



Redefining the **META** at
VRMMO Academy 3

Story: Hayaken
Illustration: Hika Akita



"MY, IF THIS ISN'T A
LIVELY SHOP."

NPC
ANITA

"YOUR HI—I MEAN, MILADY, YOU
SHOULD AVOID LETTING STRANGERS
HEAR YOUR VOICE!"

THE VISITORS WEREN'T PLAYERS;
INSTEAD, THEY WERE TWO NPCs.

NPC
LILY



"I'LL HANDLE THIS.
SWORD SAMBA!"

"HAAAAH!!"

THE TWO SWORD DANCER
BEAUTIES REVEAL THEIR
MAGNIFICENT TEAMWORK!



"BUT THAT WASN'T NICE! THAT WAS
OUTRIGHT BULLYING! HOW RUDE!"

"I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY THEY'RE
MAD, BAWK. IT'S ALL MY FAULT. WHY
WAS I EVEN CHOSEN AS A HERO
CANDIDATE?"

REN AND AKIRA SAVE A CHICKEN
BIRDMAN NAMED KOKORU. BUT
COULD HE BE THE NEWEST SOURCE
OF META REDEFINITION?!

KOKORU SANDERS

LEVEL 1

RACE BIRDMAN (CHICKEN)

Redefining the **META** at
VRMMIO Academy
VOL.3

Original Story by Hayaken
Illustrations by Hika Akita



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REDEFINING THE META AT VRMMO ACADEMY VOLUME 3

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First published in Japan in 2018 by HOBBY JAPAN CO., LTD.
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Sol Press, LLC.
11358 Knott St.
Garden Grove, CA 92841
www.solpress.co

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First Printing, September 2020
ISBNs: 978-1-948838-48-1 (paperback)
978-1-948838-49-8 (ebook)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in Korea

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Chapter 1: Akabane's Big Brother

Three days after the grand opening of our guild shop, we were still attracting plenty of customers and making steady sales. This was, of course, thanks to the ultra-rare, beautifully decorated items we made with Libra's Brush.

Our products were pretty cheap, in all honesty. They had to be, seeing as my crafting skill was so low. Nevertheless, they were selling like hotcakes.

This was redefinition of a different kind!

Even the most plain and boring items could sell well if they were spruced up a little. Though it certainly helped that Yano, our resident designer, had such good taste.

Being the first to move in on the market was definitely advantageous. So long as we had the only Libra's Brush in the world, our monopoly would provide a good source of income.

Seize the day and wring out every last drop of gold you can, I say! Once you've got your gold, load it all into the drama cannon and let loose! What a meaningful use of cash!

"Hello. May I come in?"

Akabane had come to visit. As usual, Kataoka was orbiting her.

The two of them had stopped by the shop every day since it opened. Akabane was clearly trying her best, but she and Akira were still far from greeting each other with a smile.

"Oh, welcome."

Whew, at least Akira didn't let out a groan this time. Maybe she's getting used to it after all these visits? I mean, she was still grumbly about them just yesterday.

"Hmph. I see you've finally learned basic manners." Akabane looked somewhat content.

"Yeah, well, I think I'm just used to seeing you by now." Clearly, Akira hadn't

let her guard down just yet.

Maybe I ought to provide some covering fire here, I thought.

“Yo, Akira.”

“Hm? What’s up, Ren?”

“You might wanna be a little nicer to her, like how you are with everyone else, y’know? Akabane’s been coming here every day just to open up to you.”

My bluntness had the impact of a lightning strike.

“Whaaat?!” Akira cried.

“Wh-What did you just say?! I cannot *believe* the nonsense coming out of your mouth!”

The two of them were shocked to the core.

“N-Now, now! Surely you must be mistaken; I would never do something so pitiful!”

Forget Akira, what’s with Akabane’s reaction?

Her face was cherry red as she vigorously waved her hands in denial.

What a stubborn girl. She could have just said something like “you’re free to think what you want” and left it at that.

“Oh dear! I just remembered that I have errands to attend to, so I’ve got to go! We’re leaving, Kataoka!”

Running away, eh? Maybe it was too much for Akabane to handle. Was it just a minor error? Did I pitch too straight? Providing covering fire for her is just too difficult.

Just as Akabane was heading to the shop’s exit, the door was opened from the outside, revealing a single customer.

“Coming through.”

I couldn’t help but blurt out, “The heck?!”

If I had to describe this guy in one word, it would definitely be “perv.”

He wore a well-polished iron mask that covered his entire face, concealing his

expressions from the outside world. A small, crimson scarf was looped around his neck, and his nether regions were tightly hugged by swim briefs of the same color.

That was it. The rest of him was full-on nude. That being said, he had a firm, well-toned bod.

Isn't this the same perv who was wandering around in my peripheral vision a while back?! So I wasn't just seeing things! He was real! What's this guy's deal, though?!

Actually, in most online games, there are plenty of people out there who like to wear the weirder outfits. They're just very *particular* about their choices.

Still, I never imagined a guy like this would show up in a VRMMO, where you literally are your character!

Now, his appearance was a shock to be sure. But even more horrifying was...

"Brother!"

...the word that left Akabane's lips as soon as she saw him.

"SAY WHAT?!"

"NO WAAAY!"

Ryuutarou Akabane (3-A)

Level 208 Sword Dancer

Guild: True Form (Guild Master)

Akabane?! Could that seriously be Akabane's brother?! Also, how is this wacko at an even higher level than Yukino?! And hey, I've never seen a male sword dancer before!

"Hey, sis. I rushed over to check out the painted items you told me about."

"My, so that's why you're here. I have a feeling you'll love them."

"Hrm. All right, you there. Get me something good straightaway."

"Huh? Um... Okay, come on in! Akira, you watch the shop."

Akira was frozen in place, and I couldn't let this guy scare away our other

customers. Thus, I decided to move him to the back of the store and out of sight!

Once we reached the atelier, I pulled up a chair for him. However...

I've gotta bring it up sooner or later, right? Guess I might as well ask.

"So, uh, what's with the getup?"

"Heh. You may not have guessed it, but I'm an exhibitionist."

"Gee, I never saw *that* coming! It's pretty obvious, wouldn't you say? How do you think people see you, anyway?!"

"Hmph. But wait, I say. Is it not right for gamers to enjoy games on their own terms, unaffected by others? That's what I believe."

"Still, you might want to change it up sometimes..."

Pervs like him would get arrested lightning-fast in real life.

"But wait, I say. Hear me out. You may not have guessed it, but I am an exhibitionist..."

"You just said that! We're going in circles!"

The only thing I've even learned about him is that he's an exhibitionist! Twice, at that! Did he repeat it because it's just that important, even though it's plain for all to see?!



“But wait, I say. Exhibitionists may be arrested in real life, but we have extraterritorial rights in video games. Thus, I am expressing myself to my heart’s content in this safe space. Walking around with my body exposed in such a realistic environment gives me nearly the same thrill as it would in the real world. I can only conclude that the creators of this game sympathize with sinners and outcasts such as myself! What a beautiful world! I dare call it utopia!”

He stood proudly, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

Man, he’s disgusting! This guy is bound to commit a crime in the future! Is the Akabane family going to survive this?! They’re like, celebrities or high-class politicians or something, right?!

Argh, can’t we make a law to round up all the pervs in this VRMMO and give ’em a smackdown?! Something needs to be done about this guy, and fast!

“So basically, you came to this school and got into the game just so you could get your fill of your fetish?”

“But wait, I say. That’s one of my reasons, yes. The other is that Red Phaser Software, a company affiliated with the Akabane family, is involved in the development of Unlimited World. My enrollment in this academy serves as a means of advertising and increases the school’s prestige. I am deeply interested in the academy’s groundbreaking endeavors, so I am glad to be a part of it.”

Red Phaser Software?! That’s a really famous developer! I guess the Akabanes really are celebrities. But... “advertising”? By running around naked, you mean?!

My heart went out to the good people at Red Phaser. Imagine being told that you had to let this insane pervert, of all people, advertise for you. It wouldn’t be a surprise to know he was making things worse.

Wow. This guy’s got so many problems, I don’t even know where to begin.

“Huh. Is your sister doing something similar, then?”

“Hah! But wait, I say. My pride as a brother prevents me from using my precious little sister for politics. I knew that she wanted to be friends with the Aoyagi girl... though she’s proud and earnest to a fault, so she would never

admit it. I advised her to enroll in this school because it would be fun—merely a pretense to hide her true intentions, of course.”

It was really hard to take this masked pervert seriously.

“Actually, I heard about you from my sister. I must thank you for being so kind to her.” He bowed his head to me in thanks.

“Uh, no problem.”

I genuinely had no idea how to handle this guy.

He’s much more straightforward and sincere than I expected. Gotta say, though, it pains me a little to compliment somebody who looks like... this.

“Also, congratulations on your victory in the Spring Newbie Spotlight. Your fighting was brilliant.”

“Th-Thanks. By the way, uh, sorry to change the subject again, but... why the iron mask?”

“But wait, I say. Everyone is more than happy to expose their faces, are they not?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“Then I have no need to join in such an artless display. In fact, it would only hinder me.”

In other words, he was just wearing it because he wanted to.

I don’t get this guy, and I probably never will.

Just then, Yano and Maeda descended from the second floor. When they spotted the masked man in his skivvies, they screamed bloody murder.

“Eeeeeek! There’s a pervert on the loose! K-Kotomi, do something about him!”

“What?! Me? I can’t stand weirdos like him either!”

Surprisingly, Yano seemed even less equipped to handle the situation; she was cowering helplessly behind Maeda.

Yano might be bold when it comes to her looks and attitude, but man, one glance at that bulge has her shaking in her boots. Maybe she’s purer than I

thought?

“Don’t mind me, ladies!”

Our exhibitionist guest was oozing with delight, drinking up their reactions. He clearly got his kicks from grossing out other people.

Yep, that’s a natural-born pervert for you.

Incidentally, when I’d seen this guy back at the third-year classroom, Homura must’ve also seen him but just ignored him. After three years of it, she was probably desensitized.

Meanwhile, Maeda’s and Yano’s reactions were fresh and invigorating.

You gotta wonder if exhibitionists are the way they are just because their presence causes a panic.

“Oh god, he talked! No, no, no! I hate this! Kotomi, I need you to get him the heck outta here right now!”

“Still, I can’t just...!”

“Heh.”

Listen to that perverse laugh. He’s having the time of his life.

“It’ll be okay, you two,” I said, giving Yano and Maeda a nod. “I’m here.”

Yeah, right! Even I don’t know if things are gonna be okay!

“Oh, hello, Takashiro!”

“Whew . Good to hear... Wait a sec! Takashiro, *you* brought him in here?”

The impact of this monstrous, masked nudist was apparently so strong that they hadn’t even seen me at first. Not that I could blame them.

“Well, he’s a customer. I think. Speaking of, what was it that you wanted?”

“But wait, I say. My sister tells me you perform a nail-painting service here. If that’s true, then surely you can paint something on my body. I would love the opportunity to be your canvas.”

“Your body? Hmm, so like a big tattoo?”

“Yes, if you prefer to see it that way.”

“Thoughts, Yano? We can probably do it, right?”

Last time I checked, we were able to draw art on people’s hands and the like using Libra’s Brush. Yano had the most experience with it, so I deferred to her.

“I think so. But I’m not touching that guy. Takashiro, you should do it!”

She really didn’t want to get near him; she was just that disgusted. Little did she know, that only made him all the happier.

“Sure, I’m okay with that.” I turned toward our peculiar customer. “So, what design would you like?”

“But wait, I say. I desire a single, gorgeous rose to be placed on my chest.”

“A rose, huh? Yep, that we can do. About how big do you want it?”

“The size of a fist, perhaps.”

“Let’s see here... All right, how about we do a test run? I’ll paint one on you, and then we can adjust its size and position however you like.”

“Please and thank you.”

A little while later...

“Oho. But wait, I say. This is splendid work!”

The pervert stood in front of a full-length mirror in our atelier and struck a pose. He straightened his spine and crossed his arms, cocking his head to one side. The crimson rose on his chest peeked out just above his forearms.

It was a pretty radical pose, like a cool robot from a cartoon would make after saving the day. But when he did it, it was just bizarre. A blasphemy against cool poses and any who would perform them.

“Uh, yeah. Looks good to me.”

“I am wholly satisfied. Now, what do I owe you?”

“Oh, right. We didn’t have to make a new design for it, so the only fee is for the paint itself. That comes out to... five thousand Mila.”

“But wait, I say. A reasonable price indeed,” he said, handing over the payment.

“Thank you for your business... sir.”

“Well then, I shall take my leave. I appreciate your continued kindness toward my sister.”

“Uh, could I actually have you exit this way?”

I pointed at the back door, which led directly outside from the atelier. If he went through the sales floor, he’d disgust all of our poor customers. I preferred to keep him out of sight.

“But wait, I say. I shall head this way, then. Farewell!”

Phew! He’s finally gone. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“Did he say ‘sister’?” Maeda asked.

“There’s another one of his kind?” Yano added.

“No, his sister is actually Nozomi Akabane. They’re not a family of masked nudists, don’t worry.”

“What?!”

“Huh?! That weirdo is related to such a beautiful girl? No waaay!”

“You both missed his name, huh? I guess that makes sense since the rest of him was way too distracting. If you see him again, take a look for yourselves.”

“Wow, though. Poor girl has to deal with having *that* for a brother.” Yano let out a whistle.

“I would despise having an older brother like him!” Maeda said.

“Akabane clearly has her share of troubles.”

Followed around by a Hime-chan-loving nerd *and* cursed with a mega-pervert brother. I had to wonder how she felt about it.

Is she still in the store? I’ll head back and take a look.

Chapter 2: A Hidden Quest for the Hip and Trendy Guild Shop

“We’re back!”

The three of us returned from the atelier to the sales floor. Akabane and Kataoka were nowhere to be seen.

Maybe they left?

I walked up to Akira, who was running the shop. “Where’d Akabane and Kataoka go?”

“They left a while ago.”

Huh. I really wanted to ask Akabane about the people around her. Maybe next time, though. I’m sure she’ll come and visit Akira again.

“Hey, Akira. Have you ever met that guy in real life?”

“Hmm... Yeah, a few times. I think I’d rather not talk about it.” Her face became visibly pale.

Wanting to respect her wishes, I decided to change the subject.

“Really, though, this school attracts all kinds of people,” Maeda said with a sigh.

Yano nodded. “You can say that again. Those twins from the duel tournament were PvP and item lovers, right? Older students have definitely carved their own niches.”

“Well, after playing for three years, your playstyle has pretty much solidified. Then you can go ahead and do your own thing,” I said.

Akira made a face. “Feels kinda wrong to compare Yukino and Homura to Ryuutarou, though.”

“Ryuutarou?” Maeda asked.

“That’s the name of the masked nudist guy.”

“Oh, I didn’t know his real name. Not that I cared to learn it.”

Yano turned to Maeda, grinning. “I gotta say, you looked pretty cute when you were all flustered back there.”

“I was just shocked.”

Akira sighed. “Macho men are great and all, but I *definitely* don’t want screenshots of that guy.”

The guy’s presence had torn through our happy little shop like a tornado, leaving us dazed and a little dispirited.

In the midst of all this, the front door opened yet again.

Oh, customers. Time to get back into the groove and make some sales!

“Welcoome!”

Our four shouts harmonized, showing our readiness to forget that nightmare.

“My, if this isn’t a lively shop.”

The visitors weren’t players; instead, they were two NPCs.

One of them was a girl with a hood pulled down over her eyes. Based on her stature, I assumed she was fifteen or sixteen years old. Her shining silver hair flowed past the opening of the hood.

This NPC’s name was Lily.

Her companion was a tall woman who had a “traveling warrior” air about her. A lance was strapped to her back. Unlike Lily, she wasn’t wearing a hood, so her beautiful features and her curly brown hair were on display.

The second NPC, named Anita, was probably around the same age as Ms. Nakada.

“Feel free to take a look around,” Akira called out, prompting a smile from Lily.

“Okay! Gramercy, ma’am.”

“Your Hi—I mean, milady, you should avoid letting strangers hear your voice!”

“Tilly-valley! Be not a boggler! It’s been far too long long since we’ve been able to visit such a hip and trendy shop. Especially one that’s so popular!”

“Aaaah, please stop! Don’t talk anymore!”

They squabbled back and forth for some time.

What’s the deal? Is she some sort of high-class ninja or something? “Tilly-valley,” though... That’s quite the vocabulary.

When we heard it, the four of us guildies instinctively looked at each other like, *Who talks like that?*

Nevertheless, I figured an NPC this unique must be pretty important. They’d given her a personality *and* a backstory!

She must be one of those sheltered rich girls who likes to sprinkle in super old words.

Lily, humming a tune as she looked around the shop, suddenly took an interest in one of our items. She picked it up and turned toward us.

“What is this used for?”

That’s the “Don’t Bully Me” Shield I designed! Yay, she picked mine!

Akira clicked her tongue in annoyance. She and I were secretly competing to outsell one another, and she was peeved that her Macho Armor series had lost this round.

In high spirits, I said, “You’ve got quite the discerning eye! With a beautiful, teary-eyed girl in front of you, your enemies will find it harder to attack!”

“O me! You would manipulate the minds of your opponents? I am gasted by the thought!”

Say what now?

Akira shook her head when I looked at her. Yano shrugged.

“In other words, it’s pretty scary,” explained Maeda.

“I’m surprised you knew that.”

“All sorts of archaic words come up in trivia circles. You’ll hear them on game shows and the like.”

Oh, I see. That’s our top scholar for you.

“This equipment is so unique! How about it, Anita? Would this not make your life easier?”

“Please, milady! The sheer embarrassment would send my morale spiraling to rock bottom!”

“Methinks the design is rather cute, though.”

“That’s not the issue here.”

“Heigh-ho! This one looks equally delightful! I wonder what it does?”

Ooh! She’s checking out the Macho Armor!

Bursting with excitement, Akira claimed, “Faced with your rock-hard muscles, weak-willed foes will totally surrender!”

Are you kidding me? What a crock! You just drew it for fun!

Akira had blatantly copied my spiel about the “Don’t Bully Me” Shield.

Cheater! I’d like to believe mine has an actual effect, but yours is 100% worthless!

“Another attack on thine enemy’s mind?! Say, what if one were to equip both? Would the powers of light and darkness combine and make you the strongest warrior alive?”

“They just might!” Akira and I said in unison.

After all, we both wanted that cash!

“O proper stuff! Well, Anita. I would like to buy these for you as thanks for all your hard work. Try equipping them.”

“Huh?! You want me to put them on?”

“Yes. There’s even a fitting room just over there. Prithee, shopkeepers, may we use it?”

“Of course!” we both blurted, still in sync.

“Ugh...”

Downtrodden and shoulders drooping, Anita entered the fitting room.

The poor lady must go through so much.

“Th-This could be the Macho Armor’s first sale!” Akira’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

Meanwhile, I’d already sold dozens of “Don’t Bully Me” Shields—even Homura had bought one. In terms of profits, I was the clear winner so far.

While we were waiting for poor Anita to change her clothes...

BANG!

The front door opened with incredible force!

What the heck, guys? You didn’t have to rush in like that.

This time, three men stepped inside—again, all NPCs. They were covered from head to toe, not even showing their faces.

“Hi ther—”

Before I could even finish, one of the men threw something on the floor.

BOOOOOM!

An explosion rang out, and columns of smoke billowed up from the source.

“What the heck?!”

“Huh?! What’s going on?!” shouted Akira.

“I can’t see anything!” said Maeda.

“Are they burglars?!” cried Yano.

The shop filled with smoke in an instant, blocking out our sight.

“What’s going on in here?!” Anita leapt out of the fitting room. “Somebody open a window!”

I ran over to try and open one.

Amid all the commotion, I heard Lily cry, “Eek! O me, o my! I must ’scape at once!”

BANG!

There’s the door again, I thought.

“Your Highness?! Your Highness, where are you?!”

The curtain of smoke began to dissipate, allowing us to see the shop again. However, Lily was nowhere in sight.

What the hell? Did she just get kidnapped?! What's going on?!

"Oh no... This is a disaster! Milady—no, Her Highness—is gone!"

She was a princess?!

Ping! Ping!

Suddenly, a notification popped up in front of me.

Hidden Quest "Abduction of the Incognito Princess" has begun!

[Quest Summary]

Princess Lieliz of the Telluna royal family came to visit a hip, trendy, and popular new shop! However, the princess' shopping trip was interrupted when she was abducted by a mysterious band of thugs! It's your job to get her back safe and sound! If you're not careful, this could hurt your guild shop's reputation!

[Prerequisites to Unlock]

Once the initial flag for this quest has been raised, your guild shop must be the most prosperous in all of Unlimited World.

"A hidden quest?!" all four of us yelled at once.

Libra's Brush had helped make our guild shop popular enough to trigger this quest. If we hadn't used it, a different guild probably would've unlocked it instead.

This was a crazy development! Something far beyond our expectations!

"We must give chase! Fellows, may I request your aid?" Anita asked.

"Heck yeah!" I yelled, doing a fist pump. "Let's go get 'em!"

The four of us quickly closed up shop. We tagged along with Anita and ran out in pursuit of the kidnappers.

I also woke up Draco, who had been sleeping in my hood. He was now perched happily on top of my head.

“Excuse me! Did a group of men in black pass through here with a silver-haired girl in tow?!”

Anita was addressing a group of passersby.

“Over there!” one of them said, pointing.

“Thank you! Let us be off, fellows!”

“So Lily was a princess after all?” Akira asked while we were running.

Anita nodded. “Yes. Her Royal Highness Lieliz von Telluna is part of the very same family who governs the floating city of their namesake! I am her knight and bodyguard, Anita Arshes. We were both in disguise, but...”

“Those guys didn’t even hesitate when they kidnapped her.”

My observation was met with another curt nod from Anita.

“Yes. I had no idea we were being followed!”

“They must’ve been hiding and watching your every move.”

“That’s possible. However, only a select few people close to the princess knew she was here... Could there have been a traitor among us?!”

“Any idea who it might be?”

“There are so many possibilities; it’s impossible to narrow them down! Her Highness could be targeted for just about any reason. The Tellunas are the most skilled and powerful people in the world, after all.”

Just as Anita claimed, that was the basic power balance of this world.

The Telluna royal family, taking up residence in a floating city above the clouds, had not gone and conquered each and every country on the mainland. Rather, their outstanding strength and resulting influence had made them the de facto rulers of the world.

We continued to gather information along the way. After some time, we reached the port of Telluna.

But instead of going for the large, pretty-looking pier—where many large airships were coming and going—we arrived at the corner of a miserable-looking street of warehouses.

Anita accosted an NPC walking nearby, who seemed to be an employee.

“Excuse me! Did a group of men wearing black pass through here?!”

“Oh, yeah. Just a few minutes ago. They went into that alleyway between the warehouses.”

“Good, we’re close! We can make it!”

Once we entered the alley, we came face-to-face with the band of thugs with a girl’s limp body in their arms.

“There she is! We’ve found them!” Anita yelled. “Your Highness, I’m here to save you!”

The one holding the princess fled the scene while the other two stayed in place, ready to meet our charge.

Kidnapper: Level 50

Crown Icon (rare monster)

The name was a bit on the nose... Almost as if the devs didn’t care and just picked whatever.

They were being treated like rare monsters, which meant trouble for us. This *was* a hard-to-get hidden quest, though, so it kinda made sense.

“We’ll take care of them,” I said. “Anita, you go after the princess!”

“I will. You have my thanks!”

“Hear that, everyone? Let’s do this!”

“Okay! Before we get started, lemme take some screenshots of these guys as a keepsake!” Akira quickly snapped some pics with her Otherworldly Lens.

It was a relief, of course, that she was the same as ever. No weird nervousness to be seen on her part.

Maeda readied herself. “I’ve got your back, Takashiro!”

“Level fifty rares, eh? I hope we can win this,” Yano muttered.

“I’ll draw ’em in!” Well, at least Akira was confident.

“Sounds good,” I said, nodding. “Maeda, how about we try using our Joint

Magic?”

“Sure. If it works, it will certainly give us an edge... But I don’t have high hopes.”

“Maybe it won’t, but let’s try it anyway.”

My testing with Maeda had proven that Diabolic Howl didn’t work on rare monsters when added to a magic circle. Most likely, this would end the same way. This was pretty much a trial run based on what we already knew.

Regardless, our real aim was to use Dead End while Akira was distracting the enemies.

“If this works, you handle the rest!” I shouted.

“Kay, here I go! Hup, hah!”

Akira swung Skyfall twice in succession. The shockwaves it created struck the enemies, who were lined up like ducks in a row.

After enduring the blows, the kidnappers moved to attack Akira.

Anita seized the opportunity to sprint past them.

“The rest is up to you, Anita!”

Go get ‘em, girl!

Meanwhile, the four of us had to handle these guys on our own. They were almost twice our level, and they were rare monsters to boot.

Rare monsters are typically far stronger than even notable monsters (NMs) of the same level. By the way, one example of a notable monster would be the Deadly General back at Almishr’s Burial Ground.

How would we fare this time?

“Ready, Maeda?!”

“Ready!”

We grasped each other’s hands and shouted in unison.

“Joint Magic!”

As I cast Enfeebling Circle, Maeda cast her own Diabolic Howl. The dragon

head erupted from my magic circle, lunging toward the pair of kidnappers.

Ren and Kotomi activated Joint Magic!

But the Kidnapper resisted it!

Ren and Kotomi activated Joint Magic!

But the Kidnapper resisted it!

Gah, so it really won't work!

"It isn't working!"

"Then let's change to the Dead End strat! Yano, back me up!"

"Aye aye!"

I cast a large-range Enfeebling Circle, emptying my MP bar. Then, I lunged from the side at one of the kidnappers who was attacking Akira.

"Dead End!"

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,622 damage to Kidnapper!

His HP bar went down fast, but only by about 30%.

Man, they've got a ton of HP!

Yano wasted no time in stripping aggro from me.

"Guilty Steal!"

All of the aggro I'd built up from attacking transferred to Yano. As a result, Akira and Yano were both in one-on-one combat with their respective kidnappers.

However...

"Ren, this isn't looking good! This guy's really strong!"

Akira was being pressed by her foe.

The kidnapper wasn't able to hit her easily, but a single clean hit was enough to deal a ton of damage. At this rate, the recovery from her dance wouldn't be able to keep up. Before long, she would run out of AP too.

“Ouuuch! When it comes to an all-out brawl, a level difference can really screw you over!”

Yano’s losing, too. This is rough!

The enemies in this quest were just too strong.

