her. “Once I’ve got an idea of your skills, we can decide on what to do next.”

There was a silence, and I focused back onto Recilia’s face. Her reaction was strange—not at all what I’d been expecting. She seemed neither opposed to my suggestion nor willing to follow it through. Instead, for the first time since I’d met her, she just looked utterly bewildered.

“What exactly are ‘levels’ and ‘stats?’” Recilia asked slowly.

My mind went blank for a moment. “You’ve... You’ve never heard of them?”

Recilia shook her head. “I’m afraid not. To be more precise, I have no idea what you mean by ‘stats,’ but I can infer what you mean by ‘level.’ It’s an assessment of how much you’ve grown by killing monsters, correct?”

I nodded.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know of any way to check my level,” Recilia admitted. “Furthermore, I’ve never killed any monsters before. It’s possible that my level hasn’t changed from its default.”

That...was *not* what I’d wanted to hear. In RPGs, stats were the most important values in the game. It was unthinkable to me that people in this world were going around without knowing them.

Actually...wait, I thought. *Now that we’re on the topic, how do I check my* own *stats?*

It was such a basic question that I genuinely didn’t know how I’d failed to consider it before this moment. It didn’t seem like an answer would be immediately forthcoming, either—unlike when I’d used my Arts or accessed my Inventory, my body didn’t appear to instinctively know how to check my stats.

Can I not see my stats because I’m not the protagonist? I wondered. *Wait, no—that doesn’t make any sense.*

Checking stats wasn’t something unique to a specific character, it was just something the player did. It was the same as how the player was the one who saved or loaded the game, or how they could check the quest log and so on.

And if levels and stats are information that are only meant for the player, it makes sense that the actual characters of Braves and Blades *don’t think about them, or even know that they exist.*

That was all well and good to know, but...I still absolutely needed to find a way to access my own information. Without it, I wouldn’t be able to figure out how I should grind, or come up with countermeasures to use to shore up my weaknesses against enemies.

Back when I was playing BB, *the only way to check your stats was to open up the main menu...* I pondered. *That’s a bit of a problem.*

Then, all of a sudden, an idea came to me. I went sprinting over to the room's mirror.

I hope this works!

I skidded to a stop in front of my reflection, and immediately felt a strange sense of rightness come over me. "Analyze!" I shouted.

To my joy, a game window immediately popped up in front of me. My stats were depicted on it exactly as they would have been if I'd opened the game's main menu, showing the numerical value and the letter rating both.

【Rex】

LV: 50

HP: 530

MP: 265

Strength: 200 (C+)

Vitality: 200 (C+)

Intelligence: 200 (C+)

Mind: 200 (C+)

Agility: 200 (C+)

Focus: 200 (C+)

Hell yeah! I cheered internally, breathing a sigh of relief.

Analyze wasn't typically a skill you could use in this manner—it was meant to give you information on an enemy. In the game, you actually couldn't use it on allies at all. It appeared now that I was actually in the world of *Braves and Blades*, things worked a little differently.

It'd been a bit of a gamble to try and use it as I had, since there had been no guarantee it would work on a reflection of myself, but fortunately it seemed the skill was versatile enough to let me get away with it.

That said, looking at my current stats wasn't exactly motivating.

Maaan, I thought with a sigh. *Now I'm remembering just how weak Rex is.*

It was the letter grade that had shown up after most of Rex's stats that really drove it home.

You see, in *BB*, every stat but HP and MP also had a letter grade associated with it. These letter grades gave a rough indication of how good a stat actually was. If, for example, one of a character's stats was at 0, it would be given an F ranking. As the character leveled up and the stat increased, so too would the letter grade, moving from E-to E, E to E+, E+ to D-, and so on.

Rex's stats all had the grade of C+, meaning that he was a little above average in every field. That meant he was around the strength he'd need to be towards the middle of a typical playthrough. These stats were obviously out of this world for a party member to have early on in the game, but considering that Rex was level 50...honestly, his spread was pretty poor. And, from what I remembered at least, Rex's growth rates weren't great either.

You see, the average adventurer in *BB* would be granted +4 points to every stat each time they leveled up. Considering that Rex was at 200 points in every stat except his HP and MP, it would be natural then, to assume he was on a level playing field with them. In actuality, though, that wasn't quite true.

Most adventurers' level 1 builds started off with 4 points in each stat. Rex's, on the other hand, started off with just 2, meaning his stats were half what a typical starting character's would be. Furthermore, while +4 was the average growth rate, most characters' rates were slightly different, since they were weighted to benefit their class.

Take, for instance, a character of the Warrior class. Every time they leveled up, they would typically gain +6 strength points, and +2 Intelligence points. This meant that at level 50, they would probably end up with around 300 points in Strength and 100 points in Intelligence.

If you compared the above stats to Rex's at level 50, you would immediately notice that the Warrior class character had 100 more points in Strength than Rex did. Which was *a lot*. You could of course counter this blow by saying that Rex was a versatile jack-of-all-trades, but the fact would still remain that he was much weaker offensively than most characters of his level.

Furthermore, while the average adventurer's growth rate was typically +4,

most of the major party members that could be recruited to the protagonist's party were stronger than the average adventurer. This might not seem like that intense of an advantage, until you realized that most of *BB*'s classes were locked behind certain minimum stat thresholds. This meant that adventurers with higher growth rates, like the game's recruitable party members, were able to switch classes earlier, allowing them to take advantage of the additional stat boosts granted to those classes. This allowed them to reach the minimum stat thresholds for the higher-tier classes even faster, and once they had access to those, they could unlock *BB*'s best skills and spells.

To make a long story short, strong characters could get stronger much faster than weaker ones, and weaker characters were destined to be completely outpaced by their stronger counterparts.

"Umm...you all right over there?" Recilia asked, snapping me back to the present.

"Y-Yeah," I mumbled weakly. "I'm fine."

"You sure?" Recilia prodded. "You look pale. Maybe you should rest for a bit."

She sounded genuinely concerned, despite the fact that her expression was as emotionless as ever. Still, there was no need for her to worry over me—I'd just taken some mental damage from the stark reminder of how weak Rex really was.

And, now that that's out of the way... I turned and walked up to Recilia.

Sure, the fact that I could check my own stats had been an important discovery, but I'd already known what Rex's stats were from the start. The real goal of this whole exercise was to check out *Recilia's* stats. Analyze would probably do the trick, but it still wouldn't show me what was most important—her growth rates.

Although, if she's level 1, her stat spread should tell me a great deal about what her growth rates are, I mused.

In general, a character's level 1 stats were equal to 6 times the stat's growth rate. Therefore, a character who had a growth rate of +4 across the board would normally start off with 24 points in each stat.

If her growth rates are low, she's doomed, I thought cynically.

It wasn't that you couldn't do *anything* about bad growth rates—you could always shore them up by changing into a class with the stat bonuses you were looking for and ensuring you leveled as efficiently as possible. Still, there was a limit to how much you could do. And while +4 was the average growth rate for adventurers, for regular people the average was even lower. Take a random civilian living in Freelea, for example—they'd probably only have half the growth rate of a typical adventurer, meaning they only gained an average of +2 points for each stat when they leveled.

The lowest stat I'll accept from Recilia if she's level 1 is 18, I decided.

That would mean that her average growth rate was somewhere around +3, which would be high enough for her to keep up with me with enough investment.

If her starting stats are lower than that, though... She'll have to go, I thought, wincing. *It'll be for her own good at that point.*

At this point I'd been standing directly in front of Recilia for a decent hunk of time, and her gaze had turned curious. Ignoring her perceptive eyes, I took a deep breath and once again activated my Analyze skill.

【Recilia】

LV: 1

HP: 222

MP: 71

Strength: 118 (C-)

Vitality: 100 (D+)

Intelligence: 55 (D)

Mind: 88 (D+)

Agility: 124 (C-)

Focus: 64 (D)

"...Huh?!"

How the hell are her starting rates so high?!!!

⁜⁜⁜

I woke up in a cold sweat.

"Oh!" I gasped thankfully. "It was just a dream…"

God, it had been such an awful nightmare. I'd been playing an MMO, and I'd decided to take the advice of this green-haired elf girl and make a character with balanced stats, but then because I'd split my stat points evenly amongst every stat, I'd ended up being basically useless in combat and everyone had started making fun of me.

I probably had that nightmare in the first place because I saw how shockingly good Recilia's stats were, I thought with a huff.

When I'd seen them, I couldn't believe my eyes—they were *unbelievably* high for someone who was only at level 1. As far as I knew, Recilia was the only person in *BB* that had stats that crazy at such a low level.

Oh, what I could accomplish if Rex had those stats instead, I thought wistfully.

But alas, there was no point in wishing for the impossible. Even if that didn't stop me from wanting it...

"Looks like you're up," came a voice from beside my bed.

I turned, and saw Recilia was standing there, watching me.

"Yes, um...good morning," I said weakly, doing my best not to let my conflicted feelings over her strength show. "I'm, uh, sorry about last night."

To be honest, my memory of what had happened after I'd learned about Recilia's stats was pretty hazy. The shock had been so great it had left me traumatized.

"It's fine," Recilia told me, taking my apology in stride. "Hold on a moment, I'll be right back."

She opened the door and walked out of the hotel room, only to return a few minutes later with a bowl in her hands.

"I brought you some egg porridge, though I don't know if you'll like it or not,"

Recilia said, holding the bowl out to me.

I eyed her face—there was something in her expression that felt a lot gentler to me than it had the day before.

“So,” Recilia said casually, patiently waiting for me to take the porridge, “I heard from some people downstairs that you got gravely injured the day before yesterday protecting a party of rookie adventurers from a powerful monster.”

“Huh?” I said, freezing just as I was about to reach out and take the bowl from her hands. “Oh, yeah...I guess I did.”

That’s, uh, certainly one way to spin what happened, I thought with an inward scoff.

Her face softened just the tiniest bit. “Seems to me the exhaustion of the past few days must have finally caught up to you. You should eat.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right,” I said, taking the bowl from her at last. “Thanks.”

I scooped up a spoonful of the porridge, then took a bite. For a moment, I just sat there, enjoying the feeling of the food’s warmth spreading throughout my body and soothing my soul. The lingering feeling of disappointment I’d felt at eating such a plain dish for my first meal in this new world vanished in an instant. What I’d just consumed could never be called plain—it would be an insult.

“This is really good,” I told Recilia with a smile. “Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes, I did, though I’m no chef,” she replied. She frowned slightly and turned away.

I just shrugged and went back to eating. It was no business of mine if she didn’t want to discuss her cooking skills.

In no time, I’d finished the entire bowl. I leaned back in bed, luxuriating in the feeling of being full. “That was deli— Whoa!”

I blinked at Recilia in shock. She’d snatched the bowl from my hands before I could even tell her my impression of her food.

She avoided my eyes and hurried toward the door to our room. “I’ll clean this up for you,” she muttered, yanking the door open and ducking out the other

side. Before she disappeared entirely, though, she popped her head back in one more time. “I almost forgot to say this, but...thank you for saving my life.”

“Hm?” I tilted my head at her in confusion.

“Well, I... I didn’t get the chance to tell you yesterday.”

No sooner had Recilia spoken than she scurried out of the room and was gone. She didn’t leave quite fast enough, though—I still saw the slight blush that bloomed across her cheeks before she sprinted down the inn stairs and out of view.

“Man, I’m so pathetic,” I said with a sigh, sinking back into my bed.

Here I am, a grown adult, worrying a girl who’s way younger than me. And, even worse, I’m totally jealous of her.

The thought made me cringe—I hated how petty I was being. Plus, I’d made my peace with how weak Rex was ages ago! There was no point in getting hung up over it now.

I need to change up my way of thinking, I decided. *Up until now, I’ve been treating this world the same way I would if it was actually* Braves and Blades *the game. Even though I know I’m not the protagonist, I keep acting like I am. I have to face facts—*BB *is a game where the player gets to act as a hero who takes charge and saves the world, but I’m not the player anymore. My role here is different.*

I really needed to start thinking of this world as more of a raising sim game than an action RPG. My job wasn’t to defeat the evil god myself anymore, it was to help increase the strength of other characters until I’d gathered a group of powerful allies who would take down the evil god for me. Not only was that the most efficient option, it was also the best one.

Back when I’d made my list of goals, I’d written down “Get stronger” as point number four. Now that I’d thought about it more deeply, though, it was clear that I didn’t have to *personally* get stronger.

Even though her stats inflicted deep mental wounds upon me, I should be glad I met Recilia, I realized. *I would’ve gotten an even worse reality check down the line if I’d gone forward with the faint hope that I could become strong too.*

In the end, I supposed I should just be grateful I had someone as strong as Recilia on my side. Comparing myself to her wasn't going to get me anywhere.

Almost like I'd summoned her with my thoughts, Recilia chose this moment to walk back into the room. Now that I'd truly accepted my weakness, I was able to look her in the eye and ask for her help without reservation.

"Recilia..." I said, my tone low and serious. "I need your strength on my side. Would you be willing to fight along with me?"

She looked momentarily surprised, but then gave me a triumphant smile. "I would," she agreed. "I pledge my sword to you."

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

"You want to know why I'm so strong despite being only level 1?" Recilia repeated, walking alongside me as we headed to our destination.

I nodded. I might have sorted out my jealousy, but I was still very curious why Recilia had such absurd stats at such a low level.

In *BB*, you didn't necessarily have to kill monsters to level up, but you did have to at least do generic training to raise your stats instead. Still, as far as I knew, getting stats as high as Recilia's were was fundamentally impossible without leveling up.

I didn't believe in relying on powers that I didn't fully understand—it was too dangerous. Therefore, I felt I needed to unravel the mystery behind Recilia's strength. Besides, if I did manage to figure it out, the answer could possibly give me some clues on how to strengthen myself and others as well.

That was why today's goal was to take stock of Recilia's abilities.

"If I'm going to explain my strength, I think I should start by telling you about the Tauren family," Recilia said slowly, clearly choosing her words with care.

I turned to her with interest. *So it seems her stats have something to do with Rex and Recilia's family line,* I mused.

"The Taurens have served under the royal family of Ars as their bodyguards and martial arts teachers for generations," Recilia explained. "I've undergone the same training that everyone else in the family has."

“Wait,” I said. “Isn’t Ars’ royal family…”

“Yes, they’re descended from the same royal family that fought with the Goddess of Salvation to seal away the evil god eons ago,” Recilia agreed. “Although Ars hasn’t been a kingdom in centuries, they still hold a lot of influence in the city and live in the castle at its heart.”

“Now that you mention it…” I tapped a thoughtful finger against my lip.

I could remember reading something of the sort in the lore guide that had come with my copy of *Braves and Blades.* There had also been a quest in the latter half of the game that had involved the Cult of Everlasting Darkness, which was an organization that worshiped Rasulfi, the evil god. During the quest, you learned a good bit about Ars’ royal family.

Most of the lore revolving around *BB*’s setting was focused on the gods, so the countries and political structures operating within the world itself had been left pretty vague. From what I remembered, for the most part each city was autonomous, though they eventually came together as allies in a loose federation against the evil god’s forces.

“Ars’ royal family no longer holds any political power,” Recilia continued, “but they are still descendants of the Goddess of Salvation’s most trusted followers. As such, they’ve always been targeted by monsters and demons. For many, many years, the Tauren family has honed their skills in order to protect the royal family from such threats, and as a part of that mission, they even founded their own band of knights. However, our family’s training regimen is and has always been extremely harsh, and not everyone born to the family can withstand it.”

“Is that the reason Rex ran away from home?” I asked her. “Because he wasn’t strong enough to take the training?”

“Truthfully, I don’t know what my brother was thinking when he left,” Recilia admitted. “But that is what everyone else assumed, at least.”

I gave her a wary look. Her tone might be even, but I couldn’t miss the hint of anger that burned in her eyes.

“I-I see,” I said haltingly, feeling a bit desperate to change the topic. “Anyway,

does that mean you also…”

I trailed off, immediately realizing I’d picked a terrible topic if I wanted to steer the conversation in a more positive direction. If Recilia really *had* trained to serve someone from Ars’ royal family, then there was a very good chance that her charge had died the day of the attack.

“Yes, I took the training,” Recilia said stiffly. “I would have served the royal family’s second prince.”

“Oh...” I said awkwardly. I tried to keep my expression neutral, but I wasn’t confident I managed it.

I mean, what was I supposed to say? I couldn’t make some comment like, “Well, I hope he survived.” Because, the truth was...I already knew he had.

Damn, I wasn’t expecting Recilia to be connected to anyone else in the story like that! I thought, wincing.

I fervently prayed that Recilia would never see the second prince again. He was the only member of the royal family, and in fact the only human period, to survive the attack on Ars. He was also a servant of darkness who’d sworn revenge against the Goddess of Salvation, and a powerful master of dark magic. Over the course of the game, he worked his way up to becoming the leader of the Cult of Everlasting Darkness and stymied the protagonist at every turn, doing anything in his power to bring the world to ruin.

“Does the Tauren family have a unique martial arts style?” I finally asked, not wanting to let the silence stretch on too long.

Recilia nodded. “It does indeed. Our style focuses on speed, and using wind magic to augment one’s abilities. I was granted the title of master just the other day, so I could technically teach it to others.”

“W-Wow…” I stammered, genuinely impressed.

A slight smile quirked up the corner of Recilia’s lips. “My training is far from complete, but at the very least I can call myself an Imperial Swordsman with my head held high. I’m a fully-fledged member of the Tauren family now.”

“Wait, what did you just say?” I asked reflexively, my ears perking up at a

certain phrase.

“That I’m a fully-fledged member of the Tauren family?”

“No, no, I mean the part before that.”

“That I can call myself an Imperial Swordsman with my head held high?”

Hearing that phrase a second time, it was like all the synapses in my brain fired at once. *That explains why Recilia’s stats are so high, and why they’re at those specific numbers too! I* knew *that spread was familiar for some reason!*

It all made sense now—Recilia’s stats were just high enough to meet the minimum requirement to switch her class into an Imperial Swordsman.

Oh god, this explains so much! I thought, deeply relieved that the world was starting to make sense now. Not to mention, a theory was starting to form in my mind.

The developers had created Recilia, an event-only NPC, for the sole purpose of dying pretty much immediately. She didn’t have even a single combat scene, so there was no actual need to give her any stats. It was entirely possible she’d been set at level 1 purely because it was the default. However, it was a canonical fact that she’d inherited the Tauren family’s martial arts techniques, and had achieved the rank of Imperial Swordsman before her death. Someone on the dev team had probably thought it would be good ludonarrative harmony to make her in-game class reflect that.

However, a level 1 Recilia would of course have never met the minimum stat threshold to achieve the class of Imperial Swordsman, so the game system had probably raised her stats to the exact amount they needed to be for that to become possible without actually raising her level. As a result, she’d become the strongest level 1 character in the entire game.

That was all a hypothesis, mind you, but I had a feeling it was pretty close to what had actually happened. It all made sense—there would have been no reason to flag her insane stats as a problem, since she died before ever fighting, and therefore didn’t affect the game’s progression. Honestly, chances were that no one had bothered to check her stats at all, or if they had, they’d decided not to change them since they didn’t ultimately matter.

This is why you have to be thorough when developing a game, guys! I thought, filled with exasperation. *Although, it's not like* BB*'s developers would care what I thought of them...* I sighed. *Anyways, this is great news for me.*

As things were now, there wasn't a single con attached to Recilia's overwhelming strength. Even if I did still feel a twinge of jealousy when thinking about just how powerful she was...

I shook myself, casting those thoughts away. *At any rate, I can definitely take advantage of this situation somehow.*

As far as *BB* was concerned, Recilia's survival was an anomaly. That could possibly mean that she had a lot more freedom within the game's system, which meant she might be able to accomplish a lot of things that had been impossible for me back when I was just a player.

Together, we can save people who are fated to die, recruit those who would never normally join our party, and even more. We could create the strongest party this world has ever seen! A shiver ran down my spine. *Damn, things are getting really exciting.*

Just as I was drifting off, imagining all the possibilities before us, Recilia suddenly said, "We're here," and I rocketed back to reality.

Just as Recilia had proclaimed, we'd arrived at our destination, the Demi-human Plains. There were a few groups of goblins to be seen here and there, but overall the area looked pretty deserted.

Why had we come here, you ask? To level Recilia up, of course.

"Let's get started then," Recilia said, sounding surprisingly calm.

There was a small hint of nervousness in her voice, but she definitely wasn't overly tense or intimidated at the prospect of her first real battle. She had no reason to be, honestly—it would be a miracle if the goblins gave her any trouble at all. Still, I was of the opinion that it was best not to let one's guard down.

"If you're worried I can lend you one of my weapons," I offered. "I've just the thing for killing goblins."

Recilia shook her head. "Thank you, but I'm fine. I'd rather fight my first battle

with a weapon I'm familiar with."

Accepting her decision, I tucked the orichalcum knife I'd withdrawn back into my Inventory.

Recilia took a deep breath. "Here I go," she muttered, bracing herself.

And, just like that, she leapt straight into action.

"Wind, come to me!"

Recilia's emerald-green hair fluttered in the sudden breeze, and in the blink of an eye the ten-meter gap between her and the closest goblin vanished. She let out a roar as she sliced her blade sideways through the air, severing the monster's head in one clean stroke.

I watched as the goblin's head went tumbling into the grass. It was *definitely* dead—there were some monsters that could survive a beheading, but goblins weren't one of them. I was proven right when it disintegrated into particles of light mere seconds later.

"Well done," I called, walking over to where Recilia stood.

She didn't respond, instead staring down at her bloody sword.

"Uh...you okay? I guess killing something vaguely humanoid for the first time can be a bit of a—"

"Oh, I'm fine, don't worry."

I blinked at Recilia in shock, but it didn't seem like she even noticed.

"I realize this probably isn't something I should say after having killed a living being, but I feel...moved," she said absently. "'A Tauren's sword grows in strength by serving their master.' That was the creed I was taught, and so I was forbidden from going out to hunt monsters until my training was done. But now I've finally killed my first one. One of my greatest wishes has finally been granted."

Recilia smiled a little, looking like an excited little girl. Even though I hadn't done anything in particular to make her smile like that, I felt myself smiling too.

Seeing my face, Recilia quickly smoothed her expression over. "I'm sorry, this

isn’t what we came here for. I didn’t mean to get so excited.”

“It’s fine,” I told her, still grinning. “I’m happy as long as you’re happy, Recilia.”

All of a sudden, I felt like a total idiot for being jealous of her the day before. At the same time, I was starting to feel nervous to see the result of today’s test.

“You probably only need to kill one or two more,” I told her. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Recilia tightened her grip on her sword.

Our true purpose for trekking all the way out to the plains today was to level Recilia up—I wanted to see what the growth rates were for her various stats. Once she became level 2, I’d be able to compare her level 1 stats to her new ones, and that would give us an accurate picture of what she was working with.

I didn’t need to check Rex’s growth rates, since I already knew them from playing *BB.* He gained +4 points across the board. If I was to write it out in a list, it would look like this:

Strength: +4

Vitality: +4

Intelligence: +4

Mind: +4

Agility: +4

Focus: +4

That said, I was desperate to know how Recilia’s growth rates would compare. Her starting stats were insanely high, but because of how abnormal they were it was hard to know how that had affected her growth rates. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that someone would have good growth rates just because they had high starting stats. It was even possible, with the way Recilia’s character had been made, that her growth rates had ended up manually set to zero or something.

That being said, because she was already an Imperial Swordsman, her class boosts would guarantee an average growth rate of +2 for each stat. The

question was whether her innate growth rates had been set to zero, or perhaps the same low rate that other regular civilians got.

I grew more and more worried as I watched Recilia annihilate another two goblins. Sure enough, as soon as they were dead, her body was enveloped in light.

Here we go, I thought. *That's my signal that she leveled up.*

I heard Recilia take a deep breath. "Th-This is..." she murmured, trailing off in awe.

I strode over to where Recilia stood, watching as the light slowly faded and she came back into sight. She looked the same as always, but I knew without a doubt that she was at least a little stronger than she'd been before.

"All right," I said, swallowing nervously. "I'm going to check your stats now."

"Please do," Recilia replied.

I was shocked to discover that I was genuinely worried—it had been a long time since I'd gotten this invested in someone else's life.

Please, I begged, *let her rates be good.*

In that moment, any last vestiges of the jealousy I held toward Recilia faded away. I really, *really* wanted her growth rates to be good, or if not good, at least average. That had nothing to do with how it would help me, either; I genuinely wanted it for her and her alone.

With how high her starting stats were, even an average growth rate would take her pretty far, I thought, trying to reassure myself. *Please, just let each one be at least +2...*

Praying, I activated my Analyze skill.

【Recilia】

LV: 2

HP: 234

MP: 76

Strength: 126 (C-)

Vitality: 106

Intelligence: 59 (D)

Mind: 93 (D+)

Agility: 133 (C-)

Focus: 69 (D)

All right, I thought. *Now I've just got to subtract her level 1 stats from her level 2 stats, and then her growth rates come out as...*

Strength: +8

Vitality: +6

Intelligence: +4

Mind: +5

Agility: +8

Focus: +5

"How do things look?" Recilia asked, trying to sound calm. I could still hear the nervousness in her voice, though.

Eyes wide, I met her gaze.

"H-Holy..." I stopped, hauling in a breath.

"Holy...?" Recilia repeated, her brow crinkling.

"*HOLY SHIIIIIIT!!!"*

Recilia stared at me wide-eyed in the silence following my scream. Looking at her, the shock hit me all over again. Before I knew it, I'd vomited up every single bit of the porridge I'd eaten that morning.

Chapter 5: An A-Rank Adventurer’s Training Course

As I walked down one of Freelea’s streets, I let out a thoughtful hum. Recilia and I had only just now returned from the Demi-Human Plains, and I was using Analyze on everyone who walked by in a bid to console my aching ego.

【Chivilian】

LV: 1

HP: 44

MP: 22

Strength: 6 (E)

Vitality: 6 (E)

Intelligence: 6 (E)

Mind: 6 (E)

Agility: 6 (E)

Focus: 6 (E)

【Willager】

LV: 2

HP: 48

MP: 24

Strength: 14 (E)

Vitality: 7 (E)

Intelligence: 7 (E)

Mind: 7 (E)

Agility: 7 (E)

Focus: 7 (E)

【Dveller】

LV: 4

HP: 146

MP: 46

Strength: 45 (D-)

Vitality: 54 (D)

Intelligence: 27 (E+)

Mind: 45 (D-)

Agility: 36 (D-)

Focus: 45 (D-)

Analyze is such a great skill, I thought, nodding to myself as I perused the various stat windows of the people around me. It was easy to learn too, since it was one of the beginner skills in the Scout class skill tree. On top of that, it cost no mana and was considered a basic skill, so you could use it while inflicted with debuffs like silence or confuse.

But the best part, I declared silently, *is I get to look at people weaker than me to feel better about myself!*

Seeing the stats of all these normal people had really gone a long way to healing the wounds Recilia's godlike stats and growth rates had gouged into my heart. It was a good way to remind myself that, in the grand scheme of things, Rex was still pretty strong.

Rex isn't an A-ranker for nothing! I thought, internally pumping a fist. *Sure, compared to his level his stats aren't the best, but compared to everyone else he's doing pretty well for himself!* Incredibly *well, even!*

A slight smile quirked Recilia's lips. "What has you in such a good mood?" she asked innocently.

I choked on air, my whole body stiffening up.

I mean, I could hardly tell her I was consoling myself from the shock her stats had given me by Analyzing weak Freelea residents.

"W-Well, my Analyze skill seems pretty unique so, uh, I was testing it out," I

blabbered.

It was a flimsy excuse and I knew it, but Recilia seemed to buy it hook, line, and sinker. She gave me an understanding nod and left me to it.

To be fair, what I'd said hadn't been entirely untrue. Recilia had told me earlier that the Analyze skill didn't normally show its user a target's stats—all it did was let you know how strong someone was in comparison to you.

In other words, I've found my cheat skill! Or so I'd like to believe...

I sighed. In truth, I had a sneaking suspicion that the difference in the way my Analyze skill worked compared to everyone else's stemmed from how the ability innately functioned. You see, back when I'd been playing *BB*, I remembered reading Analyze's skill description. It had said, "Use this skill to determine a target's strength."

To me, someone who had been playing video games for as long as I could remember, and who was intimately familiar with *BB*'s stat screen, it only made sense for a target's strength to be indicated via their stats. But what about everyone else in this world? They didn't even know what a video game was! Therefore, it made sense that the information Analyze gathered was shown to them in a different way.

Incidentally, my spamming of Analyze had also gotten me some surprisingly useful information.

"Actually, Recilia, there's a couple interesting things I've realized already." When she looked at me with interest, I gestured to a man wearing long robes on the other side of the street. "Take a look at that Mage, for example. This is what his stats look like to me…"

【Magishan】

LV: 25

HP: 324

MP: 128

Strength: 90

Vitality: 122

Intelligence: 88

Mind: 148

Agility: 150

Focus: 122

“I see…” Recilia said thoughtfully, eyeing the piece of paper where I’d written down what was on the stat screen I’d seen.

“You can tell his stats don’t really fit his class, right?” I asked.

Recilia nodded.

To explain a little further, one should keep in mind that the stat points people gained when leveling up were a combination of the person’s innate growth rate and the bonuses given to them by their class. When it came to the Mage class, Intelligence and Focus were the two most important stats. But, in this man’s case, Intelligence was his worst stat. If his Intelligence was that low even with the stat boost the Mage class provided, that meant his Intelligence growth rate without the class bonus was likely absolutely abysmal.

It all lines up with how things worked in BB*,* I realized. *Just like in the game, it looks like everyone’s growth rates are decided randomly.*

Back when I’d been playing the game, running into characters who had the wrong kind of growth rates for the classes they’d been assigned hadn’t been too unheard of. I’d encountered my fair share of Warriors with crappy Vitality, Priests with really high Intelligence but pathetic Mind, and so on.

“Basically,” I told Recilia, “in this world, your appearance and build don’t have anything to do with your stats or your growth rates. Take that guy over there for example.”

I used Analyze on a well-built man with a rugged beard who was passing us by.

【Veteram】

LV: 34

HP: 476

MP: 141

Strength: 171 (C)

Vitality: 189 (C+)

Intelligence: 92 (D+)

Mind: 104 (D+)

Agility: 181 (C+)

Focus: 166 (C)

Okay, nevermind... I thought, a flush working its way up my throat. *That guy's stats are exactly what you'd expect them to be. Also...hang on! He's 16 levels under me but his best stats are practically the same as mine?! I-Is everyone like that?* I scrubbed my hand over my forehead, dashing away the suddenly ample beads of sweat. *Calm down. That wouldn't make any sense. He's probably a famous A-rank adventurer too or something. I mean, just look at his name! It's totally a pun on the word veteran. He's gotta be one of the stronger NPCs. He's gotta be...*

"Umm, hello?" Recilia gave me an odd look, clearly wondering why I'd stopped talking.

"N-N-Nevermind!" I stammered. "What I'm trying to say is, there's a lesson to be learned here."

The way I saw it, the people of this world were all brimming with potential. The problem was, their builds were all over the place. That's where I came in—I had all the data I needed to come up with a proper training regimen for all and sundry.

"As long as you follow my advice, you'll become a lot stronger than you would otherwise be," I told Recilia, my voice suddenly going low and confident.

That wasn't the only lesson I'd learned as we walked through town, though. I had to admit it to myself. I—or, in other words, *Rex*—was overwhelmingly weak, and not just in comparison to Recilia. In her case, with her insane stats and incredible growth rates, I doubted there were many people who could begin to match her once she'd leveled up a bit. But, when it came to Rex...well, it was clear my stats were low even compared to other regular adventurers.

For whatever reason, that brought to mind an old fortune teller I'd visited before when I'd been playing *Braves and Blades*. She was known as the Aptitude Lady, and if you went to her she'd grade the growth rates of any of the characters in your party.

There were six levels in her grading system, Horrible, Bad, Normal, Good, Amazing, and Godlike. I could recall the brackets pretty well from memory. So basically, if we subtracted the growth rate bonuses given to Recilia by her Imperial Swordsman class, her innate growth rates would be graded as follows:

Strength: Amazing

Vitality: Good

Intelligence: Bad

Mind: Good

Agility: Godlike

Focus: Normal

An average adventurer usually had two Good stats and two Bad stats, with the remaining two being Normal, so compared to that Recilia's innate growth rates were wonderful. In contrast, I, Rex the Aloof Adventurer, one of the most famous A-rank adventurers in the world, had innate growth rates that were graded as follows:

Strength: Horrible

Vitality: Horrible

Intelligence: Good

Mind: Horrible

Agility: Horrible

Focus: Horrible

They're...so bad. They're unbelievably *bad.* My insides curdled just thinking of it.

It was a truly ugly spread. Rex's growth rates were *half* that of a normal person's, and, worst of all, his best stat was Intelligence, which was the stat you needed least as a swordsman. The only reason his growth rate even managed to become average across the board was thanks to the growth rate bonuses provided by his starting class, Brave Leo. They were as follows:

Strength: +3

Vitality: +3

Intelligence: +0

Mind: +3

Agility: +3

Focus: +3

Looking back on it, it was obvious that the developers had first decided that Rex's starting class would be Brave Leo, then realized that they wanted him to have the same average growth rate for all his stats. In order to reach that goal, they'd just gone in and reduced Rex's growth rates until the result added up to what they'd wanted it to. It was basically the opposite of what had happened to Recilia.

In other words, Rex's character was the victim of a half-assed design that had led to him having unnaturally low growth rates for someone who was supposedly a famous legendary adventurer. The real Rex must have been nothing short of a god to have climbed his way to A-rank with a handicap this large.

At any rate, I know what my next course of action should be now, I thought with a sigh.

In truth, I'd still been waffling between strengthening myself or gathering a party to train up instead, but the data made it clear that only one of those options was viable.

With these growth rates, even if I level up further, it won't do much for me. That's why...I'm gonna retrain Rex from the ground up!

Look, I knew the smartest decision at this point was to give up on powering up Rex. After all, there was no need for me to be strong—I wasn't the protagonist. I still needed to be able to at least protect myself, sure, but Rex was already strong enough for that. And it was still true that I personally didn't enjoy hacking down monsters on the front lines.

But still...the desire to overcome adversity was an integral part of human nature. My gamer soul—which I'd sealed away after getting a job—was imploring me to rectify this situation. Nothing would feel cooler than turning this crappy character into the strongest person in the world.

Not so long ago, I'd been telling myself to treat this world more like a raising sim than an action RPG, and my new decision was honestly still right in line with that goal. Back in my gaming days, I'd had a terrible habit of only wanting to raise the characters I liked in sim games, even if I knew their stats were terrible.

Determination alone won't get me anywhere, though, I thought. *Rex really is in just about the worst stat situation possible.*

Even if the developers *had* wanted to make Rex's growth rates an average of +4 after factoring in his class bonuses, it would've been a major improvement if they hadn't kept the stat distribution perfectly balanced across the board. A slightly more skewed growth curve that still averaged out to +4 would have been much better. For example, the developers could have given Rex:

Strength: +8

Vitality: +4

Intelligence: +3

Mind: +3

Agility: +3

Focus: +3

Sure, that spread would have made Rex weaker in most areas, but at least he would have had enough attack power to be usable in an end-game party. After all, at least in my opinion, Rex's greatest drawback wasn't that his stat growths were low, but that those low growth rates had been split evenly across all of his stats.

So, the question is: how do I fix this?

As far as I could tell, the only feasible solution would be to scrap Rex's current build and rework him from the ground up. There was just one problem: in *BB*, normally you couldn't reset your level or respec your stats. Thankfully, I knew of one event that would make those things possible. I'd just have to prepare a couple of things in advance. I'd need to meet all of the conditions to trigger that event, for one thing. But, more importantly, I'd need to transform Rex first.

You see, if I reset Rex's level right now and leveled him back up to 50, he'd just end up with the same stats he had right now. If I was going to help him cheat his fate, I needed to collect as many pieces of rare equipment that gave stat boosts on level up as possible. There were quite a few other things I needed to gather as well—if I was right, these items would help me access loopholes that had been impossible in the original game, but that worked just fine now that I'd been reincarnated in this world.

However...to do all that, I'd first be needing some help.

"Which means that step one is building up the strongest party I can," I muttered thoughtfully.

I'll recruit others to my side in order to save this world, to prevent as many of the tragedies that happened in the original game as possible, and, most importantly, to transform my own character into someone I can be happy with!

