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Redefining the META at
VRMMO Academy
Story: Hayaken
Illustration: Hika Akita

Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy 4

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Chapter 1: Redefinition with Airships

Over a week had passed since the hero-kidnapping caper. Right after it ended, we plunged right into the big exam.

Motivated by the personal airship reward for the number one student and the Merit Points we'd gain based on our scores, we had put our all into studying for this. Now it was time to reap the fruits of our labor!

Once we'd logged in and traveled to school, we immediately headed over to check the results sheet hanging in the hallway. It might have been a slightly excessive gesture, seeing as we *were* in a video game world, but it was still an elegant way of announcing everyone's results.

By the way, test results could be accessed later on through the in-game menu.

This test was broken down into eight subjects worth a hundred points each, so eight hundred was a perfect score.

End-of-the-year tests and the like were a great chance to get stronger. More chances to get MEP, after all. It was much appreciated!

Pop quizzes were always a possibility too, and those were still very welcome. They were pretty much rare events that gave out MEP like candy.

Now for our results.

```
Rank 1: Kotomi Maeda, 784 points
...
Rank 11: Nozomi Akabane, 744 points
...
Rank 28: Akira Aoyagi, 704 points
...
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Rank 168: Ren Takashiro, 567 points

Rank 169: Shinichi Kataoka, 566 points

...

Rank 377: Yuuna Yano, 271 points

"Oooh!" Akira, Yano, and I yelled upon seeing the results.

Heck yeah! Our girl is brilliant!

"Good job, Kotomi!" Yano cried.

I let out a sigh of relief. "Phew! Always pays to have a brainiac on the squad."

"I ended up bombing it, but you really came through for us!" Akira had caught a cold, so she hadn't been in top condition for this one.

But no matter how we got there, this was huge for our guild! We were gonna get our own airship!

"Yes! I did it!" Maeda shouted in her excitement, assuming a very out-of-character victory pose.

"Chirp! Yay, yay!" Draco shared in our joy, whirling around Maeda.

Yano grinned. "Okay, time to toss her into the air! Let's do it!"

"Huh?! N-No, I'm fine! That sounds rather embarra—"

"Nah, girl," I replied, shaking my head. "Everyone knows that when you take first place, you've gotta get tossed!"

Akira rolled her eyes. "Maybe in baseball, but... Oh, whatever!"

With that, we threw Maeda gloriously into the air!

I had set a secret goal of breaking 500 myself, so no complaints here.

"Hip, hip, hooray! Hip, hip, hooray!"

◆◇◆

After school, we invited Kokoru to come with us to receive our reward.

There was a pier that extended from the floating city of Telluna for airship

use. This was where Maeda's new airship would be parked and waiting for her.

"Whoa, look at all them airships, bawk. First time I've ever seen this many in one place, bawk." As we walked along the third pier, where Ms. Nakada had instructed us to come, Kokoru sighed in amazement.

"Yeah. I've heard these are only made in Telluna."

Airship-manufacturing technology was owned solely by the floating city of Telluna in this world; that was how the devs had set it up. For a foreign-born boy like Kokoru, they'd probably be a rare, awe-inspiring sight.

"Wow, bawk. It's really generous of them to give you this big of a reward for something as small as a test, bawk."

We continued making small talk as we progressed along the pier. Soon enough, Ms. Nakada waved and called out to us.

"Heeey, Maeda! We've been waiting for you!"

Next to her was a single airship.

"Hello, Ms. Nakada!" Maeda said, waving back politely.

"Yoo-hoo! Seems the whole guild's here with you! It's great that you have such good friends." She was as merry as ever. Then, she glanced at Kokoru next to us. "Looks like you're still working on that guild mission, huh? I heard you gunned for the weakest character first. He doesn't look very strong, to be sure... I mean, he's a chicken!"

"Listen up, bawk! We weaklings have our own ways of winning, bawk!"

The fact that he could say that meant he was growing some spunk. Nice, nice.

"Don't worry about that, Ms. Nakada!" I declared, puffing out my chest. "We've got some surprises in store for the main event."