Then again, maybe that should have been obvious. In order to unlock it, you had to make your guild shop the most popular one in the game, so newbie shops shouldn’t have even been in the running.

Under normal circumstances, this quest would’ve popped up for a stronger, more established guild, and the difficulty was higher to match that.

But that very same quest had waltzed right into our shop. We’d only hit it big because of the combined power of Libra’s Brush and Yano’s artistic talent.

In other words, we were in over our heads; this matchup was hardly fair.

However, I wasn’t ready to call it quits yet!

Low-level challenge runs are just fine with me! We’ve still got some tricks up our sleeves!

I shouted to Draco, who was floating next to me, “Draco, fly into Yano’s arms!”

“Chirp!”

As he flew off in Yano’s direction, I hurried to cast a spell.

“Enervating Circle!”

Thanks to the effect of Target Marker, the circle of light centered on Draco. Just then, he made it to Yano.

“Yano, start running! Go!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Yano turned and ran from our foes.

The Enervating Circle, centered on the dragon she was clutching to her chest, slowed enemies down. As a result, the kidnappers would be unable to catch up to her.

At this rate, she would make it out of there without a scratch!

“Akira, run side by side with Yano!”

“Yessir! Hawk Strike!”

Akira put distance between herself and the enemy with this leap, landing right next to Yano. She kept pace with Yano, staying in range of the circle.

Now we should be able to keep them from getting hurt!

Akira also had the talent Breath of Ares. Left alone, she would automatically recover AP. Yano and I continued to wait for our cooldown timers to end. Put simply, the battle would soon turn in our favor.

“Okay, girls! Keep it up! You got this!”

Akira and Yano ran laps around the area. It was like a four-man game of tag, with the two of them baiting the kidnappers to follow.

Throughout all this, Akira would occasionally slow down when the gap between them grew too wide. Each time, she would swing Skyfall, unleashing a series of shockwaves.

While the damage dealt to the enemies was not especially high, she was boosting her AP with each hit.

In fact, that was the whole point of attacking in the first place: to gain AP.

“Ren, I’m at two hundred AP now! I can use Sword Samba!”

“Nice! Come over here!”

“Okay! Sword Samba!”

Akira crouched down low as she spun in circles, then she jumped up and held her sword aloft. It was an elegant sword dance with swift, controlled movements, but Akira’s cuteness took over and made it more adorable than anything else.

I was enveloped by a magical glow that reset my skills. Now I could use my ultimate skill again! I immediately crafted a Canesword and equipped it.

“We’ll wait for Yano’s Guilty Steal to come off cooldown, then we’ll go for another!”

The reason she'd used Sword Samba on me instead of Yano was because my Turnover and Final Strike cooldowns were five minutes, while Yano's Guilty Steal took only three. It only made sense to reset the cooldowns of someone who had to wait longer.

Guilty Steal's cooldown should only have about ninety seconds left, I calculated.

We continued the marathon for some time until I shouted, "Okay, it's time! Open fire!"

"I'm ready for another Sword Samba!"

"All right! No holding back, then!"

It was time for Dead End, round two!

Smaaaash!

"Guilty Steal!"

"Sword Samba!"

"Crafting a Canesword now!"

It goes without saying that all this was happening at a rapid-fire pace.

"Here it comes!" Akira cried.

She was being a great hype man, but by this point, the whole process was just muscle memory.

"Now, for the grand finale... Dead Eeeeend!"

Smaaaaaash!

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,622 damage to Kidnapper!

Ren defeated the Kidnapper.

"All right! Nailed it!" I cheered.

Yep, the Enervating Circle marathon strat was strong indeed! I needed Draco around for it to work, but with it, we could beat down even the strongest of foes. Pet dragons could definitely put in some work!

“Let’s keep this up for the second one!”

Before we could continue, a sound rang out.

That’s the level-up tone!

Ah, yes. Normal trash mobs had a maximum EXP yield no matter how massive the level difference; that would be the normal EXP calculation, based mainly on level difference.

However, rare monsters would always give a fixed amount of bonus EXP divided among the party who defeated them. Despite his crappy name, this kidnapper was high-tier and dished out some serious EXP.

In the end, we each heard two level-up tones. Akira and I were now level 32; Maeda had reached level 33 and Yano level 35.

“We got that much experience?! That’s bonkers!” said Yano, impressed.

“Yeah, it’s great! They’re like Metal Slooms!”

Akira made a sour face. “These guys are nowhere near as cute, though.”

“Okay, time to kill the next one!” I shouted.

“Yes, sir!” the girls replied.

Thus, using the same sequence, we took down the other kidnapper. We leveled up again, putting Akira and me at level 34, Maeda at level 35, and Yano level 36. Moving on up!

“Nice! We killed it!” I was feeling pretty victorious.

“Eheheh. More! I want mooore!” Yano whined.

Akira stared at her. “Whoa. Looks like Yuuna’s broken.”

“She must really like leveling up,” Maeda said.

“There was another one, right? Right?! Let’s go beat him up before Anita can finish him!”

After giving Yano the side-eye, I replied, “Uh, yeah... Either way, we should follow them!”

We then jogged through the alleyway in pursuit of Anita.

Eventually, we found her in front of a dilapidated warehouse. She had apparently already dealt with the last kidnapper, as he was nowhere to be seen. A sad discovery for Yano.

“Anita! Where’s the princess?”

Anita stood stock-still, holding a robed figure in her arms.

“See for yourself!”

She threw the bundle to the ground. For an instant, I was shocked that she would treat her royal charge in such a way... until I saw what lay beneath the clothes.

The “princess” they’d been carrying was merely a life-sized doll.

“They’ve tricked us! This was all a diversion!”

Crap, they got us! What happens now?

Furious, Anita told us she needed to report to the king and thus returned to the castle.

We went back to our guild house and started looking for the princess all over again, but to no avail. Yet when I looked at my quest list, the hidden quest did not display as having ended in failure. This meant there was more to come.

The four of us were kicked from the game at the end of the day, but we were more than ready to resume our search tomorrow.

Chapter 3: A Cinematic Development

The next day...

“Time to pick up where we left off,” I said, letting out a big yawn.

When I logged in, I was in the guild house.

Just then, someone shouted, “Don’t move!”

I found myself surrounded by soldier NPCs, their lances pointed at me from all directions.

“Captain, we’ve found someone sneaking around!”

“What?! This is literally *my* guild house!”

A man with a beard and an ornamental suit of armor walked up to me, presumably their captain.

“I’m sorry, but His Majesty has ordered us to seize this guild house for the time being.”

“Huh?! ”

“Are you unaware of the incident that occurred here yesterday? We’ve been ordered to search this place from top to bottom for any clues we can find. Until we finish, you are not permitted inside, despite your status as guild master.”

“Aww, man!”

Looks like things are still in motion. What happened to Anita after all that?

“Frankly, you and your guild members are also under scrutiny for potential involvement. However! Out of goodwill, and because I believe the students of Legrand Academy of Magic—the most distinguished learning institution in the world—would never do such a thing, I shall turn the other way.”

“All right, then. Would you happen to know what happened to Anita?”

“Lady Anita has been imprisoned.”

“What?! ”

“Should her testimony be false, and she’s revealed to be a co-conspirator, she’ll receive a harsh punishment. In the event she was uninvolved, her failure to protect the princess remains inexcusable.”

“Mmm... I see.”

“We were originally Anita’s subordinates. Naturally, I wish to both save the princess and free Anita from her imprisonment. To that end, I must ask for your cooperation. Please, do not give us any trouble.”

“Understood. If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Guess the only thing I can do is to go to class, then.

Draco was missing, so Akira or one of the other girls must have already taken him for me.

I headed to our classroom at the academy, where I found the others already present. Draco was, of course, cradled in Maeda’s arms.

“Oh, Ren! Good morning.” Akira gave a little wave.

“Good morning, Takashiro. I brought Draco here with me.”

Yano looked over at me. “Yo. Did you get chased out of the guild house too, Takashiro?”

“Hey, girls. Thanks for bringing Draco along. And yeah, I got kicked out.”

“Figures. Even the guild master gets no respect,” Akira grumbled.

Maeda sighed. “As long as they’re occupying the guild house, we can’t open up shop either.”

“How long do you think they’ll be there?” Akira asked.

Yano offered a shrug. “I dunno, but they said Anita’s been imprisoned. If we ignore that, I feel like things are gonna get worse.”

“For sure,” I said. “The quest isn’t marked as failed yet, but we don’t know when it could be.”

“So it falls to us to find the princess, then?” Maeda deduced.

“Seems like it.”

Scratching her head, Yano asked, “Do we have any leads, though?”

“I took some screenshots of the bad guys yesterday.” Akira breezed through her collection and picked out one image in particular.

The picture showed a man in black holding a shortsword—indeed, it was an image of one of the kidnappers.

“Maybe if we take this to an information broker, we might be able to learn something?”

“Ooh, good idea, Kotomi! I’ve got butterflies in my stomach thinking about *my* screenshots helping with an investigation!”

“We could also see if Anita herself knows something about it.”

“That could work too, Yano. I say we try both angles. Once class ends, we’ll start off by checking on the guild house. After that, we’ll stop by the information broker and then go see Anita. How’s that sound?”

“Works for me, Ren!”

“Same here.”

“Ditto!”

All right. Time to wait for school to end! Gotta pay attention in class, though. Those Merit Points are precious!

Once we were released from school, we headed straight for the guild house as planned. However, the captain and his cohorts still showed no signs of leaving.

Is this supposed to last until we finish the quest or something?

With no other choice, we hung a sign on the door stating that the shop would be closed for a while.

“What a shame. Anyway, off to the information broker.”

At that moment, a player came to speak to us.

“My, are you closed for the day?”

“Hm?”

“Oh, it’s Nozomi.”

Our visitor was none other than Akabane. Of course, she was not without Kataoka, who was stuck to her like a remora.

I figured she was here to try to improve her relationship with Akira yet again.

Sorry, gal. We have no idea when we’ll be able to open again.

Just then, I was struck with an epiphany! I could practically feel the light bulb shining over my head.

“Actually, we’ve just started a quest related to our guild shop. Until we finish it, our guild house is going to be occupied, so we won’t be able to open.”

“Hmm. Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“On that note, if you have time, would you like to join us on our quest?”

“Whaaaat?!” Akira and Akabane shouted at once.

If we joined forces to finish this quest, then the cold wall between them would thaw even faster! Plus, it would make us stronger. Was this not a perfect, win-win proposal?!

Maeda, Yano, and Kataoka were just watching things develop from the sidelines. Nobody seemed especially against it.

“C’mon, Akabane. You want us to reopen our guild shop soon, right?”

I made up an excuse to pump up my proposal in order to make it easier for her. Her true desire, of course, was to quest with Akira! Or so I thought, anyway.

Nevertheless, Akabane would never be able to say such a thing outright. If I hadn’t thrown her a bone, she would’ve tried to escape. I recognized the value of giving someone an easy excuse!

Now, strike an exasperated pose despite your inner joy and come with us!

“Hmph! If you insist, I suppose I’ll lend you a hand. Not that I want to, of course; I’m only doing it because this is an emergency.”

Hook, line, and sinker! That line was so classic, though. What an obstinate girl.

It was kind of cute to see this unfold, considering I knew her true feelings.

I leaned closer to Akira and whispered, “I know you two are like rivals or whatever, but rivals can make the best allies, y’know? Just picture her in a white trench coat, lending you her Brown-Eyes White Dragon!”

Akira chuckled at my example. Nailed it!

“Hahaha, maybe. I’ll leave it up to you. A guild member has to listen to her guild master, right?”

With that, Akabane and Kataoka boosted our party to six people. In Unlimited World, this was the maximum party size.

Come to think of it, this is probably our first time having a full party.

“All right. We’re relying on you two!”

“Glad to be of service.”

“You got it, dude!”

Kataoka seems awfully eager about this. What’s gotten into him?

My wonder only lasted a moment, however, as he muttered something into my ear.

“Woow, we’re drowning in Hime-chans! They smell so sweet, too!”

No, they don’t! This is a video game!

Food and other items had simulated scents, but there was no way someone could pick up on another person’s smell. This guy was getting all excited over stuff he’d made up.

Man, he’s freaking me out a little!

“Make sure you keep your head in the game, Kataoka.”

“I know, I know!”

“You sure? Uh, anyway, there’s actually something I want to ask you.”

Despite his bizarre nature, he was a member of an information broker guild known as Fountain of Knowledge. Apparently, he had joined just so he could

learn more stuff to aid his Hime-chan.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Akira, show him the pic.”

“Okay.” Akira displayed the screenshot we’d all taken a look at earlier.

“Would you happen to know anything about these guys or who they’re with?”

“Huh. Who’s that?”

“He’s an enemy from our guild shop quest. We fought a couple of them yesterday.”

I gave him the long and short of the quest summary.

Akabane offered her thoughts. “A hidden quest? I’ve heard of those. I suppose that’s why there’s been an increase in soldier NPCs in the city.”

“Hidden quests involving guild shops do happen once in a while. They come with some slight variations each time, but this is the first I’ve ever heard of one featuring a kidnapped princess.”

I would hope she wasn’t getting abducted every single time. That would just shatter the players’ suspension of disbelief and make it feel totally contrived.

This game’s world is essentially alive. The NPCs, with their own wants and needs, are autonomously creating the history of the world... or so it might seem to the inexperienced eye. That much is proof of the incredible game design.

Meanwhile, players’ actions and decisions actually influence the progression of the world at large. The super-high-quality event generator is no simple decision tree; it’s a veritable storyteller capable of moving and shaking the dynamic world!

At least, that’s what the school told us. As for me, I didn’t care about the little details as long as I got to enjoy a good game!

“I was wondering if this could be a useful clue to help us find Princess Lieliz. Does anything stick out to you?”

“Hmm, can’t really tell just by looking at it. We’ll have to access the database back at my guild's shop.”

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Thus, it was time to pay a visit to Bigsmax Info Brokers!



When we arrived, we saw the shopkeeper of the day: a mustachioed male NPC.

Wow. Larger guilds really do love to use shopkeeper NPCs. We'd better get big enough to hire one!

“Welcome! Why, hello there, Kataoka.”

“Hey, Marx. There's something I wanna look up. Let me take over for a sec.”

“Sure, no problem.”

Kataoka stepped behind the counter and started operating the Dealer's Desk.

“Hmm... So this enemy was just called ‘Kidnapper’?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“Pretty lame, huh? There aren't any other enemies in the database with that name, though.”

“What about the design of this emblem on his shortsword? Could that be a lead?”

Marx, who was hovering nearby, interjected, “How about we scan this part of the emblem, upload the image data, and send it through a search?”

This guy knew his stuff! Even better than Kataoka, at that.

I wish we had a capable NPC like him.

“A'ight. Let's try it!” Kataoka typed away on the Dealer's Desk. “Hmm... Got it!”

“Oh? Did you find out some info?”

We all turned our attention to the screen on the countertop.

“Yes. Looks like this emblem is used in the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught.”

“Karanaught?”

“It’s a developing nation in Mishr. These past few years, they’ve been ceaselessly feuding with their neighboring country, Mishuria. As you know, Telluna has a strong, close-knit relationship with Mishuria. As such, though Mishuria may not have an immediately hostile relationship with Karanaught, the possibility of one developing is very real.”

I sure did appreciate Marx’s explanation.

“Then if they’re involved in all this...”

“Maybe the princess was taken to Karanaught?” Akira finished for me.

“Soldiers have been scouring every nook and cranny of Telluna. If the kidnappers were lying low around here, they would’ve been found by now. It might be better to search outside of Telluna at this point,” Marx added helpfully.

Yano smiled. “Time to make a little business trip to Karanaught, then?”

“But it’s an entire country. Where would we even start?” I asked.

“Perhaps we could use an Eye of Pegasus?” suggested Akabane.

This item is a navigational tool that allows the user to find a specific person’s location in dungeons and whatnot. It’s often used to get the party back together after they’ve been split up.

People also use it in sieges and city defense events, so you don’t necessarily *have* to use it in a dungeon.

However, there are some prerequisites before you can use it to search for someone outside of your party.

For example, you have to have been in a party together for a certain amount of time at some point, or you need an item that was once held by that character.

Additionally, it wouldn’t work if you were too far apart. At the very least, people have to be in the same dungeon or city to find each other.

“If we want that, we’ll need an item that belonged to the princess.”

We had never partied up with the princess, after all.

But if we had something of hers, we could use some Eyes of Pegasus while wandering around Karanaught and eventually find her.

“Looks like we have even more reason to go see Anita, then,” Akira said.

She was right. If anyone had anything related to the princess, it would be Anita.

“All that remains is whether we can procure the Eyes of Pegasus, then.”

“We’ve got some in our guild shop's storage room,” Kataoka told me. “They’re fifty thousand Mila each, by the way.”

“That’s a fortune!”

In the past few days, our guild shop had raked in about a million Mila.

Even so, I have a feeling we’re about to go broke!

“If we can find something that belongs to the princess, should we buy the Eyes?” I asked my other guildies.

“Yeah.”

“Yes.”

Okay, so Akira and Maeda are in.

“Money this, money that. That’s all anyone cares about,” Yano grumbled.

Well, you gotta do what you gotta do. Next stop: the royal castle!

Thus, we made our way to the castle to meet with Anita. I figured we’d be turned away at the door, but the guards surprisingly allowed us to see her.

In this game, our only real social status came from our being Legrand students. But that alone was enough to put us in the privileged class or at least make us very trustworthy in the eyes of society.

We were the cream of the crop, the elite who would one day shoulder the future of the floating city! Students the world could take pride in! Or something like that.

Once we had explained the state of things to Anita, she said, “I see. So you’ll search in my stead, then? I thank you. You should take this with you—the

princess made it herself.”

With that, Anita handed me a silver ring.

“She has some interesting taste,” I muttered.

The ring was made from expensive-looking silver, and it had a skull inset where a stone would have been. It was kinda punk rock.

I thought that princess seemed like a bit of a weirdo.

Princess’ Skull Ring (O)

Type: Accessory

Level: 1

Effect: Multiplies experience gain by three. However, stat boosts upon level-up will be divided by three.

It multiplies EXP by three?! That’s insane! But it divides your stat gains by three... If each level-up gives you three stat points, does that mean you only get one instead? What happens if you get two, then? Does it round down to zero, or up to one? Do you just end up with a three-times-weaker character at three times the speed?

What the hell? This is useless! It sucks! What is it, cursed?! I’d like to test it to see if there are any loopholes, but...

The EXP boost was an insane effect, making my disappointment all the more potent.

“As a knight charged to protect the princess, I can’t really equip this myself.”

“Figures. It just ends up making you weaker.”

“Regardless of the effects, I am grateful to have it, so I have carried it with me always. But with this, you should be able to use Eyes of Pegasus to aid in your search. If you do choose to equip it, please feel free.”

“Uh, I’ll pass on that. We’ll just borrow it for now. Thank you so much!”

With the Princess’ Skull Ring in tow, we stocked up on Eyes of Pegasus and prepared to set out for the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught.

We ended up buying ten Eyes of Pegasus for a total of 500,000 Mila. If my crafting level was higher, then I could make them myself for cheaper. I wanted to cry a little.

Our journey would be by airship. We headed to the port and boarded a vessel destined for Karanaught. Since we had never been there before, we had to go by airship for the first time.

“Woohoo!” Akira cried. “It feels so good to be on an airship!”

As usual, I could never get enough of our resident sightseeing maniac.

The clear skies and the vast sea were a bright, vivid blue. It was as if Telluna and the isles of the Lagoon were sending us off with a smile.

“Haha. You’ve always been restless when it comes to airships,” Akabane said with a smile, her voice rich with nostalgia.

“Wait, what? We’ve never ridden an airship together before!”

“Ngh!” Akabane immediately realized her mistake.

Yep, she made a little slip-up. Akabane had secretly hung out with us in Eternal Fantasy, so she already knew about Akira’s penchant for taking in the sights.

Akira, of course, was blissfully unaware of this.

“Did you have someone spy on me or something?” She glared daggers at Akabane.

Yeah, I guess her mind would go there first.

“Erm, no, I... You see...”

Girl, just tell her already!

But Akabane, weak as she was to such a direct attack, floundered for a response.

Eventually, she blurted, “Th-That was my stupid follower’s doing!”

No way! She used the old “blame the secretary” trick! What are you, a corrupt politician?! I can’t even laugh because her family is literally full of political figures!

“I’m sorry, Aoyagi! She’s right! I thought it was for the best!” Kataoka hung his head shamefully.



I had no idea how much he knew, but that was some split-second decision making. This man was a professional orbiter.

“Look, Akira. Even *he’s* apologizing, so just let it slide this time.” I decided to support them as best as I could.

“Well, I’m not gonna tell you again, so you’d better cut out that weird stalker stuff! Are we clear?!”

“Crystal. Right, Kataoka?”

“Yes, Lady Nozomi!”

“All right, it’s water under the bridge,” I said. “Now, how about we take a group photo to commemorate this?”

“Sounds great! Draco, can we get you to snap a pic for us again?” Akira’s frown turned upside-down as she handed Draco the Otherworldly Lens.

“Chichirp!”

All six of us huddled together as Draco took our photo.

“Being on an airship with you guys reminds me of the whole Skyfall thing,” Kataoka muttered.

“Huh. Yeah, that happened. I do appreciate your noble sacrifice, though.”

“No prob. As long as my actions bring even one Hime-chan happiness, then it wasn't in vain.”

“Dude, she's not a Hime-chan. Don’t lump me in with you.”

But Kataoka ignored me completely.

“Besides, it put in enough work to get her to the tournament finals.”

“Hey, speaking of... Did you get any screenshots of Akira in that Angelic Charm armor?”

“Yeah, of course I did.”

“Zip ’em up and send them to me later.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Nooo, stop! That whole fight was seriously humiliating! I want to forget all about it!” Akira flushed as red as a beet.

“That really was a heck of a shock.”

“Agreed. I wouldn’t dare wear that myself.”

Yano and Maeda were whispering to each other on the side, apparently experiencing some secondhand embarrassment.

Akabane, on the other hand, seemed unperturbed. “Is that so? If it were absolutely necessary, I would have no problem with it.”

“What?! You’d genuinely be okay with that?!”

“C’mon, Kotomi. Remember that weirdo brother of hers?”

“Oh. Yes, I see your point.”

“Huh?! N-No, you have me all wrong! I wouldn’t do it for pleasure, but if the situation called for it, then what is there to complain about? I have nothing to be ashamed of.”

She was just that confident in her figure.

“That’s Lady Nozomi for you! If I bought you one, would you wear it for me?”

“Yes, I would.”

Wowie. Maybe the complete lack of shame is hereditary?

Akira hurried to change the subject. “By the way, Ren, do you think there might be ambush events on this route too?”

“Hmm... I dunno. What about you, Kataoka?”

“Eh, it’s possible. But just like the other one, there’s a pretty slim chance of it happening.”

Just as those words left his lips, however...

“Where did you come from?! Gah, what are you doing?!”

“Waaaaagh!”

Abruptly, the NPC sailors started to scream.

We quickly turned to the source of the commotion, only to find fallen sailors surrounded by a bunch of silhouettes that resembled the kidnappers from before. The weapons they wielded also bore the same emblem of the Holy Empire of Karanaught.

Speak of the devil, right?!

Still, this ambush was a little different from the norm.

“The fact that they’re here means we’re on the right track! Let’s cut them down and keep moving forward!”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

This time, there were four foes. We had increased our party size by two, but so had they.

Last time, our enemies all had shortswords. This time around, each enemy had a different weapon: brawler’s knuckles, a sword and shield, a lance, and a staff respectively. Their fighting style would probably be completely different.

Furthermore, we were on a smaller battlefield this time. We’d have trouble using our marathon tactic on the deck of an airship.

Once again, the gang was all level 50 crown-marked, rare monsters. But this time, their names were cooler: Shadow Assassin.

Our party was as such: symbologist, sword dancer, another sword dancer, sky pirate, rogue, and scholar. Thanks to all but the rogue being Bummers, we made for a pretty eccentric gaggle of losers. How could our party defeat such powerful foes?

If Akira and Yano were to face them head-on, guard break would turn the situation from bad to worse before long. The same was true for Akabane and Kataoka as well.

We were at a disadvantage in a face-to-face confrontation, and the layout of the area made marathon-style combat next to impossible.

The only way to minimize damage and maintain the situation would be...

“Sorry, Yano. Can I borrow your Parry Ring? I can stop all of them except the staff guy.”

Gotta be polite, considering she owns the thing.

I had borrowed it for the Spring Newbie Spotlight, but I'd given it back as soon as it was over.

"Yup. Here you go!"

"Thanks! Maeda, back me up! Akira, Akabane, and Kataoka, you all gang up on the staff guy. Yano, stay close to Maeda while you attack him. If Maeda takes aggro, use Guilty Steal to cover her!"

The strategy here was to bait three of them while my allies took them down one by one! Much more dangerous than the marathon method, but this was our only choice.

The reason I was the one doing it was because of my full-on VIT investment and my Fanatic's Staff.

Good thing I stocked up on backup Fanatic's Staves.

"Looks like they're coming at us!"

Our foes had decided to make the first move. There was no more time to talk. Fanatic's Staff in hand, I took the vanguard.

"Maeda, hit me with that Revenge Blast!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Enfeebling Circle!"

I cast an Enfeebling Circle around me and waited for their charge. This was the very same tactic that I'd used in Almishr's Burial Ground.

First to attack was the assassin with the knuckle weapons. I guarded both his left and right jabs.

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Shadow Assassin was dealt 11 counterattack damage!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Shadow Assassin was dealt 11 counterattack damage!

Nice! No guard break here.

If I were to take damage from either guard break or just fudging up my guards, Maeda would have to waste time healing me instead of attacking. And if that happened, she would take aggro because of her healing, sending the enemies her way. We had Yano to take care of that with Guilty Steal if needed, but then that would just put her in a pinch.

If I had a Taunt skill, then I could try to build up aggro on my own. Unfortunately, nothing can be so easy. After all, my class was never intended to be a tank.

Without the aggro from Dead End, all I could do was to stave off enemy attacks to nullify them entirely while building up little bits of aggro with my counterattack damage.

It was gonna be tough, but nothing ventured, nothing gained!

The hardest part of all was the early stage of this fight, where I had to deal with three foes at once.

After the fist fighter came his sword-and lance-wielding friends.

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 21 damage.

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

“Ngh!”

Darn it. They’re breaking my guard, even through my Enfeebling Circle!

As lances were two-handed weapons, they had higher guard break than most

others. At this rate, Maeda would end up healing me and taking aggro.