"I have no idea what you're thinking right now, but you seem to be enjoying yourself," Recilia commented, sounding exasperated.

Still, despite her fed-up tone, I could see the traces of a faint smile curving her lips. The sight made me grin.

All of a sudden, I was feeling chock full of motivation. Before, I'd been struggling because my desires had clashed with the optimal path I should take,

but now everything had neatly fallen into place. At the end of the day, all I'd had to do was acknowledge the truth—I was just a regular guy who got jealous of people with better stat growths than me, and who got a big head whenever someone praised me. I couldn't base my actions around how the protagonists I'd read about in stories had acted, and same went for the protagonists I'd played before in *BB*. I was nothing like them, and I knew it.

But doesn't that make this whole thing more exciting? How far can a normal guy like me take Rex, solely using the game knowledge at my disposal?

I already knew who my first test subjects—I mean *recruits*—were going to be too. When I drifted down the street in the direction of the Guild building, they were already standing right in front, waiting for me.

"Hey, old man! Over here!"

"Oh, it's Rex!"

I strode over to the group of newbie adventurers and leaned forward, hands on my hips. "You guys interested in training under me?" I asked plainly.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

An indeterminate amount of time later...

Crap I'm going to be late! I thought as I sprinted through the crowded streets of Freelea, bumping into dozens of people along the way.

Even though I ran as fast as I could, a few minutes had already passed by the time I finally reached the doors of the Adventurer's Guild. I immediately rushed up the stairs to the second floor and slipped into the Guild conference room, which I normally never visited.

Whoa, it's packed...

Normally, most Guild members acted like this particular room didn't exist, but today it was filled wall to wall with hopeful young adventurers. It wasn't just newbies that were here today either—there were a few high-ranked adventurers standing around too. Some of them were even famous enough that I knew them by name.

This is crazy! He barely even advertised that he was holding this seminar, and there's still so many people here!

The whole thing had started when a certain adventurer had walked up to the Guild receptionist and asked, "Can I borrow a room for a few hours? I want to hold a class where I can teach the new blood the basics of adventuring."

The receptionist had gladly given him the room, and even offered to see if anyone else in the Guild was interested in taking his course. And...that was it. That had been enough to fill the room to bursting.

So this is how much influence an A-rank adventurer has! I thought, eyes going wide.

But this was no time to be struck dumb by awe. I might not ever get a chance like this again—I had to make the most of the experience.

I squeezed my way deeper into the room, knowing I would regret it for the rest of my life if I missed even a word of this seminar.

"E-Excuse me! Sorry!" I apologized, elbowing my way into a spot where I could see the podium.

The adventurer who was going to give the lesson had already arrived, but from what I could tell he'd only just started talking.

Thank god, I thought, letting loose a sigh of relief. *I made it in time!*

All the open seats had already been taken, so it looked like I'd have to stand. Still, I didn't mind. I was just happy to be here at all.

The adventurer standing at the podium clapped, drawing everyone's gaze to him. I focused in on him too.

"Well, this sure turned into a bigger event than I was expecting," the man said with a chuckle. "I thought I'd just end up having to give advice to a few newbies, but it looks like we've got a full house instead." The man smiled kindly at the crowd, but his expression was overshadowed by the palpable aura of power radiating off his body. "Anyway, now that we're all here, let's get started."

His aura of power is so intense! I thought, amazed. *So this is what it feels like to stand before Freelea's top adventurer...*

From what I'd heard, this guy was practically an immortal beast—he'd taken down a whole squad of monsters even after being stabbed a few dozen times! I knew that stories like that tended to be exaggerated, of course, but after seeing the man in the flesh I could honestly believe he'd done all that and more. He might have a gentle demeanor, but it was belied by the sharp glint in his eyes, which spoke to years of experience. You could tell just from looking at him that he'd stood on the brink of death countless times, and if you'd told me he'd actually died and come back, I would have believed it.

"Today I want to talk about what I think are the best ways to get stronger as an adventurer," he began. "Remember that though I am the one imparting this knowledge to you, it is not I who discovered it all. Everything I am about to tell you is based on knowledge that has been built up and passed down by generations of other adventurers. I'd like it if all of you could pass on what you learn here to others as well."

It was clear from the man's tone that he wasn't trying to show off; he was just a veteran who genuinely wanted to help his fellow adventurers.

I bet even if someone here ended up surpassing him someday, he'd probably be happy for them, I thought.

Honestly, having that kind of mindset was probably just as important as becoming a strong and successful adventurer yourself.

"With that out of the way," he continued, "what do you all think is the most important quality a first-rate adventurer needs?"

A young swordsman with spiky hair who was sitting in the front row shot his hand up into the air. "Strength!" he shouted.

The veteran adventurer chuckled. "Well, you definitely *do* need to be strong. Some adventurers will even tell you that's the right answer, but personally, I think there's something even more important for an adventurer to have than raw power: an unyielding spirit. It's vital to have the determination to never give up, no matter how dire the situation."

The man cast his gaze over the room and grinned. "Sounds pretty cliché, doesn't it? Maybe a bit too boring of an answer for you guys? But the simple truth is, as long as you're alive, you can try again as many times as it takes. And,

luckily for us, we have the ability to grow stronger after killing monsters. No matter how bitter the defeat you face is, no matter how badly any particular request goes, as long as you're willing to try again, the experience you accumulated from your last attempt will help you in the next."

By this time, the man's voice had grown hot with passion. All of the people who had been muttering and whispering to each other before had fallen silent, waiting for his next words with bated breath.

"Remember," the man continued, "there is no wrong path for an adventurer to take. What's important is that wherever direction you choose to go, you keep pushing forward. As long as you don't stop, the path before you will never be closed off. Even if you get ridiculed for your failures, fail and fail again, for one day, if you keep soldiering on, you'll eventually acquire the title of first-rate."

Now that the man's speech was over, he paused and awkwardly scratched at his head. "Sorry, I got a bit carried away there, didn't I?" he asked with a self-recriminating chuckle. "You guys didn't come here to listen to a bunch of abstract talk like that, so let's focus on something a bit more concrete. As you all know, the gods graced us with six different forms of power. Let's go over them one by one."

The man turned to the blackboard behind him and started writing.

Strength: determines how strong you are physically, or when fighting with a weapon.

Vitality: determines how well you're able to take physical attacks.

Intelligence: determines how strong the spells you cast are, and how many you can use in a row.

Mind: determines how well you can take magical attacks.

Agility: determines how fast you can move and act in battle.

Focus: determines how precisely you can control your magic, and how effectively you can use certain skills.

I took out my notebook and copied down everything he wrote. I'd already known that killing monsters generally made you stronger, but I hadn't known the specifics of what each type of power actually did for you.

This guy really knows his stuff, I thought as I scribbled. *He's exactly what I envisioned A-rank adventurers to be like: strong, smart, and reliable.*

Finished with his writing, the man turned back to face the podium. "Now, everyone has a different innate level of aptitude for each of these six forms of power," he continued. "A portion of that aptitude will be determined by your race. Dwarves, for example, are naturally tough, while elves tend to be proficient in magic. Most of us here have mixed blood, of course, but typically you can determine what traits you'll be most skilled in by figuring out which type of blood flows in you the strongest. There isn't much you can do to change that, unfortunately, but regardless it's useful information to keep in mind."

The conference room burst into a tumult of sound. Throughout the space, people turned to one another and began declaring things like, "You look pretty dwarfish," and "I'm pretty sure I've got a lot of fairy blood in me!" I was pretty slender, and had slightly pointed ears myself, so I figured my blood leaned in the elvish direction.

If that's true, maybe I should change my class from Scout to Mage... I mused.

The man at the podium waved his hands, indicating that everyone should quiet down. "Calm down, guys," he said with a chuckle. "You can analyze what race you are later, my lecture's not over yet."

The room fell into an abashed silence.

"You all listening now? Good. So, now that you know about the six forms of power, it's important you all understand that each of them are equally important. You might be thinking, 'Well, I'm a Warrior, so I don't need Intelligence,' or 'What use would I have for Strength, I'm a Mage,' but going down that line of thought's a big mistake."

My heart skipped a beat. I'd been thinking exactly that.

"Think about it," the man continued. "Even Warriors have to expend mana when they use their Arts, and Mages need quite a bit of Strength if they want to be able to wear stronger equipment. That's why you should remember that each of the six powers can prove equally valuable to you—it doesn't matter what your class may be."

What an incredible wealth of information! I thought, scribbling frantically in my notebook again. *Even if I did end up being late, hearing just a tiny fraction of this would have still been totally worth it!*

"Now, that being said," the man declared, clearing his throat, "just raising your level of skill in each of the six powers isn't enough to make you a first-rate adventurer. There's one more very important thing you need to do." A palpable air of excitement filled the room as the man slowed down the cadence of his speech, carefully emphasizing every word. "You need to forge a talent that's unique to you, and only you!"

The man grinned, his eyes scanning over the rapt faces of his audience. "Find out which of the six powers suits you best, and focus on increasing your skill in it as high as you can. Make it into your specialty, and find creative ways to use it to solve problems. If you want my personal recommendation, I'd say to focus on training that increases your agility."

My brow scrunched. *Agility?* I wondered. *That doesn't sound like that impressive of a power—all it does is make you faster.*

Almost as if he'd read my thoughts, the man added, "Yeah, I figured you all would have that kind of reaction. Raising Strength or Intelligence feels more flashy, after all—it makes your attacks stronger and more impressive. It's true that if you've got twice as much Strength as the other guy, you'll cut down monsters twice as fast, and if you've got twice the Intelligence, your spells will double in size and blast through twice as many foes. But you know...that's all those powers will do for you." Passion flooded the man's voice once again. "Know this: no matter how Strength you have, it won't save you if you get blasted by a spell. No matter how much Intelligence you have, a single swing of a sword will still be enough to take off your head."

A heavy silence fell over the room as the audience absorbed what the man was saying.

"Now, let's talk about Agility. It's different from those other two powers, since it'll help you both defensively and offensively. The faster you are, the more hits you can get in at once. Hell, it'll even help you cast spells more quickly too. Even better, it'll help you when things get dicey—you'll be able to escape

faster than anyone else, and if your friends end up in danger, you can reach them that much sooner. Basically, Agility will help you in any and every situation you find yourself in."

Once again, the man's words made a lot of sense. I could see now that while building up your Strength and Intelligence would improve your firepower, they weren't nearly as versatile as Agility, which was useful in every context.

"To be honest, I only realized this pretty recently myself," the man said with a short chuckle. "I'm not all that fast, myself. But that's enough about the types of power. Let's talk about equipment next, and which kinds we should rely on to keep us alive."

I leaned forward, highly interested. In truth, this was a subject I'd been wondering about a lot recently. The thoughts of an A-rank adventurer would definitely be a good reference point.

Seeing the crowd's expectant faces, the man nodded and said, "Let me start by telling you a story of two swordsmen. They both became adventurers roughly at the same time, and were equally strong. They'd both hunted down a few stray monsters before they'd become adventurers, so they had each gained a bit of Strength too. There was only one thing separating the two of them: one was poor and the other was rich, so the swords the two of them were using were very different."

I felt a nervous shiver run down my spine. My family was rather poor, and my equipment was shabby even compared to my fellow party members.

What am I going to do if he says that you can't make it as an adventurer without good equipment? I thought, my hands clenching into fists.

Praying that wasn't the case, I waited with bated breath for his next words.

"Now, the poor adventurer carried around a worn Iron Sword with him, while the rich adventurer had a shiny, brand-new Mythril Sword. Knowing that, what do you think happened when the two adventurers got into an argument in a dungeon one day, and it escalated into them both attacking the same monster at the same time?"

Well, that's obvious, isn't it? I thought sourly. *If they were equally strong, then*

the stronger weapon would have won. The adventurer with the Mythril Sword probably—

"The Mythril Sword got parried, but the Iron Sword did not."

"Huh...?" My thoughts came screeching to a halt.

I mean, that made no sense! How could the person with a weaker weapon have won?

"I can see what you're thinking, and it wasn't because the Mythril Sword was defective either. I need all of you to hear me loud and clear—just because a sword is sharper and more expensive doesn't mean it's better. In order to use high-quality equipment like that, you have to have enough Strength to handle it. If you buy powerful equipment before you can use it properly, the only thing you're doing is wasting your money! Not only that, but it'll lead you into an early grave!"

Once again, my entire world was turned on its head.

The man grinned and continued, "Now think about this: since the knowledge of the adventurers who came before us has been spread across the world, most people tend to learn from their legacy and use the same types of equipment they did. But personally, I think we adventurers shouldn't become slaves to our equipment! Who cares if your weapon is weak or strong?! A truly strong adventurer should put in the effort to be able to beat any monster with whatever weapon they please!"

The breath rushed out of my lungs as I felt the man's words strike a chord deep within me. Until now, it had weighed upon me that my equipment was worse than everyone else's. I'd even thought that the reason I couldn't pull my weight sometimes was because my equipment was so bad. But now...I'd realized the truth: I'd just been making excuses. Maybe to those who had money for better equipment, the man's words felt harsh, but to me, they offered nothing less than salvation.

"Now then..." the man said, waiting until the murmuring in the room quieted once more.

The veteran adventurer's voice had grown quiet, and when his gaze swept

over the crowd, it was clear his earlier passion had receded back into him. I knew just from looking at him that his speech must finally be coming to a close.

“I’ve been rambling on up here for quite a while, so it’s about time I started wrapping things up. It’s up to you guys whether you take anything I said to heart or not. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind if you forgot all of my advice the moment you stepped out of the room.”

At that, a low hum filled the room. People murmured to one another, wondering if the man had just been spouting nonsense this whole time if he genuinely didn’t care how his advice was received. But, just as I’d hoped for, the man’s next words made it crystal clear what he’d been trying to say.

“It is a strongly held belief of mine that being an adventurer is all about freedom. Just like I said at the start, people like us are free to choose our own paths, and no matter what direction we choose to go, we’ll continue to grow. There’s no need for us to worry over finding the right way, or the shortest one, for all our paths will ultimately lead to the same destination. And besides, there’s no shortcuts to getting strong. So try new things, struggle to overcome challenges, get sidetracked, fail, spend time reflecting, mess up, do whatever you like! Just remember, the most important thing is you never give up!”



The mood in the audience relaxed—it was clear that his final words had resonated with all of us. Personally, I found myself trembling in anticipation. I

knew I would never forget this day for as long as I lived. And, as the crowd slowly began filing out of the room, the man said something that made me even happier.

"If any of you ever find yourself at a loss for what to do, you can always come to me, Veteran the Immortal, for help." The man pounded his breastplate with a fist, the loud metallic clang echoing through the Adventurers' Guild. "Pretty sweet deal, right? Free guidance from an A-rank adventurer!"

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Back in the present...

When Rex had asked us if we wanted to train under him, we'd been shocked. Still, we'd all immediately jumped at the chance. Nyuuk's desire to get stronger was as ravenous as mine was, and even Prana, who normally grumbled and complained at everything, hadn't had any objections.

I hate admitting it, but that guy's skills are top notch, I thought. *If he's willing to teach us, then that's great! Besides, Mana seems to, uh, have a crush on him, so it'd be nice of me to let her spend more time with him.*

And so, we'd found ourselves being led to a corner of the training grounds.

Once we'd gotten settled, Rex turned to us and said, "All righty then. We're going to start by going over some foundational theory."

I raised a hand. "Uh, if you're going to be giving a lecture, wouldn't it be better to borrow the conference room?"

Rex shook his head. "The training grounds are practically deserted today, so there's no need."

Huh, I thought. *Now that he mentions it, they totally are. It's super quiet out here compared to yesterday. Hang on...wasn't a super famous adventurer supposed to be stopping by the Guild today? Maybe everyone went to go see him?*

"A-Anyway, if you're going to be giving us tips and stuff, shouldn't we gather up some other newbie adventurers so they can hear what..." I trailed off, frozen

in my tracks by Rex's chilly stare.

Does he think this information will be less valuable if more people know it or something?!

Taking in the look on my face, Rex sighed. "Sorry, but I'd rather keep this between just us," he admitted. "Let me just say this up front: the things I'm going to tell you today won't help you have a fun life as an adventurer. This knowledge is a curse that will bind you for the rest of your lives."

"R-Really?"

"Yes, really. And since this particular curse doesn't need to be cast, you won't ever be able to dispel it either."

Everyone gave Rex baffled looks.

Sometimes this guy says some really weird stuff, I thought, mystified.

Rex obviously noticed our confusion, but he didn't elaborate any further. We were left to mull over his words in silence. At least, until he finally seemed to decide on what he wanted to say next.

"How about we start here," Rex said. "What do you guys think is necessary to become a first-rate adventurer?"

"An unyielding spirit?" I ventured hesitantly.

"Yeah, right," he scoffed. "Well, I guess everyone has their own opinions. But, if you ask me, efficiency is the key."

"E-Efficiency?" I repeated, turning to look to my comrades. That was such a clinical word, devoid of hopes and dreams.

Rex nodded. "Some people might say that if you learn ten times slower than others, than you should just put in ten times the effort. But, by that logic, you'd never catch up to anyone. There's only 24 hours in each day, and all it takes is someone who learns ten times faster than you to put in three hours of training, and they've already surpassed your ability to match their speed."

"You've got a point, I guess," I said slowly. I could already feel my mental image of the ideal adventurer crumbling in my head.

“So, what I’m going to teach you today is the most effective way to become a first-rate adventurer, not how to survive, or have fun, or enjoy your adventures. The goal is to get as strong as possible, and anything that isn’t necessary for that goal will be mercilessly abandoned.”

Rex’s words chilled me down to the bone. I could tell he was being dead serious.

“All right,” he said, “I think that’s enough preamble. Let’s get into the specifics. As you guys all know, you level up and get stronger by killing monsters. Every time you level up, each of your six stats increase slightly. This is what each of them do.”

Rex took out a notebook and opened it to a specific page. It read:

Strength: determines the amount of physical damage you deal, and the level of the equipment you can wear.

Vitality: determines how effectively you defend yourself from physical attacks and how much damage you can take.

Intelligence: determines the amount of magical damage you deal, and how much mana you have to cast spells.

Mind: determines how effectively you defend yourself from magical attacks, and how effective your healing spells are.

Agility: determines how fast you move and how much energy you have to launch physical attacks.

Focus: determines what spells you can learn and the success rate of specific skills.

“Your race will affect which of these stats you are the best in. Most adventurers who go on to become heroes have at least one or two standout stats based off their race. When it comes to regular adventurers, though, race doesn’t really matter. Even if a fragile adventurer has a lot of dwarvish blood in them, that won’t make them any less fragile, and no matter how much fairy blood you have, you won’t automatically be fast. Furthermore, there’s some people who pick starting classes that aren’t a good fit for their natural growth rates, which muddies things even further. Basically, what I’m trying to get across is that you shouldn’t worry too much about what race you’ve inherited the most from.”

“What?!” Nyuuk exclaimed.

Hearing all his knowledge is useless is probably a shock, I thought. *He’s always put so much stock into all the stuff he learns...*

Rex ignored Nyuuk’s outburst, muttering under his breath, “Well, randomized characters all have randomized growth rates, so for them it doesn’t matter at all.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but in the end I didn’t get to dwell on it for long.

Rex focused back on us and said, “Anyway, *this* is what you actually need to know: all six stats are important, but if you try and raise them all equally, you’ll just end up being useless. You need to pick one or two to focus on.” Then, with extreme emphasis, he declared, “More importantly, you need to decide which stats to abandon working on.”

“H-Hold up a second, old geezer! Even a Warrior uses mana when they activate Arts, and a Mage needs Strength if they want to wear decent equipment! So, you can’t just abandon those traits altogether...”

Rex nodded in agreement. “You’re exactly right—there’s no such thing as a useless stat. However, some stats aren’t as efficient for you to work on as others. Strength and Intelligence are both important enough that you can’t afford to abandon them entirely even if your growth rates in them aren’t great. If I had to pick the least useful stat...it’d be Agility. “

My friends and I exchanged glances once more. Though we weren’t especially knowledgeable, even we knew that Agility was the most important trait when it came to combat. If anything, it was the one trait that shouldn’t be abandoned.

“Now, don’t get me wrong—since Agility influences your movement speed, raising it is top priority at first. However, because of how important a stat it is, it ends up plateauing early on.”

I narrowed my eyes in confusion. “What do you mean by that?”

“Essentially,” Rex replied, “raising your Agility has a big impact on you when you’re lower leveled. The problem is, the higher you raise that particular stat, the less each point you add matters.”

Rex went on to explain that Agility plateaued at around 100 points. I didn't really get what that number meant, but Rex explained that it was the typical amount of points a mid-rank adventurer would have in Agility. He made it clear that it was important to raise your Agility points until they reached that amount, but that getting it any higher didn't matter much in the scheme of things. He claimed the difference between 100 and 0 was the difference between an adult's sprint and a child's jog.

"But remember, once you get your Agility to 100, each point you add gets diminishing returns. There isn't a huge difference in speed between someone who has 100 points in Agility or 150 points in Agility, and the difference between 150 and 200 is negligible. Now, if you plan on changing your class to something like a Thief or Assassin, you might still want to raise your Agility a bit higher, since they have skills that scale with that particular stat. But a Warrior or Mage? They shouldn't bother increasing it past 100. With that said, unless your innate growth rate for Agility is atrocious, you'll get enough points just from leveling up that you'll reach 100 pretty easily. You shouldn't have to put any extra work into it. The long and short of it is: there very little value in focusing on raising your Agility."

My friends and I exchanged glances again, but it wasn't because we were confused this time. Just as Rex had said earlier, his way of doing things wasn't the most fun, but his plan for getting stronger as efficiently as possible did appear to be very analytical and objectively good.

This is crazy, I thought. *I've never met anyone who thinks about getting stronger like this.*

"Now, let's talk classes and equipment," Rex said, breaking into my thoughts. "You'll need to choose each one carefully in order to focus on leveling up the stats you need the most. The stronger a piece of equipment is, the more efficient it will be."

"Wait, what?" Nyuuk asked, looking deeply confused once more. "Why—"

"Radd, if you had an Iron Sword, a Mythril Sword, and an Orichalcum Sword, which would let you hit the hardest?"

"The Orichalcum Sword, obviously."

Mythril was a sturdier ore than iron, and orichalcum was even sturdier than mythril. Even a kid like me knew that much.

Nyuuk shook his head. “No, it would be the Iron Sword, wouldn’t it?” he asked.

“B-But why?” I demanded.

That doesn’t make any sense!

“Well, if your abilities don’t match the grade of equipment that you’re using, you can’t bring out its full potential,” Nyuuk explained. “At the level we are now, we wouldn’t be able to master weapons made from mythril of orichalcum. Which is why you’d be strongest using the Iron Sword.”

Nyuuk turned to Rex, seeking confirmation, and the older adventurer nodded.

“Nyuuk’s absolutely correct,” he said, “but actually, Radd’s answer is the right one.”

I felt my eyes go wide. *Wait, I was actually right?!*

“It’s true that for a lot of strong equipment you need to meet certain stat criteria to use them. However, the selling point of magical ores like mythril and orichalcum is that they’re lightweight and easy to use despite being sturdy. Even as he is now, Radd has enough Strength to wield an Orichalcum Sword without getting hit by a stat penalty.”

Nyuuk’s cheeks had gone pale. “B-But I read in a book that a beginner is better off using an Iron Sword rather than a Mythril Sword...” he stammered.

“That’s true,” Rex confirmed. “A beginner will absolutely dish out more damage with an Iron Sword than a Mythril Sword. But that isn’t because they’re incapable of handling a Mythril Sword.”

“Th-Then *why*?”

“You see, every weapon has a flat base damage that doesn’t change regardless of who’s using it, and a variable damage modifier that’s a multiplier of the primary stat the equipment uses. The reason an Iron Sword is better than a Mythril Sword for a beginner is because it has a higher base damage value. *However,* the Mythril Sword’s variable damage multiplier is much bigger. That

means once you've leveled up and increased your stats enough, the Mythril Sword will be stronger than the Iron Sword. Same goes when you compare a Mythril Sword to an Orichalcum Sword—even though the Orichalcum Sword has a higher base damage value, the Mythril Sword still has the best multiplier, so it ends up being stronger."

My head was starting to spin. Until now I'd only thought of weapons as either strong or weak, but it seemed the world of equipment went much deeper than that.

"That isn't all—some pieces of equipment will affect your growth rates when you level up, and others are enchanted to raise your stats while equipped. That's why choosing the right equipment is extremely important if you want to let your strengths shine. Which is why you shouldn't compromise just because you think you're not ready for a certain piece of equipment yet, or because you think it won't fit right. Try it anyway, and if you find you can't utilize it effectively, try and figure out why that is, or replace it with an even better piece of equipment. That's why I think that an unrelenting drive to get stronger is more important than an unyielding spirit."

I get what he's saying, but I just can't accept it... I thought, drooping a little.

Nyuuk seemed to feel the same way I did. He could only manage, "I get what you're saying, but..." before trailing off, unsure of how to phrase what he was thinking.

It was true that the strategy Rex was recommending was efficient; I couldn't deny that. But it was hard to let go of the idea that an adventurer's true strength came from within, and instead accept that it came from the equipment he wore. Also, I couldn't really shake the thought that it was really necessary to go *this* far just for efficiency. After all, adventurers got stronger by defeating monsters. Even if we did a couple of inefficient things, we'd just have to adventure a bit longer and we'd catch up.

"I can tell from your expressions that you guys aren't getting it at all," Rex said with a sigh. "You're probably thinking something like, 'Even if it's a stat I don't use much, it's better for it to be higher rather than lower,' or 'Even if we level inefficiently for a bit, we can always make up for it by leveling up some more.'

Am I right?”

My breath caught in my throat. Not because he’d read my mind perfectly, but because I had a sinking feeling he would say something that would utterly shatter my shining image of what adventurers were.

“What you kids aren’t understanding is that leveling up is a system. Yes, it’s granted to us by the gods, but that doesn’t change its innate nature. As such, there are very strict rules in place around how it works. It’s true that you get experience for every monster you kill, and that once you earn enough experience you level up. But the higher your level is, and the greater your stat total gets, the harder it is to reach the next level. Do you understand what that means?”

“O-Oh...” Nyuuk mumbled, going pale. He seemed to have realized something we hadn’t, and whatever it was made him look down at his hands worriedly.

“I see one of you understands,” Rex said with a lopsided grin. “For the rest of you...imagine this scenario: you’re facing off against a monster you’ve finally become strong enough to beat. Now, if your level is lower than the monster’s, beating it will probably get you another level, and you’ll grow stronger. Depending on how much stronger, you might even be able to utterly dominate that type of monster the next time you encounter one. But what if your level is actually higher than that monster you can barely beat?”

It was at this point I realized the true horribleness of what Rex was trying to say.

“If that was the case,” Rex continued, “you wouldn’t get much experience for beating that monster, since it’s at lower level than you. It could take everything you have to beat it, and in the end you wouldn’t even net a level. Now, if you killed that same monster a couple dozen or even a couple hundred times, you might finally level up again. But then you’d have to fight even stronger monsters even more times to reach a new level after that. Meanwhile, say there’s a lower level adventurer that’s just as strong as you. They’ll be able to kill that monster and level up off of it, getting even stronger and then going on to fight even stronger monsters after that. That means they’ll get to level up again pretty quickly too. Are you starting to understand now? The moment you

reach a point where you can't defeat monsters at your level is the moment your journey as an adventurer ends."

My throat went dry. My dreams of having an adventure full of courage and hope and hard work crumbled before my eyes.

"That's right!" Rex cried, his eyes flashing. "Abandon your naïve thoughts of leveling up in a way that doesn't make maximal use of your natural aptitude! Every level up that isn't perfectly efficient makes reaching the next level that much harder. Beating stronger monsters becomes more difficult, and if you switch to killing weaker monsters you're forced to grind in order to get enough experience. And while you're throwing up blood and spilling tears, forced to kill a monster a hundred times over in order to level up, someone else, who leveled up properly, will just kill fourteen of those same enemies with ease and reach the next level without even pausing to take a breath!"

I-I've never seen Rex get so worked up before, I thought dazedly. His words had penetrated me to my very core, and my soul felt as if it had frozen solid.

"Do you understand now?" Rex demanded. "Do you understand who our true enemy is? It's not the monsters we're fighting, but something far more frightening—the specter of our ideal selves!"

I suddenly had a vision of another me chasing me down from behind. It kept steady with my own pace, waiting for me to make just as single misstep so that it could catch me.

Oh, no... How many times have I leveled up already? Is my ideal self already beyond my reach?! How close is that other me to catching up?!?!

Rex cleared his throat, and my frantic gaze flew back to him.

"I'm going to be perfectly clear," he said. "Don't think that adventurers are free simply because they can do whatever they want. An adventurers' freedom is an illusion! If you want to become strong, then you have to look for every shortcut you can! Always strive for maximal efficiency, struggle to the very end, don't take any detours, don't fail, reflect on yourself, don't make any mistakes, and most of all...*never compromise*!"

There was a dull clang, and it was only a few seconds later that I realized it

had been caused by me dropping my sword.

I...I always thought that all I had to do was put in enough effort, and that would be enough for me to become strong. I thought that if I just kept running toward my goal of becoming a hero, I'd make it there eventually.

The hero in front of me...he'd shattered my dream into a thousand pieces.

I wanted to plug my ears, to scream at Rex to shut up, but before I could he mercilessly added, "If you ever feel like taking an easy way out, like running away, just remember..." He looked each and every one of us in the eye. "...that Rex Tauren, the A-rank adventurer, is watching you!"

And with that, he gave us all a devilish grin.

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

Was I...a bit too harsh there? I wondered.

I'd just wanted to explain the basics of character building to the kids, but Radd and his friends looked completely despondent. Furthermore, the reason I'd given such an impassioned speech wasn't because I'd wanted to feel superior by showing off my knowledge—it was because I wanted to give the kids the tools they'd need to succeed. Admittedly, I might've gotten a little carried away by the end, but if you truly wanted to master *BB*'s systems, you needed to put in a lot of effort. The game's difficulty curve was no joke.

You see, back when I'd first *started Braves and Blades*, there hadn't been any guides or walkthroughs floating around on the internet. I'd just played the game in the way that felt the most fun to me, leveling whatever characters I liked the best rather than the optimal ones. That had worked well enough for the early stages of the game, but by the midgame I'd been softlocked.

Why, you ask? Well, there was a very nasty trap baked into *BB*'s difficulty curve.

It was complicated enough that I hadn't really explained it to Radd and the others, but basically the experience you needed to reach the next level wasn't based just on your current level, but also the total of your combined stats. Furthermore, if an enemy monster's level was lower than yours, the amount of experience it gave you upon its defeat was significantly reduced.

During my talk, I'd impressed upon Radd and the others how important it was to focus on stats over levels, but that wasn't the only thing you could do to optimize leveling in the early portions of the game.

You see, early game monsters were designed to be easily beaten even by a level 1 character. In the same vein, early game equipment all had relatively high stats, since they were meant to balance out newer players who had crappy numbers. In that way, someone with bad stats and low innate growth rates could take down some monsters as easily as someone who had actually good stats. In fact, the person with the crappier stats and growth rates would actually level up faster, since their stat totals were lower.

That all changed when you moved into the mid and late game. Enemies became much stronger, and the difficulty spiked considerably. All of a sudden, the characters who'd once leveled up super-fast thanks to their low growth rates were now unable to keep up with enemy stat inflation, even when enemies were of the same level as them. Those characters quickly became nigh unusable, unless you decided to take it on the chin and grind for ages.

The characters who had very good growth rates and stats, meanwhile, got exponentially stronger from the midgame on. They'd had a disadvantage in the early game since their starting stats were higher, making them level up much slower, but if you'd made the effort to keep leveling them up and hadn't let them lag behind, this problem vanished in the midgame. Indeed, the characters with higher stats and better growth rates were the only ones who could actually keep up with late game enemies and therefore subsequently reach much higher final levels and stat totals.

To make a long story short, *BB*'s character leveling system was a very slow-and-steady-wins-the-race situation.

The scariest part about this was that, since characters with bad growth rates leveled up faster, you only realized the trap of *BB*'s difficulty spike once it was already to late. Your character's levels would already by too high at that point for you to fix them.

Needless to say, my first playthrough of *BB* had been a disaster. By the time my allies had reached level 30, they were all basically unable to defeat any

monsters at their level, and three entire years of in-game time had passed without me making any progress past that point. Unsurprisingly, when the boss fight against the evil god had kicked my shit in, and I'd gotten a bad ending. I'd had to start over from the beginning.

I didn't want the same thing to happen now that I was actually living in *BB*'s world. And *that* was why I wanted to get a good grasp on everyone's stats and make sure they leveled up efficiently. There was only one problem.

You see, I'd noticed pretty quickly that the people of this world didn't think of their stats in terms of numbers. When I'd been explaining stats to Radd and the others, they hadn't really understood what I'd meant when I'd told them to get their Agility to 100. They'd understood me, however, when I'd compared that score to the typical Agility levels a mid-rank adventurer would have.

Well, at least I think they did, I thought sheepishly.

Prana had seemed disinterested in everything I'd said, while Mana had just nodded happily along. But, judging by Nyuuk and Radd's reactions, I'd likely gotten through to them too.

I wonder how they chose their classes, though, I mused. *If they don't know their stats, how would they know the right one to pick?*

Feeling curious, I decided to ask them. "By the way, how did you guys choose what classes you wanted to be?"

Taken aback by the sudden question, Radd and the others exchanged glances.

"Well, I've always admired the heroes in stories, and they all used swords, so..." Radd said, trailing off.

"I thought magic would suit me better, since I'm not very physically fit," Nyuuk admitted.

"I picked Scout because it seemed like the most useful class," Prana muttered.

"Umm, I couldn't see myself swinging a sword or axe around, so I thought it would be better for me to use healing magic and support from behind," Mana explained.

W-Well, all right then, I thought. *It's not like those reasons are wrong,*

necessarily, but I wouldn't exactly call them good either. Although feeling that way is probably only natural, with all the hours I spent optimizing my characters.

With a sigh, I decided I shouldn't expect much from the kids. Sure, Prana, Nyuuk, and Mana were meant to be a part of the protagonist's party, and as such had higher base stats than other average adventurers, but if they'd picked the wrong classes we'd be in trouble. That would mean that their growth rates didn't match their classes, so even their baseline level of strength wouldn't help them. Still, they shouldn't be totally hopeless—we'd just have to decide on some course of action to get them back on the right track.

Feeling settled in my decision, I took a notebook out of my Inventory and looked down at the four of them. "I'm going to examine your stats and write them down, I explained. "When I call your name come forward and take your stat sheet."

Mana replied with an enthusiastic "Okay!" but the other three still looked completely lost.

I sighed, and explained further. "When I say stats, I mean a numerical representation of how skilled you are in each of the six traits. I'll be using this information to figure out the optimal growth routes for all of you."

Nyuuk quietly whispered, "I didn't even realize that was possible..." but Radd and Prana still just looked confused.

Well, whatever, I thought with an inward shrug. *You guys'll get it once you see what I'm doing.*

"Radd, you're up first."

"O-Okay." The red-haired youth stepped forward and I used Analyze on him.

【Radd】

LV: 4

HP: 164

MP: 46

Strength: 54 (D)

Vitality: 63 (D)

Intelligence: 27 (E+)

Mind: 45 (D-)

Agility: 36 (D-)

Focus: 27 (E+)

All right, now that I've got his stats this should be simple enough, I thought. *A person's starting stats at level 1 are normally six times their growth rate, so Radd's stats are currently nine times his growth rates, which means I should divide them all by nine and I'll... There we are.*

I leaned forward, scribbling his growth rates into my notebook.

Strength: +6

Vitality: +7

Intelligence: +3

Mind: +5

Agility: +4

Focus: +3

Total: **28**

The stats I'd written were of course Radd's total growth rates, meaning they included the stat bonuses granted by his class.

Still, just to make sure, I asked him, "Radd, what class are you again?"

"Me? I'm a Fighter, but..."

The rest of Radd's words faded into the background as I focused back on my notebook.

Just as I'd thought, I mused, nodding to myself.