"Yeah! Thanks to Kotomi, I've got a feeling he's gonna grow up just fine," Akira added.

"Ohoho. I see Hell's Crafters are full of confidence. Well, I'll be the announcer at the battle royale that wraps up this mission. Since it's an official event, I'd better do my research ahead of time!"

“Huh?! The tournament’s going to be a battle royale?!”

We had heard there would be a tournament at the end, but the format hadn’t been mentioned.

A battle royale, huh? Wow!

“Oh! Ahaha... I, erm, only leaked a liiittle bit of info just now because I was worried about you, okay? That’s all! I didn’t do that by accident, no sirree! It was one hundred percent intentional.”

No one said anything in response.

Either way, it was fine with me. Knowing that the competitive guild mission would be settled with a battle royale was useful.

I’d better come up with a game plan.

“Ahem! So, look! Here’s the airship you’ve been dying to see. Go on, try it out!” Ms. Nakada pushed at our backs to cover up her error, urging us onto the airship.

“Ooh. So *this* is our airship!”

“Wow, nice!” Akira said.

“While we have the chance, I’d love it if we could paint it back at our guild later.”

“If it’s cool with you, Kotomi, I’d be happy to!”

It was much smaller and more compact than the passenger airships we usually took to faraway areas. Design-wise, those ships were much rounder; this one was sharper and sleeker, so it probably traveled fast.

“This is the LHS-13, the newest small high-speed model. It has a low weight capacity, but its speed more than makes up for it. Also, it’s not outfitted with options like cannons, *but* nitro is a standard feature on this model. So have fun with it!”

Nitro? Isn’t that, like, an explosive boost of speed you get when you press a special button in a car? I’ve seen it in movies too.

“The wheelhouse is over here.” She pointed toward the back of the deck.

There was a staircase at the back of the airship that went pretty high up, leading to a little hut-like wheelhouse. The door below the wheelhouse went into the cabin. It was surprisingly similar to a normal ship.

We quickly shuffled up to the wheelhouse, where a steering wheel was affixed to a wooden stand. The glass in front of it was like the windshield of a car, commanding a wide view.

Inside, it was pretty darn plain. There were handrails running all around, probably to help you keep steady when the ship lurched.

“Now, I’ll explain the basic controls. As you can see, you steer with this steering wheel. Turn it right, it circles right. Turn it left, it circles left. It’s pretty simple.”

“How do you go up and down?”

“You do that by pushing and pulling the wheel. Pull it to ascend, and push to descend.” Ms. Nakada told me.

Maeda was the next to probe for more. She must have been *really* excited; her eyes were practically sparkling. “Ooh, ooh! Do you accelerate and decelerate with these pedals down here?!”

“Wow, someone’s already quite taken with their airship! Yes, the right accelerates and the left brakes. I take it you like this stuff, Maeda?”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m partly attached to it because I earned it myself, but I’ve played a lot of racing games at home!”

Oh, I get it. Maeda said she didn’t have much experience with MMOs, but that she played a lot of family-friendly games. So racing games are more her speed, eh?

“And how do you use the nitrous?!”

“See the little protrusions on the wheel there?”

The steering wheel resembled one you might see on a medieval ship, with little spokes sticking out of it.

Ms. Nakada pointed at one of them. “Notice the red one here? Pull it, and you activate nitro!”

“I see. Very interesting! Also, also, also! Do sky pirates get a bonus to their piloting abilities when they’re behind the wheel?!”

“Yes! You’ll learn certain traits that help with that as you level up. Your skill with the nitro rises, along with your cannon fire and hand-to-hand combat. Alternatively, you can raise these skills with a talent.”

“So nothing that *requires* you to be a sky pirate? Once you learn the talents, it’s all the same?”

“W-Well, I guess you could say that.”

Even Ms. Nakada was starting to get scared by Maeda’s zeal. She had been full of enthusiasm when she was taking that test. It was partly in service of the guild mission, but you could tell she *really* wanted to pilot her own personal airship.

“Weird, bawk. Don’t think I’ve ever seen Kotomi that excited.”