I'd better start building up some aggro from the lance guy!

After taking in my current situation, Akira and the others set about attacking the assassin with the staff.

“Haaah!”

A slash from Skyfall sent a shockwave toward him. As it passed by the Shadow Assassins who had attacked me, it closed in on the staff-wielder in the back.

Akira and Akabane stood on either side of him, sandwiching him in.

Between their one-handed and two-handed sword attacks, their hit rate was pretty good. About 70% of their attacks were hitting their mark.

Though he had a much higher level, the staff-wielder was a back-line kinda guy, so his evasion was rather low.

Yano's gunshots also nullified evasion, so they were hitting every time.

Guns really are some of the best weapons out there.

But the one putting in the most work was none other than Kataoka.

“Scapegoat! Shadow Walk!”

The aggro-switching skill, Scapegoat, came with a damage bonus. Right after, he'd used a damage bonus and concealment skill called Shadow Walk. Stacking these together, he added in an Art that increased damage even more when attacking from behind.

“Backstab!”

With his shortsword in a reverse grip, Kataoka leapt into the air and thrust his fist at his foe.

Shinichi activated Backstab.

Dealt 1,007 damage to Shadow Assassin!

Oooh! He dealt some sick damage! Imagine landing a four-digit wallop without spending all your hard-earned cash!

Thanks to the two sword dancers in our party, Kataoka didn't have to wait

long to use Scapegoat and Shadow Walk again.

“I’ll handle this,” Akabane said. “Sword Samba!”

He attacked normally for some time to build up AP before firing off his combo again.

“Scapegoat! Shadow Walk! Backstab!”

Shinichi activated Backstab.

Dealt 1,011 damage to Shadow Assassin!

Then came Akira’s own Sword Samba.

Shinichi activated Backstab.

Dealt 1,024 damage to Shadow Assassin!

Nice! Our sword dancers’ duet made the rotation quick as a flash. As long as I could hold out, we could do this!

Meanwhile, back to my three-on-one situation.

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 24 damage.

11 counterattack damage dealt to Shadow Assassin!

This was the result of guarding against the knuckles, the sword, and the lance in that order. The damage I took was continuing to add up over time. I moved carefully so that no two blows would land at once, continuing to stave off attacks by guarding.

Still, the lancer's attacks *hurt*. He was consistently breaking my guard, leaving me with about 400 HP.

"Do you need healing, Takashiro?"

"No, not yet!"

If Maeda healed me now, she would be overcome by enemies.

The fighter and swordsman were still accumulating aggro from Revenge Blast, so even if she topped up my HP, there was a chance they'd stay locked on me. However, the lancer would almost definitely go after her.

Aggro—essentially, enemy hostility—increases the more you deal damage to enemies and decreases when they deal damage to you.

Between my counterattacks and the lancer's guard break, his guard break was winning out. In short, the aggro resulting from my counterattacks was being canceled out completely by the decrease in aggro caused by his guard break.

The only reason the lancer was even attacking me now was because he had targeted me at the start of the battle. If anyone else built up aggro, he would immediately switch targets. We had to avoid that at all costs!

To that end, I continued to wait for the perfect opportunity to grab all the aggro I could from the lancer. I had a feeling it would come soon enough.

The counterattack damage from Revenge Blast wouldn't build up AP, so the fighter and swordsman should have had 0 AP. But the lancer was building up AP from guard break, so he would have some unknown amount of AP.

Finally, the time came.

Shadow Assassin prepares to unleash Spinning Charge!

I was waiting for just that to appear in my log! Thanks to the Parry Ring I'd borrowed from Yano, my AP bar was more than ready!

"Windmill!"

Facing away from the lancer, I activated Windmill and leapt high into the air. As he activated Spinning Charge, the assassin whizzed through the spot where I'd been standing.

Windmill causes the user to jump slightly forward along with the high jump, so my jump drew an arc somewhat parallel to the lancer's Spinning Charge.

In that moment, some distance opened up between the lancer and his two allies. I was a little closer to the lancer.

Lance Arts are often some variation on a forward charge. Knowing this, I had calculated my actions to separate my foes.

I immediately began casting a magic circle.

"Enervating Circle!"

I made it pretty wide to empty my MP bar before running to the lancer.

"Maeda, I'm gonna use Dead End! Change to Equipment Set B!"

This changed my weapon to Canesword, allowing me to use Dead End!

"Dead End!"

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,622 damage to Shadow Assassin!

Immediately after, Maeda used her healing magic to give me back a huge chunk of HP. But thanks to all the aggro I'd built up with Dead End, the enemy's target did not change.

All right, I've got aggro for good now! We can totally keep this up!

I re-equipped my Fanatic's Staff, continuing to parry in the same basic pattern.

Can't forget to evade the lancer's Art using Windmill, of course.

Once Akira and the others finally defeated the staff-wielder, they dragged the sword-and-board guy out and whaled on him. After that, they downed the fighter and then the lancer.

We'd finally defeated all four of them.

"Nice, we won! Good job, everybody!"

Akira was all smiles. "Yeah, we did it!"

"The four of them posed a lot of trouble," said Maeda. "It's a good thing there were six of us."

"Heheheh. Delicious EXP!" cheered Yano.

Now Akira and I were level 40, Maeda was level 41, and Yano was level 42. We just kept moving on up!

Akabane and Kataoka were now levels 44 and 41, respectively.

"Lady Nozomi, we've done it!"

"With us in the party, a level difference means little. I must say, you did a fine job."

"Aww yeah! I'll treasure those words forever, my lady!"

"Seriously, Kataoka, you did the most damage out of all of us. Thanks to you, we were able to get rid of one guy right away and control the rest."

"Heh. Pretty impressive, right? I'm a full-fledged follower. When the going gets tough, I get going."

"That being said, the MVP was clearly Takashiro for his ability to sustain an outnumbered fight. But that's no surprise from someone who was able to defeat me."

"Ooh, I got a shout-out! Nice!"

"Okay, buddy, calm down. It's lootin' time." Akira yanked on my sleeve.

Indeed, once we'd finished off our foes, they had left a big treasure chest behind.

"Doesn't look like it's trapped."

“I’d say you’re right.”

We’d been given the go-ahead by our rogue and sky pirate.

“All right. Wanna open it for us, Akira?”

She was our Lady Luck, after all. I trusted in her ability to roll something good.

“Okay! I’m on it.”

Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump.

My heart drummed against my ribcage. Popping open a treasure chest was the highlight of any MMORPG!

Akira opened the treasure chest!

There was a Nurse Ring in the treasure chest!

There was a Rush Ring in the treasure chest!

Ooh, so we got two accessories.

Nurse Ring

Type: Accessory

Level: 40

Effect: Whoever equips this ring gains the ability to use healing magic.

This is the same effect as the talent Master’s Scroll (Healing Magic).

Rush Ring

Type: Accessory

Level: 40

Effect: Whoever equips this ring gains the ability to learn striking skills.

This is the same effect as the talent Master’s Scroll (Martial Artist - Strikes).

“Dang, this is great! You’re my Lady Luck, Akira!”

“Heh! Yeah, yeah. This is a pretty good haul!”

“With that one, Takashiro, you should be able to expand the scope of your abilities.”

“Heck yeah. For grinding mobs and big scuffles, you might as well have been invisible. But now you can help just fine!”

“We came only to offer our aid. You all are free to use your spoils as you please.”

“If Lady Nozomi says so, I have no objections!”

“All right, Ren. Take it away.”

Akira’s command was followed up by scattered agreement from the group.

Wow. They’re all so considerate. I’m tearing up over here!

“Thanks, everybody! I can’t wait to use it.”

Thus, I decided to take the Rush Ring from the loot chest!

Man, I wanted this so bad!

“Wait, that one?!”

Suddenly, everyone jumped on me.

“Huh? Uh, something wrong with that?”

“I-I thought you would go for the Nurse Ring instead!”

“Yeah, what she said! You gotta find some use for your ridiculously high MP, right?!”

Maeda’s and Yano’s cries of disbelief gave me pause.

“Oh, I get it. I usually have to waste my MP all at once, and I’m ridiculously weak when it comes to clearing mobs. Working as a sub-healer would help patch up my weak points during times like that.”

“Then why’d you choose that one, man? Healing magic is top-tier for boosting your follower power!”

You’re going to have to explain what follower power is before you even begin to get through to me.

Even Kataoka seemed doubtful about my decision.

“Well, duh. I’m not the kind of guy to worry about my weaknesses. I’d rather build on my strengths!”

“So you picked Rush Ring to amplify your strengths? C’mon, tell us how!” Akira was suddenly on the edge of her seat.

This kind of thing happened time and time again. Whenever I came up with an idea Akira hadn’t thought of, she was always dying to hear my explanation. It made telling her about it feel pretty darn satisfying.

“Well, get this: striking techniques scale based on VIT, and they also ignore evasion! The only downside is that striking Arts cost HP.”

There are as many martial arts techniques as there are stars in the sky, so their abilities are divided into four categories: punches, kicks, throws, and strikes. Those who choose martial artist as their class can pick any two of the four to start. The other two have to be acquired through talents or equipment.

Yukino’s techniques from the tournament were kicks, by the way. Wielding a weapon and striking out with her feet gave her a wide range of potential attacks. An extremely useful addition, indeed.

The most popular choices are probably punches and kicks. Almost all martial artists choose punches as one of their mains. As for kicking, many other classes need it for their sub-class.

Throws come after these two. This category includes joint-locking techniques and the like, allowing players to get some pretty sick results through debuffs.

Dead last, of course, is strikes. No doubt about it. As for why, it’s because the damage scales off of VIT. Striking involves shoulder charges, tackles, and other similar moves. It’d hurt more if the guy rushing at you was super bulky and heavy, so that’s probably why they chose VIT.

Only tanks really care about raising their VIT, so they’re the only ones who can use strikes effectively. That said, though, even tanks don’t want strikes in their arsenal because the Arts consume HP. Tanks are meant to absorb enemy attacks and live on; they exist to be meat shields. Taking that into consideration, anything that involves lowering one’s own HP is just too risky. It’s essentially exchanging HP for the ability to ignore evasion, and tanks just aren’t willing to pay that price.

Normal strike attacks don’t reduce HP, but if you’re just planning to use

normal attacks, then kicks are the better choice; the attacks flow into one another much more seamlessly. Also, there's far more variety in kicking animations, making it the superior choice either way.

Strike attacks are just one-off hurling moves, leaving way too much of an opening between each one.

But all this worked out perfectly for me! I was no tank—just a guy who put all his points into VIT. My ultimate lowered my HP to 1 anyway, so the Arts weren't a problem. Without the ability to ignore evasion, all my attacks missed just about anything. But the power of my ultimates was far and away the most dramatic drama cannon!

Hello, developers? It's me, Ren. I'd just like to thank you!

Anyway, I had the perfect setup to ignore the drawbacks and reap all the benefits of the striking technique. Most importantly, I could actually hit my targets with normal striking attacks!

Was this not incredible progress? I'd always wanted one of my normal attacks to connect, even if it was just once!

Naturally, there were also plenty of new Arts to be learned. My drama cannon could evolve beyond my wildest dreams!

To be honest, I'd had my eyes on this path for a while. In fact, part of my decision to throw everything into VIT was because I'd hoped to take up strikes one day.

The unpopular hidden weapons, and the unpopular striking techniques... Multiply two negatives, and what do you get? A positive!

I passionately explained all this to Akira.

My dream had finally come true when she popped open that treasure chest. They'd given me a choice, but that choice had already been made long ago.

Actually, I'd been planning on studying hard for my next test so I could earn the talent. Pretty lucky for me to get it ahead of schedule!

"Cool! Then I guess you could say you *struck* gold, eh?" Yano grinned.

"Yeah, exactly!"

Akira smiled awkwardly. “Hahaha... Uh, not much I can say when your eyes are all sparkly like that, heh.”

“Right... Well, I have no need for it either, so it’s not a big deal,” Maeda said.

“Same. But aren’t you the one who can make the most use of the Nurse Ring too, Ren?”

“Nah. I’m perfectly satisfied with the Rush Ring. You should take the Nurse Ring, Yano. You’ll be pretty close to being a paladin again.”

“Me? Well, I guess Akki and Kotomi can both heal already.”

When equipping Master’s Scroll (Healing Magic), even a class like sky pirate that doesn't use MP gets half of an MP bar so it can work like other healers. All you gotta do is equip it, and it should work out.

Yano was originally a paladin, and now she wouldn’t have to buy her own scrolls to relearn healing magic.

“Go for it. With healing abilities, you’ll be able to do a lot more solo content.”

“Then shall we have Yuuna take it?” Maeda asked.

“Yeah. If I ever desperately need it, you could just let me borrow it.”

“Okay! Then I’ll take the Nurse Ring.”

Not long after we’d decided who got what loot, the airship arrived at its destination. I was overjoyed to have my Rush Ring, but we still needed to accomplish our original goal.

It was time to resume our search for Princess Lieliz!

Chapter 4: Boss Battle and a New Ultimate

The next morning, I was on the first floor of Trinisty Isle. I'd gotten there early, so it was mine to do with as I pleased.

My good buddies, the Island Bunnies, welcomed me with open arms. Dozens of them ran straight at me to attack.

Island Bunny attacked.

But Ren evaded the attack.

Island Bunny attacked.

Dealt 1 damage to Ren.

Island Bunny attacked.

Dealt no damage to Ren.

Log messages flowed down the screen like a waterfall. To be fair, I *was* gathering up a whole mob of them to mess with.

If I ever had a true home in this game, it would be here. Whenever I wanted to test something on random enemies or just try out a new experiment, I always ended up coming here.

"Hah! Get a taste of my normal attacks!"

With no Canesword equipped, I charged toward a bunny, shoulder-first. This was a simple shoulder charge, the only normal attack in the martial artist's striking arsenal!

Ren attacked.

Dealt 153 damage to Island Bunny!

Ren defeated the Island Bunny.

Ooh. That's some good damage!

Though it was only a single hit, it ignored evasion. And I wouldn't lose HP like

this!

Next, I used my Canesword to strike another one.

Ren attacked.

Dealt 55 damage to Island Bunny!

Ren defeated the Island Bunny.

As was apparent from the huge difference in damage, going all-in on VIT was working. Thanks to the evasion-canceling effect, as long as my attack touched the enemy, I was guaranteed to hit.

My DEX was too low to go around swinging my Canesword. Against stronger foes, it would hardly ever hit. Even when it did, it would deal some pretty pathetic damage.

Yes, yees. My ability to land normal attacks has gone up dramatically! Even if that's only compared to my own past results.

Next up, trying out my Arts. My AP was already full, of course.

“Windmill!”

With this, I put some distance between myself and the mob. They immediately gave chase. Facing the flock, I began to charge.

“Here comes my killer attack! Explosive Tackle!”

Squatting down low, I surged forward like a rugby player gearing up for a tackle. I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be from the friction between my feet and the ground or what, but my entire body erupted into flames.

Just like that, I plunged into the mob of Island Bunnies, sending each and every one flying!

Mm-mmm! What an incredible kill shot!

Bwee! Bwee! Bwee!

Each of my fluffy buddies screamed as they died in succession.

The charge was pretty narrow, but this Art allowed the user to change directions as they moved.

Very nice. That was exhilarating! I see I can also move to or from enemies as needed.

Incidentally, striking Arts cost both AP *and* HP. Thanks to activating that Art, my HP had fallen by 10% of my maximum health.

“Hmm. That does make me think, though.”

What happens if your HP falls to zero when you use it? Would you just drop dead on the spot? Or would you survive with 1 HP?

I just had to test it! It was time to knock some bunnies around.

Okay, the next one brings my HP to zero! Let's do it!

“Explosive Tackle!”

Fwoooooosh!

Flames enveloped me, sending several Island Bunnies flying. Then, suddenly, all the strength drained from my body. Unable to move, I fell listlessly on the spot.

“Ouch! Hahaha... All right, I get it. HP falls to zero, you die.”

This was an important lesson. I made a mental note of it.

I would've been ridiculously excited if it left me alive, but oh well. Gotta follow the rules. Time to respawn, then.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, I heard a familiar voice.

“Whoa! You died here of all places? What happened?!”

It was Akira. Maybe she was bored so she'd come to check on me.

“Yo, Akira. I was just checking what happens if you use a striking Art to fall to zero HP.”

“Oooh. Testing to see if it leaves you with one HP, then?”

“Yep. But the answer is no.”

“Hahaha. It's funny to see you on the ground surrounded by Island Bunnies, though. It looks like you lost to them.”

“My name will be forever stained by this shameful display.”

"This is so funny! I'm gonna take a screenshot!"

"Nuh-uh! I'm gonna respawn, so you can't!"

"Aww, wait, wait! Just ten seconds!"

I gave her permission to take pictures of me, then finally respawned in our classroom. Akira returned not long after.

"Mm. Not enough time to go back, I guess."

"Yeah. Class is about to start."

"Darn it. I wanted to do some more testing, but whatever. Guess I'll do it tomorrow since we're continuing our quest tonight."

Right. Yesterday, we'd failed to find Princess Lieliz.

We'd searched a ton of places in the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught using our Eyes of Pegasus, but to no avail. After we'd used up all ten of the Eyes we'd bought, the game had kicked us off for the night. As a result, the guild house was still under occupation.

Today, the plan was to buy ten more Eyes of Pegasus and continue the search. The last one we'd used yesterday had finally reacted, telling us the direction but nothing more. As long as they didn't move the princess, we should be able to find her.

Surely today would be the day we finished the quest. I was glad I'd been able to test out my new abilities a little before then.

If we ran into any battles, I'd be able to show them off!



After school, Hell's Crafters reconvened with Akabane and Kataoka. We formed a party of six and resumed our search for the kidnapped princess.

Since we'd taken the long way yesterday, we could now use the warp room to go directly to the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught.

We departed from the capital, the Holy City Mirjam, heading through the northern suburbs and up a mountain. Plants on the plateau in the middle of the mountain range were beginning to take over the area, creating a natural garden

of sorts. Yesterday, this was where we stopped.

This area, apparently called Nayuta's Garden, would also be today's starting point.

A gentle breeze sent flower petals dancing through the sky. From where we were standing, we had a beautiful view. You could call it the perfect vantage point.

"This place is sooo pretty! We should have a picnic here sometime."

We waited for the sightseeing maniac to take her screenshots before proceeding with the search.

First, we had an Eye of Pegasus read data from the Princess' Skull Ring. I should mention that even though it was called the Eye of Pegasus, it wasn't something grotesque like an eyeball gouged out from a flying horse or whatever.

Rather, it was a jewel with an eye-like emblem carved into the center. Once it was fed information about the person we wanted to search for, it would float above our heads and point a thin ray of light in the direction of the target.

"She's northeast of here. Let's get going!"

All six of us were on rental dragon mounts, allowing us to travel quickly without having to worry about enemies.

We followed the ray of light, consuming five Eyes of Pegasus along the way.

"This is it. The light leads here!"

Our destination was an old stronghold that seemed long abandoned. The stone walls were crumbling, with weeds peeking out of the crevices.

At first glance, it seemed to be in ruins, unlikely to have anyone inside. Yet this was where the Eye of Pegasus was pointing.

"Okay. Let's get off here and take a look inside."

Nobody objected. We switched to walking and stepped inside the ruins.

Awoooooo!

Shaka-shaka-shaka!

Immediately, monsters resembling wolves and skeletons started heading our way! Fortunately, they were only around level 40. Normal mobs like this weren't particularly intimidating.

"Woo, it's button-mashing time! Let's gather AP while we still can!"

"Aww yeah! Right behind you, Akki!"

"Hmph. Well, this should serve as a warm-up, if nothing else."

"Lady Nozomi, let me guard you from behind!"

Everyone except for Maeda and me leapt in to crush the enemies.

Against subpar enemies like these, I was at the greatest disadvantage. They weren't strong enough for me to waste a Dead End on them, so all I could do was watch from afar. At that point, I could use my magic circles to support our party members. But on top of not being very helpful, my circles couldn't move by default, making me pretty useless all around.

"Times like these can be a bit boring," Maeda said, standing in the back line with me.

When stuff like this happened, she usually just flung magic around however she liked. Even if she wanted to heal, we had two sword dancers on the front lines, so there wasn't much need for it.

"Heh. I would've agreed if you'd told me that yesterday. But today, I'm a new man!"

On that note, I stepped up to the front line and joined in the battle, shoulder-charging any and all enemies I could reach!

The sheer joy of my normal attacks hitting their target! The ecstasy of actually being able to gain AP!

"Ooh! Ren's normal attacks are hitting!"

"Mwahahaha! Have you ever seen such next-level evolution?!" I boasted, guarding an attack from a wolf that had stepped out to challenge me. I then countered by throwing my weight at it.

My target tottered back as it sustained damage. After my charge, I swung my

staff as a bashing attack to combo, which was evaded with ease.

Afterward, I repeated my shoulder charge. Obviously, this one landed.

Animation-wise, weaving a staff bash between each shoulder charge would let me get to the next strike attack faster than just doing it over and over, so this was the best way despite every other miss. Call me a one-trick pony, but it was better than nothing.

Now I could finally build up AP to use on Explosive Tackle!

“Okay. Over there!”

Once we had finished taking down the last of our enemies, we followed the Eye of Pegasus’ light, stepping foot into a large structure in the center of the ruins.

The effect had run out several times along the way, making this the sixth Eye of Pegasus. I hoped we would find the princess soon.

Creeeeek...

We pushed open a rusty door and headed inside. The ceiling had collapsed, allowing light to filter in directly.

The Eye of Pegasus was pointing to another door deep within. We made our way to the center of the giant hall.

Just then...

BANG!

The inner door ahead of us was thrown open.

Several men in black sprang out from inside. All of them bore the crest of Karanaught on their weapons.

They weren’t the only ones. More enemies appeared from the shadows, from all around the room, and even from the door we’d entered.

There must have been nearly thirty of them. Incidentally, they were all level 50 crown-marked monsters.

“Whoa, whoa, that’s a lot! They’re really giving us a red-carpet welcome!” I said.

“Were they lying in ambush?! This is bad!” Akira cried.

“Um, yeah, this really *is* bad. I think there might be way too many of them!” Yano said nervously.

“Wh-What do we do?” Maeda asked.

“I don’t foresee us winning here,” Akabane commented.

Kataoka had a slightly different attitude. “Man, your quest really is high-difficulty! I gotta tell my guild about this later.”

Surrounded, we prepared ourselves to fight. At that moment, another man appeared—one we hadn’t seen before.

His black robe was the same as the others, but his hood was down so we could see his face. He was a young man with pale-blue hair and even features with a touch of sternness behind them.

Froi Jasin: Level 75

Crown Icon (rare monster) He must be the boss!

“Heh. So, you came all this way to save the princess, eh? Well, no matter. Now that you're here, you’re as good as dead!” Froi grinned ferociously.

“Whoa, this guy’s a real hothead! He’s not even gonna give us a chance to turn back, or threaten us, or whatever?!” I blurted in disbelief.

Now this is just unfair! Who wouldn’t die on their first attempt?! Something this crazy ought to give you the option to leave and come back more prepared!

“Hah! I am a kind man. We all know this ends in a fight, so I’m skipping the pointless dialogue choices for you! The princess is in the next room. If you manage to beat me, don’t forget to take her home with you!”

“Not really what I wanted, but thanks, I guess?”

What kind of game skips conversation options when you really need them? Aren’t the devs worried people are gonna start thinking this game is unfair?

“Hmph. My tedious duties were boring me to death. How about you provide me some entertainment?!” Froi then turned to his subordinates. “Attack! Try to convince me that you gaggle of small fry are worth your salt!”

The Shadow Assassins didn't say a word, instead pouncing on us in perfect sync. Froi sat atop a nearby stone, ready to enjoy the spectacle.

Ooh. Is he one of those guys who loses because he underestimates you?

This big, bad boss seemed like he was just going to kick back and watch until we defeated his huge horde of assassins.

Heheheh. If so, we just might have a chance! I have a feeling we wouldn't win if this level 75 rare monster came at us alongside the horde. But if he's willing to wait, that changes everything. After all, this is a chance for us to grow exponentially! With all these Shadow Assassins to slay, we're gonna be getting plenty of level-ups! After that, we can probably take that one guy down! We actually might be able to do this!

"Here they come!"

"Aaah! They're gonna overwhelm us!"

"This is a few too many! What do we do?!"

"Any ideas, Takashiro?"

"Do something about this fast, Sun Tzu!"

This little cutie was coming out of left field with the references again. If Akira was willing to make jokes at a time like this, that meant she had some peace of mind.

In other words, she knew I had some tricks up my sleeve.

I wasn't one to ignore a request, of course. Perhaps it was time to write my own chapter of *The Art of War*!

"Draco, get in my arms!"

"Chirp!"

"Enervating Circle!"

I made sure to cast a relatively large one. As the Shadow Assassins closed in on us, my circle enveloped the majority of them. The only ones who didn't make it in were the long-range fighters, such as those with staves and bows.

"Let's go, Draco!"

I slipped through the enemy circle and headed to a corner of the battlefield. As I did so, I tried to include as many of those back-liners who weren't already in the circle as I could. By getting them in the circle and thereby debuffing them, I could grab just the tiniest bit of aggro from all of the encircled enemies. As long as nobody else touched them, they would all single-mindedly chase after me.

It was a repeat of the Enervating Circle monster train from Almishr's Burial Ground.

This ought to buy us plenty of time!

The close-range fighters would chase me, so I could keep up the marathon forever. The back-liners were a problem, though, as they could hit me while I ran.

"Everyone, let's start by smacking down the ones with staves and bows who're attacking Ren from afar! Everyone except for Kotomi, pick a single one to grab aggro from, and then focus your attacks on the one I'm fighting!"

Yeah, that's a huge help!

Truly, Akira understood my needs.

She, Yano, Akabane, and Kataoka each forced one long-range fighter to target them, decreasing the load on me. Now there were almost no long-range attacks coming my way. The marathon was stabilizing.

Enemies charging at me would be slowed down the moment they touched my circle. However, any magic and arrows coming at me would not.

The biggest threat to my marathon battle strategy was long-range enemy attacks. Though our front-liners were pulling aggro from different opponents, they were focusing their own attacks on just one.

And while their respective enemies were battering them from afar, they ignored it. After all, it'd be real trouble if I died because all the long-range attacks got focused on me.

Fortunately, our party was chock-full of HP-recovery skills. We could make up the loss with healing!

I continued my marathon, waiting for Akira and the others to kill off some of the assassins. Our enemies dropped to the ground one after another, bumping our levels higher and higher.