The newbie party you got in the game all started at the lowest tier of class that fit their niche, but since Radd wasn't the true protagonist I'd expected him to instead default to the lowest tier of the Warrior classes. That would be the

Fighter class, so I'd been correct. Fortunately, I had the growth rates bonuses of all of the base classes memorized. For the Fighter class, you'd get:

Strength: +2

Vitality: +2

Intelligence: +0

Mind: +1

Agility: +1

Focus: +0

Total: 6

In order words, two plus twos, two plus ones, and two plus zeros, which came to a total of six. Pretty much all the base classes had that distribution. Now I just needed to subtract those class bonuses from the growth rates I'd calculated for Radd, and then I could get his innate growth rates. I swiftly did just that, and then wrote them down.

Strength: +4 (Good)

Vitality: +5 (Amazing)

Intelligence: +3 (Normal)

Mind: +4 (Good)

Agility: +3 (Normal)

Focus: +3 (Normal)

Total: 22

I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me as I looked over his numbers. Radd's growth rates weren't quite as insane as Recilia's, but he was four points over the average growth rate of 18! Granted, his growth rates were a little too balanced to be truly perfect, but his exceptional Strength, Vitality, and Mind meant he'd be a perfect frontliner.

I was suddenly forcible reminded of Rex's total innate growth rate, which

came to a measly nine.

“W-Well, how are my stats?” Radd said nervously. “Are they good or bad?”

“Hard to say,” I said snarkily. “Here, why don’t you figure it out for yourself.”

I copied Radd’s information onto another page, savagely tore that page out, and thrust it at him. I wanted to tell myself I wasn’t jealous, but I knew it wasn’t true.

Radd took the sheet gingerly, then stared at it with awe. “S-So this is what my power levels look like...” he muttered as he read through the numbers.

“Okay next up is you, Nyuuk.” I proclaimed.

I won’t take it so hard this time, I promised myself. *I’m prepared to be dazzled now, so I should be fine.*

I went ahead and dove right in, since I already knew Nyuuk, Prana, and Mana’s starting classes. Nyuuk was a Magician, so I quickly Analyzed his current stats and calculated his growth rates.

[Nyuuk]

LV: 4

HP: 110

MP: 82

Strength: 18 (E+)

Vitality: 36 (D-)

Intelligence: 63 (D)

Mind: 36 (D-)

Agility: 45 (D-)

Focus: 45 (D-)

Strength: +2 (Bad)

Vitality: +4(Good)

Intelligence: +5(Amazing)

Mind: +3(Normal)

Agility: +4(Good)

Focus: +3(Normal)

Total: 21

Urrrgh...

It took everything I had to keep a straight face. It seemed Radd's starting party's stats and growth rates weren't just a little better than average, they were *way* better than average. Nyuuk's Focus growth rate only being Normal was a bit of a drawback, but that was still a high enough grade that the right class would be able to fix it. Intelligence was the most important stat for a mage, and he had that in spades.

I scribbled Nyuuk's information down and handed it over to him. "Here's your current stats and innate growth rates."

"Th-Thank you!" Nyuuk said, sounding uncharacteristically nervous as he took his stat sheet. He looked down at the paper, ignoring his surroundings completely as he read through the numbers that dissected his potential.

Can't blame him, really, I thought with an inward smile. *Those six stats are an adventurer's lifeline. Not to mention that Nyuuk realized faster than anyone else how integral his growth rates would be to his future.*

Little did they know that the person with the worst growth rates imaginable was standing right before them. In comparison to these kids, my future really wasn't looking too hot.

"Mana, let's do you next."

"O-Okay," she stammered.

She looked almost as nervous as Nyuuk had, but since she was an adventurer megafan she was basically always nervous around me.

Honestly, she doesn't look that much more scared than she normally is, I thought with an inward laugh. *That means she's probably the most mentally prepared out of all of them to see what her stats are. Let's see here...*

So far, everyone had had better than average growth rates, and a growth

distribution that was practically ideal. I was curious to see how Mana would stack up.

I went ahead and Analyzed Mana and calculated her growth rates once I saw her stats. Her starting class was Priest, and since I knew that class's growth rates well, it was a quick process.

[Mana]

LV: 3

HP: 100

MP: 66

Strength: 24 (E+)

Vitality: 32 (D-)

Intelligence: 48 (D-)

Mind: 56 (D)

Agility: 24 (E+)

Focus: 32 (D-)

Strength: +3 (Normal)

Vitality: +4 (Good)

Intelligence: +5 (Amazing)

Mind: +5 (Amazing)

Agility: +2 (Bad)

Focus: +2 (Bad)

Total: 21

Hmm, this a bit iffy... I thought.

Mana was a level lower than Radd and the rest of her party since she was their healer, but even so her growth rate distribution wasn't the greatest. For a healer, the most important stats were Mind, Intelligence, Focus, and Agility, in that order. Mana had great growth rates in Mind and Intelligence, but I would have preferred it if her Agility and Focus were +4 instead of +3. Healers needed

Agility for when they got in a pinch, and they needed Focus to unlock better spells and shorten their cast times.

Well, this isn't so bad, I reassured myself. *We can fix this as long as we get her into the right class.*

Besides, higher-tier classes had a lot more variation in the types of weapons they used, and the skills and spells they could learn. There were several classes that I could think of which would be able to take advantage of her higher Vitality and Strength growth rates.

Banishing my pessimism, I copied Mana's stats down onto a new page and handed it to her.

Upon receiving it, she started poring over it. To my surprise, she looked uncharacteristically troubled as she read through the page. It was only for an instant though.

She walked over to Radd and Nyuuk, and the three of them showed each other their stat pages, discussing what they did and didn't like about them.

"Man, my Strength growth rate is great," Radd said, while Nyuuk muttered, "I wonder if it's bad that my Mind isn't higher..."

In that moment, the three of them reminded me of my old self. Back before I'd gotten my soul-sucking corporate job and had been able to devote hours and hours to just playing video games.

After a few seconds, I shook my head, casting my nostalgia away. *This isn't the time to be getting all sentimental.*

"And, last up we have..."

"Me." Prana stepped forward before I could even call her name.

That's a surprise, I thought, raising my eyebrows.

I'd thought Prana wouldn't be interested in getting her stats measured, but I could tell by how stiffly she was standing that she was both excited and nervous.

I took a deep breath and activated Analyze for the fourth time.

[Prana]

LV: 4

HP: 92

MP: 46

Strength: 45 (D-)

Vitality: 27 (E+)

Intelligence: 27 (E+)

Mind: 27 (E+)

Agility: 54 (D)

Focus: 72 (D)

Strength: 4 (Good)

Vitality: 3 (Normal)

Intelligence: 3 (Normal)

Mind: 2 (Bad)

Agility: 4 (Good)

Focus: 6 (Godlike)

Total: 22

Holy shit, this stat spread is insane! Did she hack her growth rates or something?!

I did my best to keep my expression blank. After seeing Mana's stats, I'd let my guard down a little, thinking that Prana probably wouldn't be anything special. In the end, that'd proven far, far from the truth. Prana had the ideal stats for an Archer. One Godlike growth rate in any stat was such a rarity that it barely ever appeared, but *two*?! It was practically unheard of.

Even as a player of *BB*, where I'd been surrounded by important characters with above-average growth rates, I could count on one hand how many had a Godlike growth rate in even one stat. It was hard to believe a randomly generated character had managed to roll Godlike in anything, and it hurt even more because most of my growths were Horrible.

“Well?” Prana asked, her voice flat.

Prana strode over to me, her gaze piercing. “Will I be able to contribute?” she asked, voice deadly serious.

“Ah! I was just about to get to that!” I squeaked. Honestly, it was a miracle I managed to respond at all, with how scattered my thoughts were.

I thrust Prana’s stat sheet at her and cleared my throat. “After looking at all of your stats and innate growth rates, I’ve determined that...”

I paused dramatically, looking at the kids’ faces. Every one of them—Radd, Nyuuk, Mana, *and* Prana—were looking up at me with such hopeful, worried expressions. After seeing those earnest faces, there was no way I could keep feeling jealous of them—the negative feelings that had welled up within me again faded away into nothing.

“...you guys have more potential than I expected,” I finished. “Each and every one of you has what it takes to become first-rate adventurers.”

Radd and the others beamed. Even Prana did a small fist pump.

I hid a small smile and continued, “You all have high starting stats and good growth rates in the places that matter, and your only iffy areas are ones you can easily afford to give up on. It’s like you four were born to be adventurers. However…”

I paused again, but it wasn’t fun and dramatic this time. I felt sad—their stats really were amazing, even if you factored out their high growth rates. Compared to me, they were basically gods. But, still...that wasn’t going to be enough.

“Ultimately, none of you have the stats you’d need to become a true hero.”

Radd and the others’ expressions froze.

It might be harsh, guys, but it’s the truth.

You see, in *Braves and Blades*, the protagonist had such ridiculously high stats and growth rates that they overshadowed everyone else by a country mile. It was possible to screw up your character’s growth rates by allotting them poorly in the character creation menu, of course, but that didn’t change the fact that they had 25 points to divide up between their different stats.

Neither Radd, his friends, or Recilia had growth rates made up of that many points. And, while I'd been floored to see that Prana had two stats with Godlike growth rates, the protagonist could do something even more impressive: they could choose to allot 7 points to a single stat, giving them a Legendary growth rate—a rating that was unique to them.

I cast my gaze over the four young adventurers. Radd was clenching his fists, Nyuuk was staring despondently at the ground, Mana's eyes were brimming with tears, and Prana was glaring at me while biting her lips.

I cleared my throat. "That being said, I have a different goal for you four. I'm going to transform you all into the strongest party in the world."

"H-Huh?" one of the kids muttered.

All four of the newbie adventurers looked up at me in shock, and I couldn't help but chuckle. *So what if none of you have the natural aptitude required to become the protagonist? That just makes training you to be strong an even more interesting challenge for me!*

Up until now, when I'd seen the kids' stats, I'd been planning to find the true protagonist of *BB* and offer my assistance in training them up, using my knowledge to help them beat the game's main story. But now that I'd seen how invested all Radd, Nyuuk, Prana, and Mana were in their stats and potential, I'd changed my mind.

Now, turning these four kids, who absolutely *weren't BB*'s true protagonists, into fighters even stronger than the game's main character was my goal. It would certainly be more enjoyable than going about things the boring, regular way. And yeah, maybe some of my decision had to do with how I'd decided to respec Rex from the ground up, but what was wrong about that? I wasn't *purely* acting on sentimentality—I had a plan in mind.

Truthfully, if I'd found out the kids' growth rates were all below average, or if their levels had already gotten too high for me to easily correct their weak spots, I probably wouldn't have decided on such a reckless path. But...these guys had real potential. They could go far with the right guidance, even if they weren't quite at the true protagonist's level. More importantly, though, these kids were motivated. They dreamed of becoming heroes, and only a heartless

bastard would deny them that dream.

“You guys hear me?” I demanded. “I just said I’m going to transform you into the strongest party in the world. So—are you interested in training under me, or are you too scared of failure?”

My tone had been purposely provocative; I wanted an affirmative response.

Unsurprisingly, Radd was the first to step forward and take the bait. “Screw you!” he said, excitement filling his voice. “Like hell I’m scared!”

“I’ll train under you too!” Mana said, sounding just as pumped.

Nyuuk nodded, determination in his eyes. “If I let this opportunity slip through my fingers, I know for a fact I’ll regret it for the rest of my life,” he declared. “Please, Rex, teach me your wisdom!”

“Then let’s do this!” Prana agreed. There was more emotion packed into those four words than I’d ever seen her show before.

Moved by their passion, my lips curled up into a grin. “Just so you know, my training’s going to be harsh. You guys sure you’ll be able to keep up?”

“You bet!” they all cried at once. Their eyes were filled with hope, and none of them looked even the least bit daunted. “We’ll take whatever you can throw at us, even if we have to risk our lives!”

I nodded, satisfied. “Good. Then here’s the first step of your training. From this point on...you four are forbidden from engaging in combat of any kind for a month!”

Chapter 6: Inheriting the Hero's Mantle

"Hey, no slacking!" I shouted. "Your pace is dropping!"

A week had passed since I'd started training Radd and the others, and today, I was watching the party's two mages, Mana and Nyuuk, run across the crowded Guild training grounds.

"Faster, faster, faster! If you're that slow you'll get ripped to shreds by any monster chasing you! Come on, come on! Keep moving no matter how much your legs hurt! Remember, it's this training that will carry you through truly difficult situations!"

So far, everything had been going according to my plan. As such, Radd and the others were all focusing intently on going through basic training at the Guild.

You see, in *BB,* leveling up wasn't the only way to increase your stats—you could do regular training to boost them as well. The reason I'd ordered everyone to focus on this sort of training first was because—

"A person's base aptitude and the class they currently are affects how much stronger they get when they grow from defeating monsters! Training, however, grants strength to all equally! Regardless of how good or bad your aptitude is for any given attribute, you can raise it at the same rate as everyone else with training! This is the true value of hard work! You may not notice the results immediately, but later down the road you'll be grateful you did this training!"

My brow furrowed in irritation as I turned to look at the old, bearded man standing next to me, who was yelling out encouragement to the adventures on the training ground. *Holy shit, can you shut up for just one second, old man?!*

Noticing my gaze, the bearded man turned toward me. "Yo," he said. "I take it you're one of us?"

Dude, stop acting like we're friends, I thought, instantly put off by him. *I mean, I've seen you around the Guild and stuff, but we're certainly not close.*

"Frankly, I don't know who you are," I told him, voice flat. "So I can't say for sure if I'm 'one of you' or not."

I mean, judging by the way he carried himself, he was probably an adventurer, but I really didn't want to get into a long conversation with the guy. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to get the hint.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Well I wasn't expecting *that* reply! No need to be so cold, friend." He slapped a hand against his forehead in an exaggerated manner.

I really, really don't like the vibes of this guy, I thought in distaste.

Sadly, before I could sidle away, he said, "I'm telling you this as a kindness. There are unsavory rumors spreading about you."

"I'm sorry?"

"Well..." he said, averting his eyes, "people are saying you're ruining the prospects and potential of these youngsters by making them go through pointless training."

Incredulous, I stared at the bearded man in silence. Unfortunately, he seemed to take this as his cue to explain.

"You see them every now and then, you know? Adventurers who were so scared of real combat that they spent far too long preparing for their first adventure. Having such an overabundance of caution tends to stunt an adventurer's growth, even if they go out into the field more prepared than their comrades. They tend to get stronger much slower, to the point that even if they go through the same dungeon as their comrades, they'll come out of it weaker than their party mates. Once a few more dungeon runs go by, they end up so far behind that they drag their buddies down." The bearded man gave me a smile, like he thought he'd just said something wise. "Now, the more reckless ones, who embrace the spirit of adventuring and set out bravely into the world —they tend to get stronger much faster."

Aaaaand that's precisely the attitude that got me destroyed on my first BB *run,* I thought, scoffing internally.

I glared at the bearded man, and he scratched at his head, unsure who to interpret my lack of response.

"Sorry if I touched a nerve, friend," he said with a shrug. "I don't have anything against you. Honestly, I get just how you must feel. I only recently

started training youngsters myself, and I already am feeling the pressure to send them out as prepared as possible so they don't meet an unseemly end at the hands of some monster."

The bearded man smiled sadly and looked off into the distance. "Even in my own adventures, I've often run into situations where I've thought to myself, 'If only I'd prepared a bit better...' So believe me, I get why you're being so protective of these kids. But you know…" the man met my gaze again, this time with a sharp glare. "If that overprotectiveness of yours ends up smothering those young sprouts, you'll have to answer to me."

I took an involuntary step backwards, and the bearded man nodded, seemingly satisfied that his words had gotten through to me.

"Just giving you some friendly advice, man. It's up to you whether or not you take advantage of it."

The bearded man flashed me one last smile then walked away.

As I watched his retreating back I muttered, "Who the heck *was* that guy?"

⁂ ⁂ ⁂

"Mana, was that guy someone you know?" I asked.

After thinking on the matter for a while, I'd decided maybe the reason he'd acted so friendly toward me was because he knew Mana or Nyuuk. I hadn't wanted to interrupt their training, though, so I'd waited until the two of them took their break to indulge my curiosity.

"N-No, I've never seen him before," Mana said, shaking her head.

"I see." I propped my chin in my hand, thinking.

Maybe he's just a strange old man who likes to lecture people? Yeah, that's gotta be it, I decided.

Nyuuk, however, blew this theory out of the water mere seconds later. "That was Veteram, an A-ranked adventurer," he explained as he walked over to us. Mana and I both gave him quizzical looks, and he smiled wanly. "He's a member of Freelea's strongest party. People call him 'Veteram the Immortal' because he once fought his way out of a crowd of demons despite being gravely injured."

“O-Oh, I see.” I stammered in response, my mind flicking back to around a week ago, when I’d been randomly Analyzing townspeople during my walk with Recilia.

Back then, there was one adventurer who had a surprisingly high level, wasn’t there? I mused. *I’m not 100% sure it was that guy, but I* do *think his name was Veteram...* I sighed, then suddenly wanted to smack myself in the head at the next thought that came to me. *Come to think of it, I should have just used Analyze on him while he was talking to me.*

Still, there was no better time than the present—I used Analyze on him before he vanished from my sight.

[Veteram]

LV: 34

HP: 476

MP: 141

Strength: 171 (C)

Vitality: 189 (C+)

Intelligence: 92 (D+)

Mind: 104 (D+)

Agility: 181 (C+)

Focus: 166 (C)

Those stats are familiar all right, I thought, examining them with new eyes.

It was true that the guy’s stats were pretty high compared to the other adventurers in Freelea, but honestly, for an A-rank adventurer they felt kind of lacking.

Then again, Rex worked his way up to A-rank solo with only 200 in each stat, I remembered. *If you consider the fact that he fights in a party, they probably make sense.*

“Hey, Rex,” Nyuuk muttered wistfully, “do you think we’ll at least manage to become as strong as him?”

I smiled slightly. Despite Nyuuk's coolheaded, analytical appearance, it was becoming clear that he had quite the competitive streak. The endless days of tedious training were probably starting to get to him as well.

"As strong as that guy?" I asked with a dismissive scoff. "As if."

Nyuuk drooped. "I should have known…" he said despondently.

Whoops, looks like he mistook my meaning, I thought with a wince.

"I *meant*," I clarified, "that you guys will go on to become much, much stronger than him."

Judging by Veteram's stats, his growth rates weren't all that high—either that, or he'd spent some time leveling with a useless class. My own stat distribution might be about as bad as it got, but Veteram's had quite a few issues as well. There was no way I'd let one of my students level up in such an inefficient manner.

"But…" Nyuuk didn't look convinced.

I sighed. "Listen up. Right now, it barely matters whether someone's a newbie or a veteran. Now that the Goddess of Salvation has given us her oracle, the world is drastically different."

You see, in *Braves and Blades*, your journey could only go on for three years maximum. That was all the time you had in order to finish the game. So, the natural question became, how did the protagonist, who was someone who was just getting into monster hunting regardless of the starting point you chose, surpass adventurers who'd been fighting monsters for decades? The answer turned out to be pretty simple: it was because of the goddess of salvation. Now that the goddess had given her oracle, the effects of her blessing would grow exponentially, and the monsters in the world would become much more active as well.

You see, the goddesses' blessing on the people of *BB*'s world had waned during her deep slumber, which she'd retreated into after sealing away Rasulfi, the evil god. Furthermore, the monsters which had once served as the people's means of getting stronger had become weaker, and had nearly stopped reproducing after their god vanished from the world. But now, with both the

goddess and Rasulfi growing stronger, their respective blessings and curses were becoming stronger as well.

Because of this, in the beginning of *Braves and Blades*, adventurers started growing dozens of times faster than they had before. Normally, the protagonist would be able to take advantage of this better than anyone else because of their OP growth rates, but that didn't apply to my group of kids, since none of them held that role.

"How about this," I said slowly, raising my eyebrows at Nyuuk. "If you're still worried, why don't we make a bet?"

"What kind of bet?" Nyuuk demanded.

"Give me a year... No, half a year," I said. "If you diligently follow my training regimen over that time, you'll be stronger than that guy before you know it."

A light flashed in Nyuuk's eyes, and I grinned internally. I'd figured it would be better for him to have a concrete goal to work toward, instead of just chasing after the vague notion of getting stronger. Fortunately, Veteram made for the perfect goal post.

Sorry, not sorry, Veteram, I thought with a shrug. *I'll go to any lengths necessary to make these kids stronger, and that includes using you as a benchmark!*

⁜⁜⁜

Once I was done with Mana and Nyuuk's training, I said goodbye and headed to the Guild's contemplation room, where I joined Prana in her silent meditation.

Long minutes slid by, with nary a word passing between us. As a matter of fact, Prana hadn't even greeted me when I'd come to check up on her—she'd remained completely mute the entire time.

Honestly, I was a bit impressed. Silent mediation of this sort was the best way to increase someone's Mind and Intelligence, but it wasn't something adventurers, who preferred moving their bodies and being active, tended to enjoy. Indeed, Prana and I were the only ones who were even using the contemplation room today.

At first, I'd just planned to pop my head in and observe how Prana was doing, but I'd felt awkward just standing there staring. I'd ended up joining her in her meditation, but I hadn't expected an entire half hour to pass without a single word passing between us.

As time stretched on, the silence seeming infinite, I felt like the air around us went completely still. Despite the quiet, I couldn't even hear my own breathing, let alone Prana's.

I guess I could strike up a conversation with her, I thought, drawing in a deep breath. *I can't think of anything worth talking about, though...it's probably better for us to just meditate together in the silence.*

Truthfully, I had a hard time getting a read on Prana. My knowledge from my playthrough of this branch of this story didn't help, since the first time I'd made the fateful choice of letting my companions die after the first dungeon in order to keep Rex on my team, and during my second run, where I'd kept them alive, I hadn't learned much of anything about my comrades. That was only natural since they were randomly generated each time you started up a new playthrough, and had little in the way of characterization or story presence.

All that to say, without the additional assistance of my game knowledge, I didn't really understand Prana, and I couldn't really tell how close we were or weren't. If she'd been as normal as Nyuuk, or as guileless as Radd or Mana, I'd have had an easier time figuring her out. Unfortunately, she wasn't, and I still felt like I didn't have a good grasp on her personality.

I was so deep in thought, musing over this issue, that I failed to notice something within the contemplation room was moving. A sudden warmth enveloped my shoulder as something touched me, and I let out an involuntary cry of terror, my eyes flying open.

I was greeted with the sight of Prana's face, which was pressed so close to mine that barely a few inches separated us. I blinked up at her, startled and confused, as I realized that the warmth I'd felt had just been her hand on my shoulder.

"It's break time," the elf told me brusquely.

Really? I wondered. *Has it been that long?* I glanced over at the clock hanging

from the room's wall, and saw immediately that quite a bit of time had passed.

Prana, seeing that I'd opened my eyes, nodded in satisfaction and went back to her original spot.

Another long minute stretched by with neither of us speaking. This time we weren't meditating, though—we both had our eyes open, and were facing each other.

Finally, I couldn't stand the silence anymore. "Hey, Prana," I said, "why did you decide to take my training?"

It was perhaps not the best question to bring up, but the truth was, I'd been curious for a while. From the way I'd observed Prana butting heads against Radd, she appeared to have quite the rebellious streak. It seemed odd to me that she would just accept my ridiculous training regimen without a word of complaint.

"Aren't you worried, even the slightest bit, that I'm just spouting bullshit?" I demanded. "Even I know my explanations are hard to swallow."

To those who'd grown up in the world of *BB*, the training regimen I was having everyone go along with at the moment made no sense. I mean, why would anyone forbid Prana, who was an exceptional Scout, from fighting monsters? And that was only the beginning—I'd made her change classes into a mage, even though her magical stats were terrible, and was now having her train by meditating. And yet, she hadn't given me even the slightest pushback. I honestly wanted to know why.

Prana turned to me, staring me directly in the eyes. "Why does it matter?"

"W-Well, I..." I trailed off, flustered. I hadn't been expecting her to respond with a question of her own.

"The things you say make sense," Prana said, voice firm. "I have no reason to reject your advice. If it's more efficient to train with weaker stats than stronger ones, then it only stands to reason that we should train as much as we can before beginning to use our limited number of 'level ups' from killing monsters. Furthermore, if the effects of our training are determined by those 'growth rates' you talked about, then switching to a class that increases them for the

particular stats you're targeting for the duration of your training is a logical choice. So why should I have any reason to doubt you?"

When she put it like that, I wasn't sure what to say. It was true that I'd explained my whole thought process when I'd explained how I wanted them to train for the next month, but I hadn't expected them to fully grasp what I was saying.

To be honest, most *BB* players didn't really understand this concept either. They always seemed to think that regular training wasn't affected by growth rates, but that was just a straight up lie. The higher your growth rates were, the faster your stats went up during training. Most players didn't catch that, because training made it easy to raise a stat even when your growth rate in it was slow. In addition, the lower a stat was, the faster it increased with training. Armed with that knowledge, it became obvious that you should get your stats as high as possible while your level was still low.

Still, the residents of this world lacked that meta-knowledge—it wasn't surprising at all that they found my methods questionable.

"You should have more faith in yourself, Rex," Prana continued, sounding surprisingly stern. "I've never been able to get such straightforward answers to my questions anywhere else, be it from a book or from people I just asked. We're extremely lucky to have someone like you training us."

Wow... I thought, unable to restrain the smile that rose to my lips. I could feel the sincerity in Prana's words, even if the straightforward manner in which she spoke lacked any frills.

I'd long admitted to myself that I hadn't decided to train Radd and his friends out of the kindness of my heart; a large part of my choice had come from my desire to make players who weren't the true protagonist strong. Not to mention that another main contributing factor had been my desire to use the kids to experiment with how far the game would let me push its limits.

Even now, with Prana thanking me so sincerely, I couldn't honestly say I would be willing to abandon my goals and devote myself entirely to helping them. That being said, I was still genuinely invested in seeing just how far these guys could go.

At the very least, I need to train these guys well enough that they don't regret picking me as their teacher, I decided. *I have a responsibility to do that much for them.*

Finally, I told Prana, "I'm sorry. I underestimated you."

"Huh?" She gave me a confused look, and I bowed my head.

I went to all that trouble of explaining my reasoning to these kids, but somewhere in the back of my mind I've always been thinking, "There's no way the people of this world can understand what I'm getting at." This whole time, I've been underestimating them, expecting them to look at me with suspicion by default, just like that Veteram fellow did.

That was why I had been unable to comprehend why Prana had been willing to follow my instructions without complaint. Which left me to come to the conclusion that my prejudices had poisoned my interactions with the kids more than I'd realized.

"Thanks to you, Prana, I've realized how hard it is to view things without relying on your own biases to understand them. Thank you. I'm glad you guys became my students."

Prana's eyes widened in surprise. I flushed at her reaction, realizing that I'd said something pretty uncharacteristic of me.

"A-Anyway," I stammered, "I'm going to go see how Radd's doing." I got to my feet, fleeing the conversation.

H-He's probably at an impasse right about now anyway, I thought, trying to rationalize my actions. *It won't hurt to give him some encouragement.*

But, before I could reach the door, I heard Prana calling out to me from behind.

"Wait!"

I turned around, my face still flushed.

"I...I know I'm not the easiest person to work with."

Abruptly, my embarrassment vanished, whisked away by surprise. "Where'd that come from?" I asked Prana softly.

In a strained voice, she replied, “The truth is, accepting everything you told us was pretty hard. But I wanted to believe in you. After all…” There was something fragile in her expression, and she looked more vulnerable than I’d ever seen her. “You risked your life to save us.”

She gave me the tiniest, faintest smile.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

“I sure wasn’t expecting that,” I muttered, fleeing from the meditation room at top speed.

I kept moving until Prana was completely out of sight, then stopped and pressed a hand to my chest. I could feel my heart pounding beneath my fingertips; it was going way faster than its usual speed.

I can’t believe a fully grown man like me is getting flustered over being thanked by a girl half my age, I thought, cringing at myself.

But, at the same time...I couldn’t get that fleeting smile of hers out of my head.

It wasn’t like I’d done much worth thanking me for, anyway. I mean, sure, I’d tried to find an alternate route out of Ars to save Prana and the others, and I’d risked my life to protect them from the doom demon, but that was just how things had turned out. My main motivation hadn’t even been protecting them —I just hadn’t wanted their deaths on my conscience.

Well, Rex is *really handsome,* I thought. *I probably looked super cool fighting that doom demon, and that’s why Prana feels the way she does.*

This was a satisfying thought, at least until I realized that Prana had run to Freelea to call for help right before the battle had begun. She hadn’t even seen the fight! Which meant all that Prana had seen me do was guide their party to Ars, and promise to serve as a rearguard while she went to get help. And still, despite that, she’d felt compelled to thank me from the bottom of her heart for risking my life to save hers.

I blew out a long sigh. *Maaan, I’m pathetic. I can’t believe I thought even for a second that she just thanked me because she was overcome by Rex’s hotness.*

Feeling guilty, I swore to myself that I'd do everything I could to help Radd and the rest of his friends.

I might be a worthless scumbag, but that doesn't mean I can't help others! At the very least, I'll give training these kids my all!

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After that, I went in search of Radd. It ended up being a relatively easy task to find him, as he was surrounded by a group of onlookers.

"V-Slash!" I heard the young boy snarl. He let out a fierce cry as he swung his sword at the scarecrow that served as the Guild's training dummy.

It'd turned out that manually imbuing your weapon with mana was a harder concept for newbies to grasp than I'd originally expected, so the first few days of training Radd had really struggled. Now, though, he seemed to have gotten the hang of it. Mind you, his swings were still sloppy and the angle he traced could barely be called a V-Slash, but he still managed to activate the Art regardless.

However, Radd wasn't the only one the crowd was watching. Many, *many* pairs of eyes were focused on the girl next to him—Rex's younger sister, Recilia. Her equipment was basic—she was wearing a plain training outfit, and her sword was a generic Steel Sword I'd bought from a weapon shop. As such, it was clear that it was the level of perfection with which she executed her skills that was drawing attention, not anything about her appearance.

"V-Slash! Lightning Blade! Cross Raid!" she cried, linking together Arts with a mesmerizing level of speed and grace.

It would have been easy to assume she was showing off, but I knew she wasn't. Recilia was so engrossed in her training, in fact, that it was clear she barely even noticed that people were watching. Seeing her fairy-like grace as she danced through move after move, I was forcibly reminded of how shit I was. *Not* in terms of personality—though admittedly I didn't have a great personality either—but more in terms of how garbage Rex's stats and abilities were.

I was just a game nerd who'd been reincarnated into a character with intentionally broken-down stats. In the face of beautiful, talented Recilia, who

possessed skills and strength that far surpassed the average person's, I was nothing. I certainly didn't have the star-quality that was such a part of her, that made it so easy to imagine her as the protagonist of a fantasy novel.

Still, I'd already made my peace with the fact that neither I nor Rex would ever match up to her. Instead, I needed to focus on finding a way to be useful to her when we were fighting on the battlefield together, especially because no matter how much effort I put in I'd definitely end up weaker by far.

Fortunately, I did have a single advantage over her—she still hadn't managed to master manual art activation.

"Radd, Recilia, that's not quite right," I said, stepping up next to them. "At the speed you're swinging, you should tighten your arc a little more and pay more attention to the inertia of your blow."

I drew my own sword and envisioned the trajectory I'd always traced to activate V-Slash back when *Braves and Blades* had just been a game to me. My blade traced a perfect V in the air, and my sword glowed much brighter than Radd or Recilia's had. Recilia nodded earnestly and immediately tried to mimic my movements, while Radd let out a groan.

"The way you activate your skills makes no sense, old man! Your sword swing was even more messed up than mine, so how come your skill activation was better?!"

"Sadly, the only answer I have for you is that's just how it works," I said with a shrug. "Remember, you shouldn't be trying to trace the movement of the Art itself. What you want to do is reflect the essence of the Art in the physical world. Got it?"

To be clear, I realized my words probably made zero sense. Unfortunately, I didn't have any better way of explaining it. From what I could tell, the reason that Recilia couldn't manually activate V-Slash, even though her reproduction of the Art was far more perfect than my own, was because this world seemed to be using the game version of *BB*'s motion inputs as a trigger.

Originally, I'd thought everyone would be able to manually activate Arts as long as they replicated the motions they did when automatically activating them, but now I was realizing that that wasn't true. In reality, what you needed

wasn't to accurately reproduce the Art, but to copy the motions you had to make with the motion controller to trigger the move in the game.

The movements were similar, of course, since even in the game version of *BB* you were supposed to trace out the motions of an Art with your controller, replicating its movements, but the difference between the two motions still loomed large. The closest comparison I could think of would be to compare it to holding a racket and playing tennis in real life, and playing a tennis simulator with a motion controller. The motions were similar, but they were also fundamentally different.

To continue the analogy, if tennis video games played like real tennis, you'd need to practice for hundreds of hours to be decent, you'd get tired after every session, and you also probably wouldn't be able to play them in your bedroom. That was why pro tennis players weren't automatically good at tennis video games, and same goes for pro boxers, and so on.

No matter how much video games tried to replicate the real thing, at the end of the day a motion controller simply worked differently from a tennis racket or your actual arms. In *BB*'s case, I'd learned that it was much easier to activate Arts with small, swift motions than with wide swings. Because of how the motion sensor worked, moving your arm 50 centimeters in a wide arc registered exactly the same as a quick 15 centimeter flick of your wrist. If you wanted to manually activate arts in this world, you needed to base your movements on the same principles.

In essence, you needed to think of your weapon as a Dynamic Motion Z (MSRP: 7980 yen), and move as if you were trying to get a motion sensor right in front of you to read your inputs. For obvious reasons, this was a skill no one in *BB*'s world had. It was a strange system that only existed because this was a real world based off of a video game. This made it difficult to teach anyone else how to take advantage of the system, but small disconnects like this were also the only advantages I had over the godlike characters around me.

"Goddamnit! How long do I have to train before I can manage to do those weird movements you do?!" Radd moaned.

Sadly, there was no shortcut I could give him. If we'd been playing the actual

game version of *BB*, he would have been able to use practice mode, where you could try various Arts inputs for as long as you wanted without consuming MP. It was quite handy—it could also show you how close to perfect your movements had been, and could guide you through how to do some of the more complicated ones. But, alas, that didn't exist here, so even though I'd been blessed with the perfect training environment I couldn't provide it to anyone else.

"Don't worry," I reassured him. "We have plenty of time, so there's no need to rush. And besides..."

Considering the kid's personality, he'll probably end up being more of a frontline tank who baits enemy attacks, so there won't actually be a need for him to fire off a whole chain of Arts.

Still, even if Radd wasn't going to be making use of Arts Plus, there were still a lot of advantages to learning manual arts activation. He seemed to have realized this as well, since he was taking his training quite seriously, but it was understandable that he was beginning to get fed up.

"Old man, are you *really* sure I should be swinging my sword around like this?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, and Radd gave me a worried look.

"The other three are doing a bunch of training to raise their attributes right? But at this rate I'll end up spending the whole month practicing Arts. I'm worried I'll get left behind."

Well, that's a surprise, I thought.

I'd always considered Radd to be a hot-blooded musclehead, so I'd thought he'd just jump at the chance to swing his sword around as much as he wanted for a month. It seemed he'd thought things through more thoroughly than I would've given him credit for.

Hmm, I thought. *What should I tell him...?*

The truth was, the stat he needed to increase the most was his Strength, and this training worked just fine for that, and let him practice his manual Art activation too. That probably wouldn't be a good enough answer for him

though.

It's probably a bit soon for this, but I guess it needed to happen eventually either way, I decided.

I held my right hand out to him and said, "Here." Held in that hand was a certain sword.

"W-Wait, isn't that…"

"That's right, it's my beloved Brave Sword," I said lightly.

"I-I know that! But why—"

I chuckled. "Come on, you're smart enough to have figured that out. I'm giving it to you."

"*Wha—?!"* Radd looked up at me, speechless.

"Remember what I told you the other day? That if I ended up biting the dust, you could have this sword? Well, I may have revived thanks to an item, but I *did* technically die once. So this is yours." With that, I dropped the Brave Sword into Radd's hands.

"I-It's heavy…"

"'Course it is," I said with a smile. "It *is* an A-rank adventurer's sword, after all. Don't think you'll be able to wield it that easily."

When Rex had died in the game, the protagonist ended up in a similar situation to the one I was putting Radd in now. Although they'd inherited the Brave Sword, they hadn't had nearly enough Strength yet to use it properly. It was only after the protagonist grew strong enough to wield the weapon that they truly felt as if they'd inherited Rex's resolve.

"But then... I don't deserve to..." Radd trailed off, looking glumly down at the ground.

"I heard from Nyuuk that you want to be a hero." I said, and his head snapped right back up. "That sword right there? That's a legendary hero's weapon. If you really want to be a hero, do you think you can afford to run away from it?"

Radd grit his teeth and looked back down at the Brave Sword. I honestly

couldn’t guess what was going through his mind in that moment. But, after a few minutes, he looked up at me with newfound determination.

“You really suck at encouraging people, you know that?!” he shouted. “But fine, I’ll accept your dumb challenge!” There was no worry in his eyes anymore, just a burning desire to prove himself. “Just you watch, old man—no, Rex! I’ll become a hero worthy of this sword!”

With a spirited yell, Radd started doing practice swings again, this time with the Brave Sword. Unfortunately, it required way more Strength than he had to wield it, so it ended up swinging him around more than he swung it.

Still, even though he fell over more than a few times, Radd kept at his training, determined to master the sword. He didn’t look anything like a legendary hero, with how he was fumbling about, but his earnestness struck a chord within me.

“Man, isn’t he embarrassed to be staggering around like that?” I muttered, my lips twitching up into a small smile. I shook my head, and turned on my heel. “Now then...” I glanced over at Radd one last time, to sear the image of him training wholeheartedly into my brain, then left the training grounds.

As I walked out, Recilia silently appeared next to me. “Are you done with your training already, Recilia?”

She shook her head. “But if you’re planning on going somewhere, then I’m coming with you. Who knows what mischief you’ll get up to if I let you out of my sight.”

I gave my whimsical little sister a wry smile, and the two of us walked out into the main street.

“I’m going to the Guild,” I said with a grin. “We’re going to be causing a scene.”

I was going to do something I’d never tried in-game. There was no guarantee it would work out, but after seeing how serious those kids were about their training, I couldn’t afford to be half-assed about chasing my own goals. It was my turn to do something.

“I need to show a certain someone how a modern gamer fights!”

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The door before me opened with a creak, and I was met by a wall of noise. I stepped into the bustling building without hesitation, and was met almost immediately by a number of rude stares.

There's a lot more people here than usual, I thought, feeling quite satisfied with myself. *I made the right call coming here at noon.*

To be clear, this wasn't because the impression most people had of adventurers—namely, that they were all rough-and-tumble types who went where the wind took them, drank themselves silly at night, and only woke up well after the sun had risen—were true. Frankly, I had no clue whether the idea had merit or not; all I'd based my decision on was the fact that the request board updated at noon.

I only knew that bit of trivia because I remembered an NPC saying it once, but now it was proving useful. Just as I'd thought, it was only natural for people to congregate around the Guild when new jobs were being posted.

Still, I thought, *I'm attracting more attention than I expected.*

It wasn't like I was doing anything special; people were just parting for me as I walked forward. It wasn't out of admiration, though—it was clear from people's expressions that they didn't think very well of me.

In the distance I heard someone mutter, "He's a failure of an A-rank adventurer."

I'm surprised I was able to make that out in this din, I thought. *Is this what people mean when they talk about the 'cocktail party effect'?*

Maybe it wasn't quite that, but it was close enough for me. And, despite the negativity I could feel beaming my way, the fact that I was attracting this much attention was actually convenient for me.

In retrospect, it was probably a good thing that Recilia had decided to tag along. The fact that the newcomer who'd caused a stir with her perfect training form was walking side by side with the black-clad A-rank adventurer who'd come to the city recently was probably pretty shocking to them. In a way, the other adventurers' reactions were to be expected.

I glanced back at Recilia to see how she was holding up, and saw that she was completely unfazed by the attention. As always, her mental fortitude really impressed me.

And so, ignoring the stares of those around us, we made our way to the Guild's receptionist counter. We passed by the line that had formed to see the general receptionist and went over to a bored looking receptionist at the edge of the counter.

Seeing us walk in her direction, she jerked up, her eyes widening as they snapped back to reality. "H-Huh?"

Incidentally this receptionist actually had a name in-game. She was called Erina, and she even had her own event. Though she was clearly surprised, she was professional enough to hide it quickly.

I smiled at her slightly. As it turned out, this particular receptionist was a named character, and had even had her own event in-game. If I recalled correctly, her name was Erina.

Although clearly surprised, Erina was a consummate professional—in seconds, she'd hidden her reaction. After a moment's confusion she said, "Umm, you're the A-rank adventurer Rex, correct? I'm terribly sorry, but I think you've come to the wrong person. I only handle civilian—"

"I know," I interrupted her.

I'd already decided it would be best to get this over with quickly. I held out my left hand and dropped a huge number of coins on the counter.

"Wh-What is..." Erina's eyes widened even further as she watched the growing mound of gold pile up in front of her. Everyone else in the guild, including the people who hadn't even been staring at us, turned as the coins continued to clatter onto the table.

"I want to place a request. The reward is 300 million," I proclaimed. My voice carried across the guild hall, which had gone silent. "The nature of the request is collecting certain equipment. The details are written here on the request note."

"Umm…" Erina seemed utterly confused, so I flashed her a winning smile.

“Sorry did you not catch that? I want to place a request. I have the money to pay the reward too, as you can see. I’m counting on the hardened veterans of Freelea to take care of this for me.”

A few seconds later, the silence was shattered, and everyone started talking to each other at once. Erina finally processed what was going on as well and ran into the back, shouting “G-Guild Master! We need you!”

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A few minutes later, the Guild Master showed up and berated me for my unseemly conduct. Erina also gave me a withering look and muttered, “What kind of adventurer asks other adventurers to gather equipment for them...?” Still, in the end, my request was accepted.

I guess when you suddenly show up with 300 million you’re going to throw people off-balance, I thought with a shrug.

BB was a fantasy video game, so the value of currency was pretty arbitrary, but 300 million wen was obviously still enough to make a big impact on people.

In retrospect I probably shouldn’t have caused the poor receptionist so much grief, I thought, wincing a little as Recilia and I left the stunned Guild hall behind. *If I ever have to do this again, I’ll make sure to be more diplomatic next time.*

As we made our way back to our inn, Recilia said, “I understand what you were trying to accomplish, but did you really have to be that showy about it?”

I let out a thoughtful hum. “I’m not actually sure,” I admitted.

Honestly, it wasn’t my style to throw money around like that. I’d just done it as part of my act. Ultimately, what I’d needed to do was draw everyone’s attention to the fact that I’d filed a request at the Guild, and the money had certainly done the trick. It was all part of the plan I’d been cooking up over the week that Radd and the others had been training. I couldn’t just sit back and watch, after all.

Basically, I’d been checking to see what game mechanics did and didn’t work as they had in the game, and had also slowly been selling off my orichalcum and Brackish Water to buy equipment and secure funds.

You see, in order to properly level up a character, you needed good equipment. The problem was, I'd ended up needing a lot more items than I'd initially expected to craft the particular pieces I was after. I'd checked out the armor store and general store just in case they had any of the things I needed, but unfortunately, just like in *BB*, Freelea only had beginner equipment for sale this early into the game.

I *could* have started clearing dungeons to get the items myself, but a number of key things like Iron Sandals and Clockwork Armor were random drops that didn't have a particularly high drop rate. Another item I needed, the Black Cat's Lucky Coin, had an abysmal drop rate of 0.01%. I'd end up old and decrepit before I found enough of them to do what I was trying to do.

That's when Recilia had shown up, seen the list of items I was agonizing over, and mentioned they were all considered trash items by the people of this world. That was when I'd come up with the idea of having other adventurers gather all of them for me, since getting them myself would be too much of a pain.

Now, if the things I'd been looking for were popular items that were always in high demand, it would have been difficult to gather enough even if I'd put out requests for them. But if Recilia was to be believed, most of them were items regular adventurers thought were junk, and more often than not they just discarded them if they found them.

"Maybe you should have offered a smaller reward?" Recilia ventured.

I shook my head. "Nah. If I'd done that people would end up holding a grudge."

If someone saw me making use of an item they'd sold to me for a pittance, they'd probably feel like I'd tricked them. But if I paid a hefty sum instead, they'd just be impressed that I'd come up with a use for an item that they'd never considered worthwhile before.

That was the hope, anyway.

"Well, I'm not that good at reading people, so maybe I made the wrong call," I said with a shrug. "Either way though, we need those items fast. Which is why it's important that everyone realizes I put out that request, and that the reward

is big enough to get people motivated.”

That was the real reason why I’d just dumped 300 million wen on the counter earlier. Granted, 300 million was just the total reward pool. In truth, my request had been subdivided by item, and I would pay out a specific amount for each item someone brought me.

“If I’d stipulated that you needed to bring every single item to complete my request, no one would be able to manage it,” I explained to Recilia.

“When you’d first said you were planning to put out a request for others to gather equipment for you, I thought you’d lost your mind,” she said, nodding. “But it seems you’ve properly thought it through.”

I narrowed my eyes at Recilia, not appreciating her lack of trust in my plans. *One day I'm going to get back at you for all the times you've looked down on me,* I thought darkly.

Regardless of Recilia's thoughts, I thought my idea was a pretty normal one. Maybe it would have been a little strange if I was still playing *BB* the game, but this was real life now. It seemed only natural that adventurers would use any means necessary to acquire the best equipment when their lives depended on the quality of their gear.

In fact, now that I thought about it, most MMOs had player-based markets where you could buy all types of items. Those games even had guild organizations that were similar to traditional Adventuring Guilds, though they weren't quite the same. I'd heard that, even in MMOs which didn't have those organizations built into the setting, they typically still popped up anyway.

I suppose it's possible that BB*'s mechanics have warped this world so much that coming up with a plan like mine seems radical,* I mused. *Well, part of it is probably because it's frowned upon for an adventurer to put out their own request. That's kinda just common sense.*

This thought brought with it the realization that it was very possible I'd just antagonized a nice chunk of Freelea's adventurers.

I hope I didn't piss them off so much that they won't participate in my quest...

"It's fine. Everything will be fine...probably."

I mean, the sum I was offering was staggering. Plus, the Guild was in charge of distributing the reward—even if someone had a problem with me, they could trust they'd get their money's worth if they brought any of the items I'd requested.

At the end of the day, there wouldn't be many people who could resist the allure of all that easy money. And though I of course didn't expect everyone to cooperate and actively work on my quest, there would probably be a decent number of adventurers who brought in the items I needed, having just coincidentally picked them up while they were out dungeon diving.

"You're making that face again," Recilia said warily.

I declined to respond, preferring to sink back into thoughts of my own brilliance instead.

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Within a few weeks, I came face to face with the fruits of my labor. For the first three days there hadn't been any deliveries, like the adventurers had been debating over whether or not my request was some kind of elaborate ruse. On the fourth day, though, someone had delivered an item for the first time, and as soon as the other adventurers watched them properly receive their reward, the floodgates had opened. By the time two weeks had passed, 90% of the items I'd been looking for had been delivered. And I hadn't had to take a single step out of town.

After that, I'd gone ahead and crafted Radd and the others the equipment I'd had in mind for them. Over time, that gear would help get a lot stronger, but there was one more method I'd recalled that would power them up even further. I actually totally forgot about it until I'd happened to walk past an oddly familiar looking house on the edge of town.

Wait, this is the Special Safe House that was part of the fourth DLC pack!

It was pretty common for games that were sold as a complete package to later get additional DLC—downloadable content, that was—but *BB*'s had been a bit...special. You see, since *Braves and Blades* hadn't sold nearly as well as the developers had hoped, their company had ended up nearly bankrupt after the initial rush died out. As a result, they'd quickly started pumping out DLC that completely broke the balance of the game.

The first DLC had been a pack of basic equipment. Most of it had been pretty strong for how low the usage requirements were, and how easy the gear was to obtain. Some of them had been so ridiculously overpowered that they were forever seared into my memory.

For example, one of the items had been a maid outfit. It hadn't looked like it offered a shred of Defense, but its stat in that category had been crazy high. They'd also given attack stats that could only be described as unholy to a toy hammer which just looked like a hunk of plastic, and added a "Moonlight Saber" that gave the user the ability to use telepathy and just so happened to

glow just like a Lightsaber did. Oh, and who could forget the powered armor suit they'd made, which was *definitely* based off of a certain mecha anime? To top it all off, they'd even added a goddamn telephone pole that had an insanely wide attack range and had massive levels of attack power. And that wasn't even mentioning the stuff like the cat tail and cat ear set they'd made, which'd had far, *far* too much detail put into the motion tracking.

Incidentally, each of those pieces of DLC equipment had cost 600 yen each. You'd been able to buy them as a bundle if you wanted, but it had been so expensive the price had worked out to 580 yen per item. And that was one of the better DLC packs, where they'd at the very least put the equipment in hard-to-reach places like the ruins of Ars, or in a museum where you had to buy the item for a huge amount of in-game money at an auction.

The subsequent DLC waves hadn't even had the courtesy to do that. By the fourth wave, which had included the Special Safe House, they'd completely given up on pretending the DLC they were pumping out weren't just a string of desperate cash grabs.

The Special Safe House itself was a building that you could turn into your base of operations. That didn't sound too special all on its own, but the benefits you got for doing so were insane. The house had an instant full heal corner, fast travel capabilities for a multitude of locations, and a whole slew of other abilities, including being able to teleport in any characters who met the conditions to join your party.

These were all convenient features to have, but there were two aspects of the house that completely broke the game. The first was that it gave you the ability to purchase unique items you might have missed or lost due to story progression. The second was that it gave you the ability to initiate a one-time enchantment transfer from one piece of equipment to another—meaning you could transfer an incredible enchantment that was on a shitty piece of equipment to an actually worthwhile piece of gear.

That was why, back when *BB*'s developers had announced the fourth wave of DLC, I'd despaired. It wasn't even just the fact that the Special Safe House destroyed the integrity of the game; it was that the developers had had the gall to demand 4,250 yen for it. There hadn't even been anything else included in

that DLC pack! The Special Safe House had been it!

The developers hadn't even had the decency to try and make the pack look cheaper by pricing it at like 3,999 yen or something. No, they'd just slapped the 4k+ price tag on it and called it a day. Meanwhile, all the DLC that had actually sounded interesting, like the pack that added an additional protagonist and starting storyline, or the one that introduced new combat styles for people to experiment with, never even got released. The company had gone belly-up before it ever had the chance to finish them.

But none of that's relevant right now! I thought, brushing my memories aside. *If I can make this safe house mine, it'll make things a hell of a lot easier for me from now on!*

Excited, I ran over to the building.

In the game version of *BB*, the Special Safe House had just automatically become the protagonist's once you bought the DLC—there'd been no story justification for it whatsoever. Honestly, the fact that the developers hadn't even tried to tie it to *BB*'s world or setting showed just how strapped for cash they must have been at that point.

Regardless of that, though, finding it could prove an important clue in discovering who the true protagonist was! After all, if it functioned the same way it had in the original game, that meant the true protagonist should be the owner of the property.

Some of my joy over this possibility died out, however, as I drew closer to the building and caught sight of a little sign that had been placed in the front yard. I didn't remember it existing back in *BB* the game, but the writing on it was easy enough to read.

FOR SALE : 100,000,000 WEN.

I groaned. *I should have known!*

Sure, game logic applied to the world of *Braves and Blades* to a certain extent, but the fact that this was now real life and not a video game meant that a

random person couldn't just magically acquire ownership over a house out of nowhere. *Especially* considering how valuable the house was. Honestly, I didn't even find the price point of 100,000,000 wen that unreasonable, for what you'd be getting. Unfortunately, though, I lacked the means to get my hands on that much cash in a timely fashion.

Still, this discovery provided a boon aside from just giving me a new goal to work towards.

"Because if this house exists, that means…"

It's likely the other DLC packs, including the free ones, do as well!

If that was really true, then the information I'd just learned had huge implications for everyone's stat growths. Just off the top of my head, one of the free DLC packs had included a way of raising your characters' level caps, along with a hidden dungeon. The former was far more important, of course.

You see, *BB* normally capped levels at 99, meaning that if a character reached that level without being usable, they were doomed. The free DLC had changed that, adding something called Level 99+. The long and short of it was, if you had the Level 99+ DLC, every time you accumulated enough experience to go up a level after you hit level 99, you would remain the same level but still get a stat boost as if you'd leveled up.

On one of my playthroughs, I'd decided to ignore all the events and story flags just to grind experience so I could see how hard it was to level past 99, and had ended up wallowing in utter despair. The experience it took to get your first "level up" with the DLC had turned out to be ten times the required amount you needed to go from level 98 to level 99.

Still, regardless of the insane amount of effort that would be required, the lack of a level cap meant there was still hope for me and Rex. As long as there was no hard limit to how much a character could grow, that meant I could eventually catch up to everyone else—even despite my shitty start. But, first things first, I needed to continue training up Radd and the others, and I needed to work on getting a little bit stronger myself.

My determination renewed, I turned my back on the Special Safe House and returned to the inn where I was staying.

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After that, I upped the intensity of Radd and the others' training. Not because I'd found out about the DLC, mind you, but because I finally had the items I needed to accelerate their growth. Nyuuk and Mana were now stuck running laps while wearing unwieldy Iron Sandals, while Radd was forced to swing his sword around while wearing armor made of springs and gears and a pair of heavy wristbands. Prana was no better off—she was having to meditate while wearing tacky swirly-eye glasses that did bad things to her good looks.

To tell the truth, I'd thought Prana had looked so silly meditating with those glasses on that I'd accidentally started laughing at her, and had subsequently been chased out of the meditation room by her far-too-accurate arrows.

The other adventurers of Freelea's Guild, meanwhile, had started to glare at me far more often than they had before, and the townspeople's demeanors toward us had turned frosty. Despite this poor treatment, Radd and the others resolutely stuck to my training regimen. If anything, they seemed to relish the added challenge of doing their regular routines with their new ridiculous pieces of equipment. And indeed, that challenge had accelerated their growth significantly.

Every piece of equipment I'd given those kids lowered their current stats while equipped, but they increased their growth rates in return. And, thanks to their zealous training, Radd and his friends grew stronger far faster than even I had anticipated.

If only I could have stuffed even more *growth rate boosting equipment into their loadouts...*

So far, I'd found a number of things that I could do in this world that had been impossible for me to do in *BB* the game, but unfortunately it had turned out that when it came to equipment, there were no such exceptions. For example, back when I'd played *BB*, you'd only been able to equip three rings per character. I'd hoped that, now that I was living inside the game's world, I could equip one for each finger. Sadly, I'd discovered that the line of in-game flavor text that informed the player "If you equip too many items for the same slot, the magic contained within them will cause them to nullify each other," had

carried over to this world as well. No matter how hard I wished for it to be different, I could only get as much out of equipment here as I had in the original game.

That said, *BB* had nine equipment slots for a player to make use of. There were two weapon slots, one in the right hand and one in the left, and four armor slots, one for the character's head, chest, arms, and legs. Finally, there were three generic accessory slots that could take accessories of any type.

When it came to growth rates, the unfortunate truth was that the only pieces of equipment that could alter them were armor and a few very rare accessories that had specific conditions tied to their effects. This meant that even if you equipped all of the growth rate boosting equipment you could, you'd only be able to increase the growth rates for four of your stats.

That's fine for the training they're doing now, I thought. *But...*

Even if I raised the kids' growth rates sky high, they wouldn't actually be able to level up and take advantage of those rates by fighting monsters if their stats were reduced too low. And since the amount of experience needed to level up was determined by a character's base stats, not the adjusted stats they had after taking their equipment into account, that meant grinding by fighting lower-level monsters would soon become inefficient.

Thankfully, the growth-rate increasing items were just one half of my grand strategy. In order for everything to work out the way I wanted, I'd eventually need to initiate the second half as well. Basically, I had some extremely powerful weapons and accessories in mind for the kids, which would offset the stat reductions their armor pieces gave them. Unfortunately, I'd have to procure them myself.

Think on the bright side, I silently told myself. *You've already cleared the biggest hurdle standing in your way.*

That's right—as soon as the last few efficiency boosting items I needed were delivered to the Guild, I'd be able to launch the second half of my master plan!

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Days trickled by, and still the last items on my list remained undelivered.

Without them, my progress had come to a standstill. And that wasn't the only thing that was bothering me, either.

"It's strange…" I murmured.

Strange that almost a month had passed since the fateful day the goddess had given her message unto the world, and yet we'd still not heard a thing about the true protagonist making a move. In the game version of *BB*, the true protagonist had quickly become a central figure in the world. That being so, I'd figured that news of their grand accomplishments would have started reaching us in Freelea before long. For now, however, it seemed the world was at peace. There hadn't been a single trace of the true protagonist, or any news that might lead me to them.

This doesn't make any sense, considering the timeline of the game, I mused.

From what I remembered, after the tutorial phase was over, the true protagonist's first major world event was an encounter with a particularly pesky boss monster. You see, beyond the bosses that waited for the player at the end of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness, there were a number of boss monsters that you generally encountered in story events. Some of them were known as Demon Lords, difficult boss monsters that ruled over the different species of monsters.

Since Demon Lords were endgame bosses, their strength far surpassed that of the true protagonist's early on in the game. However, *BB* featured your standard "Face an endgame boss early on in the story and get absolutely wrecked!" type event. It was meant to trigger as soon as the true protagonist cleared their first dungeon, after the events of the opening. One of the Demon Lords gets curious to see which adventurers conquered the dungeon, and ends up fighting the true protagonist's party once he finds them. During the battle, the true protagonist finds themselves hopelessly outmatched, but just as things seem hopeless they awaken their powers as *BB*'s fated hero. Wielding the strange new powers, the true protagonist barely manages to repel the Demon Lord.

After that, the people of *Braves and Blades'* world would learn that the Demon Lords were active once again, and that there was a person who

possessed a special power which allowed them to fight the monsters on equal footing. At least, that's how I'd remembered the event going.

So why has a whole month gone by without anyone saying a word about Demon Lords? I wondered. *What's going on?*

Generally, even an inexperienced player would finish their first dungeon in a week or two of in-game time. And, if the true protagonist had cleared a dungeon, then it would follow that they should have had their Demon Lord encounter, and the world would have learned of the threat they posed. The news would have spread fast too, if anyone had reported it to an Adventurer's Guild branch. It would have reached the other branches within days. And yet, I hadn't heard a thing about Demon Lords.

There were a few possible explanations for why that was the case. The first was that the true protagonist was progressing much slower than they typically did in-game, and had yet to clear a dungeon. The second was that the true protagonist had already fought a Demon Lord, but for whatever reason the world didn't know about that encounter.

Which means the last possibility is...that this world doesn't have a true protagonist.

Just as that depressed thought crossed my mind, Recilia came jogging up to me. "Rex!" she said quickly, the corners of her lips turning up slightly. "Someone finally brought a Black Cat's Lucky Coin to the guild!"

Now *that* snapped me out of my brooding. I pumped a fist into the air, despite the fact that Rex would have never done such an unsightly thing.

The Black Cat's Lucky Coin was a consumable item that increased the quality of the items you found for a set amount of time after it was used. It was one of the items on my list for which there was no substitute, and I'd set aside 1,000,000 wen to pay for it, meaning the item's cost made up a third of my total request reward. Honestly, it made sense that despite the ludicrous reward, it was still one of the last items to be brought in.

Almost every enemy and chest in the game had a chance of dropping a Black Cat's Lucky Coin, but the problem was the drop rate—an abysmal 0.01%. It was so rare that in a regular playthrough, you might never come across a single one.

Honestly, it's a stroke of good luck that I managed to get my hands on one this quickly, I thought. *Even with the increased odds of a whole city's worth of adventurers searching for it.*

Though it had been a close call, it looked like my gamble had paid off. My worries regarding the true protagonist hadn't disappeared, of course, but now I didn't have the time to dwell on them.

I turned to Radd, who I'd been watching train, and said, "Sorry, kid, but I need to head out for a bit."

Radd froze, then whirled around to face me. "What?! Why are you leaving all of a sudden?"

I gave him a calming look. "I'm just going to a nearby dungeon to grab some equipment for you guys. Don't worry, I'll be back soon."

Radd grit his teeth and sent me a dubious look. "How soon is soon?" he demanded. "Is there even a dungeon near Freelea that has any decent equipment in it?"

I ignored his first question in favor of answering the second. "I'm planning on going to the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness."

Radd's jaw dropped open.

It was an understandable reaction. After all, the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness *was* one of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness. It was the one closest to Freelea, but it also happened to be the one with the strongest monsters living in it. In fact, it was one of the dungeons I'd never managed to clear during my time playing *BB*.

You see, while I'd spent a great deal of my youth playing *Braves and Blades,* I hadn't ever been able to 100% the game. Granted, it wasn't really the kind of game that was meant to be played that way. All in all, I'd done four run-throughs of the game, and I'd only achieved a proper ending for two of them. Frankly, I didn't even know if I'd ever gotten the best ending.

I've mentioned it before, but *BB* was the kind of game that was easy to get into, but incredibly difficult to master. For better or worse, it was balanced to be quite hard, and the enemies grew stronger the farther you progressed into the game. The ostensible goal was to defeat the last boss, the evil god Rasulfi,

but regardless of how you chose to play the game, you'd always get the chance to fight him. Even if you spent your three in-game years sleeping at an inn over and over, at the end of those three years the goddess of salvation would appear before you and teleport you and your party to the Shrine of Darkness, where Rasulfi awaited. Not that you'd have a chance against him if you hadn't bothered to level your party.

That said, most players chose to level their characters while trying to beat as many of the Twelve Ruins of Darkness as they could. This was because, at the end of each one, there was a statue containing a fragment of Rasulfi's power. For each one of those fragments the player destroyed, Rasulfi would weaken a bit further for the final boss fight. This advantage also came with a drawback though—each time you destroyed a statue, you would also release its sealed power, which would then spread across the land and power up the monsters in the *BB*'s world. It was a pretty neat system, gameplay wise.

The main story of the game had a similar mechanic, where the further you progressed, the more strong enemies grew. It was pretty good at making the areas you'd already cleared still feel interesting and fresh. The difficult part was that this strength progression applied to the Twelve Ruins of Darkness as well, which made their high difficulty even more punishing. From what I remembered, most players had recommended heading for the dungeons you had the worst party composition for first, since they'd only get harder with time.

That all worked from a gameplay perspective, sure. But what about for the inhabitants of this world? Even in the game, cities had seemed to become darker, more desperate places with every one of the Ruins you cleared. Shops would close up, and NPCs would comment on how much harder it was becoming to get by. Adventurers would start dying more frequently too. There were even some drastic in-game events that led to the destruction of entire towns and cities. On top of that, as the people of *Braves and Blades* grew more and more desperate, doomsday cults began to gain influence as well.

All of these shifts in setting served as some really nice ludonarrative flavor, showing the player clearly how much more grim and difficult the game was becoming as they soldiered on to the final battle. I'd appreciated that, as a

gamer, but now that I was actually living in the world...it felt sadistic.

That being said, you didn't actually *have* to beat all twelve of the Ruins to beat the game. Clearing six of them weakened Rasulfi enough that a high-leveled party could take him on. Clearing seven would allow you to steamroll him even if you'd missed some of the more important world events. However...you'd only get the normal ending if you beat Rasulfi when he was that weakened. The Goddess of Salvation would appear after you'd emerged victorious and give you a few token words of thanks, with the screen then fading to black, a solemn track playing as the credits rolled. The game even hinted that it wasn't the true ending, with a message saying, "The End?" appearing once the credits were complete.

When I'd first gotten that ending, I'd been disappointed that I hadn't even gotten to see an epilogue with all of my party members, but thinking back on it now, it made a lot of sense. If you wanted to see the true ending, you probably had to trigger a considerable number of the game's events. Furthermore, it was obvious the Ruins were important in some way. Most likely, you either had to beat Rasulfi without clearing a single one of the Ruins, or you had to beat him without leveling up past a certain point.

I'd started experimenting in my third playthrough, since I'd gotten softlocked on my first and only gotten the normal ending on my second. I'd tried to complete all twelve of the Ruins, and tried to participate in as many of the in-game events as I could. There had been so many of them, and so little information available about the game, that I'd ended up making a spreadsheet where I'd plotted out my entire run. Even then, I'd only managed to beat eleven of the twelve Ruins. The final one, the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness—which just so happened to be the one I was heading to now—had bested me.

To be clear, part of the reason I'd failed was because I'd gotten ambushed by the Cult of Everlasting Darkness while I was inside the dungeon. Granted, even if they hadn't shown up, the monsters in the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness were just plain strong. Unlike the other dungeons, which were harder or easier depending on when you did them, the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness had monsters over level 100 at all stages of the game. They didn't get any stronger or weaker. Fortunately, all the monsters had been treated like mini-bosses, which meant

that their locations were fixed and they didn't respawn. Taking this information about the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness into account, it seemed pretty clear that it had been meant to be the game's final dungeon.

In the end, I'd given up on beating the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness in my third playthrough. When I'd won against Rasulfi, I'd gotten another instance of the regular ending. That had been right around the time that all the broken DLC started being released, so I'd bought it all in the hopes that I could get the true ending of the game in my fourth playthrough. Unfortunately, I'd gotten busy with real life, and had never completed that run. After that, I'd ended up never going back to it even when I had the time, mostly because of how hard it was to pick up a game you'd left half-finished again after a long break. But, honestly speaking, I wasn't sure I would have been able to beat the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness during my fourth run either, even with all the DLC I'd bought. That was just how insanely hard that dungeon was.

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"I'm surprised you volunteered to come," I said, looking at Recilia over my shoulder.

"I don't care if you die, but you're in Rex's body right now, and I don't want him dying," she replied coldly.

I sighed. "Anyway, I'll just warn you again that it's going to be dangerous."

"I know," Recilia said stiffly. "That's precisely why I'm coming."

Maaan, she's stubborn, I thought, laughing a bit to myself.

It was clear that I wouldn't be changing her mind, so I gave up on dissuading her and focused on the path in front of me once more. It was time to get serious about the task ahead.

Taking my silence as permission to accompany me, Recilia upped her pace until she could comfortably settle in by my side. "Don't worry, I'll follow your orders, *brother*," she told me.

Frankly, I don't know if that should reassure me or make me feel even worse...

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask you about that," I said. "About why you've

started calling me 'brother' instead of Rex now."

"I don't want to call you Rex. You're not him."

I stared at her for a second, absorbing that. I couldn't tell if she was being blunt because that was just who she was, or if she was barbing her words on purpose.

"So, you don't want to call me Rex because I'm not him...but you're willing to call me your brother even though I'm not?"

"Correct."

"I... I see..." I replied slowly, continuing to walk forward.

Frankly, I can't quite see what the difference is there, but as long as you see one, Recilia, I guess it's fine.

"Besides," Recilia snapped, "Why is it you only act differently when you're around me?"

"I mean, why wouldn't I?" I asked. "You already know I'm not Rex. What's the use of me continuing to pretend I am?"

If I was telling the truth, I knew I didn't actually have to roleplay as Rex at all. It was just, for some reason I ended up doing it around other people without even realizing it. The only time I stopped pretending was with Recilia. After all, it seemed silly to try and act cool and aloof like Rex when she knew I was just a regular dude from another world.

"In a way, it kinda feels like we're a perfect match for each other," I said lightly.

Recilia gave me a dubious look. "I wouldn't go that far…"

The two of us continued to chat and make small talk in the same general fashion as we drew closer to the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness. The area was mostly clear of monsters, probably because it was meant to be the final dungeon. The way we did find in the fields along the way were still pretty weak as well, since no one had cleared any of the Ruins yet. As a result, we were able to reach the dungeon's entrance without much trouble.

"This certainly does look like an ominous place," Recilia said mildly.

I nodded. “Yep. But remember, our objective isn’t to conquer this dungeon or to defeat any monsters. We’re just here to collect powerful equipment, so don’t do anything reckless.”

“I understand. I swear on the Tauren name that I won’t get in your way, brother.” Recilia’s expression grew serious, and the slight mocking tone to her voice vanished, not a trace to be seen.

Good, then we should get through this just fine.

I pulled the Black Cat’s Lucky Coin out of my Inventory, then gave Recilia a grin before flipping it up into the air. “Guess it’s time to go ahead and use this, then.”

The coin let out a little jangling noise mid-toss, then vanished. A second later, the two of us were enveloped in golden light.

“What’s going on?” Recilia demanded.

“The coin’s just taking effect. Now, for a set amount of time, every piece of equipment we find will be guaranteed to be enchanted.”

That was the whole reason I’d come to the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness in the first place—I’d wanted to gather a bunch of enchanted equipment.

Braves and Blades, like most hack-and-slash RPGS, had been programmed to periodically drop enchanted equipment with various stat modifiers in dungeons. The chance of such a thing occurring was randomized, so you could never tell when it was going to happen, or whether you’d end up with Strength +34 or Intelligence +11 or so on. You *could* be sure, however, that you’d come across stronger enchantments in more difficult dungeons. Naturally, that meant the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness, the strongest dungeon that I knew of, would have the best enchantments on its equipment.

I didn’t have time to explain it all to Recilia now, though—the Black Cat’s Lucky Coin’s effect only lasted 30 minutes. It was more than enough time to find what we’d come here for, but I didn’t want to waste any more of our precious time.

“Let’s go!” I told Recilia, taking the lead and stepping forward into the dungeon.

It wasn't long before I found myself agreeing with Recilia's previous sentiment. *This place really* does *feel ominous.*

The ground was wet and each step I took made a squelching noise. A few sloshing strides in, I heard Recilia groan in disgust behind me. I couldn't blame her—this place truly wasn't a pleasant environment at all. Honestly, it almost felt like we'd stepped into a different world.

"The room at the end of this hallway has the first enemy of the dungeon, a Damascus Gargoyle," I murmured over my shoulder to Recilia. "It won't do anything unless you attack it or touch the door, so just be careful and—"

I turned to look her in the eyes, then froze when I saw Recilia had collapsed to her knees, her hands covering her mouth as she gasped for breath.

"Recilia?!" I hurried over to her, worried.

"How...are you...able to stay standing...when the mana...in this place...is so *dense*? You really...are something else...brother…"

Recilia tried to get back to her feet, but her legs were trembling under her, and her face was a ghastly shade of white. The difference between her reaction and mine was stark. I mean, I'd noticed a change in the air when we walked into the dungeon as well, but the denseness of the mana hadn't felt overwhelming or oppressive, to me, just thick enough to make me a little tense.

Am I less affected because I'm not from this world? I wondered. *Or is it just because my level is higher?*

I could think of a variety of reasons why we experienced the dungeon's mana density so differently, but honestly now was not the time to be worrying over stuff like that. Recilia clearly couldn't come any further into the dungeon, and now that I'd used the coin, I didn't have the option to leave and come back later.

Decision made, I said bluntly. "Recilia, you'll have to wait for me outside. I can take care of this alone, so—"

I took a step forward, ready to leave her behind, but Recilia reached out and grabbed my arm. "*No.*"

I sighed, ready to cast her off and chide her for being so stubborn, but then she added, “Don’t go. Please,” and my heart wavered. Her desperation came through in the tightness of her grip around my arm. It was clear that even though she could barely stand, Recilia was determined not to let go.

“Th-This place is too dangerous!” she said, voice tight. “If you leave me now, then...”

Recilia’s usual confidence and composure had fled, nowhere to be seen. She clung to my arm like a child would cling to a departing parent, as if seeking reassurance that I wouldn’t abandon her. Seeing that, I honestly didn’t have any other choice. I stopped trying to pull away, then turned around to face her.

“Fine,” I told her. “I’ll stay here.”

“H-Huh?” Recilia looked up at me blankly, as if shocked that I’d given in so easily.

I smiled gently at her in return. “I probably should have explained this from the start, but remember how I said our objective isn’t to clear this dungeon? We don’t actually have to go any deeper inside. This is far enough, since I already have the treasure chest we need.”

Recilia gave me a confused look as I pulled two items out of my Inventory. One of them was an orichalcum Goblin Slaughterer, and the other was a Steel Blade that I’d picked up as one of my prizes from the Grand Lilim casino.

I’d actually gotten a ton of Steel Blades from there, since I’d gotten enough tokens to buy out most everything I wanted. Steel weapons weren’t particularly special, of course—Recilia was currently wielding one of her own, and you could buy them from most weapon stores. They weren’t rare in the slightest. But the Steel Blade I held, which I’d gotten from the casino? It was a bit special. After all, the casino only gave out items you couldn’t buy elsewhere. It wouldn’t make sense for this to be just any Steel Blade.

“Watch this!” I said.

Nearly as soon as the Steel Blade had left my Inventory, it began to transform into its true self. The sword got thicker and wider, rapidly turning into something that didn’t look like a sword at all. In just seconds, it shifted into a

brown treasure chest with fangs growing out of the lid.