“Keep it up, and we can win!”

Target Marker and Enervating Circle were a fearsome combo. It may have been boring to an onlooker, but this was my best way of tipping the scales.

Suddenly, Froi stood up from his perch. “I see. Not bad at all!”

Uh, I’d prefer if he kept loafing around for a little while!

“No need for that, my man!” I said. “Go on, just put your feet up!”

“Not a chance. Why, I’m a man of action! Frozen Bomb!”

Froi cast his spell and a glittering, blue bullet of ice landed at my feet, freezing a wide area.

“Dammit!”

Not only did the ice deal a hefty chunk of damage, but it also locked my legs in place. This was the Frozen status effect.

There were more than a few Shadow Assassins caught up in his magic as well. Like me, they were frozen to the ground and unable to move. However, about half of them were still mobile, and they were all headed straight for me.

I could guard against any frontal attacks without taking damage, but they were also coming at me from behind. Since I couldn’t move my legs, I had no way to fend off the guys at my back.

Shadow Assassin attacked.

Dealt 66 damage to Ren!

“Ngh!”

“Oh no! Ren!”

More Frozen Bombs rained down on Akira and the others as they tried to rush to my aid. Thus, their legs were frozen as well.

Meanwhile, the enemy attacks continued.

Shadow Assassin attacked.

Dealt 71 damage to Ren!

Shadow Assassin attacked.

Dealt 64 damage to Ren!

This is bad!

I saw death in my future. If I fell here, it was almost guaranteed that the party would be annihilated.

Grrr! Is this what they call being driven into a corner?

“But wait, I say!”

It was then that a man’s voice echoed from above.

“No way! It can’t be!”

That voice, that weird catchphrase! I’d never forget this guy.

It was *him*! He’d come to save us!

“Oh? Who dares get in our way?! Show yourself!” Froi shouted, incensed by the interruption.

“But wait, I say. Look up!”

I looked up to the edge of an open hole in the ceiling.

Mr. Pervert to the rescue!

A shining, iron mask covered his entire face. A small, crimson scarf was wrapped around his neck, and he wore a red pair of budgie smugglers to match. If I had to give the outfit a name, I would call it the Pervy Three-Piece.

He was standing in his characteristic pose: spine straight and tall with his arms crossed over his chest. The deep-red rose painted on his skin was eternal proof that I had taken part in this man’s depraved proclivities.

“Brother, it’s you!”

“Heya, sis. I see you’re in a tight spot. Worry not; your trusty older brother is here to give you a hand. Hah!”

He descended from the edge of the ceiling, doing moonsaults in the air before landing. Then he struck a weird, birdlike pose. I never knew what to expect from this dude.

“Call me inelegant, but I, with my brotherly heart, could not help but leap into action when I found out my little sister was in danger! I hope you can appreciate these feelings of mine!”

“Umm, err, thank you very much!”

Ooh, Akabane’s eyes are darting all over the place! She’s blushing, too. Could it be that even she’s embarrassed by him?!

The sheer shame of her perverted brother appearing at her darkest hour—even Akabane couldn’t “appreciate” that!

“Oho. You there, don’t show off your impeccable style in my domain.”

Froi’s reaction caused our entire six-man party to scream in horror.

“Eww!”

Is this guy’s fashion sense bugged or what?!

“Hey, guys! I bet Akabane has some thoughts about *that*,” I said, gesturing to the heinous getup.

“Wh-What are you saying?! I never—”

“Hm? What’s the matter, my dear sister?”

“Err, nothing! Now, look, we can’t move. Please do something about this, and fast!”

“Right! Prepare yourselves. Bear witness to my beauteous dance!”

The masked nudist began to twirl and dance, causing the ice at our feet to disperse.

Ugh, male sword dancers creep me right out.

These dances belonged to people like Akira, who could marry cuteness and titillation with every shake of her hips!

“And now... heyo!”

He sprang into the air, whirled around, and clapped his hands twice. Yep, it was still weird, especially since this man was practically naked. I just couldn't take it seriously.

But the game harbored no such bias, so despite how it looked, the dance worked perfectly. In fact, it fully replenished everyone's HP! This was the incredible healing power of someone over level 200.

"Come! Notice me, curs! Fall upon me, I dare you!"

Healing that much at once caused all enemy aggro to focus on him. The Shadow Assassins rushed in his direction.

However...

"Bwahahaha! Dull, far too dull! Learn to aim!"

They couldn't even hit him! Evade, evade, evade... It never ended!

"I've drawn in all the weak mobs! Defeat the boss now, friends!"

"Uh, gotcha!"

I stepped in front of Froi.

"Hmph. You challenge me, do you?"

As we glared at each other, Akira came to my side.

"We're safe for now. Still, we were almost goners back there."

Maeda and Yano weren't far behind.

"I'm not sure if I should be delighted or disgusted."

"Hey, wait. Why's that masked guy just evading instead of counterattacking?"

Apparently having heard her, Akabane's brother struck a strange pose as he turned to look at Yano.

"Hah! You may not have guessed, but I am both progressive *and* a vegetarian! I do not wish to take the lives of others!"

"Eek! Don't look at me, please!"

"Well, um, at least he's a very kind older brother," Maeda said meekly.

So he's a pacifist? Wait, then how did he get to that level?! I know pacifist runs are a thing, but this makes no sense!

"My values do not change just because we're in a game world! In fact, I daresay it is *because* there is no penalty for cruelty that my willpower is truly tested!"

He crossed his arms once more. Again, a blasphemy against cool poses!

"What about the part where you're an exhibitionist here just because you won't get arrested?"

"D-Do not press me on that point!"

"Yeah, Takashiro! Stop talking about it!"

Dammit, Kataoka, I want answers!

"Very well! If you aren't coming for me, I'll just have to make the first move! Orbs of Cocytus!"

Countless glimmering, blue orbs appeared around Froi, each around the size of a fist. They hovered close to their caster, apparently in order to protect him.

"What is that?!" I shouted.

"I'll scope it out!"

Akira swung Skyfall. The shockwave approached Froi, but one of the many orbs collided with it. As a result, the shockwave dissipated.

"The orb just brushed it off!"

"So that won't work, huh?"

"Takashiro, I'll try stealthing and getting closer."

"All right, good luck."

"Yep. Shadow Walk!" Kataoka vanished into thin air.

Meanwhile, Maeda attempted to cast some magic. "Perhaps fire will work. Fireball!"

The fire collided with Froi's Orbs of Cocytus.

Pssshhh!

This was accompanied by the sound of steam rising, causing both to disappear.

“We can nullify the orbs this way!”

“Nice. Keep it up, Maeda!”

“Understood!”

She cast Fireball again.

“Fools! You really think your one-shot skills will work?!”

Froi held his palms above him, sending several blue shimmers flying toward Maeda.

Oh no, he can control them freely!

Fireball fizzled out on contact with the first, and the rest were still headed her way.

“Eep?!”

“Kotomi, watch out!”

Yano rushed in front of her and guarded them with her shield.

Plink-plink-plink!

As the orbs hit Yano’s shield, they spread ripples of ice across its surface. Soon, the ice reached her legs, freezing them to the ground.

“Brrr! Cold, cold, cold!”

Even through the guard, she lost about half of her health.



“I’ve got your back, Yuuna!”

“Keep it together!”

Akira and Akabane used their dances to heal Yano’s HP and remove her freeze status, respectively.

“Hah! You have only prolonged your death!”

Again, Froi launched his orbs.

“Not even close. Backstab!”

Ooh, nice, Kataoka! Kick some ass!

“Hmph!”

But in that instant, all of the orbs around Froi swarmed Kataoka!

Plink-plink-plink!

“Whooooa?!”

“Kataoka!”

Oh no! He took too many hits at once!

Kataoka’s HP went from being nearly full all the way down to zero.

If only we could dive in, chip at him a little, and then dip back out. But whenever one of us gets within his range, his orbs just maul us to death. This guy’s one heck of a nuisance!

Akabane sneered. “Goodness. Dying like that is just pathetic!”

“Aww... Sorry.” Kataoka fell limply on the spot, dead as a doornail.

This meant there was only one ability that could get us through this now. We didn’t have the time to take things slowly and test this out, so I trusted in my spark of inspiration and began operating the system menu.

“But look, the orbs are gone!”

Akira was correct. The focused attack on Kataoka had consumed all of the Orbs of Cocytus.

“Maybe now it’ll work!”

Akira quickly struck the ground with Skyfall.

“Orbs of Cocytus!”

Once again, the newly formed orbs repelled her shockwaves.

“Wha?! Geez, that cooldown is so fast!”

I could understand her frustration.

“Hmph! You there, the pink one! You’re one hell of an eyesore, you know that? I can’t stand women who dress so provocatively! Have you no shame?!”

“I-I don’t dress like this because I want to! Besides, it’s none of your business!”

“Yeah! And y’know, this is one of the most conservative outfits she has!”

Having finished menuing, I stood with Akira and protected her from this verbal onslaught.

“Ren, stop butting in and making things worse!”

Aww, she’s mad at me!

“Hah! Look, there’s another one of you over there! But you’re more plump, so it’s even less pleasant to look at you.”

“How dare you! Are you calling me fat?! Is there a world where this *isn’t* considered harassment?!”

Well, Akira *did* have a much larger bosom, and she was shorter than Akabane to boot. Still, she wasn’t fat in the slightest.

It just came down to a difference in tastes. Akira was a healthy and voluptuous cutie, whereas Akabane was more of a traditional beauty.

“Now, now. Akira, listen up...” I whispered my strategy into her ears.

“Whaaat?! Do I *have* to?!”

“Yup. Now, let’s get started! Devitalizing Circle!”

I cast a wide magic circle—not large enough to empty my MP bar, though. I made sure to keep my MP at about 10% of my max HP.

“Send them to their doom!”

At Froi's order, Orbs of Cocytus rushed in our direction.

I stood in front of Akira, covering her. If I took the countless attacks coming our way, I'd most likely end up dead like Kataoka. But I wouldn't let that happen!

"Final Strike!"

I immediately activated Final Strike on its own. My upcoming ultimate move would not include this Art!

"Now, here comes my ultimate!"

Fwoosh!

My body was enveloped in crimson flames!

The blue orbs landed immediately after, but they evaporated on contact with the fire. As proven by Fireball, flames could nullify the orbs.

Thanks to that, I knew I could use an ultimate that created a flame aura!

"What?!"

"All right! Here comes my new killer move!"

Still enveloped in flames, I squatted down and twisted my upper body, ready for a Quickdraw.

I maintained that stance as I charged toward Froi.

Psssh, psssh, pssssshhh!

Every orb coming at me evaporated into steam.

The flames around me left a trail as I ran, morphing into a flaming bird . It symbolized Suzaku, the Vermilion Bird of legend.

This was the new ultimate I had chained together! I had only just discovered the combination, and this was my first time actually using it.

It was made up of Turnover, Explosive Tackle, and Quickdraw.

"Vermilion Wing!"

My flaming Quickdraw seized Froi!

I continued to run as I swung my blade, leaving Froi in a pillar of flame behind me.

“Gaaaaah?!”

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.

Dealt 3,555 damage to Froi Jasin!

Aww yeah. This is even mightier than Dead End!

Furthermore, having Explosive Tackle as a component meant that my charge passively damaged enemies around me. That meant I could keep running as I destroyed the Orbs of Cocytus.

It did present some problems, though—namely, careful HP maintenance to make sure Explosive Tackle didn’t kill me, along with needing to have AP ready.

Still, as long as I could clear those conditions, this outstripped Dead End! Being able to knock Final Strike out of the third slot of Skill Chain was nice too.

When I used Final Strike alone, I could wait to unleash my next blow until the cooldown ended, allowing me to activate it twice in a row. Waiting for a second cast like this was more efficient overall.

But if I added Final Strike to the ultimate, I couldn’t do that. If the skill wasn’t usable, I’d be barred from using the ultimate move at all. Excluding it gave me more options.

“Dammit! How dare you! Orbs of—”

Froi was so focused on me that he didn’t notice Akira fast approaching!

I had blown away every last one of his Orbs of Cocytus, which made it easy for Akira to close in on him without taking any damage.

“Not this time! Ultimate move!”

“Ngh!”

He swiftly reacted to guard, but it was pointless... for Akira had equipped Angelic Charm!

“Aerial Crescent!”

“Hrngh?! What?!”

With his guard nullified by the armor, Froi was helplessly launched into the air.

I'll take this opportunity to craft my next Canesword!

“Akabane, use Sword Samba on me! Yano and Maeda, focus fire now!”

“Right away!”

“A'ight! This might just be our chance!”

“Yes, sir!”

Akabane activated her Sword Samba. My Final Strike and Turnover were now ready to be used again!

As Akira entered the second part of her ultimate move, Froi fell and bounced off the ground.

“Ultimate move: Shadow Blaster!”

“Fireball!”

“Urgh!”

While he was still unable to act, I cast a magic circle to manage my HP. I still had AP left.

Let's keep it up! Time to combo again!

“Here comes another one! Final Strike! And... ultimate move!”

Once again, Suzaku's flames enveloped my body.

“Vermilion Wiiiiing!”

BWOOOOOSH!

Ren activated Vermilion Wing.

Dealt 3,555 damage to Froi Jasin!

“Waaagh!”

Another massive pillar of flames engulfed him.

“I'm not done yet either! Aerial Crescent!”

With the second activation of both our ultimate moves, Froi's health had fallen by a whole 70%.

I've still got more in the tank. Time to finish this all at once!

Or so I thought .

Just as Froi was hit by the second Aerial Crescent, he was abruptly surrounded by a dark-grey sphere.

"You're not half bad, fools! I'll remember your faces! Next time we meet, I'll pound you into the dust! Get ready to die!"

By the time the orb had shrunk and blinked away into nothingness, Froi was no longer there.

For real?! This guy is one of those bosses who retreats when he takes a certain amount of damage?!

Once Froi had escaped, his Shadow Assassins likewise disappeared.

"He ran away? Woo! We woooo!" Akira cheered.

Maeda was equally excited. "Yes! We've done it!"

"Nice!" cried Yano. "We really pummeled him!"

Akabane let out a sigh. "That was quite the challenging quest."

"Heh. Well done, everyone. Perhaps you didn't even need my assistance," said the masked nudist.

"Chirp chirp! Chichichirp!"

In the midst of everyone's joy, I was silent.

I took out the Otherworldly Lens and nabbed some screenshots of Akira.

C'mon, can you blame me?! I missed my chance to get some shots of Angelic Charm last time! This is a very rare opportunity!

The shutter made a couple of satisfying clicks.

Nice, I got some! I'll look back on them fondly!

"What the—?! Geez, Ren! At a time like this?!"

Akira returned to her usual gear in a jiffy, but I'd already gotten my fair share.

"Thanks for the best pic ever. I'm one-hundred-percent satisfied!"

"I don't care about that! C'mon, this is more embarrassing than you think!"

"Now, now. It looked very nice on you."

"Ughhh!"

The masked nudist, who had been watching us from afar, cleared his throat.

"Ahem! Friendship is truly beautiful! Well then, my work here is done. Farewell!"

With unusually light bearing, he leapt back to the hole in the ceiling and disappeared.

Huh. Well, I guess I ought to be grateful. If he hadn't shown up, we probably would've been dead meat. After all, he made it so that we only had to defeat Froi instead of his whole army.

"Moving on... Let's find the princess!"

Froi said she was in the room back there, right?

We progressed through the open door, and there was Princess Lieliz!

She was bound to a pillar and had a gag stuffed in her mouth, but she seemed to have no real injuries.

"Haah! Ahh, thank you, everyone. You're the people from the guild shop I was kidnapped from, right? I apologize for all the trouble. A hail of my gratitude upon you!"

Yep, this princess still speaks like a weirdo.

"Oh, what happened to Anita?! I don't see her among you."

"Anita was thrown in jail because she couldn't protect you."

"Egads! I cry you mercy!"

Wait, what?

Maeda translated her archaic speech for us. "I believe she means 'beg your pardon?'"

I guess I understand, but...

“This simply won’t do. I’m sorry to impose, but could you take me to Anita?”

We had no reason to refuse.

Thus, with the princess in tow, we returned to the castle jail.

“Your Highness! Thank goodness you’re safe! Are you unharmed?!”

Anita rejoiced for her princess’ safety with tears in her eyes.

“Unbend, Anita. I am all right.”

“She doesn’t want her to fret,” Maeda said, now clearly annoyed.

This was supposed to be a really moving reunion and all, but the princess somehow managed to kill the mood.

Anita, on the other hand, was giggling with joy. “Hehe... Hahaha. You seem well, Your Highness. I couldn’t be more relieved.”

Though they were NPCs, there seemed to be a bond between them—something we could never intrude on.

What a well-made game.

With the princess home and Anita free, we returned to the guild house. At last, we were able to reopen our store.

And with that, we had successfully cleared the hidden quest, “The Abduction of the Incognito Princess.”



Tantaraaaa! Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-tantaraaaa!

As we walked the red carpet, trumpeteers belted out fanfare on either side. It kinda felt like a big welcome party, with us as the returning heroes!

“Ooh, this is awesome.” I whistled.

“Gosh, I’m terribly nervous.”

“Ditto, Kotomi. I’m pretty uncomfortable.”

Commoners like us weren’t exactly used to grand formal ceremonies like this.

“Don’t worry, girls,” said Akira. “All you have to do is stare straight ahead.”

“And maintain a refined posture,” added Akabane.

Our two celebrities were perfectly calm, of course.

“Just like that! Stately as ever, Lady Nozomi.” Kataoka was operating as usual too.

In the end, we made it through the door to the throne room. The throne was occupied by a dashing older man wearing a crown.

At his side was Princess Lieliz.

Among the civil and military officers that lined the sides of the room, I spotted the princess’ personal escort, Anita.

After rescuing and safely returning the princess, we had been summoned to Telluna’s royal palace. Normally, players can’t enter this area. This was a rare experience!

“Greetings, valiant youths. Thank you for coming!” The king was all smiles. He seemed more affable than I’d expected.

We knelt down and bowed our heads in respect. In reality, most of us were just imitating Akira and Akabane.

“Saving my daughter’s life was truly a noble deed. Allow me to express my thanks.”

He, too, bowed his head. It felt kinda weird to see a king doing that for us.

“But this sort of heroism is to be expected from scholars of our country’s greatest academic institution. Even I feel a sense of pride. I can only pray that you will continue to serve our nation—nay, our world—after your graduation.”

We all nodded at once.

“Now, I’m told that Lieliz has something to give you. I implore you to accept it!”

Ooh, a present?! This must be our reward for completing the quest! Come on, I’m chompin’ at the bit here!

The princess stepped forward. “This tragedy only occurred as a result of my

own selfishness. But thanks to all of you, I have come home safely and Anita has gone unpunished. Gramercy, everyone. I offer you my sincere gratitude.”

As everyone’s representative and the guild master, it was my duty to reply. “It was nothing. I mean, we couldn’t just stand by when a princess was abducted before our very eyes. But, uh, do you have any idea why those guys from Karanaught did that?”

“I wonder... I believe I have an idea of what they were trying to prevent.”

“Huh?”

“Your Highness!” Anita shouted menacingly.

“Oh, ehehe. Try as I may to comprehend, their motives remain occulted. One day, we may haply know.”

I heaved a huge sigh.

“Occulted”...? I guess we can just assume she doesn’t know.

“Leaving that aside, allow me to meet you grace for grace. Please, take this.”



She offered an item to me with a smile, which I accepted.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness.” I thanked her and took a knee once more.

In doing so, I took a little peek inside the pouch she gave me.

Princess' Skull Ring (O) Type: Accessory Level: 1

Effect: Multiplies experience gain by three. However, stat boosts upon level-up will be divided by three.

No way! I don't want this freakin' thing! I had a bad feeling about this, but come on! This is our reward for a quest that difficult?! What a disappointment. Well, I guess the Rush Ring I got along the way was reward enough.

“I put all my heart, body, and soul into making this ring! I hope you treasure it!”

Her radiant smile *was* pretty cute, though.

After the ceremony, we returned to the guild house and had our own little celebration. It was nothing fancy; we just cracked open some sweets, junk food, and juice that we'd brought in.

Akira had whipped up the pancakes and cookies from scratch. She was improving her cooking skill more and more by the day.

I'd love to sell some of her creations in our shop.

“Hey, Nozomi?” Akira said.

Naturally, we had included Akabane and Kataoka in our party.

“My, what is it?”

“Thank you for helping us today. We couldn't have cleared it without you.”

“Oh! I, erm, well, it's not as though I did it for you! It's just that my brother and I happen to like this shop, so we would hate for it to remain closed!”

Ah, her prickly side is coming out.

She turned away with a huff, but the way her nose was twitching proved she was actually happy.

“Haha. Well, I was hoping to offer you a reward of my own. Will you take it?”

“I-If you insist, then I suppose I shall.”

“Okay. Hold out your hands.”

“Sure.”

With a smile, Akira handed something to Akabane.

It was a full-face, iron mask that had been painted pink using Libra’s Brush!

“Do you like it?! It matches your brother’s!”

Thwap!

Akabane slapped the pink mask out of her hand!

“I would never wear something like this! Are you trying to pick a fight with me?!”

“See, I told you she’d hate it!” shouted Yano. “Who wouldn’t get offended over this thing?”

“I-I tried to stop you too,” piped Maeda.

“The heck’s wrong with you?” I asked Akira.

Here I had thought that when it came to picking a gift for a girl, it'd be best left to another girl. At the very least, Akabane seemed to understand that it wasn’t a prank or anything.

After that, I turned to Kataoka. “Here, man. This one’s for you.”

“Ooh, thank you! I’ll treasure it forever!”

It was made in the vein of the “Don’t Bully Me” Shield, except this one was a “You’re a Useless Follower” Shield. The perfect product for the real masochists out there, it featured a drawn version of Akabane looking down at you with a cold glare. I’d figured Kataoka would like it, so I’d had Yano draw it up for me.

I’m just glad he loves it.

“Argh! I really thought you’d like it, though!” Akira cradled the iron mask with tears in her eyes.

You’re the one with weird tastes, girl. But hey, that’s my best friend for you.

Might as well try to back her up.

“Akabane, just so you know, I don't think Akira meant anything rude by it. She's just got awful taste, y'know? Look, she's even crying!”

“Ah... Oh? Th-Then I suppose I must!” Akabane reached over and snatched the mask back from Akira. “For now, I will accept it, if that will make you happy.”

“Thank you, Nozomi! Do you wanna try it on?!”

“What?! I couldn't!”

“Oh. Okay then.” Akira was deflated.

Seeing this, Akabane was conflicted yet again. She wanted to get along well with Akira, not bring her down.

“All right, fine! I'll do it, so please don't make that face! Watch!”

Carried away by the flow of conversation, she put it on!

That poor girl!

“Ahahahahaha! Wow, you look craaazy!”

What the hell? Don't point and laugh! She endured all that shame for you!

“H-How dare you! How about you try putting it on, then?!” Akabane, understandably angry, forced the iron mask onto Akira.

Oh, yeah. Crazy is the perfect word to describe it.

“Nooo! Yuuna, you take it!”

“I don't want it either! Kotomi, it's yours now!”

“Wait, no! Stoooooop!”

It really livened things up, so maybe it's actually the ultimate party prop?

“Chirp chirp! Chirp chirp!”

In the end, the mask was left upside-down on the floor. Draco was more than happy to crawl inside it and roll around.

“Err, at least it won't go to waste,” I said.

Just then, we heard a voice from inside the mask.

“Rolly, roly, roll. Fun, fun, fun!”

What the—?! D-Did Draco just...

“DID HE JUST TALK?!” everyone else blurted at once.

That he did. I guess pet dragons can learn human language!

Chapter 5: Cowardly Kokoru

Ding dong, ding dong.

A chime signaled the end of the school day. Now we could all kick back and enjoy our gaming time!

But today, I had somewhere to be. Not in real life, but in the game world.

“What should we do, Ren? Should we just go straight there?”

“Yeah, let’s head on over.”

Akira and I had the same destination.

Where, you might ask? It was the meeting to explain the details of the next public event: the competitive guild mission!

Only two people from each guild could be present, so Akira and I had stepped up as representatives.

“Cool, see you guys later. We’ll hold down the fort,” said Yano.

“Leave it to us. Good luck out there,” added Maeda.

“Thanks. I think they’re just going to give us the rundown, though. We’ll take it nice and easy.”

With that, Akira and I left the classroom. We exited the building, walked off campus, and made our way to Telluna’s palace grounds.

This mission was meant to be a mandate from the royal family.

Looks like we’re supposed to gather in the palace chapel.

“Oh boy. I’m curious about what kind of mission they’re gonna give us,” I said as we traversed the courtyard.

“I wonder. Personally, I’d love to search through uncharted lands for treasure. It takes you to so many cool places!”

“Yep. There you go again with your sightseeing obsession.”

“You know it. So, Ren—”

POW!

Huh? That was a pretty violent sound!

“Stop it, bawk! That hurts!”

There was a group of several NPCs clustered in one corner of the courtyard. Although they stood on two legs, they weren't humans; each of them had wings and distinctly avian features.

They must be Birdmen.

Birdmen were a race of beastmen. Their species had plenty of variation, with some of them resembling hawks, some gulls, and some even peacocks.

The one who had made that pitiful cry a minute ago was a chicken-like Birdman. He was short and stout with a round body. If you squinted, he resembled a caricature of a little old man that you might see in anime or video games.

And his name? From his display, it seemed to be Kokoru.

Everything from his body shape to his silly face made it seem like he was made to be a mascot character. At the moment, he was surrounded by other Birdmen, cowering and grimacing.

“Say what?! You're the one who ran into me!”

“I-I said I was sorry for that, bawk!”

“Shaddap! Nobody said you could talk!”

POW!

The hawk in the group kicked him.

“Bawk?!”

“Ugh! We got summoned all the way up to a city in the clouds, and we had to bring stupid, cowardly Kokoru here with us.”

“Right? There should've been better options. With this oaf as a hero candidate, he'll sully the name of Birdmen everywhere,” scoffed the peacock.

“I bet your daddy bribed somebody. Must be nice bein' the son of a

merchant.”

“I wouldn't know, bawk. It's not like I came here because I wanted to.”

“What?! Do you know what an honor it is to have the chance to become a hero?!”

“Th-That doesn't change anything, bawk!”

It looked like Kokoru was about to get kicked again. I couldn't bear to watch anymore, so I ran in and stood between them.

“Okay, that's enough. I don't know what your beef is, but this is just cruel.”

“The hell you just say, kid?!” The hawk glared daggers at me. It was actually pretty darn intimidating. Very much the look of a bird of prey.