"*Gyaaaaaaaaah*!" the mimic screamed, the bloodcurdling sound echoing through the dungeon. It rushed at us, ready to fight, but I was of course ready for it. I cut it in half with a single slash.

"Huh?" Recilia breathed, giving me a dumbfounded look. Seconds later, a bracelet plunked to the ground right where the mimic had died. The item was enveloped in a faint golden glow—it was enchanted.

⁜⁜⁜

You see, in *BB,* the game data didn't consider mimics that had taken the shape of items to be monsters. Instead, they were considered items that could *turn into* monsters. In other words, a reaction triggered as soon as you touched, attacked, or otherwise interacted with the item that was a mimic, resulting in the dummy item being deleted, and a mimic being summoned in its place.

At the casino, the 10,000 token prize was a randomly chosen item. Whatever that item ended up being, it always had to have the same two qualities: it could be found in a dungeon, and it couldn't be sold at a shop. As a result, there was always a slim chance for that 10,000 token prize to be a mimic pretending to be a basic item.

"Normally, you can't put mimics into your Inventory, of course," I explained to Recilia, who was now watching me frostily from outside the dungeon's entrance. "You'd trigger them as soon as you picked them up. But, since the casino prizes get sent directly there, it's the one loophole you can take that allows you to transport them around."

"I see..." Recilia said, voice deceptively casual. "That's reassuring to know."

Although she'd had trouble even breathing within the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness, once she'd stepped outside she'd recovered practically right away. As a result, she'd decided to remain where she was, watching me as I farmed mimics.

"Now that you've explained, I can understand how you're managing to pull mimics out of your Inventory, but..." Recilia trailed off, glancing over at the huge pile of equipment stacked up in front of me. "It doesn't look like your

gamble paid off. All of that equipment is just regular stuff you can buy from a store."

It was an even more pointed comment than the ones I usually received from her, but I didn't take offense. In fact, I had to try and hide a smile. I knew that the only reason she was talking to me so bluntly was because she was trying to hide her embarrassment over what she'd said earlier.

"What's so funny?" she demanded, noticing my smile.

"Oh, nothing," I said lightly, turning back to look at the pile of equipment in front of me. "You're right that most of this stuff is just normal equipment. Just because I'm killing these guys in a strong dungeon doesn't mean they'll suddenly get any stronger themselves, or drop better equipment than they would have otherwise. And since these mimics are pretending to be regular old Steel Blades, they're pretty weak—at least weak enough that most experienced adventurers could handle them. That naturally means the items they drop aren't the greatest either."

It made sense, if you thought about it. If an adventurer saw a piece of basic steel equipment lying around in a high-level dungeon, they'd immediately know that there was something afoot, just like how they'd know something was wrong if they found a high-level piece of equipment in a low-level dungeon. That was why mimics stuck to pretending to be items that were around their level.

It also just so happened that mimics dropped equipment of around their level upon being defeated as well, which was why Recilia was eyeing my pile of treasure with such doubt. Most of the equipment I'd gotten was stuff that I could buy for myself in an equipment store.

"To be honest," I continued, "I don't really mind if the drops they give me are low level, I explained to Recilia. "I'm not trying to farm the absolute best quality equipment from these guys—I just want something that's pretty strong relative to what newbie adventurers can equip."

If I'd gone after the equipment that dropped from the monsters living in the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness, the kids wouldn't have been able to do anything with them because of their high stat requirements. I mean, some of the

equipment in there required 500 Strength, or 600 Intelligence. Radd and his friends wouldn't be getting themselves to those sort of numbers for a long time.

"Besides, Recilia, you're missing one important thing," I said with a grin. "Even though I could buy all of this equipment from a store, I *couldn't* buy them with the sort of enchantments they're dropping with now. And it's all thanks to that Black Cat's Lucky Coin."

"I don't have much experience with enchanted equipment myself…" Recilia mused, not looking all that impressed.

It'll probably be easier to show her firsthand how powerful enchantments are, instead of just trying to explain, I decided.

"Recilia, can you use any offensive magic?"

She frowned. "That sure came out of nowhere." There was a short pause, and then she quietly muttered, "Wind Cutter."

Seconds later, a blade of wind shot out of Recilia's hand and slammed into a tree about ten meters away. The blade left a deep gouge in the trunk, cutting through a good third of it.

"As you can see," she said mildly, "I can. Though I only know beginner wind spells."

My eyebrows rose. "That was some pretty impressive damage for a beginner spell."

It's probably because she had such high base stats that even simple spells hit quite hard, I thought. *Even though Intelligence is her lowest stat, she's still got more of it than a beginner mage would.*

"In that case..." I mumbled, Appraising some of the equipment lying on the ground around me. "Here, take these."

I leaned down and picked up three rings, which I handed over to Recilia. She looked down at them, a doubtful expression on her face.

"These won't curse me if I wear them, will they?" she asked reluctantly.

I rolled my eyes. "Do I really look that untrustworthy to you? They're just

regular rings you can find in any old shop. The only difference is they're enchanted."

Giving me one last dubious look, Recilia hesitantly slipped one of the rings onto her finger. As it went on, her brow furrowed. "That's odd," she mumbled. "I felt a little jolt."

As Recilia slid the other two rings on, I pointed to the tree she'd hit earlier. "Now, try hitting that with Wind Cutter one more time."

"You could at least say please," Recilia grumbled, but she dutifully prepared to fire off another Wind Cutter. Mana coalesced around her hand, creating a much bigger wind blade than the last one.

Recilia's face went blank with shock as her spell shot forward, slicing straight through the tree she'd aimed at and tearing through several more before it vanished into the distance. The chopped trees hit the ground with a series of loud thuds.

"What...in the world...?" Recilia turned back to me, looking as pale as she had when she'd first entered the dungeon.

I grinned at her reaction. "What did I tell you?" I said, laughing. "This is the power of enchantments."

"B-But that's impossible!" Recilia snapped. "I'm a close-range physical fighter! So how did I just cast a spell at the same level as an experienced mage?!"

I shrugged. *You can choose not to believe it, but the truth's right there in front of you, my friend.*

You see, any enchanted equipment that dropped from a monster had a maximum stat modifier limit. *However*, that stat limit was based on the level of the area that the item dropped in, not the level of the monster that was killed. The average stat modifier was half of the dungeon's level, though even on an incredible roll it could never go above that limit.

Usually, regular old steel equipment was only found in dungeons where the max stat boost from enchantments was +10 at best. That wasn't a negligible boost, but it also wasn't enough to feel truly impactful. But the equipment my mimics had been dropping was a whole different story—since I'd used the

casino trick to spawn them in the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness, the game considered them to have spawned in that location. That meant that all the items I'd acquired had much higher stat boosts associated with their enchantments than would normally be possible, because they were using the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness' level as their upper bounds. As it happened, the dungeon's level was 99, so most of the drops from the mimics had enchantments that were around level 50, though some were a bit higher and some were a bit lower.

"The three rings I gave you boosted your Intelligence by 48 points, 62 points, and 72 points respectively," I informed Recilia. "In total, they boosted your Intelligence by 181 points. A veteran mage might spend their whole life leveling up enough to have that much Intelligence."

Naturally, a boost that intense had increased Recilia's Intelligence far higher than even her best stat. Which meant that, if she fought with those three rings equipped, she had stats that better befit a Mage capable of close combat, rather than stats that worked for the close combat Swordsman who could use a bit of magic that she really was.

"Brother...are you saying these three rings can grant more power than a lifetime's worth of training and adventuring?" Recilia asked, giving me a stupefied look.

My grin grew even wider. "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet. Remember, everyone can equip up to nine different pieces of equipment. What kind of stats do you think a person would have if they had nine enchanted pieces equipped?"

That high of a boost would be more than enough to leave Recilia or Rex's current stats in the dust. It would give the wearer such an advantage that, if other adventurers found out about my strategy, they might start changing their jobs entirely, or rethink their entire fighting style just to match the equipment they found. With my knowledge, people would become slaves to their equipment, and no one would even be able to blame them for it.

Personally, I didn't see much wrong with that outcome. After all, mastering insane equipment was where a true adventurer shined. Knowing when to adapt

a character's build to the equipment you found, and knowing how to find equipment to match the character build you were going for were equally important strategies for a gamer.

"Don't forget, it's not just this equipment's strength that makes it so valuable," I reminded Recilia. "Its true worth lies in how versatile it is."

There were plenty of items out there that could be used by anyone but were pretty weak, or were quite strong but required a specialized skill set to master. These enchanted pieces of equipment, however, were different.

"What makes these items so special is that they aren't legendary pieces of equipment only chosen heroes can wield—even a newbie adventurer who can only handle beginner dungeons can equip these."

"Ah…" Recilia looked down at the rings on her fingers in trepidation, like they were a group of some kind of terrible monster.

It was everything I could do to keep from breaking out in a cheer. "This, *this* right here is the power I've been seeking! The perfect equipment to raise people up from level 1!"

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After that, I headed back to Freelea, giddy with the knowledge that my Inventory was full of god-tier equipment. Recilia followed silently behind me, perhaps still processing what she had learned. She didn't seem nearly as over the moon about how good a haul we'd gotten as I was—instead, I felt like she was horrified over how powerful equipment could be.

A few minutes passed as we made our way toward home, and then Recilia quietly asked, "Are you sure you want to give this equipment to those kids?"

"Hm?" I said, only seconds later grasping what she'd said. "Oh, yeah, it'll be fine. I know I made a big deal about how amazing enchanted equipment is, but ultimately these enchantments are on beginner equipment, so there's a limit to how useful they are."

Plus, I wanted to make sure that Radd and the others continued wearing the growth-rate increasing armor I'd gotten them, so there was only so much enchanted equipment they could actually wear. I'd probably only be able to use

their three accessory slots, since I wanted their weapons to be stronger than a basic Steel Sword. Even enchanted, a basic sword like that would be quickly outclassed by weapons with better variable damage.

"Also, since enchantments are all concentrated on one particular stat, they seem much stronger than they actually are," I continued. "All it takes is leveling up two or three times, and you've gotten the equivalent number of stat points. It's just that they're all broken up into different areas."

If my math was correct, I'd be able to get Radd and the others around six levels' worth of extra stat points, but in the grand scheme of things that really wasn't that much of a boost. Sure, they'd be able to take down enemies at their level much easier, but they'd still struggle pretty hard against anything ten or more levels over them.

"The real problem is that all the equipment we'll find for a while will be weaker than this enchanted equipment," I explained. "Ideally, we can procure our own strong equipment, but…"

I trailed off as we drew near to the city, where a group of familiar faces were lingering in wait around the main gate.

"Heeeeey, old man!" Radd yelled, sprinting over to me, the others following close behind.

Worried that something might have happened, I asked, "Why are you all waiting out here?"

"What do you mean *'why'*?!" Radd demanded. "You said you were going to the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness and ran off! We were worried about you!"

Oh, I thought, a bit caught off guard. *That makes sense*, *I guess. Even newbie adventurers must know the dangers of the Labyrinth of Pure Darkness...*

"W-Well, it looks like you got out just fine," Radd sputtered, "but don't worry us so much next time! You're my, my...teacher after all."

My eyebrows winged up. *Oh shit, did Radd actually just go there?*

Just as I was musing over this new development, Mana rushed up to me. "I-I knew you'd be fine! I told Radd there was nothing to worry about, but…"

Prana rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You looked just as worried as Radd did, and you came out here to wait for Rex just like the rest of us.”

“Y-You didn’t have to mention that, Prana!” Mana cried in dismay, her eyes going a little watery with embarrassed tears.

Well, they certainly seem relieved, I thought, laughing to myself a little. *Their tongues have loosened up considerably.*

“*Regardless*,” Nyuuk said, stepping in front of his comrades in an attempt to calm them down, “we’re all glad to see you both safe and sound.”

I looked over the kids with fond eyes, a trickle of pride running through my chest. *At first glance, these four might seem like a bunch of incongruous misfits, but they balance each other out really well. They’ve gotten really strong over the past month too.*

Honestly, with how unreasonable my demand to not go adventuring for a month must have felt to them, I was impressed with how well they’d followed my directions. Their current stats were a testament to how much that break had helped them grow.

“Now that I think about it, tomorrow will mark the one-month anniversary of our first meeting,” I muttered softly to myself.

Radd and the others gave me an odd look, but I ignored them and started Analyzing each of them instead. From what I could tell, they’d all kept to their training without slacking in the slightest, and they’d grown even more than I’d expected. They’d far surpassed the minimum bar I’d needed them to reach, and at this point their stats would only grow very slowly with more training. Furthermore, I’d finally been able to procure good equipment for them, which had been the thing I’d been most concerned about doing before they completed this stage of their training.

In which case...looks like it’s time to move on to the next! I thought with a grin.

“We’re two days ahead of schedule,” I told the kids, “but you guys have already made it further than I thought you would. So...today is your last day of training.”

“You mean...?” Radd looked up at me expectantly.

I smiled at him. “That’s right. From tomorrow on, we start adventuring!”

Radd let out a whoop of joy, and though I didn’t think it was really that big of a deal, I couldn’t help but feel a little happy as well.

“Hey, don’t you celebrate just yet,” I said with a laugh. “You guys still need to finish today’s training quota. Also, there’s one last big event waiting for you guys before we officially start our adventure.”

“What’s that?” Radd asked, and

My grin grew wider. “It’s time all of you changed classes. Everyone, meet me at the temple tomorrow at noon.”

⁜⁜⁜

In the world of *Braves and Blades,* classes were considered miracles handed down to the mortal races from the gods. Likewise, class changing was considered a holy thing, and was always done at a temple, where vestiges of the gods’ power still remained. To the people of *BB*’s world, picking a class meant receiving the gods’ blessings and protection. My perspective was, of course, totally different. To me, classes were just another part of the game’s systems.

“This is my first time visiting one of these since I came to this world,” I muttered to myself as I joined Radd and the others at the gate of Freelea’s temple.

We passed through the temple gates together, and as soon as we were inside I felt the atmosphere shift. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the temple were pure white, and I could feel the solemnity and majesty of the gods permeating the air. Statues of past heroes filled the wide-open space, each one unique in some way. And each of those statues also corresponded to a class.

You see, class changing in *BB* was as simple as touching the statue of the class you wanted to change into. So long as you met the minimum requirements, the statue would light up and you would successfully switch over. If you didn’t meet the requirements, however, nothing would happen.

As for what classes were represented in each temple, it varied from city to city, meaning that the classes you could become changed depending on which temple you visited. There were also a number of rare classes whose statues only existed in the depths of certain dungeons, so you had to clear that dungeon before you could become that particular class. It was possible that I might eventually decide that Radd or one of the other kids should change into one of those classes, but that wouldn't be for a while yet.

A newbie adventurer's first class would be one of the generic beginner classes like Fighter or Mage, typically chosen based on where that particular person thought their aptitudes lay. After that, with the way *BB* had been balanced, you typically leveled up ten or more times in your original class before your stats were high enough to change to a more advanced one. Advanced classes could learn more powerful skills than beginner classes, but more importantly, the bonus stats they awarded with each level up were higher than their more basic counterparts. For example, a beginner class like Fighter only handed out a bonus of an additional six stat points per level, with Strength taking up a good chunk of those points. But the next class above Fighter, Swordsman, gave nine additional stat points per level. The third tier of melee class, Imperial Swordsman, gave you a whopping twelve additional points.

That was the main reason why I'd had Radd and the others train so much instead of leveling. By raising their base stats with training, I'd gotten them to the point where they could swap to a tier two class while still at level 4. Normally, they wouldn't have had the stats for that until level 10 at the earliest.

To be clear, this feat wasn't possible just because of my training—without the high base growth rates Radd and the other kids had, it would have been impossible to get them this far. That, plus the fact that, since they'd barely leveled up at all so far, they'd been able to train up their stats faster.

Now that they'd made it to this point, all four of them would be able to start their adventures with much higher base stats and growth rates than any other newbie adventurer could have ever dreamed of. It was for that reason that I'd had them all do dull, repetitive training day after day for a whole month.

Those kids must have worried about listening to me and treading a path none of their fellow adventurers had, especially since the other adventurers looked at

my training regimen with nothing but scorn. But they stuck with it anyway, without a single word of complaint. And now, here, today, their hard work is finally going to bear fruit. So...

“Let’s get started!” I said with a grin.

Radd remained at my side while Mana, Nyuuk, and Prana all moved towards separate statues. The three of them had already chosen what classes they'd be changing into.

First up was Nyuuk. The statue he stopped in front of corresponded with one of the second-tier mage classes: Battlemage. He placed a hand against its stony surface, and light enveloped him. As we watched, it was slowly absorbed into his body—Nyuuk had successfully completed his class change.

As the realization hit him, a beaming smile burst over Nyuuk's face. After a brief moment of celebration, he turned to me and bowed.

Battlemage was a rather interesting class, since it was capable of close physical combat despite being primarily magic-focused. It hadn't been easy for Nyuuk to reach the required stats to switch over to it, but he'd worked hard and hadn't voiced a word of complaint. Curious, I used Analyze on him to see how much the past month of training had raised his stats.

【Nyuuk】

Strength: 25 (+7)

Vitality: 37 (+1)

Intelligence: 72 (+9)

Mind: 40 (+4)

Agility: 50 (+5)

Focus: 50 (+5)

"I-I'd like to go next!" Mana exclaimed, excitedly touching her hand to the statue that corresponded with the Bishop class.

As we waited for her class change to complete, I used Analyze on her too, mulling over her stats.

【Mana】

Strength: 27 (+3)

Vitality: 38 (+6)

Intelligence: 51 (+3)

Mind: 76 (+20)

Agility: 32 (+8)

Focus: 50 (+18)

My brows raised. *I can't believe she's managed to reach the required stats for becoming a Bishop at just level 3.*

Without a doubt, Mana was the one who'd grown the most over this past month. I'd figured she'd have a rough time switching over to her second-tier class, since she'd started one level lower than everyone else and being a Bishop required a really high Mind stat, but she'd proved me wrong. As it turned out, she had a knack for praying, which was the type of training you had to do in order to raise your Mind. Her stats hadn't grown at such a lightning speed just because of some natural talent, though—Mana had gotten this far because she'd trained with a single-minded focus that had far outstripped everyone else's efforts.

It made me feel a bit sheepish for thinking that she wasn't cut out to be a Healer, just because her growth rates were a little off. I'd been totally off base—I hadn't taken into account the unique talents Mana had that weren't reflected in the hard data presented to me by Analyze.

"Me next…" Prana said, and a second later she too was enveloped in light.

Just as with Mana, I used Analyze on her as her new class settled in.

【Prana】

Strength: 50 (+5)

Vitality: 30 (+3)

Intelligence: 30 (+3)

Mind: 30 (+3)

Agility: 55 (+1)

Focus: 86 (+14)

Unlike Mana, Prana hadn't had to work so hard to qualify to change into her second-tier archer class, Sniper. But, despite her perfect stat spread, she'd still poured her heart and soul into her training anyway. As a result, she'd raised her Focus to ridiculous heights for someone who was just level 4. And, just like Mana, she'd proven my first impressions of her dead wrong—where I'd thought Prana would be the most difficult of the four to work with, training her had been a breeze.

"I guess I'm last," Radd said, turning to me. "So, which class am I going to be changing into, old man?"

Radd was the only one of the kids who hadn't known what class he'd be changing into ahead of time. I hadn't told him a thing, not even what stat requirements he should try and meet. The only instructions I'd given him were to work on raising his Strength, and to get used to using the Brave Sword.

I went ahead and used Analyze, curious as to how well he'd done.

【Radd】

Strength: 76 (+22)

Vitality: 63

Intelligence: 27

Mind: 45

Agility: 36

Focus: 27

Judging by the stats before my eyes, Radd had taken my words seriously—he'd only raised his Strength, but he'd managed to get it up a truly staggering amount. His level of improvement didn't look as impressive as the other's stats at first glance, but you had to remember that the higher a stat was, the longer it took to increase through training. That's why he'd ended up raising his stats less in total than everyone else. However, that was just fine—I was happy with the improvement he'd managed to make.

76 Strength, huh? I thought, striding toward a statue that depicted a heroic figure thrusting his sword into the air. *That's just barely going to be enough.*

A confusion broke out over Radd's face as he saw where I was heading. He joined me in the center of the temple, then gave the statue a puzzled look. "You want me to change my class to Young Leo?"

I nodded. "I sure do."

"W-Wait!" Nyuuk's shocked voice called out from behind us. "Young Leo is a *terrible* class! It only hobbles your growth! Shouldn't Radd—?"

"Nyuuk," Radd said firmly, interrupting him. "It's fine." Turning and looking me right in the eyes, Radd asked, "I can trust you, right, old geezer?"

I nodded again. There was no need for words.

"*Radd!*" Nyuuk shouted.

Ignoring his friend's warning, Radd muttered under his breath, "Let's do this."

He stepped forward and touched the Young Leo statue and was enveloped in light, just like everyone else had been. The light began to be absorbed into Radd's body, but that was when things started to go a bit differently...

"M-My sword's glowing!" Radd exclaimed, staring in awe down at the sheathed Brave Sword I'd given him. It was wreathed in the same light that had enveloped him mere seconds ago.

"Try unsheathing it," I told him.

Radd dutifully pulled the sword free from its scabbard. As he did so, he was enveloped in light again, signifying a second class change.

You see, while the Young Leo class was well-known for its severely lacking stat bonuses—it only awarded a character a measly +1 point in Strength and +1 point in Vitality per level—it also had a secret. It was actually the only class in the entirety of the game that could upgrade into a different class based on the equipment you had on you. Basically, if you had the right equipment and the stats to utilize that equipment without penalties, the Young Leo class would evolve into something else.

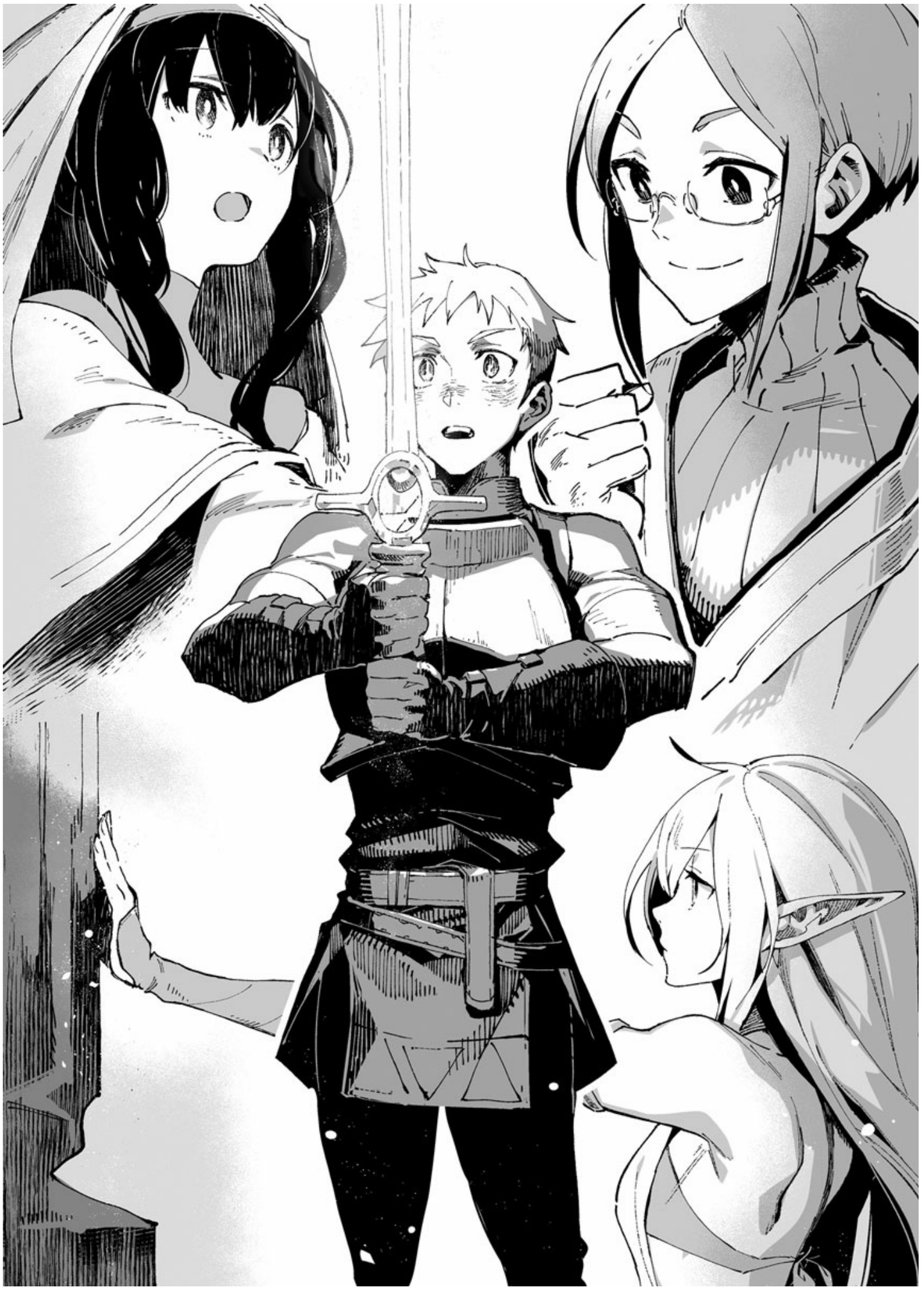
I'd figured this out after reading the flavor text of the Brave Sword, which Rex

had carried in the original game. It had been something to the effect of: “This sword was favored by a hero who lived in a time centuries past; it holds the secret to unlocking a young lion’s true power.” And, just as the text implied, if you had the Brave Sword equipped when you changed into the Young Leo class, you’d skip completely over the first, second, and third tiers of the melee classes—Fighter, Swordsman, and Imperial Swordsman respectively. Most *BB* players hadn’t seemed to figure this out, though—back when I’d been playing the game, people had considered Young Leo such a terrible class that there had been guides online on how to get the protagonist who started off with it to a temple while leveling as little as possible.

“Wh-What just happened?” Radd mumbled, staring down at the sword I’d gifted him with wide eyes.

I grinned, then patted him on the shoulder. “Congratulations on your new class, Radd. From today on you’re a Brave Leo.”

And so, Radd gained a great deal more power than he’d expected—instead of changing into a base tier class with legendarily bad growth bonuses, he ended up becoming a Brave Leo, a fourth tier melee class.



Chapter 7: The Chivalrous Warrior

One of the reasons *Braves and Blades* was considered to be such a hard game was that, despite being an action RPG, it also required a lot of resource management from the player. The primary resource you needed to manage was time. You only had three years before you were thrust into a battle with the final boss, and those years would need to be spent wisely in order to win. This meant that you'd have to account for a number of things, including the days of travel time it took to go from one area to another across *BB*'s vast world. Furthermore, if you wanted to get to the harder dungeons or the more remote towns, you'd have to head to an area's hub city and then travel even longer over rough terrain in order to reach them. This reality wasn't immediately apparent at the beginning of the game, but as you progressed further through its storyline and the world started opening up more and more, it became exceedingly clear. That said, it was considered best practice to clear out all the dungeons in an area before leaving, and to try and pick up an escort mission of some kind whenever you were journeying from place to place, in order to make the most of your travel time.

There was a second resource you needed to carefully manage in order to expertly make use of your three years in-game, though: monsters. Some people had a difficult time conceptualizing the idea, of course, since it was hard to look past the fact that monsters were enemies who posed an eminent threat to the world. But most of them, if told to think of monsters as living sacks of experience, caught on soon enough.

You see, in *BB,* the only way to gain experience was to kill monsters, but unlike in other RPGs, those monsters didn't spawn endlessly. To be clear, defeated monsters *would* eventually respawn, if given enough time; they'd even pop back up pretty quickly if you'd only killed one or two of them in a given area. If you cleared out a whole dungeon, though? It would take a whole ten days or more for the monsters to return. That meant that you couldn't just sit around and constantly reuse the same grinding spots—if you did, that ten day interval would cause you to run out of game time pretty fast. As such, the

adventurers in *Braves and Blades* tended to wander around exploring different dungeons and areas, in lieu of choosing a single place to be their base of operations.

After explaining all this to the kids, I continued, “In addition, the stronger you are for your level, the more options you have to choose from when it comes to good grinding spots. That was another reason why I wanted you guys to work on raising your stats before we went out and started leveling you up.”

When fighting monsters for experience in *BB*, it was best to avoid challenging any enemies who had a lower level than you—with the way the game’s mechanics worked, you’d end up getting a pittance in comparison to what you’d get if you battled monsters at your same level or higher. That meant that, if you were level 20, for example, you’d want to be challenging dungeons that were between level 20 and level 22 in order to keep leveling at a reasonable pace. If you were a level 20 with stats high enough to be a level 25, though, you could take on dungeons from level 20 all the way to 27, meaning your list of viable dungeons to challenge grew substantially. This would give you a big advantage, since you wouldn’t have to spend as much time traveling to and fro, searching for another suitable dungeon, and if you focused on going after monsters at the upper end of your level spectrum, you’d be able to level up faster.

Musing over this, I mumbled, “Although in this worl— *Ahem.* I mean, in this *profession*, most adventurers don’t seem to have a good grasp on their own level, so they end up gravitating toward dungeons that are easier for them to handle.”

Radd and the other nodded, their eyes rapt on my face. They seemed to be hanging onto my every word now—it was only natural, as they’d all just come face to face with how amazing the results of my training regimens were when they’d swapped classes. In truth, I’d actually saved some of my longer explanations until today just so I could take advantage of the highly receptive mode I’d known the class change would trigger in them. Although, it seemed their trust in me had soared to heights even I had not expected.

That confidence would probably shrink a little if I told Radd he could have changed classes three days ago, I thought with a slight smile. *Though of course,*

I'll be taking that knowledge with me to the grave.

You see, Radd had only needed to have 75 points in Strength in order to wield the Brave Sword, and he'd achieved that number several days before. It hadn't been the right time to tell him, though—I'd wanted the occasion to be a grand event for the entire group, so they could all feel the excitement and exhilaration of their achievements. It was important to dramatize moments like this; they'd motivate the kids to work even harder.

"Hang on a second, old geezer!" Radd suddenly burst out. "How are you supposed to know if a dungeon's been cleared out or not until you actually visit it?"

He might respect me more now, but I guess Radd is still going to call me an old man, hmm? I thought. I frowned a little at that but decided to properly answer his question nevertheless.

"You just have to check the Guild's request board," I replied. "The whole reason they post requests for adventurers to clear out certain dungeons is to let people know which ones are empty, and which ones aren't. It also keeps adventurers from clashing over resources, since everyone can see when a party accepts one of the requests. There will be times, of course, where you'll be aiming to go to a specific dungeon because you want to harvest a particular item from the monsters there or something, but beyond that I'd recommend sticking to the request board."

"And what kind of things would you use the items you harvest from monsters for?"

I shrugged. "Crafting, alchemy, blacksmithing, and the like, mostly."

If I was being honest, even I didn't know the usages of a lot of *BB*'s items—a decent number of them just had the flavor text "Can be used in various ways," without any further explanation. I couldn't really adequately explain that to the kids, though, so I decided it was best to change the subject.

"That's enough lecturing for today," I told them, pointing to the temple exit. "Let's get headed to the Guild so you guys can find some quests to take. Naturally, you'll be completing them while wearing the equipment sets I assembled for you."

Radd's face screwed up in annoyance at my final words, and I held back a grin.

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The moment we entered the Guild, everyone turned to stare at us. Unlike before though, they weren't staring at us with hostility. No, they were all looking at Radd and the others with unbridled curiosity.

It was hardly surprising, all things considered. After all, the kids didn't exactly look as if they were outfitted to go adventuring. Radd was wearing heavy weights on his arms and legs, along with some armor made of interconnected springs. Nyuuk was wearing proper mages' robes at least, but he was also wearing glasses with a swirly eye pattern painted on the front, and was stumbling a little because of how hard they made it to see. Mana was wearing what looked like a party hat over her priestess' robes, and was trying her best to make herself as small as possible. Lastly, Prana was wearing heavy Iron Sandals, and a pair of thick, unwieldy goggles.

Trying to encourage her, I mumbled, "Uh...those goggles are honestly starting to look kind of cute on you…"

"Say another word and I'll shoot an arrow through your mouth," Prana snapped, hurrying forward.

I let out a long sigh. *And here I was trying to be nice...*.

I was almost on the verge of sighing a second time when Recilia piped up from behind me.

"I think her response was warranted, all things considered," she commented.

"But that was heartfelt praise!" I protested.

"I think you're the only person in the world who would genuinely consider those words praise, my dear brother," Recilia replied, her tone as dry as ever.

Too bad she didn't get to change classes as well, I thought wryly. *Maybe then she'd be in a better mood.*

I turned my head, planning to give Recilia a *look* over my shoulder, but was distracted by the sight of the strange assortment of equipment she was wearing, which wasn't far off from the kid's bizarre outfits. Unlike them,

though, she seemed unfazed by her outlandish appearance. Still...

"If you don't like what I'm making you wear, you can say it to my face."

Recilia gave me a thoughtful look. "I neither have issues with your methods, nor do I expect special treatment. In fact, I think your plan is as good as it gets. It's just…"

"Just what?"

In a small voice, Recilia replied, "My Strength rose all the way to 130 over the past month too, you know…"

"Okay?"

Why is she bringing that up...?

"Never mind," she said hurriedly. "It's not important. I'll go check on the children."

Before I could say another word, she'd sprinted off. I stared after her, flabbergasted.

What the hell just happened there? I wondered. *Is she...thinking of Radd and the other kids as her rivals...?* That seemed close, but not quite right. *Well, either way, she's helped me out a lot since I came to this world. I should probably let her know how much I appreciate her more often.*

Resolving to be nicer to Recilia, I followed after her to see how Radd and the others were doing. As I reached the counter I saw the Guild clerk speaking with Radd.

"Umm...D-rank adventurer Radd, correct? I believe your party name was…"

"Braves and Blades!" Radd finished cheerfully.

That's right—by sheer coincidence, the name Radd had chosen for his party was the exact same as the name of the game. When I'd asked him about it he'd said, "We were trying to think of a party name together, and I happened to hear someone say that phrase! I thought it sounded *really* cool!" It had honestly made me question if Radd wasn't secretly the true protagonist after all.

Or maybe whoever created this world wanted to throw in a title drop...?

“What a splendid name!” The clerk smiled sweetly at Radd, likely trying to ease his nervousness. “So, valiant members of the Braves and Blades, what request would you like to undertake today?”

Radd confidently placed the paper he’d taken off the request board onto the counter. “We’d like to accept this request to clear out the Rainbow Lava Caverns!”

As Radd’s words echoed across the Guild hall, it fell silent. A few seconds passed in frozen stillness, and then all the adventurers started muttering to each at once.

“The Rainbow Lava Caverns? He can’t be serious.”

“Oh man, they’re so dead.”

“He’s probably just trying to act cool.”

“H-Hey shouldn’t someone stop him before he gets his party killed?”

I wasn’t surprised by the adventurers’ reactions—honestly, they were understandable. The Rainbow Lava Caverns were a level 15 dungeon. They were the kind of place that veteran adventurers explored, not a party of newbies who were taking on their second-ever request.

Erina, who was sitting nearby, chimed in to explain to Radd that the Rainbow Lava Caverns were too dangerous for a D-rank party, but he firmly insisted that this was the request his party was going to take. The Guild clerks were left at a loss—they didn’t have the authority to reject Radd’s decision, as the ranking system only existed to give people an idea of how strong and reliable specific adventurers were, and it didn’t actually restrict anyone from taking requests beyond what they might be able to handle.

In the end, they gave up and allowed Radd to take on the request. It took longer than I’d hoped, though, and when we left the Guild, I could feel the judging gazes of veteran adventurers on our backs.

❊ ❊ ❊

After we’d left the Guild, we’d gone over our plans one last time, checked over our equipment, and then headed out towards the Rainbow Lava Caverns.

It made me feel oddly like a teacher, taking his students out on a field trip.

As we drew closer to the caverns, Radd glanced up at me with a worried look on his face. “O-Old man...are you sure we should have taken that request?”

I sighed. I had, of course, explained my reasoning to Radd before, but it made sense that he’d feel a little apprehensive given how everyone in the Guild had reacted.

“It’ll be dangerous, of course,” I began to reassure him. “But as long as we’re together, I’m sure—”

WHOOSH!