“Cease,” said the peacock, who'd been watching from the sidelines. “Look, he's a guild master.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Picking a fight with him wouldn't be a good idea right now.”

“That's right. He could be of assistance to us.”

“Assistance? What are you getting at?” I asked, feeling totally lost.

“Worry not; you'll understand soon enough. Anyway, excuse us. We'll be off now.”

The hawk and the peacock walked off, leaving us—and Kokoru—behind.

“Are you okay? You're Kokoru, right?” Akira helped the tottering Birdman up.

“Thank you, bawk.”

“What happened back there?”

“They're just mad that I actually showed up here, bawk.”

“But that wasn't nice! That was outright bullying! How rude!”

Woof. She's pretty pissed.

“Well, yeah, it wasn't exactly pleasant to watch,” I muttered.

“Right?!”

“I can understand why they're mad, bawk. It's all my fault. Why was I even

chosen as a hero candidate? Bawk, maybe my dad really did have something to do with this.”

“They mentioned that before. What’s up with the whole ‘hero candidate’ thing?”

“That’s—well, I think you’ll find out in a bit, bawk. Don’t worry about me. Just get going, bawk.”

Akira tilted her head to the side.

“Anyway, later. Thanks again, bawk!” After waving goodbye, Kokoru took off.

“Wait, you’re leaving already?” I blurted.

“Hey, Kokoru! If you have any more problems, just come find us!”

He continued to run with awkward, hobbling steps, probably as a result of his odd body shape.

Once he was gone, Akira turned to me. “I wonder if Kokoru will be okay…”

“Even NPCs have trouble with interpersonal relationships, huh? That’s cutting-edge tech for you. Sometimes, the realness hurts.”

“If we see him again, we should try to help him out somehow.”

“For sure. Let’s do it.”

Soon, we arrived at the chapel where the mission briefing would be held.

“Attention, all guild representatives! Once you’ve received your materials, find a seat and wait.”

The NPC addressing us handed us booklets and ushered us inside.

“Wow, stained glass! It’s so pretty!”

Akira happily snapped screenshots behind me as I hunted for some good seats.

Ooh, this area looks pretty empty.

Empty except for one person, that is.

“Greetings. Long time no see, as they say.”

Oh god, there he is! It's the crazy, perverted, iron-masked nudist!

In the chapel, there were rows of pews arranged in front of long tables. He was sitting smack-dab in the middle of the centermost pew like he belonged there.

Naturally, nobody had sat anywhere near him. Who would want to? If the chapel were a field of crops, he would be the hole in the very center of a crop circle.

Come to think of it, he's a guild master too, right?

Considering he was here for the meeting, then yeah, he most likely was.

"Uh, heya," I replied, prompting some murmurs around us.

The whispers of "Wow, these guys know each other?" were incredible.

Ugh, so embarrassing! I wanna go home!

"What's the matter, friends? These seats aren't taken. Come, sit beside me." He patted the vacant spots at his side.

Uhh... I really don't want to!

Behind me, Akira discreetly shook her head.

"Ren! Akira! What are you doing?!"

"You idiots, get over here right now!"

The ones who had jumped in to save us from this travesty were Yukino and Homura. They grabbed our hands, yanking us to a faraway bench.

Thank God, I'm saved!

"You two had better watch out, or they'll think you're friends with that guy!" Yukino warned us.

"Yeah. You should know better than to go near that... thing!"

I was suddenly reminded of the time I'd gone to visit Homura in her classroom. Yep, she had definitely been ignoring him on purpose.

"W-Well, it's not like we don't know each other. He's actually Akabane's older brother, so—"

“Oh, the one from the tournament.” Homura whistled. “Really brave of her to come to this school with a brother like that around.”

“Yeah. She must have had a *really* good reason.”

Actually, yeah, she did.

That just went to show how badly she wanted to get along with Akira. A laudable act, indeed.

Meanwhile, the Akira she was trying so hard to befriend had given her a stupid pink mask as a present.

“All right, Ren, I can’t wait anymore. What’s in the pamphlet?” Akira asked me.

“Oh, let’s see. ‘Regarding the Competitive Guild Mission: Raising a Hero.’”

“Raising a Hero’?” she said. “Must be connected to what Kokoru and the others were saying about being hero candidates.”

“Ooh, they did say that!”

At that moment, a drop-dead gorgeous, silver-haired NPC appeared.

“Everyone, thank you for gathering here today.”

It was Princess Lieliz herself!

The whole crowd of guild reps oohed and aahed. Princess Lieliz was a cute and super-popular NPC, but she usually stayed within forbidden areas of the palace, so there weren’t many chances to see her. This was a rare opportunity.

Many people here had probably never seen her in person before.

“Wow, it’s Princess Lieliz! And there’s Anita, too.”

The female knight, Anita, had helped us during the hidden quest not long ago. She was a beauty as well. The two of them together was a radiant sight.

Behind the benches we were sitting at, there was an altar. When she reached the altar, Princess Lieliz grinned. She must have heard Akira talking because it looked like she was smiling at us.

“Teehee. This chance to meet you Legrand magnificoes has my heart fain and

heap'd in joy."

"Uhh..."

I don't understand! Our resident translator isn't here!

"Uh, I guess she's happy to see us?" Akira guessed.

Lieliz hadn't changed at all; she was still throwing out weird words whenever she felt like it. The combination of her eccentricity and incredible cuteness gave her a special kind of magnetism. There were a lot of girls like that out in the real world.

The other guild reps were shaken by her peculiar vocabulary. I figured those who were seeing her the first time were the most disturbed.

"You're confusing the students, Your Highness! Do this right!"

"Peace, Anita! I know what I'm doing."

In the midst of the confusion, the masked nudist was the first to speak.

"But wait, I say! I shall explain! 'Magnificoes' are illustrious persons, made famous in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*! She means to praise us as distinguished students of Legrand Academy! That is all!"

A gentleman and a scholar.

Seriously, though, he was a really smart guy. Wasn't he supposed to be a CEO or something? All in all, this man was 50% idiot, 50% genius, and 100% pervert. What an enigma.

"My, and what is that you're wearing? Such unique clothing. Have you considered joining a nudist colony?"

Whoa, princess! Don't you think that's a step too far?! This is bad; I'm starting to think maybe I'm the weird one here.

Crazier still was the fact that she hadn't even flinched when she'd noticed him. Noble ladies really knew how to keep a straight face.

Anita, on the other hand, was cringing so hard that her face had warped into a grimace.

"But wait, I say. I am honored to receive your praise." He stood and bowed

elegantly.

The way he struck his poses so swiftly made him even weirder.

Maybe these two would actually make a good pair?

My stomach hurt just watching them. There was so much to call out that it was hard to know where to begin.

“Your Highness, please! We should get to the actual—”

“Oh, you’re right. Ahem! Now, I will explain to you all the details of the impending mission.”

Nice job, Anita. We’re finally at the main event.

“Some days ago, the country Mishuria on the continent of Mishr requested to exchange personnel with Telluna. In short, they want their promising youths trained in the unique environment only Telluna can provide. As Mishuria has lost countless personnel to the war with Karanaught and to rampant wild monster appearances in recent years, it is imperative that their budding heroes are properly raised and educated. In accordance with our long friendship, we cannot refuse Mishuria’s request. As such, the royal family has decided to extend a hand to these youths.”

Hmm, how interesting. So basically, the deal is this: an allied country is in trouble, and they need their people trained as soon as possible. Telluna gives them the okay and is ready to welcome them with open arms. That’s pretty easy to follow.

“Naturally, Legrand Academy of Magic is our most prestigious learning institution. That is why we have gathered you all here today. We ask that each guild selects a hero candidate from Mishuria and trains them through whatever methods you see fit. I believe that each of you will be able to grow through this experience as well.”

I see! So the competitive guild mission involves raising a hero.

“Huh, how intriguing,” Homura mused. “So it’s a race to raise your NPC? Sounds fun.”

“Sounds kinda annoying. I would’ve preferred a full-on PvP tourney where

every area allowed PKing,” her sister grumbled.

“You already eat, sleep, and breathe PvP. Does it have to be part of the guild mission, too?”

“Heh. If you wanna master something, you might as well dedicate yourself to it.”

Princess Lieliz continued, “In one month’s time, we will hold a competition between the hero candidates. Each guild will be ranked based on the result. We’ll give you details on the competition at a later date. As you might expect, the highest-ranked guilds will be given ample rewards, so look forward to that.”

Ugh, I have a bad feeling about this. She’s not gonna dish out more Princess’ Skull Rings, is she?

Princess’ Skull Ring (O) Type: Accessory Level: 1

Effect: Multiplies experience gain by three. However, stat boosts upon level-up will be divided by three.

This was the one I was thinking of.

I’d tested it out a bit, but the results had been pretty dismal. The usual pattern of keeping the item on until just before the level-up, then switching it off to keep the stats hadn’t worked at all.

The moment you equipped it, the darn thing set your next level’s stat gains to one-third. I had been so crushed by the revelation that I’d intentionally died, taken the loss of EXP, and gone down a level so I could get my stats back on track.

Since I had equipped it at level 41, my level 42 stat boosts had already been lowered. In order to revoke that, I’d had to go all the way back down to 40 instead of just going back to 41.

How many times did I die just to reduce my EXP? Think of all the time I wasted! I’ll never wear that thing again!

Honestly, I had no idea what to do with this weird item. At least, not yet.

“On that note, it is time for the guilds to choose their hero candidates. I will have them file in now, so take this opportunity to get a good look at their stats

and growth rates. Come on in, everyone!”

On Princess Lieliz’s signal, the Mishurian NPCs came in one after another.

I get it, I get it!

“Ooh, so this is like a draft meeting. That’s awesome! I’m loving it!”

“Hehe, yeah! Look at all the choices!”

Akira and I weren’t the only ones getting hyped; the other guild masters all had fire in their eyes. The whole chapel was heating up.

Now, who should we draft as our hero?!

“I should mention that if multiple guilds choose the same candidate, the decision will be made by lottery. First, however, we do have one special exception.”

Oho, and what might that be?

“Having contributed greatly to the royal family’s safety, the guild Hell’s Crafters has been granted the right to select their candidate before the other guilds.”

“Huh? Seriously?!” I couldn’t believe it.

“Wow, awesome! Go us!”

Princess Lieliz smiled and nodded our way.

“Y’know what, that makes a lot of sense. I thought it was weird that we only got the Princess’ Skull Ring as a reward.”

“So getting first pick here is like our real reward, right?”

“Yeah! Wow, this could be huge.”

I was especially happy that we wouldn’t have to compete with other guilds over our draft pick. Those who knew a thing or two about pro baseball would understand just how big this could be!

The hero candidates lined up along the wall of the chapel. Apparently this still wasn't all of them, as more and more continued to enter. There couldn’t have been fewer than fifty guilds here, so there must have been at least that many

candidates to match.

Starting on one end, I took a good look at the NPCs. There were humans, elves, beastmen, and even lizardmen. They certainly weren't lacking in variety.

Mishuria must be a diverse country.

As for Telluna, it was pretty much all humans.

“Wow, we’ve got so many choices!”

“Hmm... There’s a wide variety of both levels and species.”

For every weakling between levels 1 and 3, there was a powerhouse somewhere between 30 and 40.

“I guess it’d be more beneficial for us to choose someone at a high starting level, right?”

“For sure. Especially since we have a limited time to raise them.”

Yukino butted in, “There’s also stat growth rates, current skills, each species’ innate characteristics...”

“And no matter what anyone else says, appearance is definitely a big deal,” Akira said.

Homura chuckled. “Haha. Yeah, that's important.”

“I bet you’d prefer a girl, right, Ren? What kinds of girls do you like? If I were in this lineup, would you pick me?”

“Huh? Uhh... I don’t like hypotheticals!”

“Oh, trying to worm your way out of it, I see.” Akira grinned, poking my cheek.

“Cut it out! C’mon, we gotta make a serious choice.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Yukino grinned at our little exchange. “Ahaha. You two are so close.”

Homura, on the other hand, rolled her eyes. “What an eyesore. Man, I wish I had a boyfriend.”

“Give it up, sis. With the way you act, it’s not gonna happen.”

“What?! I don’t wanna hear that from you of all people! You haven’t had a single boyfriend in your life!”

“I don’t really want one. Honestly, I couldn’t care less about dating.”

I ignored their squabble and instead focused on grabbing an outstanding candidate.

Along with their names and levels, the hero candidates had their stat-growth graphs and skill lists available for viewing. No sign of which class they were, though. Some had high starting levels, some had high stat growths, and some had super-long skill lists.

As for appearances, eh, I didn’t actually care that much. I’d even be okay with a guy. I was the only male member of our guild anyway, which made me feel kinda lonesome.

Hmm. Looks like the ones with higher starting levels tend to have much lower stat-growth rates.

I found that for most, it was more awe-inspiring—more dramatic, even—to have high stat growths, even if it involved a lower starting level.

Occasionally, there was the rare gem with a high level, high stat growths, and a good skill list. They were the blessed ones, pretty much.

So far, the one who stood out the most was...

Selphie Muse Level 62 Elf [Profile]

An elf from Mishuria and the eldest daughter in her family. She has a talent for powerful magic, but she is more of a pacifist and prefers not to fight.

[Growth Rates]

STR 2, VIT 3, DEX 4, AGI 4, INT 8, MND 7, CHR 5

*** Learns myriad magic spells, both offensive and defensive. She also comes equipped with skills that increase magical aptitude.**

Overall, she was balanced as such: Base Level: ★★★★★

Growth Rates: ★★★★★☆☆

Starting Skills: ★★★★★

Even without our help, she was already way stronger than anyone in our guild. A battle-ready force.

Plus, she was the stereotypical blonde elf babe. I figured most other guildies would be clamoring for her.

The next one who caught my eye was...

Mickott Corpul Level 58 Beastman (Werewolf) [Profile]

A female warrior who hails from a village on the Mishurian frontier. Until now, she has not strayed far from home. Despite her young age, she can compete with even the strongest of her fellow villagers.

[Growth Rates]

STR 6, VIT 6, DEX 7, AGI 7, INT 2, MND 2, CHR 6

*** Has many combat skills in her possession, including Taunt. She also has Innate Talent, a skill that decreases the required amount of EXP needed to level up.**

Much like the elf, her specs were essentially: Base Level: ★★★★★

Growth Rates: ★★★★★☆☆

Starting Skills: ★★★★★

Probably more of an overpowered front-liner, I thought. She's even easier to level up than most of the others I've seen.

Were these two the strongest? They were both gorgeous, too, so they'd easily be popular picks. I found myself wishing the male NPCs would try a bit harder.

Oh, here's a decent one.

Alfred Breaze Level 1 Human [Profile]

A son of Mishurian royalty. His family's territory was conquered by a rival country, however, so his status as royalty is in name only. He worked to become a hero candidate in order to revive his bloodline.

[Growth Rates]

STR 7, VIT 7, DEX 7, AGI 7, INT 7, MND 7, CHR 7

*** Has the skill Late Bloomer. This skill increases the amount of EXP required to level up, but adds a bonus to growth rates.**

As for this guy...

Base Level: ★☆☆☆☆

Growth Rates: ★★★★★

Starting Skills: ★★★★★

Once his level caught up, he would probably be the strongest one. He was a fresh-faced, attractive guy. Older girls would probably love him.

“Selphie and Mickott look strong. Alfred might be the strongest once we raise him,” Akira remarked.

“Yeah, sounds about right,” I agreed.

Anyone looking at them would probably think the same.

We had first dibs, so we could just choose any of the three and come out on top without a problem.

But still...

What’s the fun in getting overpowered results when they’ve been handed to you on a silver platter?

“Mmm... Any others?”

I looked at the stats of the NPCs who had just entered.

Peater Jet Level 55 Birdman (Peafowl) [Profile]

A magic knight who is well known among Mishurian Birdmen. Daring, yet composed, he is a warrior with ample experience. Like other peafowls, he is capable of flight.

[Growth Rates]

STR 5, VIT 4, DEX 6, AGI 5, INT 4, MND 4, CHR 5

*** Possesses several fighting skills and offensive magic spells.**

Ooh, he’s not bad. Uh, wait. I remember this guy! He’s one of those Birdmen who were with Kokoru back in the courtyard. In that case...

“Oh! There’s Kokoru!” Akira shouted, pointing.

The chicken Birdman we’d met was here, too!

I see. So this is what they were talking about! All right, let’s have a look at Kokoru’s stats.

Kokoru Sanders Level 1 Birdman (Chicken) [Profile]

The son of a merchant who set up shop in Mishuria’s royal capital. As a chicken subspecies of Birdman, he is both unable to fly and weak in battle. Like many of his kind, he has opted to take up trade. Kokoru is skilled as a merchant but poor when it comes to combat. He is known for his timidity.

[Growth Rates]

STR 1, VIT 3, DEX 1, AGI 1, INT 1, MND 1, CHR 1

*** Inherent Skills Apprenticeship: Can be directed to run a guild shop.**

Subcontractor: Can work in the atelier according to players’ orders.

Cowardice: In battle, all stats are reduced.

Yooooo! What the hell is the deal with that last one?!

Apprenticeship and Subcontractor were great and all, but this guy was clearly not suited for battle.

Yep, this one’s obvious.

Base Level: ★☆☆☆☆

Growth Rates: ★☆☆☆☆

Starting Skills: ★☆☆☆☆

Too bad, Kokoru. You’re probably the weakest one here. Even your profile says you suck at fighting.

All of the other Birdmen were level 30 or higher with acceptable growth rates. Plus, they could fly.

His stats, growth rates, and curse-tier skill were pretty rough.

“W-Wow. Kokoru’s stats are pretty bad,” Akira said awkwardly.

I nodded. "Yeah. In a way, it's kind of incredible."

And that made it all the more meaningful!

Again, I ask! Where's the fun in using overpowered characters to achieve your goals?!

"Heheh... Hahaha... Mrmhehe!"

When she noticed my suppressed laughter, Akira jumped in surprise. "What's wrong? Does your stomach hurt?"

"Oh no. Not in the slightest. This is great! I've found you, my shining star!"

"Uh, Ren, you don't mean..."

"Redefinition! Awakening! Giant-killing! Do you not see how Kokoru has all of this drama and romance hidden within his very soul?!"

"Ack! There it is! I can see the twinkle in your eyes, you weirdo!"

"Remember what you said, Akira? Next time we see him, we ought to help him out."

"Um, right."

"Well, we can see him now! Is this not the perfect time to help him out?!"

Akira couldn't even begin to protest. On the contrary, a wide grin played on her lips. "Hahaha, I get it. I'm not against it."

"Ooh, really?!"

"I know you won't budge. As dumb as your ideas can be, that's what makes you you."

"That's my best friend for you! You get me!"

"Yeah, yeah. I already gave up a long time ago."

"Say what? You tryna slander me?!"

"Nope, you're just imagining it. Anyway, let's do this!"

"Yeah! Let's make it official!"

"Okay!"

Thus, we unanimously made our draft pick!

Around that time, Princess Lieliz resumed speaking. “Attention, everyone! Please, take your seats! We will now proceed to the selection and lottery phase. First up, Hell’s Crafters—are you ready to provide the name of your desired hero candidate?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Akira and I rose as we answered simultaneously.

I could hear the nervous mutterings of guild masters all around us.

“Please, anyone but her!”

“Leave that guy for us!”

Relax, everybody. I doubt anyone’s eyeing this little dude.

Without hesitation, we announced, “We want Kokoru Sanders!”

“WHAAAAAAT?!”

The venue erupted in cries of shock and disdain.

“What are they thinking?!”

“Look, that’s the idiot who threw away all his money back at the PvP tournament!”

“Whoa. Now poor Akira’s stuck with that drumstick!”

Even Princess Lieliz was visibly annoyed by our decision. *You’re just going to waste my goodwill?! was written all over her face.*

“Hey, you two should really reconsider! I know how you are, but this is insanity!” cried Yukino.



“Seriously,” said Homura. “Your guild is tiny, so you’re already at a disadvantage when it comes to staff and resources. There’s no reason to make it even harder for yourselves!”

Yukino then turned to Akira. “At times like this, you have to keep Ren under control. You never know what he’s going to drag you into.”

“Not quite, Yukino. This time, I’m with him one hundred percent!”

Ooh! I see a fire in Akira’s eyes! Must be because she saw Kokoru getting bullied. She seriously hated that. I mean, it got under my skin too.

I was always struck by how kind Akira was.

Guess I’m falling for her all over again. Caught off-guard by the thought, I blinked. Huh? Wait, what am I thinking? Ah, whatever. Gotta keep going!

“But wait, I say. To all of you who choose to complain, this matter does not concern you. This man has committed no crime. Furthermore, do you not realize how rude your yawping is to their hero candidate? You could hurt his dignity. Though he is an NPC, he is still a person.”

His words silenced the other guildies.

It definitely wasn’t because they were humbled, though. They just didn’t want to interact with the masked nudist. He seemed like he was trying to say something meaningful, but he had way too many problems of his own for it to make an impact.

“You’re the one who looks like a criminal, bawk. I don’t wanna hear that from you, bawk.”

Nice one, Kokoru! You’re the only man brave enough to even speak to this guy!

“Hmph. Public indecency is not a crime in this world. Thus, I am not a criminal.”

I sure wish it was!

Once things had settled down a bit, Princess Lieliz brought the conversation back on track. “Well then, erm, Hell’s Crafters have chosen Kokoru Sanders as

their hero candidate! Kokoru, you are free to join them.”

Urged on by the princess, Kokoru trudged over to us. His stomach was as round as a barrel, so the way he waddled as he went was kinda funny.

“Bawk. We met earlier, right?”

“Yep. I’m Ren! Nice to officially meetcha, Kokoru!”

“I’m Akira!”

“S-Sorry, bawk. You just picked me because of all that stuff back there, right?”

“No need to apologize! We genuinely wanted you, buddy.”

“Yeah, yeah! Welcome to the group! Might as well have some fun while we’re doing this, right?”

“Bawk... Th-Thanks, bawk.”

Ignoring our happy meet and greet, the draft meeting continued.

“Now, on to the next group!”

This draft couldn’t have gone better! I’m totally satisfied!

Chapter 6: A Cruel Fight to Stifle the Grind

Three days had passed since the draft meeting for the competitive guild mission.

“We’re home.”

After class, we all headed to the guild house as usual. Kokoru was there to greet us.

“Oh! Welcome back, everyone. Bawk.”

He hopped down from his seat behind the counter and plopped onto the floor. There was something terribly charming about how silly his every action was.

“Chirp chirp! Chicken! Chicken!” Draco playfully flew over and landed on Kokoru’s head, giving him lots of friendly nips.

“Bawk?! Cut it out, bawk! Don’t eat meee!”

He ran around like a chicken with his head... being chewed off.

Akira laughed. “Ahahaha. I see Draco and Kokoru are getting along.”

Yano, on the other hand, looked a little uneasy. “I dunno. Some people say these dragons mean it when they bite. I’m worried about what’ll happen when he gets a little bigger.”

“Erm, I’m sure it will be fine,” Maeda said. “I doubt the devs would set up something so gruesome... right?”

“I wonder. This game does have a lot of weird little details in it.”

“Et tu, Takashiro?! Please, don’t frighten him!”

“Hey, Ren! This is for you, bawk!”

“Hm?”

Kokoru traded me a few items along with some money. On top of 110,000 Mila, there were several designer items for our guild shop. He had stayed exactly within the specifications of quantity and designs that I asked for.

“Ooh, this stuff sold well! The stuff you made was spot-on, too! Thanks, buddy!”

“If you guys are gonna let me stay here, I might as well try to earn my keep, baww.”

Indeed, with Kokoru’s Apprenticeship and Subcontractor skills, we could put him in charge of the guild shop. He could also craft things in order to replenish the shop’s stock when it got low.

I’d always wanted a shopkeeper NPC, so he was the perfect addition to our group.

As the son of a merchant, he had an aptitude for trade. He was even going outside and attracting more customers to the store. When we left him in charge during classes, he could sell things a whole 150% faster than we normally did. He was the best shopkeeper NPC I knew..

As for leveling him up, we hadn’t made any progress whatsoever. He was still level 1. He tried to say that he was still getting used to running the shop and that he wasn’t ready to move on to the next step yet, but...

We really ought to deal with that soon.

“So, Kokoru. Ready to go grind up some levels today?”

“Nice, this is what I’ve been waiting for! Let’s goooo!” Yano was over the moon; she loved grinding.

“Right. If we don’t get to work soon, we’ll surely fall behind the other guilds,” Maeda agreed.

“Yeah! Let’s go get ’em, Kokoru!”

“B-Baww. Are we really doing this? I feel bad since you guys took me in and all, but there’s no point in trying to raise me, baww. Even I know I’m worthless. I’d be better off just running the shop, baww.”

“Yeah, you’re a huge help here in the shop. But think about it like this: if you’re already helping out, then it’s not a waste of time for us to train you. Just think of it as us hanging out, all right?”

“If you’re that okay with it, then I guess we can try, baww.”

“Nice. Let’s get your equipment straight, then.”

We threw together some equipment for Kokoru. NPCs could equip weapons and protective gear too, after all. It was our responsibility to give them something good. But they couldn’t just equip anything; each character had a set type of equipment they could use.

Kokoru was a light-armor type, able to equip things between leather armor and chain mail.

Equipment had base level requirements, but level 1 would probably work for now. I could craft plenty of different items for level 1, so I crafted some stuff and had him equip it.

“What kind of weapons can he use?” I wondered aloud before taking a look.

Kokoru’s equippable weapons were shortswords, swords, lances, whips, and crossbows. He had a pretty wide range. My own symbologist class could only equip staves at base level.

“Bawk, I’m really no good at slicing or hitting stuff up close.”

“Then let’s go with crossbows.”

“I can work with that, bawk.”

All right. I’ll just make a wooden crossbow and some wooden bolts.

With that, Kokoru had a pretty spiffy starting loadout!

“Nice! Now, let’s get going!”

Everyone cheered. “Woohoo!”

And we were off!

Our destination was Timber Forest in Mishr. This was where Akira and I had done our testing on the properties of the Blowgun. There were plenty of enemies, so it wasn’t a bad spot to hunt.

However...

“Huh? Uh, where are the enemies?”

What happened to all the Bandit Wolves that were swarming the place?

“Bawk? There’s nothing here.”

Akira frowned. “That’s weird. Last time, we had plenty of mobs to kill.”

“Maybe it’s a coincidence? I’m sure that if we wait, they’ll start swarming as usual,” Yano suggested.

“Right. Let’s wait,” Maeda agreed.

A minute passed. Then four more ticked by. Still nothing!

Weird! They were supposed to have a respawn time of five minutes.

Once they died, the Bandit Wolves should’ve only taken five minutes to come back. But they still weren’t showing up. Could that have meant they were still alive somewhere else?

I turned to the team. “Something’s fishy. Let’s take a quick look around.”

We proceeded through the forest a bit more, and soon...

Grrr...

Ruff!

Groar!

Rawr...

Grrrrr!

I heard a whole bunch of crazy growling. Those were the sounds of the Bandit Wolves.

Following the noises, we entered a clearing in the forest.

“Whoa! What in the world are they doing?!” I cried.

There was a huge pack of Bandit Wolves crowding in one place. I figured there must’ve been a hundred or so.

It was as if all the enemies in the forest had gathered here. They had surrounded a single player and were attacking him relentlessly.

Despite the onslaught, the player in the center of it all seemed perfectly calm. He was over level 100, while the Bandit Wolves were all 30 or below. With the vast level difference, he was taking no damage at all.

He noticed us and called out, “Heheh. Sorry, buds. I’ve already claimed this grinding spot! Stay here as long as you want, but your NPC won’t be getting a single point of EXP!”

Uh, what? Oh! He’s trying to sabotage other guilds in the competitive mission!

By sealing off the area, he was going to prevent our NPC from leveling.

Huh. That’s some ruthless competition! Not bad, not bad at all.

“I see. They aren’t going to go easy on us, huh?”

“Yeah. It *is* a competitive mission between guilds, after all. Whatever it takes to win, right?” Akira gulped.

If he was going to keep the enemies away from us like that, there wasn’t much we could do.

In this game, the first party to take aggro from a monster is the only one who can fight it. Simply put, this is the right to monster monopoly.

If the devs hadn’t made it this way, rarer monsters could get sniped by some stranger hanging out on the side, netting him all the item drops while you and your crew got nothing. Thus, it made enough sense to me.

However, because it’s based on which party gets aggro first, competition between groups to monopolize rare monsters with good drops is pretty intense.

Several parties might wait with bated breath, ready to unleash a Taunt skill to secure their monopoly. These moments could be as tense as the seconds before the start of a short-distance sprint.

That’s the true, heated battle between those who have their eyes on certain items.

The opposite of the monster-monopoly system is the “anything goes” system, where anyone can freely jump in and bop a monster from the side. The majority of locations useful for leveling in this game use the former.

There *are* instances where kill-stealing is allowed during events or missions. This, however, was not one of those times.

At present, the hundred-ish wolves were all being monopolized by a different

player, so we couldn't lay a finger on them. This wouldn't be a viable place to grind.

Normally, I could've called a GM to settle the matter since it was technically a type of griefing activity—something done only to bother other players. But this player belonged to the guild Peacemakers, who were essentially the student council here.

Normally, the Peacemakers would help players deal with any griefing or harassment they endured. The fact that he could do this in the first place meant that the GMs were accepting of these methods for this event.

"Give it up! Go on, scram! I'm not letting a single one of these boys go! Oh, yes, good doggie! That's my boy!"

He was the spitting image of a certain chimpanzee expert surrounded by her beloved apes.

Does this guy love animals or what? This scene is pretty bizarre.

"Wh-What do we do, bawk?"

"Looks like the only thing we *can* do is leave," I replied. "Let's try somewhere else!"

"Since it's close, shall we try Almishr's Burial Ground?"

Maeda's suggestion was a good one.

"Good idea. Let's go!"

We moved over there, but...

"What?! Here too?!"

The plains above the burial ground had yet another player monopolizing a huge crowd of monsters.

This time, the player belonged to Mystic Arts.

That's Yukino's guild! Is everybody in on this?!

If so, Homura's guild, Grand Museum, was likely doing the same. And at this rate, maybe even Kataoka's Fountain of Knowledge.

“Anyway, we might as well check inside!”

We stepped into the burial ground.

Normally, blood-red Crimson Mummies would be sprouting from the walls, but everything was still.

“Seriously?! The place is completely empty!” Yano shouted.

“Perhaps all the grinding spots in the world are under someone’s thumb?”

I snapped my fingers. “Maeda might actually be right!”

“I guess doing so means you can just stop other guilds from progressing,” Akira said.

Maeda cocked her head to the side. “But I haven’t seen any other guilds’ NPCs.”

“True,” Yano said with a nod. “Just chumps trying to keep people from gaining those delicious levels.”

“Hindering others is great and all, but how are they gonna raise their own candidates?” I asked.

Yano shrugged. “Dunno. It’s a mystery.”

“Anyway, I think we should get moving again,” Maeda suggested.

“Yeah. We gotta find someplace we can use,” I agreed.

“How about Trinisty Isle?” Akira asked. “The upper floors could help a little.”

If there’s no other choice, we might as well try it.

We were pretty much on a wild goose chase, but off to Trinisty Isle we went. However, the tenth floor had already been plundered. I found myself grinding my teeth in frustration.

We went down one floor at a time, until...

“In the end, I can’t stay away from this place. Hey, fellas! Daddy’s home!”

Before us were my good friends and test subjects: the Island Bunnies. As always, they were hopping to and fro with vacant expressions.

Yep, we had come all the way down to the first floor of Trinisty Isle. This place

always gave me a little nostalgia.

I can't believe this is the only place in the clear! You don't even get EXP here once you reach level 3, so I guess they overlooked this place because there isn't much point in blocking it.

Akira laughed awkwardly. "Ahaha... Well, it's better than nothing. Let's just get him to level 3 for now."

"Sure. All right, Kokoru. Have at 'em!"

"Um, I'll try. Bawk."

"You can do it!"

With Akira cheering him on, Kokoru raised his crossbow and took aim.

Now, let's see how Kokoru's Cowardice trait affects things.

His hands trembled as he held the crossbow, making his aim dubious at best. Was he even capable of landing a hit?

"B-B-Baaawk!"

The crossbow bolt he fired went in a completely different direction from where he'd aimed it. We all watched it soar way up in an arc, then come back down toward an Island Bunny.

Ooh! That's not the one he was aiming for, but hey!

Unfortunately, the Island Bunny evaded the attack.

Still, the attack had earned Kokoru some aggro. After dodging it, the bunny made a beeline for him. It was followed by another Island Bunny right next to it. The second bunny had seen its buddy get targeted and was now ready to help it fight back.

This is called a linked mob.

The two Island Bunnies closed in on Kokoru.

"Bawk?!"

"It's okay, Kokoru!" I shouted. "You've got plenty of distance to your advantage! Keep on shooting."

“B-Bawk...”

He shakily set another bolt in the crossbow and fired. However, his fear combined with the recoil of the crossbow caused the bolt to go straight up.

When they reached him, the Island Bunnies let loose a flurry of attacks on Kokoru.

“Bagawk?! D-Don’t eat me, bawk! I don’t taste any good!”

Having taken some damage, Kokoru was full-on panicking.

“I’ll help you!”

I did a couple of simple body slams on one of the Island Bunnies. Naturally, it died right away.

Akira took down the other one with one of Skyfall’s shockwaves.

“You okay, Kokoru?” I asked.

Well, now I know he’s one of those guys who can’t aim a crossbow to save his life. Wasn’t he supposed to have an aptitude for it, though?

Was this due to the effects of Cowardice? Or was this simply an issue stemming from Kokoru himself?

“Urgh... Thanks, bawk. Those foes were super scary.” Kokoru unsteadily got back on his feet.

Bonk!

The bolt that had gone up into the air had flown back down and stabbed right into Kokoru’s head.

Kokoru attacked.

Dealt 7 damage to Kokoru!

Kokoru defeated Kokoru.

“Baaawk!”

He collapsed to the ground, dead. Kokoru had self-destructed!

“Oh. Well, uh, I can see the problem here.”

“Ahahahaha! He killed himself! That’s actually insane!”

“Pfft... Stop it, Yuuna. The poor boy... Pffhaha!”

Akira, however, did her best to cheer him up. “It’s okay, Kokoru! Nobody’s perfect on their first try!”

“Chirp! Chicken! Mmm, tasty!” Draco started chomping on the fallen Kokoru.

Despite the uphill battle, I believed it would make transforming him into a hero all the more worthwhile.





The next morning, I was hard at work crafting items for the shop. Just a little bit of productivity before class.

Kokoru was lending a hand, which was a huge help. It made things go much faster.

When he was in the shop instead of on the battlefield, Kokoru really was a capable guy. But that wouldn't mean anything when it came to the mission.

Incidentally, Kokoru was still level 1.

I was hoping we could do some quick power-leveling to help him out, but if none of his attacks were going to land...

Even other weapons like shortswords and lances had been a complete dud. In the end, we'd concluded that it was just one of Cowardice's effects.

We had to come up with a way to pump up his stats, whether it was through magic or some other means.

If only we could cancel out the debuffs from Cowardice. Might as well investigate a little on that front.

Trying to raise his level as things were now would be impossible. We wouldn't be able to power-level him, either. We would have to include him in our party and fight enemies that would yield experience at our level.

In the case of party grinding, experience yield is calculated based on the highest level in the party. If an enemy's level is too low in comparison, the party won't get any EXP.

Trinisty Isle wouldn't work because the enemies were too weak. We were still in our early 40s, so enemies around level 50 would make for good hunting. However, the interference from other guilds was no joke.

How could we redefine Kokoru? How would we get around the monopolies other guilds had over grinding spots? There was a lot to think about.

But hey, I happened to enjoy that kind of trial-and-error work!

"What to do, though?"

“Bawk. Sorry about yesterday, bawk.”

Hearing my muttering, Kokoru dropped his shoulders in shame.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad or anything.”

“But you’re stuck thinking about how to fix me, bawk.”

“Don’t worry, buddy. We came in ready to deal with stuff like this. It’ll just be extra satisfying when we get you to shine! I wanna tell the world that I was the one who raised you!”

“Bawk. You’ve got some weird hobbies.”

“Heh, don’t praise me too much. Besides, if all goes well, you’ll get to show those Birdmen who were picking on you who’s boss. Doesn’t that sound great?”

“Sure, I guess. But I understand why they’re mad, bawk. I don’t know why I was chosen to be a hero candidate. I can only imagine that my dad bribed somebody, bawk.”

“Well, Akira’s all fired up and ready to help you get back at those guys, so it’s far too early to throw in the towel. Humor us for a little longer, all right? We’ll figure this out, I swear.”

I gave Kokoru an encouraging pat on the back.

“You’re all so nice, bawk. But I know better than to expect anything from myself by now. I’m just a big, dumb chicken.”

I mean, you’re not wrong there. You’re literally a chicken.

Still, I felt his mentality needed just as much of a level-up as the rest of him.

“It’s still not too late, bawk. Why not just pick a new candidate or something? If you really push them, they might let you do it.”

“I would never. If you really aren’t up to it, then just helping around the shop is more than enough. Anyway, I’m off to class. Good luck with the shop, buddy.”

“Yeah. See you later, bawk.”

Thus, I entrusted the shop to Kokoru and left for school.

During afternoon homeroom, Ms. Nakada had an announcement for us. She

delivered it with her usual pep.

“The competitive mission is still in progress, but remember that tests are coming up. Are you all studying as much as you should be? Not that I need to remind you, but your test scores are directly converted into Merit Points. That means you gamers better hit the books! I know you all have your sights set on plenty of talents, equipment, and other items.”

Yes, ma’am! I study every once in a while! My test scores are gonna rise dramatically, just you wait!

“But just to really get you gamers motivated, your teacher has come with a teeny, tiny tidbit of information.”

Ooh? What’s this?

“Your scores don’t *just* get converted into MEP. You can also get new rewards based on your overall rank!”

Ohoho!

The class was excited now.

What could it be? Am I gonna get anything?

“And here’s the reward for the top-ranking student in your grade!”

Ms. Nakada knocked on the blackboard, causing an image to pop up.

No way, a whole airship?!

“That’s right, your very own private airship! This is a high-speed aircraft, so it’s much faster than the regular ones. You can also use it whenever and however you like!”

“Wow, wow, wow! This is great!”

I had taken a ride on the airship owned by Yukino’s guild before. It had been a very comfy, pleasant experience, and it’d made me wish that we could have one of our own someday.

Apparently, this game even has airship battles. An airship would be necessary to enjoy that experience, of course. But if you want to buy one using MEP or straight cash, the cost is just out of control.

With that in mind, it would be awesome to get one for free. Better yet, we had a real chance of winning this with Akira and Maeda on our side.

“Akira, think we can do it?”

“Yeah, I’ll do everything in my power to hit the top spot! We’ll get that airship and find all the best views in the world! Ehehe!” Akira’s eyes were sparkling like never before.

This was the incredible smile of a girl obsessed with worldly desires.

Maeda was sitting a short distance away from us, her jaw set with determination.

Ooh, she’s ready to win. Very reliable!

As for me, well, I probably couldn’t do it. But I was ready to get the highest score I could. There were plenty of talents I still wanted!



Once the school day was over, I ended up going to the info brokers with Akira and the others.

“Hey, man. Got anything about skills or equips that can cancel out an NPC’s Cowardice skill?”

Kataoka was in charge of the store, operating the Dealer’s Desk to access their database.

“Mmm... Nope! Nothing’s coming up.”

“For real?!”

“Yep. NPC training is an unprecedented event. Must be different from raising a pet dragon too, right? Pets that come with beast-tamer classes don’t let you mess with their skills or equipment either. We’re still developing our knowledge on this one.”

“Well, that’s not good. Hmm... Okay, one more.”

“Sure. That’ll be another three thousand Mila.”

“You got it.”

I paid Kataoka the info fee.

“So, what do you wanna know?”

“You know how all the grinding spots are being disturbed because of the competitive guild mission?”

“Yeah. Interfering with other guilds by cutting off their EXP sources is a super basic strategy. The GMs are okay with it too, so even our guild has a gang going out and doing it.”

“That means cutting off your own farming spots too, right? Where do you raise your NPCs, then? That’s my question.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Each guild has their own private dungeon. Only guild members or people they invite can come in, so that’s where most people are grinding.”

“I see! So *that’s* why we haven’t seen anyone else’s NPCs.” Maeda’s brow furrowed.

Yano was pretty taken aback. “Whoa, that’s crazy! And it’s rude as heck to mess with other people’s grinding zones when you have a pristine one all to yourself!”

“Well, it’s pretty effective.” Kataoka shrugged. “You can tell everyone is serious about this because they’re going about it so mercilessly.”

I nodded. “If you wanna play, you play to win. I understand how they feel. After all, everyone at this school is a video-game addict.”

The more fun a game is, the more you want to play to win. Going for the top, competing with others, and winning becomes your greatest source of joy. Sports are like that, too. Whether you can make money, though, depends on society’s values and your status.

Whoops, I sound just like my parents now. Though I do agree with them.

“Anyway,” Kataoka continued, “you can only make a private dungeon if you can get your own island in the Lagoon. So, if you’re not a bigger guild with those facilities already, it’ll be rough for ya.”

“Then this is essentially a strategy formulated by bigger guilds to crack down

on smaller ones.”

Maeda was probably right.

“Yeah. Small fries like us are at a real disadvantage,” Yano said.

“Who cares? You can only topple giants if there *are* giants in the first place!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Yano waved me off like a fly. “We know how it goes, Ren.”

“Hey, Kataoka. Is there anywhere we can go to level up uninterrupted if we don’t have a private dungeon?”

Akira’s question prompted Kataoka to stick out his hand.

“You know the deal. Three thousand more Mila.”

Cha-ching.

“All right. There’s this place called Sky Fissure.”

Hmm, I’ve never heard of that before. At least, it definitely wasn’t mentioned in the Unlimited World Guidebook.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Well, as the name implies, it’s a rift in the sky. Sends you to a randomly-generated, instanced dungeon. There are multiple entrances, and they move. Each entrance is treated as a different dungeon, so it’s impossible to stop people from grinding there. You could try using that.”

Akira nodded, listening intently. “That might be pretty good. How would we get there?”

“It’s in the sky, so you gotta use an airship. But normal passenger ships won’t go there. You could buy or rent one, but either way, you need an airship that goes anywhere you want it to go. Then, you find an entrance and hop in.”

We need our own airship!

“Mm... Maybe we could borrow one from another guild? Snowy or Spitfire might let us.”

I’d be careful throwing out nicknames like that if I were you, Yano. Snowy might be cool with it, but Spitfire would probably be pissed.

The nicknames *were* pretty cute, though, so I wasn't entirely against them.

"Eh, I'd rather not impose on them. They might be willing to help us out, but their guild members probably wouldn't. It'd be rude to put them in the middle like that."

Since they were both guild masters, they could probably make it happen if they were forceful enough. But it would be awful if that hurt their relationship with the guild.

"Ah, yeah. It'd be best for those girls to stay in their guilds' good graces."

You wouldn't have guessed it, but Yano was quick to catch on when it came to delicate social situations.

"You're right. Besides, there's something even more important at stake here."

"Borrowing is relying on others! And if you're relying on others, you're not toppling giants with your own power! Right, Ren?"

"Correct! A-plus answer, Akira!" I gave her a proud little round of applause.

"Hehe. That's very like you, Takashiro." Maeda chuckled.

"I agree one hundred percent. A follower can't accept gifts from his Hime-chan! He can only make offerings! You get me, right, Takashiro?!"

"No, dude! I don't!"

Let it GO, man!

In this guy's mind, every female player was a Hime-chan, and that made every male a follower. A very simple worldview, if anything.

"Sheesh. Then how are we gonna secure an airship?" Yano asked, scratching her head.

"Don't worry, there's a way. I am gonna have to rely on you girls, though. Remember what Ms. Nakada said during homeroom, about the reward for the top test score?"

"Oh, yeah, it was an airship! All right, Akki and Kotomi! Good luck!"

"Yes, leave it to us. I already wanted one, so I was planning to put my all into it anyway."

“Yep. All the more reason to win!”

Maeda and Akira were the pinnacle of reliability!

We’d finally found a way to level up. All that remained then was to figure out how to make Kokoru a thing.

I knew I wanted to make him explode into a full-body redefinition of the NPC meta! I just didn't quite know how yet.

I’d have to keep looking into it.

Chapter 7: The Kokoru Training Plan

“Dang, it’s huge! This is insane!”

“Yeah! It’s awesome!”

Yano and I were overly impressed by the splendor of the room in which we stood. There was a plethora of unique items arranged atop display pedestals and in exhibits. Beside each item was a museum label that explained its abilities. A jaw-dropping amount of these artifacts and their dwellings lined the walls, spilling out of every nook and cranny.

Without a doubt, this was the great passion of a group of item lovers on display.

The museum, which must have been curated through generations of players, probably housed almost a thousand items. It was owned by Homura’s guild, Grand Museum, and it was located on their private island in the Lagoon.

We had come here in hopes of finding any leads concerning the best way to train Kokoru. Info brokers were great and all, but they didn’t help much if you weren’t entirely sure what information you needed. Redefining Kokoru himself was still a vague concept, so we didn’t have any specific info we could ask for.

Perhaps by looking at the items here, we could find something that would make us say, “This is it!”

Even if we didn’t find anything, though, I had always wanted to come here at least once. It was a nice little diversion.

By the way, I was here with Yano and Draco. Kokoru was back at the shop with Akira and Maeda, who were studying hard for the next test. It was coming up soon, and we desperately needed one of them to reach the top rank!

In their stead, we benchwarmers were on a hunt for a breakthrough. As the guild’s resident genius strategist, I was ready to figure out what to do with Kokoru.

One day, I would be able to brag that indeed, it was yours truly who had raised that boy!

“Akira’s! Akira’s!” Draco stopped in front of an exhibit and began chirping out words.

I think his vocabulary might be growing.

He even had our names memorized at this point. Except for Kokoru, that is, who he called simply “chicken.”

As for what was Akira’s, it was an item inside the display. Her favorite sword, Skyfall, was sitting there.

Right beside Skyfall was a carbon copy of it, which was actually Skyfall +1. In fact, Akira’s current weapon actually *was* Skyfall +1. Even further to the right was Skyfall +2.

“Imagine how annoying it was to get all these Skyfalls,” I mumbled.

The drop rate’s like one in a thousand, right? They have some incredible passion. That’s what happens when you get a bunch of item fetishists together, I guess. I wonder what their completion percentage was?

“Ooh. They’ve got plenty of guns and shields too!” Yano’s eyes shone with excitement.

It was only natural she’d be interested in seeing her favorite items on display. I totally sympathized.

“Ooh! This Black Thunder has double the range, wow! Who knew stuff like this was in the game? I want one!”

“Heh. Shooting distance is justice, for sure. I wonder how you get it? Since it’s OEX, maybe it’s a rare monster drop?”

O means you can only have one at a time, and EX means it’s bind-on-pickup. In other words, the EX designation means you can’t try to sell it. Because it has no real market value, and can’t be given to other players, there’s no real point in forging an EX item yourself. Thus, this one had likely been a drop from a rare monster.

For some reason, there *are* some craftables marked as OEX. Want some examples? Hidden weapons, hidden weapons, and, uh... did I mention hidden weapons?!

“They’ve got bayonets, too. I love this Prism Bayonet! It’s so pretty!”

The display case Yano was pointing to contained a bayonet that reflected all seven colors of the rainbow. Just as she’d said, it was spectacularly beautiful.

I peered at the item’s label. “Says here it’s got an additional effect: ‘Deals elemental damage that matches the enemy’s weakness.’ So it’s like the seven colors have properties of each element, right? That’s pretty neat.”

This one was OEX, too!

“Maybe we should ask the info broker what drops this one,” Yano said.

This place was great for discovering new items you might want.

“Once things calm down, let’s see if we can’t hunt one of these down. Bet if we had Akira with us, she could earn us some super-lucky pulls.”

“Oh, really? For me?”

“Yeah, why not? We’ve been relying on you a lot lately, Yano. You’re the whole reason the guild shop is so popular too. Consider it a thank you for all you’ve done for us.”

Yano’s designs were so popular that our designer items had been selling like hotcakes. The made-to-order patterns that people could put on their favorite items were doing well too.

“If we’re talking about gratitude, I feel the same way.”

“Huh, really? I was just feeling bad because it seemed like I was using you.”

“Well, it’s like we’ve uncovered some sort of, uh... talent that I never know I had. All the customers love it, so it makes me feel that even a dummy like me can be useful. Embarrassing as it is, I’ve felt a real sense of purpose lately.”



Yano's bashful smile was unbelievably charming.

She was one of those girls who seemed a little vain but was actually a good person on the inside. In a way, she might have been the most upstanding out of all of us.

"Then I'll gladly keep using you to my heart's content!"

"Okay! Leave it to me, boss."

Now, deepening our friendship was great and all, but the Kokoru problem remained. Could the key to awakening him truly be found in this item museum?

Unlike players, NPCs like Kokoru didn't have five talent slots. As a result, you had to make up for that disadvantage with good equipment—like my Equip Ring or Rush Ring, for example. You could change an NPC's equipment just by trading them an item. Would we be able to find something useful here?

We wandered around the museum at length, checking out various items.

"Hm? What's this one?"

I had come upon a display case with no museum label. Inside, there was a huge egg that looked like it belonged to an ostrich.

What had lain this egg? There was no way to tell without the explanation. They must have missed this one.

"Chirp? Hand...shake?" Draco once again stopped in front of an exhibit and tilted his head.

He was looking at a weirdly shaped lance. The tip of the lance, instead of being the pointy part that kills people, was instead metal formed in the shape of a hand offering a handshake.

What even is this?

Handshaker (OEX)

Type: Lance

Level: 20

Might: 1

AP Gain: 1

Poise: 55

Guard Break: 1

Effect: Enemies defeated with this weapon will not be slain, instead compromising and joining the user. As long as this weapon remains equipped, recruited monsters can be summoned or released. If a recruited monster is defeated or this weapon is removed, they can not be recovered.

Only monsters below the user's level can be recruited. Only one monster can be summoned at a time.

Ineffective against rare monsters.

Oh?

It had low attack power, but the effect was *very* interesting. If you took down an enemy with this, you could recruit them, it seemed. Best of all, it worked on enemies up to the user's level.

The important part, then, was that it didn't use your stats to determine its effectiveness; it used your level. No matter how low Kokoru's stats were, he could recruit things with this as long as he was a high enough level.

Monsters at the same level as Kokoru were probably way stronger than him. But if he equipped this and stocked up on recruited monsters... He might be able to stack up with the NPCs of other guilds!

"Ooooh! Look, here it is! This is the item that could save us!"

We would bring the enemy close to death, and then Kokoru would hit it with the finishing blow to recruit it. With the way things were going, I wasn't sure if he'd even be able to deal 1 damage, but maybe we could fix that by raising his level.

If Maeda used Vengeful Blast, the counterattack damage might do the trick.

The "enemies defeated with this weapon" part definitely had some room for testing. If Handshaker guarded and counterattacked under the effect of Vengeful Blast, would that count as using Handshaker to defeat the enemy?

Furthermore, maybe Kokoru could land a hit if he used an Art. Basically, we could probably find one loophole or another.

If only we could get our hands on this!

“Huh? What is it, Takashiro? I wanna see.”

“It’s this one here, look! Handshaker!”

“Oh?”

While Yano was reading the item description, I shouted, “Eureka!”

A flash of inspiration had shot through me like lightning!

That’s it! If we put all our effort into this combination, we might have a chance at first place!

“We can do this, Yano! I know we can!”

It’s all clear to me now! I have the perfect plan for redefining our good buddy Kokoru!

I had to get my hands on Handshaker! Right then and there, I decided that tomorrow, another trip to the info brokers was in order.



“Man, Takashiro. Sorry, but it’ll be hard to get this in time.”

“For real? How so?” I asked Kataoka, who was once again in charge of the shop.

That morning, I had left early to head to Bigsmax Info Brokers.

I’m the kind of guy who tries to find a solution the moment a question pops up in my mind!

The info I wanted, of course, was how to obtain Handshaker. I had judged the item to be absolutely vital to our success in the competitive guild mission.

“Well, this isn’t a treasure chest drop. Looks like it only drops from rare monsters.”

“Uh-huh, and...?”

“And the ones who drop this only appear as ambush events on the airship

route to the Yuchheim continent.”

“Urgh. So it’s Skyfall-tier.”

Another one-in-a-thousand miracle drop?! That’s pretty rough.

“Yeah. And the route there only unlocks after you clear a quest that becomes available at level seventy.”

“Aww, seriously? We’ll have a real tough time getting that done before the mission is over.”

“For sure. It’d take you over a month to grind that high.”

“Ugh!”