“Get down!” Prana shouted.

Milliseconds later, Recilia screamed, “Brother?!” but I couldn’t reply—ice arrows had begun hurtling down from the sky.

Radd gaped upward, eyes wide. “Wha?!” he gasped.

I brusquely shoved him out of the way, shielding him behind me. Warily, I eyed the ground in front of us, where all the arrows were now lodged.

Seems like whoever shot those wasn’t actually aiming at us, I mused. *They’re too far up the road for it to be otherwise.*

Before I could decide on a next move, Prana stepped forward angrily, eyes flaring. “Who’s there?!” she demanded.

There was a shuffling sound, and a group of three adventurers emerged from a nearby copse of trees, their weapons drawn.

“I did warn you,” one of them said.

He was the only one of three that I recognized.

“Veteram…” I muttered, and the man pointed his sword at me, his eyes blazing. His blade was chipped and worn from years of use, but he clearly took good care of it.

“Sorry, but this is as far as you go,” he said. “I realize this is a breach of adventurer etiquette, but I won’t just stand by and watch as one man’s hubris leads four young adventurers to their deaths.”

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A short while earlier...

“Veteram, you need to hear this!”

I glanced up from my drink, which I’d been enjoying with my friends at a bar nearby the Guild. One of the young adventurers I was reasonably close to stood in front of me, panting and agitated.

“Calm down,” I told him. “Take deep breaths, and tell me everything slowly and clearly.”

“O-Okay,” he stammered, voice shaking. “Just now…”

Slowly, his story unfolded. Apparently, the A-rank adventurer Rex—who’d become the talk of Freelea recently—had come to the Guild along with the newbie party he’d been training up. To my horror, they’d apparently taken on a request to clear out the Rainbow Lava Caverns just a few moments ago.

“Those fools!” I shouted, slamming my mug down on the table.

“H-Hold on, Veteram!” Juke, the magician I’d just been drinking with, got to his feet.

My other friend, a thief whose name was Rain, stood up as well, moving in front of me so he could bar my way.

I was afraid something like this might happen, I thought, fists clenching.

I’d heard all sorts of rumors about “Rex, the Aloof Adventurer,” but after meeting him in person I’d realized right away that he was a charlatan. He didn’t live up to his reputation in the slightest. I was dead sure of that too—as I should be, after spending the last month or so watching him.

I couldn’t deny that what the man had done on his flight from Ars had been quite the feat. Feigning death to create an opportunity to strike down a powerful demon had been a clever strategy. Honestly, when I’d first heard the tale, I’d felt a little relieved—what had happened to Ars was a tragedy, but I’d thought it was nice having another reliable adventurer in Freelea. Those feelings had quickly vanished though, once I met Rex and realized I’d misjudged

him.

It was bad enough that, despite being an A-rank adventurer like Juke, Rain and me, he hadn't visited a single dungeon since coming to Freelea, but I hated that he sat around watching the newbie adventurers he'd taken under his wing do grueling training without lifting a finger even more. He seemed to really like having a place in the limelight too, since he'd paid an exorbitant sum to have other adventurers gather useless junk items for him in what I could only see as a ploy to make himself more popular. Most disgusting of all, he'd forced the newbies he was training to wear that same junk equipment just to get a laugh at their expense.

It was hard for me to believe this was the same Rex that people spoke of with awe. In fact, if you'd told me the version I'd met was a doppelganger who was faking the real Rex's appearance, I would have happily believed you.

Part of it was that first-rate adventurers had this aura of power and authority that they exuded, which I'd noticed Rex lacked completely when I'd met him the first time. He'd seemed like just a regular old person to me. And that wasn't even mentioning how he'd backed off the moment I'd tried to intimate him, which just showed how little grit he had. There was no way a man like him had fought his way through countless life and death situations.

Come to think of it, even those stories going around about him are strange once you really start analyzing them, I mused.

Adventurers generally fought together in four-person parties, which most often consisted of a warrior, a magician, a rogue, and a healer. It was only by combining the strengths of those four different class-types that you could reliably overcome difficult foes and deadly traps. You could try as hard as you wanted, take as many shortcuts as you could find, but you'd never be able to master all those fields on your own. *No one* had done such a thing before. Rex was definitely no exception—he was just a fraud who'd managed to trick people into thinking he was amazing.

The Rainbow Lava Caverns aren't a very popular dungeon, I thought. *I bet he thinks it'll be a great boost for his reputation if he helps a newbie party to clear a dungeon everyone else is actively avoiding.*

Distaste filled me. A group of amateurs like Rex's newbie adventurers might think they could handle a dungeon like that, since they didn't have much experience, but the caverns were a lot more sinister than they seemed. Even if Rex himself might be able to survive the trials that waited within, the rest of his party would almost certainly get wiped out.

Infighting between adventurers is banned by Guild law. But... Before I knew it, I'd drawn my sword.

"I'm sorry, Rain, Juke. But I have to—"

My comrades both cut me off, breathing gusty sighs. "You really need to stop trying to leave us behind every time," they said, almost in unison. "Sorry, man, but we already decided that we're going to follow you to the end, no matter where that takes us."

"You guys…" I murmured, both touched and surprised.

I'd thought they might try to stop me, but I'd never expected that they'd demand to come along instead. I mean, I was about to go and stop an adventurer party that had committed no crime *by force*. If word of this got out I would be demoted at the very least, and depending on who was judging my case, I could even get expelled from the Guild. And yet, Rain and Juke were willing to accompany me regardless.

I'm blessed to have such good friends.

Other people might prop me up on a pedestal and call me "Veteram the Immortal" or whatever, but I knew it was my steadfast comrades that deserved the praise, not me. They were the only reason I was still alive today—I'd never have earned my moniker if not for them.

Determination filling me, I nodded at my two comrades. "All right then, let's go! I'll be counting on you guys!"

I'll do everything in my power to make sure no one dies, just like always!

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When we'd reached the Freelea's front gate, we'd been greeted with the unfortunate news that Rex and his party had already departed for the Rainbow

Lava Caverns. Fortunately, we found out that they'd only left a short while ago—we could still catch up to them.

"Listen up, you two," I said, turning to Juke and Rain. "Our goal is to show those youngsters that Rex truly is a fraud who's been deceiving them this whole time. But I don't want anyone getting hurt."

They nodded. "Yeah, we get it. We're here to save those kids, not hurt them. We'll make sure to only target Rex so they don't get caught up in the fight."

"Wait, no! I don't want anyone getting hurt, *including* Rex!"

If people ended up getting killed because of our actions, it would just nurture resentment. And, once started, the cycle of hatred was almost impossible to stop. The last thing I wanted was to kill Rex—even hurting him badly might be enough for him and his proteges to hold a grudge against us. That being said, I still believed that if we duked it out and no one got crippled because of it, the two of us could become friends over the course of our fight. Perhaps it was naive of me to think that, but in my experience adventurers were a simple lot.

"I truly don't believe that might makes right," I reminded my comrades. "But I also know that adventurers are the kind of people who admire strength more than anything else."

Rex may have strayed off the right path, but he's still an adventurer. Thus, my plan was simple: the three of us should overwhelm him, but not hurt him too badly. Through his defeat, he might begin to see the error of his ways.

Yes, reforming him is the best outcome!

My comrades gave me dubious looks. "I get what you're saying, but…"

I waved them off. "Don't worry, I know."

And truly, I did—what I was proposing was easier said than done. Beating someone down without hurting them was significantly harder than just killing them, and even if Rex didn't have a true A-rank adventurer's might, he was likely still decently skilled. Fighting someone who was trying to kill you while holding back was paramount to suicide.

"It's going to be hard, but if we can't pull this off then we don't deserve to call

ourselves A-rank adventurers!” I proclaimed.

The adventurers I admired, the adventurers I always strove to be, were the kind of people who could make the impossible possible. I stared determinedly at my two dependable comrades, and they grinned at the resolve they saw on my face.

“Heh, I figured you’d say that.”

“That’s the Veteram we know and love!”

“Oh, give me a break,” I said, laughing.

With that, the three of us dashed off towards the Rainbow Lava Caverns. There weren’t any monsters near the city, so we were able to catch up to Rex in no time. Once I saw the equipment he’d made his trainees wear, I started to get really pissed.

“That bastard!” I muttered furiously.

The young adventurers were all dressed in the same garbage equipment Rex had made them put on while they’d trained. Not only was that gear utter garbage, it even hindered the movements of the person wearing it! It might have been a little useful during training, since it added difficulty to whatever skill they were working on, but training was one thing and dungeons were quite another!

Rage boiled up, blotting out all my rational thought, and before I knew it I was barking out orders to Juke. “Aim your Freeze Rain for the area right in front of them! I’m gonna teach that motherfucker a lesson he won’t forget!”

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“Sorry, but this is as far as you go,” I said. The three of us walked forward, barring Rex’s party’s way forward. “I realize this is a breach of adventurer etiquette, but I won’t just stand by and watch as one man’s hubris leads four young adventurers to their deaths.”

The reactions to seeing us were varied; the children looked confused and a little scared, but the woman next to Rex didn’t appear frightened in the slightest. She gave us a piercing glare.

That woman's quite strong, I realized. *Not just physically, but mentally as well. Unlike Rex, she actually gives off the aura of a storied veteran.*

The woman stepped in front of Rex like a protective mother hen, but he grabbed her shoulder and shook his head.

I narrowed my eyes. *What's going on here?*

Giving the woman a firm look, Rex stepped in front of her and looked at us. He rubbed his right hand with his left in what looked like a nervous gesture. For a second I thought he might be too scared to speak, but it soon became clear that wasn't the case.

"Veteram, Rain, and Juke, huh?" Rex said slowly, consideringly. "I don't think I've met your two friends, Veteram."

And yet, you got their names right, I thought. All of a sudden, a strange sense of foreboding settled upon me.

"So..." Rex continued, "Juke's the one who cast that spell earlier, I'm guessing. Hmm, looks like he was originally a Scout but then became a Mage."

"H-How...?!" I gasped, shocked.

Indeed, Rex was right—Juke *had* started out as a Scout. It was only after our thief, Rain, had joined our party that he'd chosen to switch to Mage. The question was, how did Rex know that?

"He's got a lot of Agility for his level," Rex said thoughtfully. "His Focus isn't bad either. But…" He looked over at the ice arrows, which were already starting to disappear, and snickered. "His Intelligence stat is pitiful."

A jolt of terror ran down my spine. Before I had a chance to think about what I was doing, I'd turned back to my two companions and begun to shout. "Rain, Juke, I don't know what he's doing, but—"

"If I prove my strength to you, will you let me pass?" Rex asked, interrupting my warning.

He held up his right hand; there were three different rings on his fingers, each glowing dully in the afternoon sun.

"Freeze Rain."

Spears of ice appeared in the sky, plunging downward in an unrelenting barrage. They shot into the ground directly in front of us, just as Juke's arrows earlier, but the massive icicles Rex had produced were nothing like the puny things Juke had conjured. I stared at the frozen spears, dumbfounded.

"B-But how...?" Juke muttered, his voice trembling. "You don't even have a staff…"

He was right, but that didn't change the fact that the spell Rex had cast was undoubtedly the same as the one Juke had cast just moments earlier. It was just that the amount of power behind Rex's spell had been far, far greater.

"Goddamnit! No one ever told me that guy was a mage!" Rain swore, dashing forward.

He's about to release his strongest skill!

"Rain!" I shouted in warning.

Rain shook his head. "We gotta take this guy out now, Veteram! He's dangerous!"

I hesitated. Rain's instincts had gotten us out of trouble more than once, but this time something just felt wrong.

"Rain, huh?" Rex drawled. "You're pretty fast, but you focused way too much on raising your Agility. Do you even have enough Strength to open a treasure chest?"

As Rain shot closer to him, the black-clad adventurer slipped a different set of rings on his fingers, gold this time. He seemed entirely nonchalant as he analyzed Rain's abilities.

Being dismissed pissed Rain off, and he attacked Rex without hesitation. "Don't blame me if this kills you!" he shouted. "Take this!"

"You moron!" I roared, jolting forward. "The kids are right behind—"

But it was too late.

Rain's right hand glowed as he activated his ultimate skill, Knife Shot. He was a skilled enough Thief that he could throw two knives with a single usage of the Art, which was a deadly, high-level feat only a veteran adventurer could

accomplish.

Yawning, Rex said, “Knife Shot.”

He’d countered Rain’s attack with the exact same Art, but he’d managed to throw four knives to Rain’s two. The black-clad adventurer’s knives tore straight through Rain’s without even slowing down, and my friend stood there, frozen in place, unable to dodge since his body was still acting out his Art.

“Rain!” I screamed, sprinting forward.

But I was too far away to save him. I watched in despair as all four of Rex’s knives slammed home, and Rain collapsed to the ground. But that was when I noticed something unbelievable.

“N-No way...”

Somehow, not a single knife had pierced Rain’s skin. Instead, they’d sunk into portions of Rex’s clothes or bits of his shadow, pinning him into place.

That’s right, I suddenly remembered. *Thieves have a skill that allows them to seal the movements of anything they hit, even if it’s only a creature’s shadow. But...you’ve gotta be kidding me! That guy accomplished that advanced of a feat without any preparation at all?!* I stood there, staring blankly at the knives, momentarily stunned.

Rex, however, hadn’t paused for a second. He immediately took advantage of the opening I’d left him.

“Veteram, behind you!” Rain shouted.

I whirled around, coming back to my senses just in time to catch sight of Rex, closing in on me from behind. He closed the significant distance between us in an instant, and for a moment all I could see were the rings on his right hand, glowing red.

“Gale Slash!” Rex shouted.

I... I’m done for...

I braced for impact, but Rex’s sword didn’t slice through my neck, as I’d expected. Instead, it sliced through the air in front of me. It would have been nice if he’d misjudged the distance between us, but I had a sinking feeling that

wasn't the case.

"Arts Plus!"

As I realized Rex was activating another Art, I felt a new jolt of terror.

It was strange—Rex was clearly a balanced fighter, but he was only wielding a simple one-handed sword. I, a man who had spent his entire life polishing his close-combat skills, and who was using a two-handed sword, should have had no problem batting away any attack he attempting from this range. But my instincts were screaming at me not to even try—they were insisting that I use my sword as a shield.

"Goddamnit!" I roared.

I swung my beloved sword upward to protect my vitals and took a step back, deciding to trust in my instincts. I'd found my weapon around three years before, and had decided to name it Revolt. It had been my partner from there on out, protecting me through thick and thin. It was this sword that had seen me through the time I'd been surrounded by monsters and all had seemed hopeless, as well as the time I'd dueled a demi-dragon.

I can't lose here! I thought, determined. *No matter what kind of attack Rex throws at me, if I can block it this match will become a simple contest of strength. Even if I can't match his speed, I know I'm stronger than him!*

With that in mind, I braced myself for Rex's slash...but the impact I'd been waiting for never came.

There was a brief flash as he swung and sun sparked off metal, and then a second later I was staring straight at the black-clad adventurer, the space between us empty.

"H-Huh...? No way..."

I looked down at my prized sword, mind churning. Rex had cut straight through its base, separating Revolt's blade from its hilt. I watched helplessly as my sword's blade spun through the air, then sunk into the ground with a dull *shnk*.

I've cut down hundreds of monsters with that blade, I thought blankly. *It's*

weathered attacks from a demi-dragon without even cracking, and his sword just cut through it like a hot knife through butter.

I felt paralyzed with the shock of it all, and stood there completely defenseless. But Rex didn't take advantage of that opening.

"Are we done here?"

I looked up, my eyes locking with Rex's cold gaze. He looked bored, like it didn't matter whether I just stood there or brandished a weapon at him.

I guess to him I'm so weak that it really doesn't matter, I thought helplessly. *He doesn't need an opening to cut me down. He could have easily just attacked one more time after he destroyed Revolt, and it would've been the end for me. Hell, if he'd taken a single step forward before he hit me with that strike, he probably would've killed me then and there.*

"i surrender." I dropped my now useless greatsword and sat down on the ground.

"Veteram!" Rain shouted indignantly, but my mind was made up.

"Surely even you can tell we're completely outmatched," I told my friend.

We've been completely obliterated. That man's magic is stronger than Juke's, he's faster than Rain and has more power behind his Arts, and he thoroughly surpasses me in both swordsmanship and strength.

Even in the mental battle, we'd lost. The moment we'd witnessed Rex's strength, we'd forgotten all about our determination to beat him without hurting him. Rain had thrown those knives to kill, and when Rex had approached me the only thing on my mind had been how to defeat him, not how to subdue him without harming him. Hell, I'd completely forgotten that my original goal had been to show these kids that Rex was a fraud.

Rex, on the other hand, had made sure not to hurt us at all, both when he'd countered Rain's attack and when he'd neutralized me. He was the stronger one, so naturally he was the one with the leeway to hold back in battle, but that didn't change the fact that we'd basically ambushed him, and yet he'd managed to defeat the three of us without hurting us. He hadn't even sustained a single scratch himself.

This...is the most intense defeat I've ever experienced...

I put my hands down on the ground and bowed my head low. "Rex... I'm sorry."

Rain's and Juke's mouths dropped open. "What are you doing, Veteram?!"

The right thing to do, I thought, determination igniting inside me.

"I'm sorry for attacking you, but that's not all!" I continued. "This whole time, I underestimated you! I thought there was no way an adventurer could actually make it to A-rank solo, so I convinced myself you had to be a fraud!"

I knew now that I'd completely misjudged Rex, the Aloof Adventurer. I'd had the gall to spout off a bunch of nonsense to a crowd of newcomers, saying how adventurers could live life as they pleased and pursue whatever goals they desired, and yet I'd had such a strong stereotype of what an adventurer should be in my head that I'd assumed anyone who was strong had to fit into it. I'd been so sure that a single person couldn't possibly fit all of a party's roles by themselves. But now here Rex was, having shown that he was a better magician, rogue, and warrior than the three of us.

It wasn't just his skill and strength that was impressive though. All adventurers grew stronger by defeating monsters, and every time they leveled up their magical power, strength, and skill increased. I myself had as much Intelligence as the average mid-rank magician simply because of how many monsters I'd defeated, but that didn't mean I could use magic as well as a proper magician could. Having a high amount of skill in a few areas wasn't enough to make a person a good adventurer—you also needed to have the training to understand those skills and take advantage of them, or ultimately they'd prove meaningless.

There was only one way to acquire that kind of knowledge—to spend time in the class that utilized them. Most new adventurers did that, in fact. They jumped from beginner class to beginner class, learning the basic Arts and spells they needed to back up their main class. Freeze Rain and Knife Shot were not the same as those low-level abilities, though—they were both advanced enough that they took a lot of time and effort to learn. On top of that, they were from two entirely different specialized classes, while most adventurers only changed

into classes of a single class-type after they moved on from being a beginner. Magicians stuck to magic classes, warriors stuck to melee classes, and so on. And *if* someone decided they wanted to pursue multiple disciplines, two was the most anyone could feasibly juggle.

And yet, somehow this man has mastered magic, close combat, and even rogue class ranged skills! I thought, still in awe. I'd been adventuring for decades, so I understood just how much training it must have taken for him to reach that point. *I can't believe I ever thought someone like him was a fraud!*

The most impressive thing about him, to me, was that even despite his prodigious strength, Rex didn't give off the aura of a powerful adventurer whatsoever. When I'd first met him, I'd thought that was because he wasn't actually as strong as most people claimed he was, but in reality he was just so far above adventurer like me that it was impossible to sense his aura! Even now, he didn't look like he'd been fighting against opponents who'd been trying to kill him—he was calm, and cool. He'd taken us down with the casual air of someone playing a game of cards.

I can't hold a candle to this man, I realized.

However, just because he'd proven himself to me as a great adventurer, that didn't mean he was also a great mentor. Still... I knew someone with this much skill wouldn't make people go through pointless training just for fun. Besides, even if I wanted to stop him, he was too strong.

"If someone as strong as you is with these kids," I continued humbly, "then I have nothing to fear. I'm sure you'll be able to protect them just fine, even in a place like the Rainbow Lava Caverns."

"You seem to be misunderstanding something," Rex said, his voice still cold. I looked up at him as he said something truly unbelievable. "I won't be going with them into the dungeon."

"What...?" I stared at him, at a loss for words.

How can you send those kids into a dungeon alone?! They won't last five seconds in there! I thought, wanting to shout the words at Rex. Unfortunately, my mouth was no longer working properly. *The monsters in the Rainbow Lava Caverns are quite strong, and even the simplest request, that just asks for*

materials that can be gathered near its entrance, are too difficult for most newcomers to handle... I thought nervously. *Does he really think those kids will be able to just sneak past the slimes and gather the materials they're looking for thanks to his training? Isn't that a bit too optimistic...?*

"But..." Rex gave me a considering look. "Actually, you know what? There's some things I want to discuss with you, so why don't you just come with us? You can wait outside the dungeon entrance with me. Besides...you can bear witness as my disciples proudly clear the request they've taken on," Rex said with a grin.

It wasn't until a few hours later that I would come to learn the true meaning of what he'd meant by that. The long and short of it was...I still seemed to be underestimating this Rex. And not just him, but his disciples too.

Interlude: First Sword

"Did you guys see how *awesome* Master Rex was back there?!" Radd demanded excitedly, punctuating his breathless words with periodic waves of his Brave Sword. "It's been a while since I last saw him fight, but watching him beat those veteran adventurers with their own skills was *so cool*! I mean, I knew he was strong, but that was just crazy!"

A slight grin quirked up Nyuuk's lips. "You really look up to Rex, don't you, Radd? How come you don't just tell him how cool you think he is in person?"

"I-I don't think he's cool!" Radd stammered, his face screwing up like he'd tasted something sour. "I was just impressed he was able to take on Veteram and his two buddies all by himself!"

Watching these vehement denials impassively from a few feet away, I held back a scoff. *My brother would never lose to the likes of those three idiots,* I thought scornfully.

Even back when Rex had been my real brother, his base stats had been quite high. Now that he'd been possessed by the "new version," who could brute force powerful item drops and was capable of manually activating Arts, he was far stronger than the average A-rank adventurer. That was the only reason I hadn't jumped to his defense back then—I'd been able to tell Veteram and his cronies were no match for him.

"Anyway, how he uses Arts is just so..."

My brain stopped tracking Radd's words as he gesticulated again, swiping the Brave Sword carelessly through the air. *That boy could stand to be a little more careful with Rex's sword,* I thought, a flicker of irritation lighting in my heart. *One can be happy to receive a valuable gift without waving it around like some child's toy.*

While Radd might be partially unaware of the value of the sword he held, I was not. That weapon was Rex's prized sword, which he'd taken with him when he left our home in Ars so long ago. For Radd to treat it with such a lack of care

only showed how immature he still was, as a swordsman *and* a human being. Just looking at the boy's cheerful, easygoing face irked me.

I still think this whole thing is a bad idea, I thought, blowing out a short breath.

My brother had tasked me with a babysitting mission—I was to accompany Radd and the three other children into the Rainbow Lava Caverns, where I was to watch over them as they trained. He'd told me to standby unless they got into any real danger, but to step in and rescue them if things got too hairy.

Ideally the four of them would have gone dungeon diving alone, as that was the best way to build experience. The Rainbow Lava Caverns were quite dangerous however, so my brother had wanted someone strong to go along just in case the children's party ended up being defeated somehow.

When I'd asked him why he didn't just go with them himself, my brother had explained that if he cleared the dungeon with Radd and the others, all the people at the Guild would just say that he'd carried them by defeating all the monsters on his own. I, meanwhile, wasn't a well-known adventurer yet, and was technically the same level as the children were.

His logic may be sound, but that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it, I thought grumpily. I sighed and reluctantly started following after Radd.

"Wait, Recilia!"

I paused, turning to face the man who'd called out my name from behind.

"Yes, brother?" I called back.

He ran up to me and skidded to a stop, then gave me a wan smile. "I just wanted to say sorry for pushing such an annoying job onto you."

"You should be," I replied blandly. "You should be grateful I even agreed."

My brother's expression grew complicated, almost troubled. Watching him, I couldn't help but think he wasn't doing a very good job of replicating the real Rex's personality. This new version showed his emotions far more freely than the original ever had. To be honest though, I didn't mind the change—I actually enjoyed this more passionate version of my brother. I even enjoyed watching

him squirm, like he was now. Alas, he composed himself before I could have any more fun.

"I k-know I'm asking a lot from you," he stammered, getting right down to business. "That's why I'm giving you these."

My brother stretched out both hands—one held two rings, both with Strength enchantments, and the other held a glowing sword. It was the Metallic King Sword that he'd been using ever since he gave his Brave Sword to Radd.

"Are you sure you should be giving that to me?" I asked doubtfully.

It didn't feel right, taking the Metallic King Sword for myself. I knew without a doubt that it was the strongest weapon in my brother's arsenal, and that he didn't have any copies to fall back on.

But he waved me off, as if that didn't matter at all. "Don't worry," he reassured me. "If anything happens, I'll have Veteram and his friends around to protect me. Besides, *you're* the one who's going into the dungeon—you'll be in more danger than me."

"That's true, but..."

If I take this, you'll be more vulnerable than you'd usually be until I give it back. I hated that thought.

Seeing my hesitation, my brother's eyes flickered abashedly to the side. "Look," he muttered awkwardly. "Radd and the rest of the kids may be my disciples, but you're the first real ally I've made in this world, Recilia. I don't want you getting hurt."

Still not looking at me, my brother stepped forward and forcibly placed all three items into my hands.

"I'm the first? Truly?" Surprised, I reflexively tightened my grip on the sword he'd tucked into my hand. "In that case…" A smile rose to my face, and I knew he could see the hint of mischief in it. "I shall gladly accept these gifts."

My brother gave me an exasperated look, clearly catching on to the fact I'd decided to keep his sword for myself.

But how could I possibly refuse? I thought gleefully. *After such a heartfelt*

declaration, he left me no other choice.

"Hey, I didn—" My brother sighed. "Never mind. Just look after Radd and the others, okay?"

Shaking his head, my brother turned on his heel and headed back to where Veteram and the rest of his party was waiting. I watched him go, not moving until his back vanished from my sight.

He's really much too naïve, I thought idly. *He acts like I'm doing this because I truly want to help him, when half the reason I'm here is because it's easier this way. Does he really, honestly believe I want to protect him?* Him*, the man who possessed Rex's body? His soul could be completely destroyed, for all I care—as long as Rex's body remains intact, I'd have no objections. And yet...he still called me his first ally.*

The thought made me feel slightly uneasy, but I was still under no obligation to clear up his misunderstanding. It certainly wouldn't prove inconvenient for me to have a brother who saw me as someone he could trust.

Giggling to myself, I pulled off the rings I was wearing and swapped them for the enchanted ones my brother had just given to me. I patted them fondly, feeling a rush of power surge under my skin.

He really is hopeless, that brother of mine.

By this point, Radd and the other children had gone far enough ahead that I could no longer see them. I still wasn't keen on babysitting the group of baby adventurers, but I resolved myself to tackle the task anyway—after all, my brother had requested it of me.

With heavy legs, I sprinted forward and within moments I drew up outside the entrance to the Rainbow Lava Caverns. Surprisingly, Radd and his three friends stood just feet away—from the tension in their shoulders, it looked like they'd been too nervous to go inside the dungeon alone.

My gaze fell on Radd, who still held Rex's Brave Sword in a white-knuckled grip. For some reason, the sight of the weapon in his hand didn't bother me nearly as much as it had a mere five minutes before. The thought that had once hovered insistently in the back of my mind—*Why would my brother give that*

kid his sword when he only has a measly 76 points in Strength, and I have 130? —had vanished entirely.

"Uh... Recilia?" Radd asked hesitantly.

I jolted back to myself, tearing my eyes from Radd and his weapon just in time to see the other children give me confused looks.

I'll show them! Puffing up my chest, I pulled my new Metallic King Sword from my waist. *Behold, the first sword my brother has ever given me!*

I swung the Metallic King Sword back and forth through the air a few times, testing out the weight and feel of it in my hands. After that, it was only natural for me to show off a little by doing a few complicated sword moves. I even waved the blade around a little just for fun.

Satisfied, I turned back to the children. "All right, let's get moving! Don't worry—if you get into trouble, I'll cut down each and every one of the scary monsters with this sword my brother entrusted to me!"

All four of the kids stared at me, dumbfounded, but I ignored them entirely. My brother's sword held out in front of me, I strode confidently into the dungeon.

Chapter 8: Dungeon Delving

Isn't Recilia supposed to be watching over us? I thought, baffled. *Why's she heading into the dungeon first?*

Thankfully, Nyuuk—my ever-so-reliable partner—had caught on fast. "Recilia, we appreciate your concern," he said with a respectful bow, "but we'll be fine. You don't have to worry about us."

Oh, I get it! I thought, immediately wanting to smack myself in the forehead.

I wasn't the most perceptive when it came to this kinda stuff, but now that Nyuuk had pointed it out, it was clear Recilia had been acting overly cheerful and excited to dispel our nervousness. She'd probably seen us standing frozen at the entrance and thought we needed a morale boost.

A slight flush rose to Recilia's cheeks. "I-I know that," she stammered, sounding a tad embarrassed. "I'm just doing as my brother asked."

We all gave her grateful looks, but that seemed too much for Recilia to bear. She gave her sword one last admiring glance, then carefully sheathed it and ducked out of the way, settling into a position all the way at the back of our group.

Nyuuk, Mana, Prana, and I exchanged glances and nodded at one another. Recilia's awkward attempt at being kind seemed to have alleviated all of our nerves a little, since everyone looked more relaxed.

"Let's go," I said decisively.

I took my first step into the Rainbow Lava Caverns, feeling abruptly confident. *With Master Rex and his sister supporting us, there's no way Braves and Blades can fail!*

The first thing I noticed about the dungeon was the sweltering heaviness of its air. The moment we stepped through the entrance, dense mana swirled around us, making it noticeably harder to breathe.

I let out a choked, excited laugh. Even though I'd understood why Rex had

asked us all to refrain from adventuring for a whole month, being cooped up in town like that had been driving me crazy. But now...

We finally get to go on a real *adventure!!!*

The Rainbow Lava Caverns was the second dungeon the four of us had ever gone into, with the first being the Cavern of Trials where we'd met Rex. On top of that, this dungeon was said to be much more dangerous, to the point that even seasoned adventurers were afraid to step foot inside. Normally, knowing something like that would've paralyzed me with fear, but today something was different. I felt perfectly calm; if anything, my senses felt sharper than usual.

As I led the way through the silent space before us, I exchanged glances with Nyuuk. All it took was that one look, and we moved in perfect sync—it was like we could see each other's physical and mental well-being, just with a locking of eyes.

That's right—none of us are going to lose our nerve! Even if this dungeon's scary, we've got each other.

"U-Umm, Recilia?" Mana suddenly burst out. "What were you talking to Rex about before you suddenly decided to join us?"

"I'm curious to have that answered as well," Prana added.

"Oh, it was nothing important," Recilia responded after a brief moment. "He was just going over the plan with me one last time."

Okay, guys, don't you think that's enou—

"B-But you guys looked like you were talking about something intimate!" Mana continued, undaunted.

"We're all already aware of your brother obsession," Prana said shortly. "Attempting to conceal it is a waste of time."

Recilia's eyes narrowed. "Please keep your assumptions to yourself. Especially the ones that have no basis in reality."

"Gaaah!" I shouted in frustration, making all three girls look at me weirdly. "Did you guys forget that we're in a *dungeon* right now?! Aren't you focusing a bit too much on bickering with one another?!"

Prana snorted. “What an idiot,” she muttered.

Recilia let out a deep sigh. “Radd...please refrain from shouting while we are inside the dungeon.”

I made a choked noise, then fell silent. I wanted to point out that they’d been plenty noisy themselves, but my earlier shout was still bouncing off the dungeon’s walls. There was no defending myself—even if I brought up the fact that the monsters of the Rainbow Lava Caverns didn’t have great hearing, that didn’t excuse me for making a racket.

“E-Everyone makes mistakes sometimes,” Mana said lightly, doing her best to defuse the situation.

“And?” Prana retorted. “He’s our party leader—he should act like one.”

How come I’m the one getting roasted when they were standing around bickering?!

I opened my mouth, ready to say something nasty in return, but froze when Nyuuk laid a hand on my shoulder. I looked over at him and saw him give a small shake of his head.

“Looks like we’ve found our first foe,” Nyuuk whispered, pointing ahead of us to where a giant blue slime was inching in our direction. “Come on, let’s go see how much stronger our training made us.”

“So that’s what a giant blue slime looks like,” I muttered.

As soon as the rest of our group caught sight of the monster, their expressions went stiff and the mood turned serious. Prana, Nyuuk, Mana, and I shuffled around, quickly getting into position as we readied our weapons.

Slimes might be the second weakest monster category in the world, stronger only than goblins, but that didn’t mean we could underestimate them. Plus, unlike the goblin race, which had little variation in terms of monster type and abilities, the strength of the slime race varied considerably based on where they spawned.

According to Rex, the slimes of the Rainbow Lava Caverns were level 15. That wasn’t *that* high a level—it certainly wasn’t anywhere near as terrifying as the

level 60 doom demon Rex had faced—but these slimes would still be the strongest enemies Braves and Blades had ever fought.

It'll be fine! I told myself, stepping forward to face down the slime. *We can handle them! Plus, if I'm remembering right, Rex told me...*

⁜⁜⁜

A short while earlier...

Rex leaned forward, giving me a serious look. "The Rainbow Lava Caverns are considered to be a mid-tier dungeon. Mid-tier dungeons have a lot of differences compared to beginner dungeons—can anyone tell me what they are?"

"U-Umm...the monsters are stronger?!" I asked in a nervous rush.

Rex gave me a pitying look. "That answer's the exact opposite of what I was looking for."

"C-Come on, you old geezer!" I sputtered back, pouting a little. "I'm not wrong, am I? The monsters in mid-tier dungeons *are* stronger!"

"Listen up," Rex said seriously. "There's a bunch of things in the Rainbow Lava Caverns that will be new to you four, and the stronger monsters are the least important of the bunch. This dungeon is essentially a secondary tutorial for adventurers; the whole reason it exists is to give beginners like you, who think that as long as you keep leveling up you can power through anything, a reality check."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, knowing Rex was waiting for one of us to respond.

"Good question. The Rainbow Lava Caverns has three different challenges you can't overcome with just physical strength—monsters with elemental affinities, monsters who can give you status effects, and terrain that damages you when you try to cross it. Unless you go inside with countermeasures planned for all three, you'll find yourself stuck no matter how strong you are."

This prompted Nyuuk, Prana, Mana, and I to exchange worried looks, but Rex

just gave us a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry. When it comes to this dungeon in particular, a single piece of equipment can solve two of your three issues." Rex pulled a simple-looking ring out of his Inventory, brandishing it before our eyes. "This Barrier Ring right here is the key—with this equipped, you can say goodbye to your terrain damage and status effect woes!"

⁜⁜⁜

Double-checking that I had a Barrier Ring equipped, I stepped forward to engage the giant blue slime.

"Get ready to dodge!" Mana shouted from behind. "It's going to shoot acid at you!"

I began to raise a hand in acknowledgement, then ended up diving to the side instead when a ball of acid came flying straight at me. I just barely managed to get out of the way; the blob whooshed past and hit the ground with a hiss. In seconds, a hunk of the sturdy rock floor had melted away.

Damn, that was close! I thought, a shiver running down my spine. *The only reason I was able to dodge that was Mana's warning. If that slime launched an attack like that in the middle of a hectic battle...I'd be toast.*

Steeling myself, I sprinted forward and began to close the distance between me and the slime. I was so aware of every movement I made that it was a miracle I didn't trip over my own feet. I'd just reached striking distance when the slime shrunk into itself, then emitted a cloud of very poisonous looking green smoke.

"Ngh!" I skidded to a stop and stumbled backward, instinctively covering my mouth.

I braced for the worst, then froze, mind spinning. *Wait, nothing's happening.*

That's when it hit me—thanks to the Barrier Ring Rex had given me, I didn't have to worry about poison.

Ha ha ha! Man, this ring really is *amazing! Even though I'm standing smack dab in the middle of a cloud of noxious gas, I feel perfectly fine!*

When Rex had given me the ring, he'd explained that it drained the mana of its user in order to create a protective barrier. Basically, it had its own HP and Defense values, and absorbed damage in much the same way as a summoned substitute would. In addition, the way the ring functioned also apparently prevented skills that sealed away a target's magic from functioning.