This difficulty level was way unexpected. I knew the feeling all too well—you’d find a really cool item in a strategy guide or on some wiki, which would of course be ridiculously hard to get.

This was essentially the same thing. I’d have to go back to the drawing board.

How lame! Here I thought I had an awesome epiphany, but now I’m back where I started! Still, I don’t plan on giving up.

Could I somehow speed-grind up to level 70 in just a month? Even if I could, I’d have to be blessed with a one-in-a-thousand drop after that.

In terms of expected value, a whole month was a tough sacrifice to make.

“Dammit. This was the one thing I needed, too.”

Before I came here, I’d even declared to Kokoru that we had a lead! The poor lad! His joy was far too premature, far too short-lived!

In my frustration, I ended up poking a weird statue on the counter. It was like a huge egg, but with a cute girl on the front saying, “Welcome!”

“Hm? Is this one of our products?”

I had some recollection of the design, but had we ever used an egg like this as a base item?

“Yeah. I go with Lady Nozomi to your shop just about every day. You weren’t there when we bought it, I think. Figured it might make a nice decoration.”

“Huh. Kokoru or one of the girls must have made it and put it on display.”

Ah, whatever.

Suddenly, a peafowl Birdman who’d been working alongside Kataoka interjected, “It may not be my place to say this, but Kokoru lacks both talent and willpower. Even this late in the game, I would suggest you apply for a change in candidate.”

I recognized him as Peater. He was much taller than Kokoru and had much better proportions.

With his level, growth rates, and skills, he was definitely one of the favorites. In fact, he seemed the strongest of all the Birdman characters.

Looks like Kataoka’s guild picked this guy.

They’d had to compete for him in the draft, but luckily, they’d won out in the lottery. His growth seemed to be going well, as his level was already a few higher than it had been at the start.

I let out a chuckle. “Heheheh, all the better. If that’s how you feel, then I’ll be even happier to announce that I raised him once he’s big and strong! I’m not giving up yet!”

“I have a feeling you’re a man with some strange proclivities.”

“Don’t worry about him too much, Peater. This guy’s a full-blown idiot.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Wow, Kataoka. I don't wanna hear that from you.”

Considering his obsession with Hime-chans, Kataoka was probably an even bigger idiot than I was.

“That said, if you can make something of him, then he won’t bring shame to other Birdmen. Good luck.”

When I’d seen him last, Peater hadn’t seemed to care about Kokoru in the slightest. Maybe he was actually a decent guy.

“Well, time to look for a different method. See you around, Kataoka.”

Once I left the info brokers, I decided to head straight to class.

Maybe I'll think of something on my way there.

Just as the school's front gate came into view, someone called out to me.

"Yo, Ren! Morning!"

"Oh, hey, Yukino."

"Why the long face? Got something on your mind?"

"Eh. Just had a little bit of a disappointment, that's all."

"Hmm. Does it have to do with the guild mission?"

"Yes. We found a weapon that could potentially redefine Kokoru, but it doesn't look like we'll be able to get it. I was just trying to come up with a plan B."

"That's what you get for making such a ridiculous choice. You've gotta put in the work. You had first pick, and you went for the worst one. I even tried to stop you!"

"Yeah, well. The Emperor of the Underpowered is bound to make those sorts of choices."

"Hahaha! That's just about the most Ren thing you could do."

"I'll find a way. No need to panic yet; we still have time."

As we chatted, we made our way through the gate. The moment we stepped onto the school grounds, we encountered a group handing out little pouches. They were spread out in order to make sure that every student got one.

Everyone involved was part of the guild Baddest of the Bad.

"Good morning! Here, please take one!"

The one who'd brought us a pouch was a young male NPC. His name was Alfred Freaze.

Oh, I remember this guy! He was the strongest candidate at the draft!

He'd started out at level 1, but his stat growths were impeccable. Evidently, he was growing at a steady rate; he was already level 20.

He also seemed incredibly affable despite his evil-sounding guild name.

I accepted the pouch he offered me. Inside were cookies, candies, travel-size packets of tissues, and more. There was also a single sheet of paper, which read as follows:

“We apologize for troubling you so often, and we humbly ask for your understanding. Normally, we would have a formal meeting with each and every one of you. Forgive us for having to communicate it to you in this format.

Sincerely, the members of Baddest of the Bad.”

I squinted at the note, wondering, *What the heck? Why are they apologizing so much?*

Chapter 8: The Great Candidate Kidnapping Caper “Hey, why are you guys handing these out?” I asked Alfred.

“Who knows? I was just asked to help hand them out, so I have no idea.”

“Huh. That so?”

“Excuse me, but I have to get back to work.” Alfred hurriedly left us to hand out more pouches.

Once he was gone, Yukino said, “He’s laying groundwork.”

“Say what?”

“If the name didn’t give it away, his guild is made up of people who idolize bad guys. When you think of bad guys who play MMOs, what comes to mind?”

“I guess PKers, event griefers, people who fix item prices, people who exploit terrain to kill bosses without taking damage...”

“Yeah. Like you said, there are all kinds. But if you kept doing that kind of stuff in a video game managed by a school, you’d be looking at a ban and a school transfer, right?”

Having your account banned would essentially be forced expulsion.

“Definitely.”

“That’s why these guys say they’re sorry in advance. ‘We’re about to do something bad, but it’s all roleplay, so please forgive us.’ It’s kind of like how in variety shows, the host will start ragging on the performers partway through. But it’s all for the sake of making things fun and exciting, so they let their guests know ahead of time. They’re trying to essentially create a situation where you can’t rightfully be mad at them.”

Simply put, the guildies were all playing at being roguish without actually *being* roguish. Mischief and mayhem was just their style, so they apologized in advance to prevent people from getting angry.

Very weird, but I guess everyone has fun in their own way.

“So what you’re saying is that if they’re passing this stuff out, it means they’re about to do something nasty.”

“Yeah. And soon, at that. Be on your guard.”

“Gotcha.”

The pathway to our school building was lined with beds of brightly colored flowers. I glanced down at one of them and happened to see a large egg sitting among the blooms.

What is that? I keep seeing eggs all over the place. Am I just imagining it?

Yukino and I parted ways, heading to our respective classrooms.

“Hey! Morning, Ren!”

“Good morning.”

From there, an ordinary school day came and went without incident.

“Okay, gamers! The testing period starts next week, but you’ll be able to log in over the weekend as usual. Only for your studies, okay? Good luck!”

No surprise there, as our textbooks were in-game items.

The textbook files were also accessible locally from our PCs, so if you really wanted to, you could print them out to make a real, paper textbook to study at home.

However, the game world had guild houses, the academy’s study rooms, and the library. Additionally, you could board an airship at any time, so players could study anywhere they wanted. If you studied in a place you liked, you’d make better progress!

We were still forced to log out at 10:00 PM in real life, though, so if you wanted to study after that, you’d have to do it in the real world.

“Since everyone’s studying, you *could* go on a hunt for some rare items. But don’t blame your teacher if your score suffers as a result! Remember to stay responsible, kids.”

I figured some people would jump at the opportunity either way. Homura’s

guild would probably see this as the perfect time to go on the prowl.

My entrance exam had netted me a painful 241 out of 500, so I wanted nothing more than to earn a better grade. There were still talents I wanted!

“All right! Time to aim for the top of our grade! I’m gonna get that airship, just you watch!” Akira was ready and raring to win.

For the sake of both our grades and the guild mission, our group planned to meet up and study together this weekend.

“Let’s get back to the guild house. Kokoru’s waiting for us,” I said.

Just as the four of us were getting ready to leave, we heard something strange.

“Whoa!”

“What is that?!”

“Monsters in a place like this?!”

A cacophony of screams was coming from outside.

“What’s going on?!”

Akira was on high alert. “Something about monsters!”

“Let’s take a look!” cried Yano.

Maeda nodded. “Okay!”

We rushed outside. Right outside of the school’s gate was a huge monster.

Prison Turtle: Level 60

Crown Icon (rare monster) It was around fifteen feet high, tall enough that you had to look up to see the whole thing.

As the name implied, it boasted a big shell. But its head looked much more brutal than that of a normal turtle, instead resembling a rhino’s. The horns on its snout and forehead curved backward rather fiendishly. Its shell was spiked, too.

Wouldn’t want to land on that.

But the thing that stood out the most was the small room of sorts on top of its

back, which was surrounded by latticework. Was that meant to be a cell, owing to the “prison” part of its name? What in the world was its purpose?

Students who had been here before we arrived were engaged in battle with the Prison Turtles. There was no right to monster monopoly in this area, so we were free to jump in and attack.

There was a whole throng of players hurling attacks at the monster, with no real divides between parties, guilds, grades, or class affiliations.

Even some of the hero candidate NPCs for the guild mission were in the fray; they must have gotten sucked into all this while they were watching over the school.

As it turned out, those same NPCs were the Prison Turtle’s argets.

Prison Turtle prepares to unleash Scud Imprison!

Whoa, what?!

I turned my attention toward the latticed prison cell, which detached from one of the turtles’ shells and flew toward an NPC with incredible speed! The cell and the rest of the turtle’s body were connected by what looked like a chain.

Chaka-chak, chaka-chak! Clink!

A young, well-built, male NPC was captured. I had no idea whose candidate he was.

With the NPC imprisoned, the chain dragged the cell back to the turtle and returned it to its original position.

“What the heck?! Hrngh! Let me go—ACK!”

He struggled in the cell, but it seemed to be made to electrically shock the prisoner when they struggled.

The only way to free him was to help him from outside!

“This is bad! We’ve gotta do something!”

“Yeah!”

“It’ll be all right. This thing isn’t even that high-leveled, so we can do it!”

The other players in front of the gate seemed to agree. They were all banding together.

“We should go help them!” I shouted.

My guildmates nodded, and we all ran right up to the gate. People were crowded all around the Prison Turtle.

However...

“Mwahaha. Now’s the time! Cyclone Scythe!”

“Waaargh?!”

Suddenly, a tornado launched away all of the players who had gathered around the turtle. Because we were still at a distance, the four of us weren’t hit by the gale.

“Haha... Ahaha... Mwahahaha!”

A shadowy figure appeared atop the Prison Turtle, wielding a huge scythe.

So she’s the one who did this?!

Aiko Hijirisawa (3-G) Level 196 Warrior Guild: Baddest of the Bad (Guild Master) Hmph. A member of the bad-guy guild. No, not just any member—it’s the guild master herself!

After blowing away the other students, the guild master burst out in a fit of cackles.

“Ahahaha! Mwahahaha!”

On closer inspection, she was pretty cute, albeit ridiculously short. She was one of those girls who would look like an elementary schooler no matter what.

Yet that little girl was doing her best to arch her back in villainous laughter. She leaned back more and more, until...

Whoa, she fell!

“Eep?!”

The Prison Turtle's back was round, so it was practically a walking hill. The girl slipped, skidded, rolled, and bang! She fell to the ground, right on her little butt.

“Ow, ow, owie... Aargh, what the heck?! Ugh, this is so uncool.”

She rubbed her sore tush with tears in her eyes, then made her way back up.

“Cute!”

“She is adorable.”

“Now I see that being attacked was a gift. I see the light!”

“Thank you, God in heaven.”

Despite the sudden, violent gust that had cast them aside, the players here seemed to be happy and comfortable with the turn of events.

Life is a blast for you guys, huh?

The guild master, Hijirisawa, loudly proclaimed, “Ehehehe. We are the Baddest of the Bad! We are not bound to evil, nor do we resent even a single one of you, but right now, we are your enemy! Why, you ask? Because we like it this way! Allow me to apologize in advance: I’m sorry!”

Oh, so you like it. If that’s all, then who can stop you, right?

Well, some people definitely like to play the bad guy during big events. Even if they can’t kill other players, they might intentionally revive fallen enemies and support them through buffs and the like.



Baddest of the Bad was a gaggle of for-fun contrarians like this girl here. They never forgot to apologize in advance, just to be sure nobody got seriously mad at them.

I guess it would be pretty rude if they didn't, though.

There are even talents for those who want to play bad guys, such as giving the player the ability to PK while also removing any death penalties from the players they defeat. There ought to be plenty more, too.

As such, the school pretty much formally accepted this kind of playstyle. At least when it came to enormous, free-for-all battles where anyone could jump in, anyway. And indeed, this very area had turned into such a battlefield.

What an elaborate rule.

“Wait, Aiko! You told me nothing about fighting our fellows!”

Oh, there's Alfred. That's right, he was also marked as a member of Baddest of the Bad.

He climbed up the back of the Prison Turtle.

“Shaddap! This is how we do things! It's our MO! Now, get to protecting the Prison Turtle! Do what I say, or we're abandoning your training!”

“What?! Aww...”

Poor little fellow. He seemed like a real honest, standup guy. Must've been hard for him to play a villain. To top it all off, the team who'd drafted him had turned out to be a bunch of double-dealers!

“Hey, Hijirisawa!” I was already close to Hijirisawa and Alfred, so I decided to speak up.

“Hmm, yes? Oh! You're the first-year with the pet dragon! You're one heck of a guy, you know that?”

“Uh, thanks. Mind if I ask a question?”

“You have my permission. Go ahead.”

“Well, uh, what are you after? Where are these guys going?”

Even while we spoke, the group of Prison Turtles that had assembled trudged onward. They moved slowly, though, so I could just speedwalk to catch up with ease. At this point, we were walking at a brisk pace alongside them.

“Hmph. As for that...”

“Yes?”

“I dunno!”

Seriously?! Now I look like an idiot, too!

“Huh?! How do you not know?!”

“Who cares? If there’s mayhem to be had, we’ll be there! That’s who we are! An evil-looking NPC told us to hide weird eggs all around town, so we did. Once they hatch, we’re supposed to protect ’em!”

“Eggs? Oh!”

Speaking of, I’ve seen a whole bunch of those, right?! Like in Homura’s item museum, at the info brokers, even in the school’s flower beds—

At that moment, someone behind us screamed, “Waaagh! A monster just came out of nowhere! What is this thing?!”

Oh, that came from the pathway with the flower beds!

There, another Prison Turtle had appeared!

“They’re multiplying!” Akira exclaimed, pointing.

“I saw a weird egg over there a while ago! They were in a bunch of other places, too!” I replied.

“Then these things are appearing all over town?!”

Yano held her head in her hands. “Aargh, there was one in our guild shop! I thought it was a product, so I painted it!”

“Kataoka bought that one and put it up in their shop!” I told her.

“There were a bunch! The others are still in storage!” she said frantically.

“That means they’re gonna hatch in our guild shop!”

“W-Will Kokoru be okay?” Maeda asked.

Things could go from bad to worse if we didn't hurry back to the guild shop!

However, we still didn't know the Prison Turtles' objective. What was the point of capturing and transporting NPCs?

"Hijirisawa! Who was the NPC who told you to do this? If there's anything you can tell—"

"It was I!"

A voice boomed from above us.

I looked up to find a young man with pale-blue hair perched on top of a nearby building.

Froi Jasin: Level 80

Crown Icon (rare monster)

"It's him! It's Froi!"

And his level was even higher than last time!

Froi glared directly at us. "Hey, brats! I'd love to kill you where you stand, but I don't have time for that today. This greeting should serve as your warning."

"What is the point of all this?!"

"We can't have anyone interfering in Karanaught's war with Mishuria. To that end, I'm going to remove your Mishurian trainees from the equation! The Prison Turtles capture Mishurians, and then they dive right into the Lagoon! Your precious, would-be warriors won't die, but they won't be found for a long time. Bwahahaha! Later!"

Suddenly, Froi vanished into thin air. He'd made his escape.

What a twist! So, this was essentially a sort of interference in our guild mission. If we weren't careful, we would lose our drafted—and for many, partially trained—hero candidates.

Damn you, Froi! You won't get your hands on our Kokoru!

"We'd better go help!"

"Right!"

“Let’s all work together!”

The nearby players decided to join forces.

However, the black-clad little girl, Hijirisawa, stepped forward.

“Think carefully, now. This could be your chance.”

Uh-oh. She’s really playing up the part of the villainess now.

“What chance?” somebody asked.

“Why, the chance to crush the competition, of course. The guild mission is a race to raise your hero candidate, right? If the weaker ones drop out simply because they’ve lost their NPCs, the rest of you will have the upper hand. Really, why help them?”

Hijirisawa was right. If you were focused on winning the guild mission, then as long as you secured your own NPC’s safety, helping other guilds recover their NPCs would be nothing but aiding the enemy.

She’s really sticking her nose in some sensitive business, though. Not surprising coming from the leader of the bad-guy guild, I guess.

“True.”

“But I don’t want to just leave them.”

“Hey, our guild’s NPC was kidnapped! Help us out!” One of the surrounding players was begging for help, but others were reluctant to respond.

Hijirisawa's words had not fallen on deaf ears.

“The best course of action in this situation *is* to protect your own NPC, isn’t it? If you have your own hands full, no one can blame you for not helping. Riiight?”

Whoa, she’s good. She gave everyone an excuse to abandon other guilds’ NPCs guilt-free.

Now people could easily say, “Yeah, we have our hands full. Too bad for them.”

Finally, one player broke. “Fair enough. All right, I’m gonna check on our guild house!”

After a round of “Me too,” the number of players around us decreased. Soon, only the kidnapped NPC’s guildmates and our own guild members remained.

“You guys should go, too,” Hijirisawa said. “I can’t stop you.”

“No, you can’t! Please, help them rescue my poor countryman!”

“Shut up, Alfred! Nobody told you to talk!”

“B-But Aiko—”

Hijirisawa and Alfred continued their squabble.

Just then, a crowd of voices cried out, “Joint Magic!”

We quickly turned toward the source.

“Look, there’s Spitfire!”

Yano was correct.

“Hey, don’t give me weird nicknames!”

Yeah, I figured she wouldn’t like that.

Leaving that aside, Homura and the other members of Grand Museum were standing on the roof of a nearby building! Every last one of them was a Wizard.

“Let’s do this—one focused attack!” Homura ordered her guild.

“Grand Bolt!”

CRACK!

With astronomical volume, their combined magic tore through the air! An insanely huge lightning bolt descended from the clouds, directly striking the Prison Turtle.

The sheer, incredible power of their magic created such a bright light that I couldn’t even keep my eyes open.

Their superpowered bolt of lightning was enough to kill the Prison Turtle in one strike. Almost pitifully, it sank down on the spot, unable to move.

The cell popped open, setting the imprisoned NPC free.

“What incredible power...” I blurted.

“That’s what happens when you use Joint Magic with a bunch of high-level players, huh?” Akira murmured.

We were dumbfounded.

With her Prison Turtle obliterated, Hijirisawa flew into a rage.

“Hey, what the heck? Why did you do that, Spitfire?! I *said* you didn’t have to help other guilds!”

“Will everyone stop calling me that?! And I wasn’t trying to help them, anyway. This Prison Turtle is a new type of monster, which means... it could drop a new type of item! Heheheheh... So, we hunt! Nay, we *must* hunt! Let us drive them to extinction, my friends!” Homura’s eyes were sparkling with glee.

Looks like we’ve gotten a glimpse of the item-lover’s true nature.

Normally, she was more of an upright, big-sister type.

“WOOHOO!” Homura's party cheered, their excitement nearly palpable.

But hey, they had been pretty helpful.

“Ngh! Argh, do whatever you want! I’m going somewhere else! Let’s go, Alfred!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

But just as Hijirisawa was about to leave, someone accosted her.

“Now, don’t be like that. Since we’re here, how about you forget the item fetishist and have a duel with me?”

It was our friendly, neighborhood PvP lover, Yukino!

“Ugh, you’re here too?!”

“Let’s fight! Right this second, even! Fighting with you is always a good time!”

“We’re always fighting! Why do we need to do it right now, in the middle of a special event?”

“Aww, c’mon. It’s better when the situation’s a little different from the usual. Maybe something special will take us by surprise!”

“Argh, geez! You’re so annoying!”

Haha! Yukino's the same as ever.

Both she and Homura were simply acting according to their own desires, but as a result, they had the situation entirely under their control.

“Yo, Ren. You’re good to go. Go and protect Kokoru.”

“Honestly, you’re probably best letting him go and having them get you a new candidate.”

Wait. Are Yukino and Homura here so we can leave?

“Okay, duel time! Let’s fight!”

“New items, hooooo!”

Nah, I must be imagining things.

Anyway, what we had to do now was clear: it was time to go save Kokoru!



We rushed to the guild house as fast as we could. When we arrived we found the place empty. The entrance to our store was wrecked, so it was clear that something big had broken out.

“Chirp! Chicken, chicken!” Draco called Kokoru’s “name” with a tinge of loneliness in his voice.

“He isn’t here. The Prison Turtle must have captured him already,” Akira said.

“Froi said they’d drag the NPCs into the Lagoon. They must be heading to the coast at the edge of town!” I cried.

“Let’s follow ’em! Which way is the closest coast?!” Yano asked.

“This way,” Maeda said, waving. “Let’s move!”

Our guild house was located closer to the edge of the town than most others. The area just outside of the Guild Market had become a scenic, coastal park with absolutely gorgeous views of the Lagoon. I had no doubt the Prison Turtles were gonna depart from there.

I nodded. “All right, time to follow them!”

We ran off in search of the Prison Turtles and Kokoru.

“I’ll go ahead and do some recon! If I see them, I’ll let you know!”

Yano’s class, Sky Pirate, possesses a skill called Sprint that ups the user’s movement speed. As I recall, she should’ve learned it at level 35. With this ability, Yano could run ahead of us and act as a scout.

“Wait, Yuuna! Take some AP with you!”

“Thanks, Akki! Here goes. Energy Steal!”

Sky Pirates learn this one at level 45. Yano was level 45 now, so she really had *just* learned it. The skill allows the user to steal half of a targeted ally’s AP, and it has a cooldown time of three minutes.

As Akira had Breath of Ares, she passively gained AP over time. Even now, she had full AP. Instead of letting it overflow and go to waste, she could give some to Yano; it was an efficient move that benefited the whole party.

“See ya soon!” Yano said with a salute before dashing to the forefront.

We followed after her, heading toward the coastal park.

Along the way, we spotted several groups of players attacking Prison Turtles, hoping to rescue other guilds’ NPCs. There was no doubt that the turtle that must’ve appeared in our house was heading this way.

“I think we’re on the right track!” Akira shouted.

“Yeah! But where in the world is our boy?!”

“Yuuna looks to be heading even farther ahead.”

We continued onward, careful to avoid getting caught up in any area-of-effect attacks by the raging Prison Turtles.

At some points, Maeda would stop running in order to cast defensive spells, magical resistance spells, and more. Not just on us, but also on the combatants from other guilds.

Occasionally, she even flung a healing spell or two over to support them. This wasn’t out of pure goodwill; she was intentionally trying to burn MP.

When Maeda had created her character, she’d chosen Tactical Magic as her starting talent. This talent has the effect of increasing AP as MP is consumed.

Pretty useless for a back-liner like Maeda to build up MP, you might think, but it wasn't intended for her to use; it was meant to be given to Yano using Energy Steal.

When we entered battle, Akira would need all the AP she could get in order to do her job. That meant she wouldn't be able to hand it off to Yano anymore.

But Maeda was a different story; she was just fine giving away all of her AP. Maeda was doing her best to generate AP to be ready for that time in order to support Yano.

By learning Energy Steal, Yano had essentially retroactively made Maeda's choice of Technical Magic a good investment. What a beautiful expression of synergy!

"Yo, he's there! I saw him!" Yano came back, still under the effect of Sprint. She must have reused it as soon as it came off cooldown.

"Nice! Whereabouts?"

"Over here! But they were super close to diving into the Lagoon! Good thing I was able to stop them with Leg Snipe!"

Leg Snipe is a gun Art. Along with receiving damage, the target is unable to move until the effect runs out.

It was a good thing Yano had enough AP left to pop the turtle with a Leg Snipe. Akira's AP transfer had done us all a world of good. A hidden pro gamer move, if there ever was one.

Akira's brow furrowed. "That's not good! We should go, now!"

"We must hurry!"

"Yeah, follow me!"

With Yano in the lead, we ran as quickly as possible.

Ahead of us was the Prison Turtle with Kokoru on its back. It was standing precariously close to a fence erected to prevent anyone from falling into the Lagoon.

Yano was right; they really were just about to jump in.

Without Leg Snipe, there was no doubt he would have been taken away from us for good.

“Kokoru, are you okay?!” I called out for my boy, who had been jailed by the turtle.

“R-Ren! I’m about as good as I look! I’m safe, but I think I’m about to get dragged into the depths, baaawk!”

“Yeah, no worries! We’re here to save you!”

“N-No, I’m fine! Just forget about me, bawk!”

I blinked in surprise. “Forget about you? What the hell are you even saying, Kokoru?! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Kokoru was nearly in tears. “It’s not ridiculous, bawk! This is for your own good! I do nothing but drag you all down! You, Akira... all of you are good people. You’re so nice, even to a failure like me. But I don’t want to bother you anymore, bawk! If I’m gone, you can bring home a new candidate! So just leave me—”

But I wasn’t ready to accept that. I could never!

“I’ll say it one more time: don’t be ridiculous! We didn’t choose you out of kindness! We just wanted to take you, a guy everyone thinks is pathetic, and make you into a giant-killing machine! We’re just doing whatever we feel like, so you have no reason to be so worried about it!”

“Uh, that’s not what you girls were thinking, is it? Pretty sure it’s just you, Ren. I just wanted to help Kokoru out.”

“Y’know, I wanted to pick the strongest-looking one out of the bunch. Not that I super care.”

“Agreed. But I had given up on it, considering how very like you it seemed, Takashiro.”

“Okay, shut up, outfielders! Listen to me, Kokoru! This is exactly how I was crowned the Emperor of the Underpowered—I find a weak-looking thing, and I make something of it! For example, my class: symbologist! It has no firepower, and everyone thinks it’s the worst. But depending on my approach, I can still

make things happen! I'll show you proof right now, so just watch this!"

I immediately got to casting a magic circle.

"Enervating Circle!"

I made it the maximum radius, of course, in order to drain my MP to nothing. I'd chosen this one in order to slow down the turtle as much as possible once it decided to start moving again.

Then, I began charging toward the Prison Turtle.

Ready to follow up, Akira moved to match me.

"Ultimate move!"

Upon my approach, I immediately let loose an attack.

I unscrewed the top of my Canesword, revealing the blade within. The Canesword was enveloped in a dark-purple glow, tracing an arc of light.

This time, there was no time to save up AP. That was why I'd decided to use this ultimate.

"Dead End!"

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,912 damage to Prison Turtle!

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren's aggro!

Kotomi cast Exheal.

Ren recovered 341 HP.