All that was pretty useful, but in the end the protection the Barrier Ring provided was minimal. Furthermore, its effects scaled with the user's Intelligence, so for a warrior-type class fighter like me, all it would be able to manage was a few weak pokes from a goblin. The ring's true value, however, didn't lie in how many hits it allowed you to take—it resided within the barrier itself. As long as the ring's barrier was active, it would take the full brunt of any attacks directed your way, *including* attacks that afflicted you with status ailments. In addition, since the ring was an inanimate object, it couldn't actually be poisoned, paralyzed or silenced.

In other words, until someone did enough damage to break the ring's barrier, they wouldn't be able to inflict any status effects on the user that affected their body. That didn't mean the user was entirely out of the woods—status effects that targeted the mind, like confusion or charm, could still make their way past the ring's barrier. Attacks that did damage on top of causing status effects were dangerous as well, since an opponent could usually break a user's barrier with a single hit unless they had a ton of Intelligence. Still, even with all those drawbacks in mind, I knew Rex had been right; Barrier Rings were the perfect defense against slimes like these, who emitted noxious clouds of gas!

Honestly, I was kind of doubtful at first, but this thing really does work!

And it was a good thing it did, too—if I'd breathed in any of the toxic gas the slime had emitted without it, I'd have ended up getting poisoned, paralyzed, weakened, silenced, or some combination of all four. From my studies, I knew that coming down with any of those status effects could be lethal, so it was clear that if you tried to fight this kind of slime without protecting yourself from them, you'd be in for a world of hurt. The problem was, it was typically really difficult to find a set of equipment that could provide the user with resistances to all four of these particular status effects at once. That was only compounded by the fact that resistance effects mostly came attached to equipment that

went in specific slots, with the accessory slot being the most common.

How on earth did Master Rex even come up with this idea? I wondered. There wasn't much time for me to dwell on it, though—I needed to focus on fighting the foe right in front of me.

With a shake of my head and one final glance at the ring on my right hand, I returned my attention to the slime. I carefully observed its movements; while the smoke around me was nothing to fear, I'd have to go on the offensive if I truly wanted to kill it.

That slime's blue, so that means I need to hit it with earth-elemental attacks, I realized.

The whole reason this dungeon was called the Rainbow Lava Caverns was because of the seven varieties of slimes living inside of it. Each slime had a different color based on the element it corresponded with, with the seventh slime being a colorless variant that was immune to all elemental attacks but weak against physical ones. In contrast, the other six types of slime were all immune against physical attacks, and could generally only be damaged by the element they were weak to.

Originally, I'd paid little attention to how elements interacted with one another, but Rex had made sure I'd studied up before he let me enter this dungeon. Fire was weak to water, water was weak to earth, earth was weak to wind, and wind was weak to fire. There were also the elements of light and darkness, which were weak to each other. Of the six elements, fire, wind, water, and earth were the most common, with light and dark being more rare.

Staring at the giant blue slime, I racked my brain for an Art that did earth-elemental damage, but couldn't think of a single one.

We might have grown stronger due to Master Rex's training, but this just proves how inexperienced we still are, I thought, flushing. *That lack of knowledge is our biggest weakness at the moment.*

I blew out a deep breath, resettling myself as I readied my sword—the Brave Sword I'd inherited from Rex.

At the end of the day, I'm just a normal person, I reminded myself. *Forget*

doing that Arts Plus thing Master Rex is always talking about; I can't even change the angle and speed of my Art activations like he can. Still, I managed to accomplish one thing over this month of training.

Just as I'd practiced over and over, I moved my arm through the air at a very specific speed, in a very specific way, tracing a very specific arc. I envisioned the point of my sword drawing the shape of a mountain, then cleaving it in two.

"Earth Slash!" I cried.

My Art activated, sending earth mana running down my sword as it slashed toward the slime. The monster's gelatinous body writhed in pain as my blade tore through it.

"Take that!" I shouted, elated.

I might not be able to combine Earth Slash with other Arts like Rex could, but I was still proud I'd managed to manually activate it at all. Honestly, it still took all of my concentration to do so, even when I was standing in the default starting position. The Art had launched too slow for my liking as well, but in the current situation that wasn't such a big deal—I didn't need to do anything fancy with it.

This past month, I'd been endlessly practicing the manual activation of four different Arts, all of which used different types of elemental energy to slice through the enemy. I couldn't use any of the Arts with the more complex forms yet, I was still a long way from freely wielding them in unorthodox ways like Rex, but now I could at least manually activate them from the default starting position and hit an enemy standing directly in front of me. I had to go pretty slow, but I could do it. Still...I'd have been lying if I said that my miniscule progress hadn't led to me despairing more than once, or to falling asleep while cursing my own lack of talent.

"Hey, check me out, guys!" I called over my shoulder, elated to see an Art I'd practiced for so long actually hit an enemy. All of a sudden, everything felt like it was worth it.

Watching the slime back away, the enormity of what I'd accomplished washed over me. *I can't believe I ever thought training was a waste of time!*

Honestly, the simple fact that I'd been able to learn how to activate Arts I hadn't acquired yet was an enormous boon for a swordsman like me. In just one month, I'd been able to add four new Arts to my repertoire—that was one hell of an accomplishment. Thinking of the man who'd given me the opportunity to learn new techniques this way, I could feel only extreme gratitude. And I was only going to get stronger from here—everything started with this first kill.

"You're going down, slime!"

"Another acid attack's coming!" Mana called.

I gave up on the Art I'd been about to activate and leapt to the side. The blob of acid missed me by a few scant inches, and I felt a cold sweat start to bead on my skin. It was scary to think that if I'd automatically activated my Art instead of started doing it manually, I would have been stuck in place, unable to dodge. It was yet another benefit to training to activate your Arts manually.

There was actually a common saying among adventurers, that went: "Arts turn prodigies into fools." It referred to the fact that, in the middle of an Art, no matter how fast or perceptive you were, you were vulnerable to an attack. That's why using Arts manually changed everything—it allowed you to take full advantage of whatever natural talents you had, even as you made use of the overwhelming power Arts provided.

Back when Rex had fought the doom demon, he'd used Arts even while he dodged the monster's attacks. Now that I understood how he'd done it, I could also understand the sheer level of skill it would have taken to achieve such a feat. Unfortunately, manual activation couldn't provide a solution to every problem. No matter how you activated an Art, its cooldown period remained in effect.

I grunted with annoyance, then yelled, "Flame Slash!"

I would have much preferred to continue attacking the slime with earth-elemental attacks, since the slime was weak to that element, but Earth Slash was the only attack I had that fell under that umbrella. While I waited for the cooldown period to expire, I had no choice but to hit the slime with a different sort of elemental attack. And so, reluctantly, I'd chosen to use a fire-elemental

move instead.

After we beat this dungeon I'm going to practice a bunch more moves! I swore to myself. *I'll learn as many Arts as I can in my free time!*

People had always told me that the more Arts you knew, the stronger you were, but I was only now fully understanding why that was the case.

"My spell's almost ready!" Nyuuk shouted. "Clear the way!'

I deftly jumped to the side once again, and a second later Nyuuk raised his staff high.

"Please don't break!" he yelled. "I'm begging you! Flare Cannon!"

A beam of red-hot light shot out of Nyuuk's staff, melting the poor blue slime into a pool of liquid. It was by far the strongest spell I'd ever seen cast.

Nyuuk's training had made him stronger for sure, but not *that* strong. The reason he could use such a powerful spell was thanks to the staff he'd equipped, which was called a Red Flare Rod. It was actually one of the items that Rex had listed in that request he'd made at the Guild. According to Rex, the Red Flare Rod had the Flare Cannon spell baked into it, so a user could cast the spell just by pouring enough MP into the weapon.

That had sounded pretty powerful to me when I'd first heard about it, but Rex had explained that there were actually a lot of restrictions that applied to the staff. Nyuuk already had really high Intelligence stats, but he'd needed to wear two rings with Intelligence enchantments and one with a Strength enchantment just to be able to equip the thing. It had also cost Rex a whopping 50,000,000 wen. Worst of all, every time the user cast Flare Cannon with it, the Red Flare Rod had a 1% chance of breaking.

When Nyuuk had heard all that he'd gone pale. But, even though you had to test your luck every time you used the staff, and despite the fact that it had cost an exorbitant amount of money, its power could not be denied. Even though Flare Cannon was a fire-elemental spell, which was an elemental type the giant blue slime wasn't weak to, it still did more damage than my Earth Slash had.

That thing might cost a lot of Nyuuk's MP and stress him out, but in my opinion, it's worth it, I thought.

As Nyuuk's Flare Cannon spell faded, an arrow shot towards the slime, hitting it square in the center. Naturally, this was no typical arrow—it was an elemental arrow, one that Rex had created using alchemy. Apparently, imbuing arrows with various elemental properties was something even beginning alchemists were capable of. The strength of those arrows, however, depended on the Intelligence stat of their creator.

Rex had circumvented his low Intelligence stat by wearing nine pieces of equipment that had been enchanted to improve Intelligence. As a result, the arrows had ended up so powerful that even Prana had gasped after seeing what they could do. I still remembered how awed she'd looked when she'd taken the quiver full of them from Rex. She'd even promised him that she would treasure them. Granted, at the moment she was firing wind-elemental arrows one after another into the slime.

She really doesn't seem like she's treasuring them much to me... I thought, watching Prana. *Although, I guess it's possible that her way of showing them respect is using them as they were intended to be used? She has to be taking careful aim before loosing each one, since every one of them has been a clean hit.*

Our final party member, Mana, was in charge of keeping an eye on the overall situation, and calling out any important information she observed. Mostly, she was watching the movements of the slime we were fighting, then warning us when it was going to attack.

Just as I thought that, Mana called out, "Be careful! Looks like there's another acid attack coming!"

This particular slime effectively had two different types of attacks it could use: a cloud of noxious smoke that could include a variety of status effects, or a blob of acid that could be shot toward a target. So long as my Barrier Ring was in effect, I didn't have to worry about the smoke, and I could trust Mana to tell me when it was about to fire a blob of acid, since the slime vibrated a little before launching its attack. If you were watching out for it, you'd be able to dodge every time, but since Nyuuk, Prana, and I were busy attacking, it was important to have someone like Mana to keep an eye on things in case we got distracted. That said, it wasn't like Mana wasn't attacking at all.

Case in point: as we focused on dodging the slime's latest attack, Mana yelled, "Holy Bullet!" and sent a bolt of light magic flying in the slime's direction. She'd been casting the same spell occasionally throughout the battle, to the point that, every now and then, a Holy Bullet would get mixed in with the barrage of wind arrows Prana was firing.

Holy Bullet was actually Mana's only offensive skill. She didn't have any equipment or supplemental Arts to increase its power either, so it was just another regular old beginner spell. Or it would have been, if it wasn't a light-elemental spell.

You see, few people could effectively wield light magic, so even a beginner light-elemental spell was valuable. Light magic spells were also generally stronger than spells tied to the elements of fire, wind, water, and earth, and were extremely effective against dark-elemental creatures. In addition, there were few monsters who were resistant to the element of light, so you could almost always count on it doing at least a decent amount of damage to the enemies you wound up fighting. In contrast, dark magic was typically weaker than the four core elements, and was really only useful for hurting light-elemental foes. At least, that was what Rex had said.

Regardless, thanks to our preparation and strategy, we were able to whale on the giant blue slime, while it could barely do anything to defend itself. In terms of raw stats, it was still stronger than us, though.

God, this thing just won't go down, I moaned internally. *Even with all our planning, just defeating this single slime is taking forever.*

With every second that passed, the heat in the cavern seemed to grow more and more oppressive, until sweat was practically pouring down my forehead. The battle had gone on long enough now that my nerves were also beginning to fray, and I was beginning to have a hard time focusing on the enemy in front of me. My biggest problem, though, was that I was running out of mana. Since I'd been using Arts that typically couldn't be accessed until an adventurer was of a higher level, the MP cost was higher than it would normally be to activate them.

So this is how much of a difference stats can make... I realized. *Healing magic might be able to keep me in good fighting form for a long time, but replenishing*

lost mana is a much more difficult task.

Just hanging around and waiting for your mana to refill wasn't really an option either, since a person's natural mana regeneration rate was normally quite slow. Mana-restoring items were difficult to find as well, since they weren't sold in shops. We did have a few that Rex had given us to use in case of an emergency, but our supply was very limited. Furthermore, using mana-restoring items came with a big drawback: if you used too many in a short period of time, you'd get potion-sickness, which would temporarily lower your stats. This was why mana-restoring items weren't popular with adventurers—if you relied on them too much, you wouldn't be able to fight effectively.

At this rate, it'll take around a third of my mana to kill this thing, I grumbled to myself.

That didn't bode well for the rest of our dungeon dive, as we had dozens of slimes left to face. We couldn't afford to default to less powerful or slower attacks either, since slimes had regenerative powers. The longer we let the battle drag on, the worse off we'd be in the end. *Especially* because there was a chance other slimes could show up and join the fray.

Knowing that, I had no other choice but to continue throwing out Art after Art, ignoring the MP cost.

We've gotta be close to killing it! I thought. *Just a few more hits, and it should go down!*

I could tell the giant blue slime was hurting. It was moving much more slowly than it had at the start, and its gelatinous body was covered in wounds. If I could just power through its last bit of HP...

"Watch out, acid coming!" Mana called.

But I was too focused on finishing the slime off. I didn't react to her warning until it was already too late.

I let out a moan of horror and tried to jump back, but ended up tripping over a small rock and falling to the floor.

No!!! This is the worst possible time for me to screw up!

With no way to escape, I brought my left hand up to cover my face as the slime's acid blob came flying toward me.

"GAAAAAAAAAH!!!"

It felt like my skin was on fire—the caustic liquid had dripped through the gaps of my armor, singing my flesh. Thankfully, one of my rings was enchanted to boost HP, so I hadn't taken too much damage.

"Radd!" Mana shouted in horror.

I grit my teeth against the pain and got to my feet. However...

"Shit, my barrier's gone!" I realized. The acid attack must have shattered the Barrier Ring's protective shield.

Just as I was adjusting to this terrifying turn of events, the slime chose to unleash another wave of toxic fog. I let out a choked gasp, but failed to get out of the way. And with nothing left to protect me from the noxious smoke, the poisoned air plunged down my throat and went straight into my lungs. I retched, feeling the corrosive burn of my body melting from the inside out.

"Radd, get over here!" Mana shouted, her voice tight with fear. "I'll heal you!"

I couldn't speak to reply, but I shook my head. Now that my barrier had been shattered, it wouldn't reform until after the battle was done. There was nothing left for me to do but...

Attack!

Tears in my eyes, I brandished my sword at the slime. The effects of the poison had slowly begun to paralyze me, turning my body numb, but I'd practiced the gestures to activate my Arts so many times that I could perform them perfectly even now.

"Earth Slash!" I rasped, my voice low and ugly.

My earth-elemental attack tore into the slime, finishing it off. All of a sudden, the giant blue slime that had given us so much trouble went still. I stumbled forward, making sure it was dead, then turned around and made my way out of the poison cloud. Finally safe, I pulled off my Barrier Ring and then slid it back on.

Back when Rex had given me the ring, he'd told me that it took ten minutes for a barrier to reform naturally in the middle of a fight. If you weren't under attack though, you could just take the ring off and put it back on again and the barrier would regenerate immediately. I breathed a sigh of relief when, just as Rex had said, my barrier instantly sprung back to life.

Seconds later, my comrades skidded to a stop next to me.

"You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Yeah, never do something that reckless again!"

"My bad," I said weakly, bowing my head. "But you know…"

I turned around, then saw that the slime had already begun to disintegrate into a cloud of light particles. As I watched, the cloud split and rushed forward, a portion disappearing into all four of our left hands. I grinned in excitement as the light faded, leaving behind a familiar sensation. My heart began to pound.

"Guys, we just leveled up."

The poison that had been eating away at my body was eradicated in an instant as power welled up inside me. All of my lost HP and MP came rushing back as well. It was a familiar phenomenon—everyone knew that once you fought enough monsters, you experienced an event where you became more powerful, at which time your body was healed to peak condition. We'd begun to refer to that event as "leveling up" just as Rex did.

Apparently, the reason Rex had chosen the Rainbow Lava Caverns as our second dungeon to challenge had a lot to do with the process of leveling up. He'd explained that the first few times you leveled up, it was a quick and easy process, but that once you reached level 10 you needed a lot more experience to reach the levels that followed. Right now, our levels were low enough that pretty much every battle we engaged in within the Rainbow Lava Caverns would result in us leveling up, which meant we could advance swiftly through the dungeon without needing to go back and recover.

"You sure you're okay, Radd?" Nyuuk asked worriedly. "If you can't do this we can always go back and—"

I shook my head. "No, let's keep going."

Rex himself had told us that we could only clear dungeons this way while we were still inexperienced and of a relatively low level. He'd said that conquering the Rainbow Lava Caverns was our fastest shortcut to growing stronger. If I gave into weakness and let this opportunity slip by for us, I wouldn't deserve the title of adventurer anymore. Besides, I was raring for another fight. One battle wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me, nor was a single level up. In fact, I wasn't planning on stopping until we'd slaughtered every single monster in this dungeon.

"Come on, everyone! All the experience in this dungeon is ours for the taking!"

⁜⁜⁜

From there on out, our battles proceeded quite smoothly, and we were able to hunt down more slimes without incident. I'd thought that we'd eventually have to kill more slimes than we had the MP to handle, but it turned out that wasn't the case. The more times we leveled up, the stronger we became, and so it took much less of our mana to kill slimes as we went on.

Compared to that time we went to the Cavern of Trials, I can really feel a big difference in my strength from level to level! I thought excitedly.

Our growth was a tangible thing—though we'd only been in the dungeon a few hours, I could tell I was leaps and bounds ahead of the version of me that had originally stepped foot into the Rainbow Lava Caverns.

It does kinda suck that most of my Strength is still coming from these enchanted rings, though... I thought, frowning down at my hands.

Besides the Barrier Rings Rex had given to each of us, he'd also handed out two enchanted rings per person. Wearing them raised our stats so high that it felt like all the training we'd done for the past month could honestly be for nothing. Though, as Rex had of course pointed out, the stat boost granted to us by the rings didn't count when it came to class change requirements. Rex had explained to me that, while I could have just used a Strength Ring in order to raise my stats to the place where I could use his Brave Sword, I wouldn't have been able to change into the Brave Leo class. In other words, our training hadn't been for nothing—instead of just raising our strength in general, it had been

preparing us to change into more optimal classes.

It doesn't really matter, anyway, I thought. *The important thing is we're getting stronger now. Not that we should let our guards down—no matter how strong you are, you should always be prepared for the worst.*

The memory of the agony the slime's acid had caused me lingered in my mind. I'd known before that we'd be doomed if we let our barriers break, but now I could understand from personal experience.

Jeez, this dungeon really is a nasty place, I thought. *It's no wonder people swear up and down that this isn't a place for beginners.*

Thinking back to how confident we'd been after we'd cleared the Cavern of Trials, I shivered. If we'd ridden that high and dove straight into this dungeon without making any preparations to speak of, we'd have been slaughtered. We probably would have seen our first slime, decided we could easily handle it because of how slowly it moved, and immediately fallen prey to its toxic gas. Even if we'd done our best to push through the disabling effects of poison, paralysis, weakness, and silence, our unenchanted weapons would have just ended up bouncing off the slime's gelatinous surface. We probably wouldn't have even been able to figure out what its elemental weakness was. Sure, Nyuuk had known a number of elemental spells before meeting Rex, but he would have needed a frontline fighter to hold the slime's attention while he cast. There was no way I'd have been able to manage that if I was suffering from poison, paralysis, weakness, *and* silence. And by the time that we realized that we were outmatched, the slime would have likely called for backup and subsequently trapped us. At which point we'd have definitely have—

"Radd!" Nyuuk shouted.

"Y-Yeah?" I stammered, coming back to reality.

"You look really pale. Are you sure you're okay? If you're tired we can—"

"Don't worry, I'm fine," I interrupted. "I was just thinking about how terrifying this dungeon would have been if we'd never met Master Rex and tried to clear it on our own."

Upon hearing that, Nyuuk chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” I snapped.

“I just find it humorous that you call Rex ‘old geezer’ to his face all the time, but when he’s not around you change your tune and refer to him as ’Master Rex’ instead.”

“Oh, shut up!” I glared at Nyuuk—he was a nice enough guy, but I hated how easily he could see through me.

“You’re right to respect him, you know. We’re truly blessed to have such a good teacher. Which is exactly why—”

“I know, I know.”

There was only one way to fully repay Rex for his kindness. We had to—

“Radd,” Prana called. It seemed she’d finished scouting the area ahead. “I don’t hear the sound of slimes slithering around anymore. I think we’ve cleared them all out.”

“Gotcha,” I said with a nod. “All that’s left now is…”

“The final chamber, where the dungeon boss is.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

“It’s changing elements again!” Mana shouted. “It’s red, so it’s fire this time!”

Damn it, it’s shifting between elements too quickly for me to hit it, I cursed, hurriedly lowering my sword and cutting off the Art I was tracing midway. I glared at the slime before me, pissed that it had forced me to cancel my Art.

The monster before me was the boss of the Rainbow Lava Caverns, the Huge Rainbow Slime. Rex had told us that we didn’t have to go out of our way to fight it before we’d gone inside the dungeon, but we’d decided to go for it anyway.

Even if you clear out all of the monsters in the caverns and level up as much as you can, you may find it too difficult to beat the dungeon’s boss still, depending on the pattern of elements it ends up cycling through, Rex’s voice echoed in my head.

As much as I hated to admit it, now that we’d tried to fight the monster, I could tell Rex had been right—the Huge Rainbow Slime might be too much for

the four of us to handle. Beyond being absolutely massive, it had the abilities of all seven types of slimes we'd fought so far, and could freely swap between elements at a moment's notice.

So far, we'd discovered that if the monster took enough damage, or if a certain amount of time passed, it would change color automatically. When it shifted to a new element, there was a brief opening where the slime couldn't move, so if you were strong enough you could utilize its shifting weaknesses to stun lock it as it constantly cycled through elements. Unfortunately for us, we just didn't have that kind of strength.

"Damn it," I shouted. "I've already used Frost Cut!"

"I don't have any water spells on my equipment!" Nyuuk replied in a panic.

"I've only got three frost arrows left!" Prana shouted, reducing the number to two when she fired one at the slime.

At this point, the situation had grown dire. Prana's arrow managed to stop the Huge Rainbow Slime in its tracks for a moment, but we all knew it wouldn't last long.

We're too weak, goddamnit! I swore internally. *Plus, the longer we fight, the more we expose our own weaknesses.*

In my own case, I only had a few Arts at my disposal. If I used them too quickly in succession with one another, they all ended up on cooldown at the same time, leaving me completely screwed. That hadn't been a big deal when we'd been fighting regular slimes, since we'd been able to use elemental attacks that the slimes weren't weak to in order to keep the pressure on, but the Huge Rainbow Slime was another beast entirely. It changed its weaknesses constantly, which made my Arts practically useless since it took me so long to activate them. And if I wasted the Art that caused earth-elemental damage while the Huge Rainbow Slime was weak to fire, I wouldn't be able to utilize it when its weakness swapped back to earth.

I should have learned more elemental attacks, even if they weren't very efficient MP-wise! I lamented. *Damnit, I didn't prepare nearly as much as I should have for this.*

I swung my sword at the slime once more, even knowing it was futile.

Meanwhile, Nyuuk called out, “Ice Bolt!” and fired a bolt of ice into the slime. Unfortunately, it barely even made a dent in the Huge Rainbow Slime’s giant body.

Unlike Arts, there was no secret way to use spells better, or to activate higher level techniques you hadn’t learned yet. Nyuuk’s stats were really high for a beginner, but at the moment he only knew beginner level spells. He’d been covering for that deficiency with the equipment Rex had given him, but that wasn’t enough to give him access to high level spells for all of the elements. Which meant that, for the elements he only had beginner spells for, his damage fell *considerably.*

“I’m out of frost and wind arrows,” Prana said simply, her voice filled with frustration and powerlessness. “There’s nothing else I can do.”

This spelled big trouble for us, as Prana had been the one who’d been filling in for Nyuuk and I when we didn’t have the right element ready to attack the Huge Rainbow Slime. And, since Prana was an archer, she had no way of using elemental attacks now that she’d used up all her arrows helping us.

“Holy— Get out of the way!” Mana screamed. “Another acid attack is coming!”

I reflexively leapt to the side, dodging the monster’s blow.

So far, Mana’s light magic had been pretty effective against the Huge Rainbow Slime—it had done decent damage to all the monster’s forms except for its light-elemental one. Still, she couldn’t just keep casting constantly, since we needed her to keep an eye out for danger and call out the monster’s moves. Furthermore, even when she did attack the slime, her aim wasn’t good enough to hit the monster’s weak points, and because she was a healer and not an offensive mage, her firepower wasn’t the greatest.

Our biggest problem, however, was shared: our small mana pools.

“Damnit, my mana’s running low!” I swore.

Up until now, most of our fights had ended within a minute or two, and we’d leveled up and gotten our mana back before we ran out. This boss, however,

was taking much longer to kill, and we didn't have the chance to take a break or level up to recover our mana. And now that the battle had drawn out for so long, our mana levels were going critical.

"Radd, we're almost out of time!" Mana shouted.

I grit my teeth in vexation—Rex had instructed us that if we couldn't beat the Huge Rainbow Slime in five minutes, we had to run. I believed his exact words had been, "If you want to try your hand at the boss I won't stop you guys, but just remember that five minutes is the longest you'll be able to keep going at full power."

I understood all too well what he'd meant now. Not only did we lack the MP to keep fighting for a more prolonged amount of time, we didn't have enough experience in battle to keep our focus up either.

Still, even though I know we don't have much time left, I know that I—no, all of us—still want to bring this boss down no matter what it takes!

And we didn't feel that way just because defeating the boss would make us stronger, either. None of us were motivated by that, or by the better reward we'd receive when we turned to quest in. Even if we failed to kill this boss, we'd still eventually get stronger, and the extra reward barely mattered in the grand scheme of things. Honestly, there was no real downside to us retreating here. We'd already cleared out the rest of the dungeon and completed a number of gathering and extermination requests along the way. No one would dare make fun of us after seeing what we'd already accomplished.

Still...that's not enough!

People had been making fun of the four of us this whole month as we'd trained. They'd either laughed at us doing things they thought were pointless, or looked at us with pity, thinking that we'd been following the teachings of a hack. It had hurt to be treated that way, but what had hurt me the most was how much they'd disrespected Rex. People could make fun of me all they wanted—I knew better than anyone else how much stronger I was growing by following Rex's teachings. I could *feel* it. That's why I'd been able to push aside the snide insults and the rumors. But whenever I'd heard people badmouthing Rex, it had driven me insane. After all he'd given us, after all he'd taught us, for

the other adventurers in Freelea to call him a wimp and a charlatan...it was unacceptable.

Which is exactly why we're going to beat the Huge Rainbow Slime and prove them all wrong!

Sure, we'd already done something impressive by managing to kill a bunch of monsters and clear a handful of requests in a dungeon as dangerous as this. But that wasn't amazing enough to change everyone's opinions on Rex immediately.

This is how we'll pay you back for everything you've done for us, Master Rex! We'll beat this boss no matter what it takes!

Well, that's what I'd thought, but the fact of the matter was, no matter how determined we all were, this boss was insanely strong. At this point, my limbs were beginning to grow heavy.

Feeling overwhelmed, I glanced back at my comrades. A sigh of recognition left me at the sight of the look in their eyes. In that moment, I knew our spirits were one. Even if no one had shouted their feelings aloud, we were all screaming the same thing in our minds: *We're not giving up here!*

My lips curled up into a fierce grin. "We need green…" I muttered.

"Huh?" Nyuuk and the others gave me a confused look.

"Fall back for now and don't attack it. We need to wait for it to turn green so the bastard's weak to fire."

"But if we do that, its regeneration will kick in and it'll start healing!" Nyuuk shouted.

I waved my hand and said, "I know that. But we barely have any mana left. Waiting is still better than wasting what little mana we've got."

"That sounds…"

"Listen to me. If we just hit it without all our strongest fire attacks the moment it turns green, we might be able to do this. We just need to kill it before it gets a chance to change again."

I needed everyone to be on board with my plan, since it was going to require

perfect timing. Because the Huge Rainbow Slime tended to swap elements the moment someone hit it with an attack it was weak to, we'd need to strike it all at once. If we failed to coordinate ourselves, we'd miss our chance for making a concentrated attack, and lose our last chance of defeating the boss.

"Are you sure the next color it swaps to will be green?" Nyuu asked doubtfully.

I grinned at him. "Nope. All we can do is pray."

Nyuuk nodded, an exasperated smile curving his lips.

After that, we just had to be patient and continue fighting the Huge Rainbow Slime through the poison smoke it was emitting, dodging the occasional acid balls along the way. Until finally, it started to swap elements.

"It's turning green!" we all shouted at once.

"When the chips are down, you always pull through, Radd," Nyuuk said in a relieved voice.

I beamed at him, feeling flattered. But of course, it was too early to celebrate. This was our one and only chance to take this boss down.

"Count us down from five, Mana!"

"Five!" Mana shouted. "Four!"

I exchanged glances with Prana, and she nocked every fire arrow she had left.

"Three!"

Nyuuk scrunched up his face and pointed his blazing rod at the slime.

"Two!"

I turned back to the boss and began tracing the shape of my art.

"One!"

We lined up together, ready to unleash our attacks as one.

"GO!"

Chapter 9: The Day History was Rewritten

Three hours had passed since Radd and the others had headed into the Rainbow Lava Caverns. This was a bit worrying, as the average time to clear the dungeon was supposed to be around two and a half hours.

“Are you *absolutely* certain you don’t need to go rescue them?!” Veteram demanded, clearly worried. He’d stayed quiet at first, trusting my judgment, but he was clearly running out of patience now.

I bit my lip, feeling a little worried myself.

I knew that the four kids had the stats and equipment needed to fight their way through the Rainbow Lava Caverns, but I also knew that there was one potential enemy in the dungeon—namely, the boss at the end called the Huge Rainbow Slime—that could give them some trouble. I’d warned them that if they weren’t able to beat the boss within five minutes that they should give up and retreat, but...

What if they got so focused on the fight that they misjudged the time and lost their chance to safely disengage...?

Just as I made up my mind to go looking for them, one of Veteram’s companions shouted, “L-Look! Over there!” and pointed at the dungeon entrance, his mouth hanging open. I followed his gaze, then breathed a sigh of relief.

“Heeeeeey!!!” Radd shouted, slowly strolling out of the dungeon with Mana, Nyuuk, and Prana and Recilia following behind him. The four kids all looked like they’d taken a heavy beating, but their expressions were bright and triumphant.

Veteram’s face turned incredulous. “Th-Those kids really did it...” he muttered. “I... I don’t believe it. Those inexperienced kids really went into the Lava Caverns and came back alive.”

“And that’s not all,” I grandly replied, eyes on the object clenched in Radd’s right hand.

“That...can’t be!”

Veteram's eyes went wide as Radd waved to us, the rainbow-colored jewel in his hand glinting in the sunlight. There was only one monster that dropped a jewel like that in the Rainbow Lava Caverns—the dungeon's final boss, the Huge Rainbow Slime.

"You guys nearly gave me a heart attack," I mumbled halfheartedly. "I told you not to push it if the boss seemed too hard, but you didn't listen…"

But, no matter the emotions I was depicting on the outside, I couldn't help but feel proud of them. It was a novel feeling for me.

Radd, meanwhile, hadn't heard a word I'd said. He ran over to me, showing off the rainbow-colored crystal off as he scurried closer. "Check this out, you damn geezer!" he shouted. "We did it!"

I grinned. "I suppose that at least gets a passing mark. Well done, you four."

Radd chuckled and grinned back at me, his face lighting up at my praise. Alas, our bonding moment wasn't to last.

"A-A passing mark?!" Veteram sputtered. "Do you have any idea how unbelievable these kids' accomplishments are?!" The veteran adventurer flailed his arms around wildly. "D-Don't you see?! Once the guild hears about this, your accomplishments will go down in histor— Whoa!"

Veteram vanished from my field of view, only to reappear a few feet away and crash to the ground in a bloody heap. I gaped, then realized something had hit him from the side and sent him flying.

"Wh-What just...?" I mumbled, still baffled. "Ve-Veteram?"

There was no reply. The older adventurer lay completely still, a puddle of blood forming underneath him from the gaping wound in his side.

"Man, humans really are fragile. What a weak race."

A shiver went down my spine. *I know the owner of that voice. But...why is he here* now*?!*

There was an airy sound, like the voice's owner had just yawned. "Still, that guy can't be the one I'm looking for. He was way too weak." The voice drew closer. "What about you, hmm? You the hero I'm searching for?"

I slowly turned around, my body trembling in fear. That was when Radd, who was peering out from behind my back and trembling nearly as fiercely as I was, decided to make his stand.

“D-Don’t you underestimate us!” he shouted. “Who the hell are you, anyways?!”

“Me?” The owner of the voice asked cooly. “Why, I am just the first of many calamities that will be visited upon your fragile world.” The creature grinned, his eyes glinting with a crazed light. Though he was wearing a torn cape and shabby clothes, the power that rippled off his body was no joke. “Behold—I am Bring, the first of the demon lords.”

Well, shit, I thought, triggering Analyze. *Looks like I’ll be facing down a demon lord after all.*

【Demon Lord Bring】

LV: ???

HP: ???

MP: ???

Attack: ???

Magic Attack: ???

Defense: ???

Magic Defense: ???

I willed my legs to stop shaking, but the question marks floating before my eyes weren’t helping. I couldn’t even begin to think of how to handle this development—I’d been completely blindsided.

I mean, what the fuck?! Why is this happening now*?! It makes no goddamn sense! And now we’ve got to deal with a motherfucking* demon lord*?!*

Braves and Blades had six demon lords that appeared throughout the game, all of which served as midgame bosses. Technically, the bosses in the Twelve Ruins of Darkness were midgame bosses as well, but they never left their locations, so the player got to choose when they fought them. The demon lords,

on the other hand, appeared whenever the requirements for their respective events were fulfilled. After that, they could attack the player at any time. All six demon lords were monsters that had been powered up and transformed with the evil god Rasulfi's power; the "lord" portion of their name came from their ability to control all monsters that belonged to their corresponding species. They were, of course, exceptionally powerful without even taking that ability into account.

The most effective weapon against a demon lord was a Blade of Light, which only the true protagonist, who was of the Hero class, could wield. That was why it was so important for us to find the true protagonist before we progressed too far into the game. Otherwise, we'd get our asses handed to us, just like the true protagonist did at the beginning of their scripted encounter with Demon Lord Bring. From what I remembered, the event triggered when a player completed their first dungeon, and resolved when you accessed the ability to use a Blade of Light for the first time. Despite being of a low level—you would typically be under level 10 at this time—and having weaker stats than Demon Lord Bring, you could then drive him back using your new power.

But none of us are the true protagonist! So why did Bring show up here?! This never happened in the game as far as... A sudden, blood-curdling thought came rushing to the forefront of my mind. *Oh no...the conditions for triggering this event must have been adjusted when I reincarnated in this world!*

For a moment, I'd let it slip my mind that while this world was based on *Braves and Blades,* it wasn't a 1:1 reproduction of the game I knew so well. It was entirely possible that, in the process of turning the game's world into a real one, the triggers for a lot of the events had been changed in some way. For example, maybe it would now be possible for certain events that used to be triggered by someone beyond the true protagonist, when normally they were the only ones who could do so. The game might only see Radd and the other kids as NPCs, but perhaps since they'd been the ones to clear a dungeon first after the goddess of salvation's proclamation, their actions had triggered Demon Lord Bring's appearance.

This sucks! I wailed internally.

In *Braves and Blades,* the true protagonist's first battle with Demon Lord Bring

was basically an event fight. There was no way that, if the battle was allowed to play out according to both sides' respective stats, that the true protagonist would manage to survive. Demon Lord Bring might be the weakest of the six demon lords, but he still had midgame stats, while the true protagonist would be at the very start of their journey when the event triggered. Indeed, the only reason the true protagonist would manage to survive the fight was because, during the course of the event, they managed to summon a Blade of Light. Demon Lord Bring, faced with the weapon's unexpected appearance, would freeze in shock for a moment, letting the true protagonist get a single hit in. The injury from that strike would be enough to drive the demon lord away, but not kill him—even the ridiculous amount of extra damage the Blade of Light did to demon lords would not be enough to kill Demon Lord Bring in one hit. In fact, if not for the event being scripted, the true protagonist and their party would likely end up slaughtered by Demon Lord Bring's attacks before the Blade of Light even appeared.