Akira activated Sword Samba.

Ren's cooldowns have been fully reset!

Log messages flooded the screen.

Our combo was pretty well-established by this point.

I crafted a new Canesword and once again emptied my MP bar using circle magic. Then, of course, came my next blow!

“Here comes another! Dead Eeend!”

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,912 damage to Prison Turtle!

Seeing this, Kokoru gasped in shock. “Wow, baww! What incredible power! And you’re supposed to be a weak class with no firepower at all?!”

“It’s all about what you make of it! Even you can be reborn! I believe in you, Kokoru!”

“But, Ren, I—”

“Now, you need to believe in me and come back! I swear, we *will* make something of you!”

“I... Yeah, baww! Okay!”

“Do you see now?! If you do, equip this! This is what will make you strong!”

I lobbed the Princess’ Skull Ring over to Kokoru!

“What?!”

Knowing the cursed effects of the ring, Akira and the others were aghast. But I had already figured out the path to raising Kokoru; there was no reason to waver now.

We’re gonna ride this to the very top, Kokoru!

Kokoru’s stat growths were among the absolute lowest. Whether he equipped the ring or not, he would be ridiculously weak. If he was going to be a weakling either way, the difference between zero and one was nothing to be concerned about. It wasn’t going to change anything.

In that case, let’s forget all about raising his stats! We’ll just get his level as high as possible!

There was an ability that would make use of his high level. The problem of how to get Handshaker still lingered, but I figured we could ignore that for now.

Either way, this was our only hope; we had to raise his level. Kokoru may have been weak, but his very weakness was what had given me the idea in the first place!

This, indeed, was the fighting style of the weak!

“Okay, Ren! I equipped it!”

Trusting in me, Kokoru had put on the Princess’ Skull Ring.

“Ren, are you sure he should be using that?!”

“Yeah, it’s perfect! Now, let’s finish off this Prison Turtle!”

With Akira’s support, I let loose yet another ultimate.

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,912 damage to Prison Turtle!

By now, the thing was at death’s door. Thanks to the focus fire from Akira, Yano, and Maeda, the last of its HP was about to be zapped away.

“This’ll end it! Here I come!”

The two twinkling, crescent moon-shaped flashes seized the Prison Turtle.

Akira activated Cross Crescent.

Dealt 308 damage to Prison Turtle!

Akira defeated the Prison Turtle.

The Prison Turtle finally fell to Akira’s ultimate.

Nice! We’ve successfully rescued Kokoru!

“Bawk?!”

Suddenly, the shell of the fallen Prison Turtle ejected him. Launched high into the air, he tried to flap his wings. Unfortunately, Kokoru could not fly.

“Kokoru’s falling!” Akira cried.

“We’ve gotta catch him!” I replied.

All four of us darted forward and caught the falling Kokoru.

“B-Bawk! Oh, bawk, I’m safe. Thank you, everyone!”

This was followed by the level-up fanfare sound effect. Having defeated such a high-level monster, our own levels had risen. I was now level 43, Akira level 45, Maeda level 45, and Yano level 46! Mine was the lowest because of all the

EXP I wasted during my experiments with the Princess' Skull Ring.

“Wooo! I'm finally level forty-five!” Akira joyfully bounced around.

That much was a given; she'd been waiting excitedly for a certain something she would gain at level 45. Anyone would be excited to reach a level where they'd learn a skill they coveted.

And as for what she learned...

“Ta-da! Check this out!”

Spinning all around with excitement, Akira hoisted up her two swords and showed them off. One was her usual Skyfall, and the other was a sword she had prepared just for this occasion, complete with Yano's own special painting.

No matter how you looked at it, she had clearly been waiting for this for a long time now.

Yano grinned. “Oooh! Lucky you, Akki! It's dual-wielding time!”

“Very cool,” Maeda added.

Indeed, a sword dancer's level 45 skill is Dual-Wielding. Yeah, this class has some high-quality abilities.

Our eternal rival, dual-wielding, is—as you ought to know by now—a very popular skill among the public. Everyone loves dual-wielding. It's the superstar of the gaming world, so much so that people would be ticked if it was underpowered. No matter what game I would decide to play, dual-wielding would somehow inevitably block my path.

“Aww, yeah! Woohoo! The motions are completely different. It's so satisfying.” Akira kept on repeating practice swings.

Damn you, dual-wielding. You've even seduced my best friend! But hey, as long as she's having fun.

“B-Bawk?! Guys, I'm gaining a lot of levels right now!”

Meanwhile, there was another guy who was riding the level-up train! Kokoru had gained EXP from the fight, too. Before, he was just level 1. Thanks to the Princess' Skull Ring, his gains were tripled.



As a result, the level-up chime was resounding like the pounding of a drum.

Akira gasped. “Wow, this is awesome, Kokoru! Your level is skyrocketing!”

“But what about the Princess’ Skull Ring?” Yano asked nervously.

“I wonder if this was really a good idea,” Maeda mused.

“Worry not! Everything is a-okay!” I declared, nodding in satisfaction.

In the end, Kokoru got twenty-nine whole level-ups before finishing. He had jumped from level 1 to 30!

“Whoa. My level’s so high now.”

“How’s it feel? You’re even stronger now!”

“R-Really, bawk?”

Kokoru displayed his stats screen.

“Bawk?! What the hell, bawk?! I’ve barely grown at all!”

Yep, thought that would happen.

Here were Kokoru’s normal growth rates: STR 1, VIT 3, DEX 1, AGI 1, INT 1, MND 1, CHR 1.

With the Princess’ Skull Ring equipped, they looked like this: STR 0, VIT 1, DEX 0, AGI 0, INT 0, MND 0, CHR 0.

After all, the ring cut growth rates to a third of their normal values in exchange for multiplying EXP by three. The zeroes meant that those stats wouldn't go up even if his level went up. With the increase in VIT, his HP also went up a little bit.

NPCs don’t receive level-up bonuses either. Players, with their level-up bonuses, talent slots, and concept of classes, are canonically extra-strong people in this world. That was why Legrand Academy of Magic, where we extra-powerful players gathered, was considered the world's top academic establishment.

“It’s all right. You’re fine just like that.”

As Kokoru fell to his knees in dejection, I gave him a nice pat on the back.

“You’re weak either way, so it doesn’t matter if your growth is one or zero. Don’t worry about growth rates because we’re gonna do this with an ability that only cares about your level. Min-maxing a single thing and winning that way is basically the first rule of giant-killing.”

“Really, bawk?”

“Yeah, bro! Better yet, did you learn any skills?”

“B-Bawk? Oh, like this, bawk? Um... Golden Sweets?”

I took a look at the skill’s description.

Golden Sweets

Cooldown: 0/300 seconds

<Effect> The killer move of an unscrupulous merchant. Offers golden candies to enemies in order to bribe them for their assistance.

Monsters successfully negotiated with can be summoned or released. If a recruited monster is defeated or this skill is removed, they cannot be recovered.

Only monsters below the user's level can be recruited.

"Unscrupulous merchant, baww? My family would never do anything so evil!"

"Hey, wait a second."

This was way too familiar. Golden Sweets had almost the same effect as Handshaker, that lance I really wanted!

The golden candies would probably cost a fortune, but at this point, that was an acceptable sacrifice.

Who could've imagined that Kokoru would learn the very thing I had my eyes on?!

"Nice, Kokoru! You've got real talent!"

"Y-You think so, baww?"

"Yeah. We have a real chance of winning now! This is our chance to boggle the minds of all those other guildies!"

"Got it. I'll come with you, baww!"

Kokoru and I exchanged a firm handshake.

All we had to do now was get his level going up, up, up!

Heheh, just watch me. It's time for some real-deal giant-killing!

It had been one heck of a ride, but we'd protected Kokoru through the Prison Turtle event and succeeded in raising his level pretty high all in one fell swoop.

Extra: Let's See How Real Ren is Doing!

On the second floor of our guild house, where Hell's Crafters resided...

It was Saturday, so the four of us spent our day off studying together. The big test was coming up on Monday morning.

This time, the prize for getting the best score in our grade was a personal airship. We needed it in order to raise Kokoru for the competitive guild mission. Plus, I really just wanted my very own airship.

With an airship at my beck and call, I want to see every last nook and cranny of this Unlimited World! With Ren at my side, of course! All right, I'm gonna do my best!

I had been studying every day, so I was feeling pretty confident by now. If I was going to lose to anyone, it would probably be Kotomi. We were in the same guild, though, so our crew was safe either way.

"Aaargh! I don't get it! This is so boring. I wish I'd gone to hang out with Kokoru and Draco instead." Yuuna put her face down on the desk.

We'd just finished filling in our answers for a mock social studies test that Kotomi made. Yuuna was trying, but as someone who already hated studying, it just wasn't getting through to her.

When you try so hard without seeing any progress, it's natural to complain here and there.

By the way, Kokoru had taken Draco out to walk around the city so we could study in peace.

"Yuuna, your grades won't go up overnight. You have to keep working at it and do a little better each time. And you've already accomplished that; your score on this one is higher than the last one." Having just finished grading her test, Kotomi did her best to sound encouraging.

"That's not persuasive at all when you've got this guy over here raising his grade like it's nobody's business!" She pointed at Ren, who very proudly pointed at himself.

“Mwahaha! When I put my mind to it, I can be a king!”

“Nobody said you could praise yourself!”

Kotomi laughed awkwardly. “Ahahaha... Well, he’s not wrong.”

I couldn’t help but be impressed. “That’s amazing, Ren! Your thirty-one in social studies from the entrance exam could go up to forty or even fifty!”

Well, Ren was probably smarter than me anyway, so it wasn’t that much of a surprise.

Good for him, though. I helped him study too.

“It’s all thanks to you girls! My need for MEP is also a huge motivator!”

“Just what the school was hoping for, huh?” I said with a smile.

“That’s what you call a win-win situation right there!”

Ren was full of energy, and he could make anything fun. I kinda envied him for that. I always ended up having a great time with him around.

Our little study session devolved into a “watch Ren’s grades climb” session before coming to an end.

Kotomi, our teacher, declared, “Let’s leave it at that for today. Good work, everyone.”

“Sorry, but I’ve got stuff to do tomorrow. I can’t come,” Ren said.

“Oh, okay,” I heard myself say.

We’d been planning to study in-game together the next day, but...

“I’m sorry, but I won’t be coming either. My parents are going to monitor my studying since it’s the day before a test.” Maeda sighed.

“Ooh, same here! I gotta help around the house!”

Ren looked at Yuuna in disbelief. “Seriously? I feel like you just don’t want to study.”

“Shaddap! You’re wrong! Wrong, I say!”

Everyone but me has real-life plans, huh? It’ll be too stuffy to study at home, so maybe I’ll just log in and study alone in the guild house.

My parents were really strict and wanted to keep me cooped up in the house, so I had no freedom at all. I couldn't even go out whenever I wanted.

In that regard, the Akabane household seemed a lot more liberated. Like how Ryuutarou could be *that way* even in a game, with no fear of punishment.

"It's not like you've got room to talk, Takashiro," Yuuna said, hands on her hips. "You're just trying to go and have fun, too."

"Nope. I'm going to a party with my old man."

"A party?"

"Pops works at a gaming company. It's a party to celebrate the completion of their latest game. Turns out it was a collab with the Akabanes' Red Phaser Software. Between you and me, I actually helped out a little with the design process, so he invited me to come along."

"Aww, lucky. Bet there'll be all kinds of tasty treats there too."

"Probably. The venue is a huge hotel, so I'm pretty excited."

"Where's the hotel? Tokyo?"

"Nope, Yokohama. I think it was... the Yokohama Empress Hotel?"

"Dwah?!" I gasped before realizing it.

That was the place my grandpa mentioned yesterday! He was going to some kind of party too! Grandpa was a politician, so his thing probably had nothing to do with Ren's. But surely they were on different floors at the same hotel!

"Hm? What's up, Akira?"

"Uh, nothing. Don't worry about it. I think I might have some stuff to do tomorrow, too."

"I suppose we'll just have to skip tomorrow's study session, then," Maeda said.

Ren nodded. "Yep."

"No objections here," Yuuna piped.

"Um, yeah. Sounds good."

Grandpa had asked me if I wanted to come, but I'd turned him down. Typically, I avoided parties like the plague. The guests always made a huge fuss about the oh-so-great young lady of the oh-so-great Aoyagi family, so they would come up to me hoping to cash in on some social capital. Then there were the creepy old guys who looked at me like I was a piece of meat.

There was never anyone like Ren, who could look at the real me without any concerns or ulterior motives. All of those other people were leeches with their own calculated self-interests in mind. It was way too tiring to deal with that all the time.

I occasionally went if I felt like it, but if I wasn't forced to go, I usually just said no. It sucked how often I was forced to go, though.

Anyway, I'd been given a choice this time around, so it had been easy to decline without thinking too much about it.

But what if I do go with Grandpa and then just sneak off to a different floor? I might get the chance to see Ren in real life! Wow, this is incredible!

This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for a girl who can't go out when she wants to! We'll have a real-life handshake, take a real-life selfie, and then... and theen...!

"Okay! I'm definitely going!"

In my excitement, I didn't even realize that I'd stood up and shouted that out loud.

"Going where?"

Everyone looked at me suspiciously.

"Ahahaha... Nowhere. Hey, Ren. You said they were developing with Red Phaser Software, right? Are people from Red Phaser going to be there?"

"Yeah, probably. I was just thinking about how I really don't want to run into a certain someone's older brother."

Yuuna grimaced. "Eww! That'd be awful."

"Perhaps he's normal in the real world?" Kotomi offered.

“But I already know who he is on the inside. How do you talk to a guy like that?”

“True, I suppose.”

“He’s the kind of guy who’ll definitely burn you if you get too close. I’d stay far away,” Yuuna said.

“Yep. A lot of third-years seem like that, too.”

Ignoring their conversation, I thought to myself, *If Red Phaser was going to be there, then maybe I could ask her for help!*

I was a little worried, but we *had* done a quest together not long ago. I had to give it a shot!

“All right, I’ve got some things to attend to, so I’m outta here. Good work today, everyone!”

I rushed out of the guild house and used the game’s messaging function to contact Nozomi.

She was still online, so we met up at the promenade just outside of the Guild Market.

“Ahem! M-My, how rare it is for you to, um, contact me.”

“Uh, sorry. I hope I didn’t bother you.”

Nozomi was being strangely awkward.

Our quest together was still very recent, so I thought maybe that would make it easier for us to talk. Still, our relationship had been poor for a pretty long time, and that wasn’t going to be patched up by a single quest.

I didn’t think it would be easy, but at this point, I was desperate and had nobody else to turn to.

“N-No! In fact, I’m very excite—hrk! Err, rather, I don’t especially mind. So, what manner of business brings us here today?”

“Well, you see...” I took some time to explain the situation.

For some reason, Nozomi let out a cheer. “Goodness! You want me to play the role of Cupid? That is unmistakably the role that a *friend* must play, is it

not?!”

“What? A friend?”

“Erm, no, never mind. F-Forget I said anything!”

“So, uh, can I count on you to help me?”

“I wouldn’t mind. Assisting in the love affairs of others is valuable life experience.”

“Um, I-love affairs, huh?”

It was kinda embarrassing when she put it like that. My heart started to beat a little faster.

“My, am I wrong?”

“No, I... I don’t think so. But it’s my first time doing something like this, so... Oh, and don’t tell Ren, okay?”

Ren seemed like the kind of gamer who enjoyed ogling girls but didn’t spare much thought to getting a girlfriend. After all, he’d gawked at me plenty without ever trying to touch me.

Honestly, half of that was probably just him appreciating my cute in-game avatar. He really did prioritize enjoying the game world above all else.

I’d be fine with him trying to touch me if he wanted to, though.

Not that I wanted to force the matter or try to instigate anything myself. Ren was just fine as he was, and I enjoyed spending time with him. So long as we could just keep on having fun together, I’d be satisfied.

That said, however, this *was* a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“Teehee. This is our little secret, right? Heeheehee.”

“Uhh...”

“Oh, erm, moving on! I understand the situation perfectly. I’ll be present at the party thanks to my grandfather’s invitation, so I can assist you. I will inform Red Phaser Software that you are a guest so you can attend Takashiro’s party.”

“Yaaay, thank you so much! I never get to do anything on my own, so I’m

really glad I asked you for help, Nozomi!”

“Hmph! If you want to thank me, do it only after our plan succeeds.”

“Sounds good. See you tomorrow!”

“Same to you.”

With that promise, we both logged out of UW.

As soon as I was back in real life, I rushed over to my grandpa and told him that I actually wanted to go to tomorrow’s party after all. He was glad that we could go somewhere together for once.

Grandpa was one of the few family members I had who were willing to let me do what I wanted. The fact that I was attending this school at all was actually because he’d backed me up. Though he was a politician, he had a wealth of experience in economics and education. Thus, he knew that our school’s VRMMO world was sort of a new frontier. Or, well, the fact that the government had apparently helped somewhat with the school’s foundation was probably more important there. As a result, he’d had some interest in the school and in allowing me to be on the cutting edge.

Anyway, this meant I could meet the real Ren tomorrow! But I wanted it to be a surprise, so I’d keep it a secret from him.

How should I make my entrance, though? Maybe I can pull a classic move, like sneaking up behind him, covering his eyes, and going “Guess who!”

I’d always wanted to try doing it just once in my life!

Okay! I’m gonna do it!

With that thought in mind, I fell asleep.

The next day...

“Goodness me, your granddaughter’s grown up to be a real looker! I’m awfully jealous.”

“Hahaha! You’ve got that right!”

Grandpa was in high spirits, but I couldn’t say the same for myself. This guy—no, I think he qualified as an old fart—was just staring at my chest like his life

depended on it.

They say politicians never lose their youthful vitality, even when they grow old. Well, this old fart was definitely energetic in more ways than one.

I *hated* this kind of thing. It was a million times worse than being ogled by Ren. In his case, even if it was embarrassing, I at least appreciated his interest. Though I might get frustrated with him in the moment.

But as long as I persevered today, a reward awaited me. Time to persevere!

“It’s nice to see you after such a long time, sir.” I forced the sweetest smile I possibly could.

After a while of battling these sorts of interactions, I spotted my savior. Her grandfather was a politician as well, so he had come to make an appearance. With Nozomi in tow, of course.

She came over and whispered to me, “Are you prepared? It’s time.”

“Yes, thank you.”

In my family’s case, I had little to no freedom whatsoever. Even if I had asked someone who worked for my family, one of my parents or grandparents were sure to catch wind of it somehow. I could tell them that I wanted to go to the party downstairs and meet a friend, but no doubt they would immediately refuse.

But Nozomi had some level of freedom, so she had taken action to shake my guards off and let me go downstairs unnoticed.

“Then let us begin.” Nozomi winked at a black-suited Akabane family guard and declared, “My, I am simply parched. Could you fetch me something to drink? One of everything, perhaps, so I might compare them.”

In no time, a tray replete with different kinds of juices was brought to us. Nozomi reached for the tray and flipped it right over.

“Oh, oopsie! How clumsy of me to stumble like that!”

With a cacophonous *crash*, all of them spilled on me. From my hair to my dress, everything was soaked.

Just as planned!

“Nozomi... what have you done?” I intentionally tried to look as angry as possible.

We were attracting the attention of those around us, so a natural reaction was vital.

“Oh, g-goodness! Erm, I swear that wasn’t on purpose! Truly, I beg your forgiveness! Let’s get you into a shower, and I’ll prepare you a change of clothes posthaste!”

“Grandpa, I’ll be back.”

“Yeah, good idea!” Grandpa pointed at a couple of guards. “You boys, go with Akira.”

“Let’s go.” Nozomi took me outside the room.

Nice! That’s one barrier down!

My family’s security came with us whether I liked it or not, but Nozomi’s guards quickly stepped between them and us, forming a buffer.

We ascended up one floor to a certain guest room.

“The lady here is going to shower in there and change clothes. All of you, wait outside.”

After that, Nozomi escorted me inside. Her guards quickly moved into formation around the front of the door, so my family’s guards could do nothing but wait.

This was now a locked room.

“Now, go ahead and take your shower.”

“Okay, thank you. But how do we get to the floor Ren is on?”

“You’ll have to wait and see... is what I would like to say, but I’ll show you now.”

Nozomi opened a huge closet in the room. Within, there was a metallic pole running straight down. It was so tall that it spanned multiple floors.

“Wow, there’s a hole in the floor!”

“Yes. I had it made myself. This is a direct way to the third floor.”

“You had this made for our plan?!”

“Mmhmm. This hotel is owned by the Akabane family, and the work was done by Red Phaser Construction in one night.”

“Thank you so much! Now we can go down without getting caught!”

I couldn't help but grab Nozomi's hands in pure joy.

“Eheehee... Ahahaha... Oh! Sorry, but you need to hurry and get ready. If we take too long, your guards may start searching the entire hotel.”

“Yes, ma'am!”

I rapidly removed my dress and underwear and attempted to take a shower, but the thing refused to give me any hot water.

“Whoa, cold! There’s no hot water! Nozomiii!” I poked my head out of the bathroom and called out to her.

“What is it?”

“The hot water isn't working.”

“Oh, my! The rushed construction must have caused this somehow. But we have to be quick with this unless we want to risk getting caught. I’m sorry.”

“Gotcha. It'll have to do, then. Be back in a jiffy.”

“Are you sure you don't mind? Be careful not to catch a cold.”

“I'm fine! If this is what it takes to meet Ren in real life, I can take it!”

Thus, I committed the ascetic act of taking a cold shower. I chose to believe I was cleansing myself with cold, holy water for my meeting with Ren.

“Phew, brrr! It's over now, though! Nozomi, where's the change of clothes?!”



“I have it for you right over here.”

I looked to where Nozomi was pointing.

Is that the sword dancer outfit from UW?! Oh my god, and is that Angelic Charm...? Why are there outfits from the game here?!

“What the—?! Isn’t this equipment from Unlimited World?!”

“I had it made just for you. Perhaps Takashiro might enjoy it?”

“Um, yeah, it does seem like he would.”

But this was all the more embarrassing to wear in real life.

“Do you have any other clothes?”

“None at all.”

“Ngh... Fine, then I choose this one!”

I put on the normal sword dancer gear. Looking in the mirror, I found that I looked almost exactly the way I did in-game, apart from my hair color not being pink. The sheer discomfort was even more intense in real life, though.

It’s seriously embarrassing! But remember: this is all for Ren’s sake! Hang in there, girl!

“Okay. Let’s roll, Nozomi!”

“Got it. Down the pole we go!”

Nozomi and I slid down the pole all the way to the third floor. Here, the pole was hidden inside a storage closet located in the party room.

We stepped out of the closet, and immediately, the party’s collective gazes focused on me.

“Eep. Nozomi, they’re all looking at me!”

“It’s okay. This party is for the completion of a game, after all. They’ll just think you’re a cosplayer hired by the host.”

“Oh, okay!”

Despite the shower of attention, we searched high and low for Ren.

Where could he be? I'd like to be able to sneak up on him.

After all, I wanted to try the thing I thought of before bed last night.

"Is that not him?"

Nozomi pointed to a person who had his back toward us. He didn't just resemble him from behind either; the guy could be none other than Ren himself.

With that suit on, he looked really mature.

"Wow, it is! Okay... Time to get sneaky."

We stealthily approached Ren from behind, hoping all the while that he wouldn't turn this way. Wouldn't wanna spoil the surprise, right?

Then, I was directly behind him. Time for my legendary technique!

"Guess whooo!"

I placed my hands over his eyes from behind! I happened to be really short, though, so I had to stand on my tiptoes.

"Whoa! Huh?! Err, who are you girls?"

The person who turned to face us was the spitting image of Ren... if he was a couple dozen years older, that is.

We got the wrong guy?!

"Oh, you're not Ren! I-I'm so sorry, I have the wrong person!" I emphatically bowed in apology.

Argh, geez! This is sooo embarrassing!

"You're looking for Ren? Oh, so you two know my son?" he asked.

Wait. Could this possibly be... Ren's father?!

"Um, yes, sir!"

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ren's dad."

He then handed Nozomi and me his business cards. Yuu Takashiro was his name. He was a lot like his son, for sure. They looked identical from behind. Now that we were face-to-face, he did have a much softer demeanor about

him.

A grown-up Ren, to be sure. It was a wonderful sight.

“Ah, nice to meet you, too! My name is Akira Aoyagi. Ren and I have been in school together for some time now—”

“Oh, *you’re* little Akira?! Thank you for spending so much time with Ren.”

“No, it’s my pleasure. Speaking of, where is he?”

“Well... actually, he didn’t come today.”

We were utterly shocked.

“Whaaat?!”

Then what was the point of all this?! Nozomi even dug a freakin’ hole in the hotel floor for me!

“Wh-Why didn’t he attend?! Is he sick, perhaps?” Nozomi asked.

I’d like to know the same thing!

“Well, not Ren, but my wife is sick. He stayed home to take care of her. He has to study for tomorrow’s test too, so we decided he can just come to the next party.”

“I-I see. If that’s how it is, I suppose he isn’t to blame.”

“Ngh... Yeah. What a disappointment, though.”

Ren’s such a sweet boy. And that’s wonderful and all, but... it’s also sooo inconvenient! Today was supposed to be my big chance!

“Achoo!”

Ugh. I’m probably feeling all chilly because of that cold shower.

“Should we go?”

“Perhaps. Maybe next time, Takashiro will be willing to stick to his plans.”

“Let’s hope so. Keeping it a secret to try to surprise him was my bad, though. I’m sorry.”

If we had officially made plans together, maybe Ren would’ve actually come.

Or he would've at least contacted me in advance.

This was my mistake. Ugh, and what a mistake it was.

Afterward, I got a harsh scolding for shaking off my guards. Even worse, I ended up catching a cold. I had to take the test in the worst possible condition.

My grade? Well, you can probably guess.

Afterword

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank you for buying my book.

Not to bore you with my personal matters, but this book makes my tenth in total. Now that I've written ten books, I think I've gotten the hang of it. I don't know how long I'll keep writing light novels, but someday, I hope I can take pride in it as a valuable life experience. Imagine telling my friends, "Yeah, I used to be an author." That said, though, I would prefer if it didn't become a past event and instead was more of something I kept doing forever.

As I've been looking to improve my prose recently, I've written more and more on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. Since baseball's off-season right now, it's the perfect time to write my little heart out! If you find the time, I hope you'll come and read my work.

Finally, to my lead editor, N; my lead artist, Hika Akita; and to everyone else involved, I thank all of you for your considerable efforts. As always, I love the illustrations, and I can't wait for more.

Well, see you next time!



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