There was only one, major problem—none of us were the true protagonist! There would be no last minute appearance of a Blade of Light for us.

We're. So. Fucked! I grit my teeth in frustration. *Seems like our only way out of this is to figure out how to fight this guy with the tools we currently have.*

I turned toward the others. "...un."

"Huh?"

I abandoned all attempts to hide my panic. "Everyone, *RUN!!!*" I shouted hoarsely.

"Wh-What the heck are you saying, old man?" Radd demanded.

It appeared even my panicked shout hadn't been enough to fully convey the danger of the monster standing before us. And, unfortunately, I was out of time—I couldn't spare enough time to breathe, let alone to lecture them on how big of a threat demon lords were.

"What's this? You really think I'll let you escape, you fools?!"

Demon Lord Bring stepped closer, and my hand curled over empty air at my side. I let out a grunt of dismay as I realized I was no longer carrying my Metallic

King Sword—I'd given it to Recilia before she entered the Rainbow Lava Caverns.

Wait, what am I doing, anyway? I thought a tad hysterically. *I can't afford to fight this guy head-on!*

After all, I was not a Hero, and without the abilities given by that class, there was no way I could fight on equal footing with any demon lord, including Bring. That was one of the fundamental rules of *BB*'s world. In which case...there was only one thing left to do!

"Knife Shot!" I shouted, throwing three knives at Demon Lord Bring.

It was the same skill I'd used to take down Veteram's comrades—I'd chosen it because the orichalcum knives I was carrying were my most powerful weapons at the moment. All three of them landed direct hits. Unfortunately...each and every one of them just bounced harmlessly off the demon lord's body.

Demon Lord Bring chuckled. "You must be kidding. Do you really think glorified kitchen knives can scratch *me*?"

I deflated. "No way..." I murmured.

The difference between our stats is just way too high!

Just like back with the doom demon, I simply couldn't damage Bring with my much lower stats. Even the extremely high Attack stats of the orichalcum knives I'd thrown hadn't been enough to give him a scratch. Still, I had no other weapons to rely on. They'd just have to do the trick.

"It seems that's the best you've got," the demon lord said lightly. "In that case...I suppose it's my turn."

Demon Lord Bring charged at me, closing the distance between us in an instant.

I grabbed another knife with my right hand and shouted, "Final Break!" then rammed my weapon right into Demon Lord Bring's side. This time, I felt a proper impact.

You see, Final Break was an Art that unleashed an extremely powerful attack, but destroyed whatever weapon you had equipped in return. The stat multiplier

of the Art had boosted my Attack high enough that I'd just barely been able to overcome the demon lord's Defense stat and push him back a little.

Hell yeah! I thought, grinning.

It may have only been by a few hit points, but I'd still managed to cause some damage. Unfortunately, my excitement had prompted me to let my guard down for a moment. The demon lord took advantage of the opening I'd left to crush my one ray of hope.

"You've done it now!" Demon Lord Bring shouted, raising his right hand.

He's going to cast the same spell he used to knock out Veteram! I realized. I leapt to the side as fast as I could, but I wasn't quick enough.

"Agh!" I cried, pain lancing through my left side.

He barely grazed me and it still hurts this bad?! I thought incredulously, fear jolting down my spine. *How?!*

But my nightmare wasn't over yet.

"Watch out!" Radd shouted.

I looked up, only to see Demon Lord Bring right in front of me, a poisoned dagger in his hand. There was no time to dodge.

"Final Break!" I screamed, whipping out another knife and forcing the demon lord back. The move was only enough to buy me a moment's respite.

From a distance, I heard Recilia yell, "Brother!"

Just after her, Nyuuk called, "Don't worry, Rex, we'll back you up!"

Upon hearing that I reflexively turned around, wanting nothing more than for them to escape. "Stop trying to help me!" I yelled. "You *have* to run, or—"

"You dare look away when fighting me, worm?!"

There was a sudden burning sensation in my stomach, and I turned back around, facing the grinning, green-skinned demon lord. Crooked teeth stuck out from between his lips. I'd been foolish to warn off my comrades—Bring was not the type to ignore an opening.

"What did you..." The world warped, and suddenly the demon lord seemed to

grow taller. That's when I realized I was falling.

"It's game over for you, worm," Demon Lord Bring said, chuckling.

"B-B-Brother?" Recilia said from behind me, her voice trembling.

I wanted to turn and run to her, but my legs wouldn't move. The world quaked as my knees hit the ground, and I bent over, clutching at the gaping wound in my stomach.

"I-I'll heal you!" Mana shouted.

Mere moments later, I found myself enveloped in a warm light. However, my wound didn't close.

"Wh-Why isn't my magic working?!"

Demon Lord Bring sneered at the young healer. "That's because this knife of mine's cursed," he spat, his face contorting back into a grin. "Your puny magic won't ever be able to heal those wounds! Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"No…" Mana whispered. She fell to her knees, her legs giving out beneath her.

"I'll make you pay for what you did to him!" Recilia shouted, charging forward.

Radd must have followed close behind, because I heard him yell, "How dare you hurt Master Rex!"

"No, stop…" I moaned. The two of them didn't stand a chance.

Demon Lord Bring casually swept an arm out in front of him, sending a shockwave booming through the air. Recilia and Radd went flying. "You insects aren't even worth my time," he said, sounding thoroughly bored.

This is...unreal, I thought, my head spinning from blood loss. *We haven't even been fighting him a minute, but we're already on the verge of being wiped out.*

"Don't like what you see, worm?" Demon Lord Bring asked, eyeing me as if he'd read my thoughts. "Too bad. This is your reality. It's not your fault—you fought well. I'm just on a whole different level than you. Weaklings of your caliber are destined to be crushed by the truly strong, like us demon lords."

It was the third-rate villain speech Demon Lord Bring gave in the game version of *BB*. Specifically, he spouted it when beating down the true protagonist. I had to admit, when you were experiencing it firsthand, his words had a lot more weight to them.

I watched helplessly as the demon lord slowly brought his palm in front of my face, preparing the spell that would end me.

“Brother!” I heard Recilia scream. “No, don’t! Don’t hurt him! *BROTHER!!!”*

“This can’t be!” Mana cried, her voice cutting through Recilia’s wails. “Rex, no!”

Their protests fell on deaf ears. Bring was a demon lord—there was no way he was going to stop just because someone asked him to. Especially now that he’d gathered enough mana in his palm to reduce me to ash.

“This is the end, worm.”

But, just before Demon Lord Bring could unleash his spell, a pillar of blinding light appeared between us.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” I sputtered.

The light slowly began to fade, revealing...

“A sword?”

I couldn’t tell who’d spoken, but at this point I figured it wasn’t really important. I was just mesmerized at the sight resting before my eyes. I started laughing uncontrollably.

“Wh-What’s so funny, you bastard?!” the demon lord shouted, incensed.

But I couldn’t answer him. I couldn’t even hold in my guffaws. Floating in front of me was the sword that had saved me countless times during my various playthroughs of *Braves and Blades*—the Blade of Light. Created by the goddess of salvation for her chosen hero, the weapon was imbued with the power to destroy all beings of darkness.

“What in Rasulfi’s name *is* that thing?!” Demon Lord Bring demanded. A hint of fear tinted his voice.

I couldn't blame him—the Blade of Light's very existence weakened beings of darkness. It was probably severely dampening his power just by floating a few feet away.

I slowly pushed myself to my feet, ignoring Recilia's shout of "Brother?!" from behind me. Demon Lord Bring's cursed dagger might have been able to prevent healing magic from closing my injuries, but it didn't seem to work on the magic emanating off of the Blade of Light. My wounds were slowly closing up. A new strength welled up from somewhere inside of me. A part of me knew, deep down, that all I had to do was grab hold of that sword, and I could beat Bring.

Now this *is what I call a comeback.*

Just a few seconds before, I'd been falling into the depths of despair, but now I was grinning. I slowly reached a hand out toward the Blade of Light. I had no idea why this sword, which only a Hero could wield, had appeared before me. But the fact of the matter was that it *was* here, and the light it was exuding was healing me while weakening the demon lord before me.

In the game version of *BB*, the player was able to drive Demon Lord Bring away with the Blade of Light even under level 10. Rex might be relatively weak for his level, but he was still level 50. With his stats, I'd easily be able to send Bring packing. It was a wild feeling—just a month ago, I'd been your typical, boring old office worker. Now, I had the chance to make the type of epic comeback I'd always loved to see in fiction. It was almost as if...as if... I suddenly stopped reaching for the sword.

"Brother?" This time Recilia's voice was full of confusion.

"No," I said. "This isn't right."

In that moment, I felt all of my doubts and concerns vanish. I looked down at my hand, the very same one which had moments before been reaching out to the Blade of Light. My resolve firm, I whipped it through the air once again.

"How could I forget?!" I cried, knocking the sword aside. "I'm not the Hero!"

Everyone, even Demon Lord Bring, stared in shock as the Blade of Light went spinning through the air.

"What in the hell...?" the demon lord muttered, turning back to me. There

was a hint of awe in his expression.

What I'd just done was stupid. I knew that. All I'd had to do was take the sword, and the event would have progressed. I'd have healed enough to land a blow on Bring, and he would have been so shaken by the amount of damage the attack had done that he would have teleported away to let the other demon lords know that the Hero had finally appeared. We would have all been saved.

I understood that. *Truly* I did. But...

"That would have been boring as hell!"

Not to mention, I wasn't cut out to wield such a legendary sword—there was no way I'd be able to become a hero everyone admired. What's more, there was no need for me to become this world's true protagonist. All I wanted was to enjoy my life here and do whatever I wanted. Even if I didn't become a hero, even if I didn't become the true protagonist, that would please me down to the bone.

"I'm the one who gets to decide how my story goes!" I shouted.

As everyone stared at me in confusion, I began rifling through my Inventory. Fortunately, I'd taken the time to raise my experience points to the perfect value before this whole excursion. Meaning, an alternate path to victory stretched out before me.

Finally finding what I was looking for, I took a Steel Sword out of storage. As it popped out, it instantly transformed into a mimic.

"Wha—?!" Demon Lord Bring gasped, his mouth dropping open.

Before he could react, I cut the mimic down using one of my orichalcum knives. It disintegrated into particles of light, and as that light was sucked into my left hand the wound in my stomach vanished without a trace.

"Impossible!" the demon lord roared. "How did you manage to heal that wound?!"

"I didn't," I said nonchalantly. "I just reset back to full health."

You see, there were two ways to heal a wound inflicted by a demon lord: one,

use the Blade of Light, or two, let it heal naturally. There was a way to expedite that latter option, though—to level up. Whatever wounds you'd acquire would heal at once as your health reset back to full. It was a simple but effective workaround.

"Now then," I drawled. "Guess I should go ahead and use these."

With a quick gesture, I swapped out the rings I'd been wearing for a second set, which were enchanted to boost Focus. My knife damage scaled with Focus, so if my calculations were correct, my attack power would jump significantly now that they were in place. I then swapped my orichalcum knife to my left hand and took out a basic Iron Sword for my right. The Iron Sword wasn't much to look at—it wasn't enchanted at all, and was no doubt the weakest of all the weapons I'd kept stored in my Inventory.

Seeing that I planned to fight him with such a pitiful weapon, Demon Lord Bring's eyes blazed with anger. "Are you making fun of me, you worm?!" he roared.

"Oh, stop yapping," I taunted him. "Come at me already."

Bring leapt forward at lightning speed.

"Gale Slash!" I cried, vanishing from the demon lord's sight.

You see, although Demon Lord Bring was faster than any human could hope to be, he wasn't faster than a human using a speed-based Art. I hadn't used Gale Slash in order to hit the demon lord—I'd used it to circle behind him.

I had to shake my head at myself. Earlier, I'd been so focused on the fact that this was an event fight that I hadn't paused for a moment to consider how I could actually beat Demon Lord Bring.

I'm lucky my carelessness didn't turn out even worse, I thought in disgust, tucking my sword away. I pulled out a few more orichalcum knives instead, then threw all of them at Bring's defenseless back.

"Wh-Where did— *Gaaah!*"

It seemed all three knives had hit home, and, thanks to the Focus Rings I had equipped, it seemed they'd done a decent amount of damage.

“Seventy-three. Sixty-five. Fifty-nine,” I muttered, mentally running some calculations.

Demon Lord Bring turned around, incensed, and I once again threw three knives at him. They also hit home, leaving small scratches on the demon lord’s skin.

“Fifty-three. Forty-eight. Forty-three,” I said thoughtfully.

It seemed that, although I was now able to inflict damage on the demon lord, I wasn’t doing enough to slow him down.

Demon Lord Bring charged at me again, cutting off my line of thought. “Stop flitting about, you bastard!” he snarled.

Alas, the demon lord was no longer fast enough to be a serious threat. I brought up the two orichalcum knives in my hands and shouted, “Parry!” stopping Bring’s reckless attack with ease. As he reeled backward, I darted forward and sliced at him again.

“Like that’ll hurt me!” the demon lord spat.

He wasn’t wrong—I sunk both knives into his neck, but they barely even managed to draw blood. Still, they’d done some damage. Once I took note of the amount, I discarded them both. Backstepping away, I sent another barrage of knives flying at Demon Lord Bring. Two of them grazed past him, while the third wedged itself into his arm.

“Is that the only thing you know how to do?!” the demon lord shouted in disgust. He pulled the knife out of his arm, looking completely unfazed, and once again charged at me.

By this point, he’d grown even slower. So slow, in fact, that dodging him was effortless. I sidestepped out of the way of Demon Lord Bring’s attack and once again slashed at him with the two orichalcum knives in my hands. “And now...we’re at 20!”

It was clear the fight was not turning out to Demon Lord Bring’s expectations. As it dragged on, longer and longer, I’d regained my composure while his had vanished.

“Why?!” Bring shouted, growing even more flustered and enraged as his dagger stabbed into empty air once more. “Why can’t I hit you?!”

This time my salvo of three knives hit him in the side.

“I’m a Demon Lord!” Bring shouted, flailing around wildly now. “No member of the mortal races should be able to stand against me!”

I sunk another three knives into his right arm with ease.

“You think that’s enough to stop me?!” Demon Lord Bring roared, swapping his dagger to his left hand.

Alas, even using his uninjured arm, the demon lord couldn’t hit me. I dodged his next attack and fired my next three knives into his left arm.

“GODDAMNIT!!!”

Demon Lord Bring jumped backward, glaring hatefully at me—it seemed he’d learned his lesson when it came to blinding charging in my direction. He took a deep breath, reining his emotions in forcefully, and then snapped, “Fine, I admit it—you’re a worthy foe. I’ll retreat for now. But make no mistake, I’ll be back to kill you one day! Don’t think you’ve won just yet!”

Staggering slightly, Demon Lord Bring raised both of his hands high over his head. His fighting spirit seemed to be burning as fiercely as ever, despite the fact that he’d just declared he was retreating.

“Enjoy what little time you have left before I come to snuff your life out, you worm! Return!”

And with that final parting shot, Bring...stayed right where he was. It seemed the spell he’d just cast, which was supposed to teleport him back home, had failed.

“What?!” he shrieked. “Why am I still here?! Return! Return! *Retuuurn*!”

And yet, no matter how many times the demon lord shouted his spell, it didn’t activate. I’d expected as much, of course.

“You can’t cast it,” I said coolly. “Your stats aren’t high enough.”

“What?”

I held out the orichalcum knife in my hand. “Did you know? This knife is known as a Goblin Slaughterer.”

“S-So what!?” Demon Lord Bring spat.

I started spinning the knife between my fingers. “You see, it’s *supposed* to be a high-level piece of equipment, but it has a bunch of crappy secondary effects that make it hard to use. However, it’s extremely useful when fighting against a specific species of enemy. Do you know which one?”

“D-Don’t tell me…”The weakest of the six demon lords started trembling.

If you remember, the six demon lords had originally started off as regular monsters. The evil god Rasulfi had chosen a leader of each respective monster species, and then granted them extra power. That was why they were referred to as “lords.” The green-skinned Demon Lord Bring, my current opponent, was the weakest of the six, which meant he was also the leader of the weakest species. And of course, there was only one species that was universally considered the weakest in the world of *Braves and Blades*.

“That’s right,” I said with a grin. “These knives are extremely powerful against goblins.”

Bring, demon lord and king of the goblins, staggered backwards upon hearing these words.

“Oh, and that’s not all. These bad boys have another useful effect on top of doing extra damage against goblins. If they deal damage to a monster of the goblin race, they lower its stats by 10%. And that debuff stacks with each Goblin Slaughterer you hit a goblin with.”

“N-No, stop…” He wasn’t even trying to hide his fear now.

And here you were, boasting about how we were all fated to be crushed by the demon lords, I thought with a laugh. *Now* you’re *cowering before* me*.*

“At first, 10% doesn’t really seem like all that much,” I continued. “It adds up pretty quickly, though. While the first hit drops you to 90% of your stats, the second hit will drop you to 90% of that 90%. That’s 81%, if you’re struggling to do the math. By the time you get hit with five of the daggers, your stats end up being reduced to 59%.”

“Don’t!” Bring shouted. Spit frothed at his mouth, dripping to the ground.

I ignored him, looking around at the dozens of knives littering the dirt around us. “I wonder just how weak a goblin will become after being hit by this many knives?” I added with faux curiosity. I was just barely restraining a grin.

“STOOOOOOP!” the demon lord wailed. It seemed the full weight of what I’d done to him had finally sunk in. “You bastard! *How dare you!*”

Bring was so mad with rage, it seemed he was no longer able to think straight. He charged mindlessly at me, his movements almost comically sluggish.



“You may not be human,” I said pityingly, “but I’d still rather not kill an intelligent creature. Sadly, you leave me no choice.”

I raised my right hand, preparing to deliver the final blow to *BB*'s weakest Demon Lord. When I swung my Goblin Slaughterer down, the weapon did exactly what its name implied it would.

"Goodbye, Bring."

❊❊❊

【Blade Emperor Calendar, November 10th, 664】

Precisely one month after the goddess of salvation appeared to deliver her message unto the world, news of a series of historic accomplishments reaches Freelea's Adventurers' Guild. It is said that a party of green adventurers cleared a mid-level dungeon that they had never entered before that day. Furthermore, upon emerging victorious, it is said a demon lord materialized before them, the first appearance of that sort in a few hundred years. Most shocking of all, the party struck this demon lord down, leaving their number at five.

This report is given to the Adventurers' Guild by the most trustworthy adventurer in Freelea, known as Veteram the Immortal. Thus, despite its shocking content, all come to know the story as true.

Soon, the information spreads from Freelea's Adventurers' Guild to the Guild of the next town, and the next. Within days, the whole world has heard. Adventurers throughout the land rejoiced, excited to hear of the birth of a new Hero. Off they went, seeking the man out, only to find that the demon lord had been slain by another adventurer, just like them. And, somehow, he'd accomplished the feat solo.

Thus was how the world came to know of Rex Tauren.

Chapter 10: Epilogue

That night, I looked out of my inn room's window and stretched my hand out toward the starry night sky. "Come to me, Blade of Light," I muttered quietly, my words melting into the darkness.

Nothing happened.

Well, I thought, *I kind of expected as much.*

In *BB* the video game, the true protagonist could summon the Blade of Light any time they wanted after the fight with Bring. It seemed that wasn't to be the case for me.

If I'd taken the Blade of Light back then, maybe I'd be able to summon it now, but... I shook my head.

Sure, I could have resolved things the same way as the scripted event had played out in the game. I could've snatched up the Blade of Light and used it to drive Bring away. But...I'd known how the future would unfold if I'd let the demon lord live. He would've slaughtered countless innocents.

I made the right choice, I thought. *I know I did.*

Besides, when I thought back on it now, the sword's appearance hadn't happened quite the same way it had in the original game. The biggest discrepancy, of course, was that it had appeared before *me,* a non-protagonist. That wasn't all, though—in the game, the Blade of Light hadn't just "appeared" at all.

You see, the Blade of Light wasn't a weapon, strictly speaking. It was more a manifestation of the Hero of Light's—aka the protagonist's—special power. Basically, the protagonist could concentrate all their evil-destroying power into their hands and use it to craft the weapon. Normally, during the Demon Lord Bring fight, the Hero would summon the blade to their hand in a moment of need. But that hadn't happened today—no, the blade had appeared by itself, in a flash of light.

It's possible someone summoned it for me, I suppose, I mused. *But there*

wasn't anyone nearby.

Hell, even if the true protagonist *had* been nearby, the way things had played out still didn't make any sense. Even in the game version of *BB*, the player hadn't been able to telepathically control the Blade of Light and cause it to float around in the air and stuff. It was just so strange, how it had just popped up between the demon lord and me. Then again, the demon lord's appearance was in itself a strange thing. Why had he appeared before us, when the true protagonist was nowhere to be seen?

Wait, maybe his appearance is the cause of all the other discrepancies, I realized.

While I knew I wasn't meant to wield the Blade of Light, I'd still ended up taking part in an event that required the weapon. It was possible that the forces that governed the world had brought the Blade of Light to me in order to make sure the event could continue as it was supposed to. But...

I shook my head again. *I don't have enough information to come to any concrete conclusions, and there's no point in speculating.*

There *was* one thing I was sure of, however—this version of *Braves and Blades* was fundamentally different from the game I was so familiar with. I couldn't just blindly rely on game knowledge to pull me through; I would need to carefully discern which portions of the world followed the same principles as the game, and which didn't. And in order to do that, I—

"What are you doing, brother?"

I pulled my gaze from the notebook on my desk, turning to face the familiar figure of the green-haired girl who'd flung open my inn room door.

"R-Recilia..." I stammered. "Um, you know, I'm just—"

"You nearly died during your battle with the demon lord!" Recilia snapped, marching over and grabbing me by the arm. She wrenched me sideways, pulling me straight out of my chair. "What happened to spending the day resting, like you promised me?!"

"What are you, my mom?" I asked drily.

“No, I’m your sister.”

I sighed, then raised my hands in surrender. It was clear she wasn’t letting go of me anytime soon. “All right, all right,” I soothed her. “I’ll spend today resting. But first there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

I picked up my notebook and tried to hand it to Recilia. “This contains every last bit of information I could remember about *BB* as a game. At the moment, I don’t intend to spread around what I know, but I’ve written it down in such a way that anyone can understand it, even if they don’t have the background context of who I am.”

The notebook was the crystallization of all of my knowledge and gaming skill. Originally, I hadn’t planned on showing it to anyone, not even Recilia. But, after nearly dying earlier today, I’d had a change of heart. This world wouldn’t stop if something bad happened to me—it’d keep on going. Recilia, Radd, Mana, Nyuuk, and Prana’s lives would continue. It’d made me start to wonder if there was something I could leave behind to make their lives any easier. The notebook had been the only thing that came to mind.

“Everything I know is written down here,” I explained. “So if, for whatever reason, something happens to me, Recilia, I want you to—”

“No,” Recilia snapped, cutting me off.

I looked over at her in surprise.

Seeing my confusion, she said firmly, “Sorry, but I won’t do it. If something happens to you, I’ll burn that notebook to ashes and make sure no one can ever restore it no matter what magic they use.”

“But... But *why*...?” I asked, shrinking back.

Recilia looked me right in the eyes as she said, “Everything changed the day Ars was attacked. I lost my father, my mother, my friends, Rex...*everyone*.”

“Recilia…” My heart ached.

Until now, she’d kept her innermost thoughts hidden from me, but it seemed she was finally letting me see a glimpse of the pain that lay behind her walls.

“So, I’m begging you, brother...” Recilia grip tightened on my arm to the point that it hurt. She looked imploringly up at me, her eyes brimming with desperation. “Please don’t leave me all alone.”

There was no way I could say no to a statement like that.

Overwhelmed, I averted my gaze and muttered, “I guess I have to get a lot stronger, then.”

Recilia blinked in confusion, but then a moment later the meaning of my words sunk in. “You better!” she replied with a smile.

Maaan, I thought with a grimace. *I definitely can’t die now. Not that I was planning on dying to begin with, but...*

I was really going to have to start taking the whole “getting stronger” thing more seriously, for Recilia’s sake as well as my own. The only reason I’d managed to defeat Demon Lord Bring was because I’d just so happened to have a huge stockpile of the one item that was super effective against him. I’d been lucky, plain and simple.

The whole fight had just reminded me once again how helpless Rex was against *BB’s* top tier threats, and how much of an advantage the true protagonist had over all the other characters in the game.

If I want to survive in this world, I’ve gotta move forward differently than how I did when playing the game, I reminded myself. *I need to grow stronger, and gather even stronger allies than I was able to find when I was playing as the true protagonist. Otherwise, something’s going to kill me, and sooner rather than later.*

Renewing my resolve, I turned back to face Recilia. “Listen up,” I told her. “You might not want to hear this, but my—or rather Rex’s—stat spread is utter garbage.”

“I suspected as much.”

“Wait, you knew?!” I shouted.

I honestly hadn’t been expecting that response from her. I’d been doing my best to hide how weak I was, as I hadn’t wanted my inferiority complex show.

Recilia rolled her eyes. “You wear your heart on your sleeve, brother. Besides, considering your equipment and abilities, I always thought it was strange you weren’t stronger.”

“I-I see…”

So I didn’t hide it very well after all... At least Recilia is the one who caught on, and not Radd and the others.

“Well, I can’t deny that I was pretty jealous of you guys,” I admitted at last.

I didn’t have Radd’s stable but high growth rates, Mana’s hidden talents, or Prana’s hyper-specialized stats. Indeed, most of my growth rates were utter garbage, and my one good one—which was only good because the developer’s had wanted to keep my growth rates perfectly even—was Intelligence. And even that was lower than Nyuuk or Mana’s growth rates in the same stat.

However, recently I’d started looking at things in a different light. I’d had no other choice, really, since...

“In the end, I’ve got absolutely nothing going for me!”

Recilia gave me an exasperated look. “You just wanted an excuse to say that line, didn’t you?”

“N-No,” I stammered in reply, waving my hands in denial. “Anyway, what’s important is where I go from here.” I pointed at the notebook on my desk. “As I am now, I won’t be able to keep up with your guys’ stats, and I’ll be basically useless in fights. But there’s one way I can fix my stat problems. A respec.”

It was the only possibility left for me, and happily enough, Rex was an ideal candidate. Since he had perfectly average stats across the board, I could transform him into just about anything and he would fit in perfectly—he could be a Swordsman, a Thief, a Priest, or even a Mage. But, considering his innate growth rates, I thought there was one obviously superior choice.

“I’m planning on completely revamping Rex’s fighting style,” I told Recilia. “If I can get that respec, I’ll turn him into a Mage.”

Recilia gave me a surprised look.

I shrugged. “In a way, I’m more Nyuuk’s mentor than I am Radd’s. Actually, I

guess Nyuuk will be *my* mentor, since I'll be becoming a Mage after him."

My tone was half joking, since I was trying to lighten the blow to Recilia. I imagined my news might be a bit of a shock, since a magician-type class was the complete opposite to the all-rounded, close combat fighter she'd probably imagined her brother to be. It was possible she'd have a hard time accepting my choice, but even if she disapproved, I had no intention of compromising when it came to optimizing my own build.

Recilia closed her eyes and said nothing for a few minutes. Finally, she opened them again and gave me a small smile. "I think that's a very fitting choice for you, brother."

I relaxed, happy to have her blessing. I felt like I'd received forgiveness in advance for all the choices I was planning on making in the future. Still, even with her approval, that didn't mean I could just do the respec right away.

"Now that we've gotten that out of the way," I said, "We've got to start planning on how we're going to go about getting the respec. It won't be easy."

I'd spoken about it so casually so far that Recilia probably figured it was going to be no big deal, but the truth was, it was actually extremely difficult to successfully use the one respec that existed in BB.

"Basically, in order to access the respec, you have to trigger an event called the Trial of Souls. The event only happens once, and only at a very specific time. Also, it's super fucking difficult to clear."

"It's *that* hard?"

"Yep," I said with a nod.

The Trials of Souls was a completely optional event, meaning that you didn't need to complete it in order to beat the main story of the game. It revolved around the Prince of Light, who'd gotten caught in a trap—the player's job was to save him. However, even if you didn't go to his aid, he'd eventually escape all on his own.

The whole series of events had very little to do with the main story, which was probably why the developers had thought it would be fine to make it super difficult. It *was* optional, after all.

“Part of what makes it so hard to clear,” I continued, “is that I can only bring one other person with me for the bulk of the event. Not to mention, we’ll need to beat a level 50 boss while under a heavy stat debuff.”

“That *is* quite difficult…”

The boss in question was of course much, much harder than the Huge Rainbow Slime Radd and the others had just beaten. In fact, it was even stronger than the doom demon I’d fought outside Freelea, since that particular monster had had its stats lowered due to the fight being a scripted event.

“Frankly, I don’t think I’ll be of any use during the event,” I told Recilia. “I’ll need an extremely strong ally who is willing to risk their life in order for me to successfully clear it.”

Look, I knew I was asking for a lot, and not even just in terms of strength alone. Even if a strong enough person agreed to come with me, they wouldn’t have all the knowledge of *BB* that I had. If I started spouting off orders based on game knowledge to them, they’d have no way of understanding what I was saying. To tell the truth, that was precisely why I’d decided to start training Radd, Nyuuk, Prana, and Mana. Surely, at least one of them would feel indebted enough to me to help me out with the trial once I’d personally trained them up into a super strong adventurer.

To be clear, I realized I was being quite selfish. If someone told me I was still looking at this world as a game and treating people like NPCs, I wouldn’t be able to fully deny it.

Recilia, however, didn’t seem to have any issues with my methods. She just laughed and said, “You should probably go ahead and tell Radd and the others about this trial then.”

“Huh?” I said blankly.

I’d expected Recilia to scold me for thinking of others as disposable tools, but it seemed that lecture was not going to be forthcoming. I stared blankly at her as she turned on her heel, heading toward the exit to my room.

“I’ll be heading out for now,” she called over her shoulder. “I feel like swinging my sword around for a bit.”

B-But the sun is starting to set...

Seeming unperturbed by the coming darkness, Recilia opened my door and strode out into the hall. “Oh, but you *better* stay here and rest,” she said firmly, almost threateningly. “I’ll come back and check up on you once I’m done with my training, so if you’re still—”

“I’ll sleep! I’ll go to sleep, I promise!”

“Glad to hear it. Good night, brother.”

With that, Recilia closed the door and disappeared from sight. I waited until I heard her footsteps fade away, then let out a long sigh.

Radd, Prana, Mana, and Nyuuk were good kids—I *knew* that. To be honest, I was starting to get quite attached to them. But...

“That’s precisely why I can’t tell them about this!” I muttered under my breath. “I’m not sure I can even go through with recruiting one of them for the trial…”

You see, while I hadn’t lied to Recilia, I hadn’t told her everything, either. What was best for me wouldn’t necessarily be best for everyone else. I knew Recilia well enough at this point that I was pretty sure that if I’d told her the full details of the trial, she would’ve almost certainly refused to let me take it. As for Radd and the others, they’d never agree to help.

“The question is, who should I choose?” I said softly. “Or...maybe I should give up on the respec after all?”

I glanced down at my notebook again. The page it was open to had a number of details written down about the trial.

【How to Respec Your Stats During the Trial of Souls】

A set amount of time after *Braves and Blades* begins, there is an event that occurs that involves the disappearance of the Prince of Light. The chain of happenings which follow his disappearance eventually leads to the Trial of Souls. The trial isn’t supposed to be an event that revolves around respeccing a character’s stats, but you can use a quirk of how they function to do so. This is a one-time event.

The biggest advantage to respeccing a character is to fix stats that you messed up leveling. However, there are still advantages to respeccing a character that you’ve been leveling up as

efficiently as possible, since you should have access to better equipment and classes at the point of the game when the trials begin then you have in the beginning portions.

The Trial of Souls is essentially a one-time boost for the protagonist, as it only happens once, the player is one of the required characters for the event. However, although the boost is significant, the event is extremely complicated to complete, as well as devilishly difficult. Not only are the fights hard, but you have to win using only two people, as well as defeat a level 50 boss while under severe restrictions.

This feat is almost impossible to complete in a normal playthrough. If you want to beat the trials, you have to plan to do so from nearly the very start of your run, and focus on strengthening yourself and the party member you will be bringing as much as possible at the expense of everything else. This can cause issues with the leveling of your main party, as the person you plan on bringing with you should be a non-party member. Ideally, they should be someone who's just strong enough to clear the trial with you, but won't be very useful later on in the game.

You see, the quirk of the game you use to respec isn't *truly* a respec. Instead, you transfer one character's stats to another's. If you use the quirk to raise your own stats, you will lower the stat of your party member significantly.

In other words, you needed to pick out the perfect sacrifice to take with you into the trial. That was why I was waffling so hard about whether or not to go through with the event.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Usber here.

You all have probably figured this out by now, but I am a HUGE fan of video games! Not just playing them either—I love making games, and thinking up settings for them as well! To tell you the truth, I even put writing on the backburner for three years so that I could make a freeware game. Basically, what I'm trying to say here is that I spent *a lot* of time coming up with the setting for *Braves and Blades*. I combined all the elements of the games I like to play with the elements of the kinds of games I want to make, and *BB* was the final result. Everything I love about games is in there somewhere.

However...after actually developing a game myself, I've come to realize that the kind of games I want to play and the kind of games I want to make aren't exactly alike. There are plenty of similarities, of course, but I've found there's quite a few fundamental differences as well.

To give one specific example, as a player I always want to make things easier for myself. Yet, as a creator, I'm constantly thinking about how to make my players suffer. It'd drive me nuts if players were able to beat my game without really having to try. That means that even while my creator brain is focused on making a game play as smoothly as possible, I'm still driven to make things difficult enough that players have to do a bunch of trial and error before they manage to figure out a solution. Maybe there are some game dev saints out there who don't think about things the same way I do, but at the end of the day, that's just how I am.

I try and strike a good balance between the two sides of my mind when I'm making a game, but I know my creator side always ends up coming out a lot more strongly than the player side. For example, when I'm working on a level, and the creator side of me is saying, "You should stick instant-kill traps everywhere so players are constantly stumbling into game overs!" while the player side of me is saying, "You know, if you make things easier for the player here, they'll get a huge morale boost from making it past this stretch and making it safely to the next town," the creator side is always going to win. As a

result, I always end up making riddles that have too few hints, and creating stages that don't change much even though I know players will have to go through them multiple times in order to reach a good ending. In the end, that's how it should be—I'm a game dev, after all, not a player.

When I created the setting of *Braves and Blades* I poured all these tendencies of mine into it as well. That's how Rex ended up facing the impossible mission of clearing all twelve Ruins of Darkness in an absurdly short time limit. There are plenty of nasty traps awaiting him as well, but fear not, there is hope! You see, being the player in a novel about a video game has one advantage against being one in an actual video game—authorial omniscience! In other words, writing *I'm Not the Hero!* is practically the same as me making a video of my characters playing through a game I created—while the setting may be filled with my malice as a game dev, my urges to make a player's life easier are what define the novel.

This is why Rex, a character who's armed with an encyclopedic amount of knowledge of *Braves and Blades*, is the novel's main character! He's our only hope for making it through the harsh world of *BB* unscathed. As the one playing the game, he carries on his shoulders the hopes and expectations of all you readers. That's actually why I decided on the title that I did—Rex isn't the novel's protagonist, he's the messiah who will save this work from the author's evil machinations!

Anyway, with that I'd like to segue into the acknowledgements. First off, I'd like to thank my editor, Fta-san, who's been working with me since my past serialization, as well as my new editor, Ykuchi-san! I'm terribly sorry I didn't finish this afterword by the deadline, and I hope you two won't abandon me! I'd also like to thank my illustrator, Amano-san, for turning my half-assed character descriptions into proper character designs. The image of Mana gushing over Rex is just absolutely perfect. A big thanks to my designer, Kiba-san, as well. The layout for the chapter titles and stat windows came out really well! And of course a huge thank you to my proofreader for fixing my many, *many* typos.

There are many other people who helped make this book a reality, and while I don't have the space to name them all, I'd like them to know that I'm truly grateful to each and every one of them! Last but not least, I'm especially

grateful to all of my readers out there! Let us meet again in the next volume!