Yano nodded. “Yeah, she’s usually like a class rep. Nothing wrong with havin’ fun once in a while, though, y’know?”

“True, bawk. Ren’s always like that too, so I’m used to it, bawk.”

“’Scuse me? Actually, I always analyze the situation with a cool head and figure out how to make bad apples into superstars.”

“Maybe, but you do it like you’re having the time of your life,” Akira chimed in. “I always see that excitement on your face; you’re just doing whatever you want. But I mean, I pretty much just enjoy the ride.”

“Thanks!”

“Speaking of, it’s time to enjoy the ride with Kotomi today.”

“Yeah! We gotta check out that Sky Fissure, anyway!”

Sky Fissures were entrances to instanced dungeons. These dungeons created a new, randomized area for each party who went in, so we had no idea what we’d find there. Basically, once you were inside, nobody else could bother you.

As long as people were stifling the usual grinding spots due to the guild mission, and as long as we didn’t have our own big-boy private dungeon, all we

could do was find an instanced dungeon and start grinding up Kokoru.

To search for a Sky Fissure, we needed a personal airship.

“Well, that’s really all there is to it. Anything else you need, just check the manual. But you know what they say: practice makes perfect!” Ms. Nakada handed Maeda a thick book.

It kinda feels like she’s blowing off her job as an instructor, but we’re ready to get going ASAP anyway.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you so much!”

“Okay, kids, I’m off. Have tons of fun!”

After that, Ms. Nakada vanished into thin air.

“Hey, can I really pilot? Huh?!” Maeda pleaded, her eyes aglitter.

“Yeah, of course. Let’s go find a Sky Fissure!”

“Agreed! Let’s go, already! Ahh, an area we’ve never been to before! I’m ready to grab some screenshots.” Akira already had her Otherworldly Lens in hand.

“Go, go, go! You got this, Kotomi!”

“Gladly. Then let us depart!” Maeda said, abruptly pulling the red handle on the steering wheel.

“Wait! That’s the nitro—”

But I was too late.

Bwooom!

Suddenly, the airship shot away from the pier with explosive speed.

“Gaaaaah!”

“Baaaaawk?!”

“Chichichiiirp?!”

Everyone except for Maeda was thrown against the back wall. The ship itself

was banging against something, swaying and lurching all the while.

“Ahahaha! It’s so fast! This is wonderful!”

Damn! Is she one of those people who’s dangerous behind the wheel?! I thought. *At least stop using the nitro!*

“Aaaaah?!”

As we zigzagged around the pier with nitro on, other players and NPCs fled in terror. Their screams were audible from here.

In the wheelhouse, we were all heaped together in a big pile.

Huh, at least something soft is cushioning my face.

“Eep?! Hey, cut it out?! This ain’t my job!”

My face was buried in Yano’s chest.

“Yeah, Ren! I’m the only person you can do that to!”

“It’s not like I can control what’s going on here!”

“Baaawk! Stop bitin’ me, you little scoundrel!”

“Chickeeen! Chomp, chomp.”

While we all screamed and hollered, the pressure exerted on us by the speed of our ship began to decrease.

Oh, is the nitro done? Whew.

“Aww, it’s already over? I want more!”

Maeda kept pulling and releasing the nitro lever over and over, but it only responded with clunks.

“Maeda, you’re gonna break it! It probably has a cooldown like our skills do, or something.”

“Oh... That’s a shame. How long do you think it’ll take before I can use it again?” She pouted like a child who’d had their toy taken away.

I almost expected her to start sucking her thumb.

“Who knows?”

“Then I guess we’d better test that!” Maeda gleefully opened the system window and checked the current time.

“One!”

Clunk! She pulled the lever.

“Two!”

Clunk!

“Three!”

Clunk!

The rest of us gawked at her in disbelief.

Is she seriously going to pull that thing every single second?

“Sorry to ruin your fun, but maybe we should just lay off it for a while.”

“Yeah. Let’s go outside! I wanna grab some screenshots.” Akira left the wheelhouse and stepped out onto the deck.

“Me too. We’re lookin’ for this Sky Fissure, right? What’s it look like?”

“I’ll go too, bawk. Gotta get those level-ups going! Level is power, bawk!”

Well, Kokoru wasn’t exactly wrong; all the stats aside from his level were meaningless to him. On top of his already-bad growth rates, he had the Princess’s Skull Ring equipped, which cut his growths down to a third in exchange for multiplying his EXP gain by three.

His expected growth on level-up was as follows:

```
[Growth Rates]
STR 0, VIT 1, DEX 0, AGI 0, INT 0, MND 0, CHR 0
```

No matter how much he leveled up, he would only gain some VIT and max HP. His fighting power was essentially that of a level 1 right now.

Even worse, his Cowardice trait made his stats go even lower in battle. As a result, Kokoru could hardly even hit the broad side of a barn, let alone a real enemy. Thus, we’d have to give up on making him fight fair.

But Kokoru *did* have something up his sleeve.

It was his new skill, Golden Sweets—the trademark of a shady merchant. With that, he could bribe monsters up to his level to fight for him.

This was another waste-of-money strategy that was useless if we were broke, but for now, we just needed to raise his level to be able to do it.

If his growths were gonna be trash either way, I figured we might as well abandon them, focus only on his level value, and bet it all on the dirty sales tactic.

Min-maxing like this was the weakling’s way of fighting. Even if we lost in general power, we could excel in one area: his level. So Kokoru was right; level was, in fact, power.

“All right, same. Let’s get going, Draco!”

“Chichirp!”

Now that even Kokoru was motivated, I had to do everything I could for him. After all, I was the one who had chosen him and decided on this path to success.

“Wow! There are a lot of other airships out too! Cool!” Akira, having left for the deck earlier, was taking screenshots left and right.

Yano made a face. “Maybe we’ve got some competition.”

“Ooh, maybe, yeah! All the other farming spots are taken, so...”

I nodded. “I get it. None of us have private dungeons, but anyone who can get their hands on an airship is looking for a Sky Fissure. Go in, and the place is all yours. I guess it’s a race to see who can get to the entrance first.” Still, that was probably much easier said than done. “First, I wanna figure out what this Sky Fissure actually looks like.”

“Same. Where even is it?” Yano mused.

“I got this. I’ll search using my camera’s zoom function!” Akira said assuringly.

Thus, Yano, Akira, and I picked our own corners to survey from. However, we didn’t see anything that resembled the name.

“We should try going over to where all those airships are gathered,” I said, looking over the starboard side.

Maybe I’ll tell Maeda to steer us closer.

“But Ren, it looks like those ships are all coming this way. I can see it when I zoom in.”

“Uh, but there’s nothing here.”

“Oh! Everyone, look down, bawk!”

Leaning over the railing of the deck, Kokoru pointed downward.

Ahh, that’s the one place we didn’t try.

We leaned over the railing and looked down. Amid the blues of the sky and

sea and the white of the clouds, there was something like a pitch-black vortex.

“Ohoho, that? It’s like a real-life black hole!”

“Wow, this is awesome! Gotta snap some pics!”

“Let’s jump right in!”

Still, it might’ve been difficult for an airship to go straight down.

Can it perform a vertical drop? Or do you have to go in circles while you slowly lower your altitude or something? Well, whatever. Time to go tell Maeda.

“Okay, I’ll go let Maeda kno—”

I looked into the wheelhouse and saw Maeda yanking away at that nitro lever with childish delight. Maybe it had been a bad idea to give her the wheel.

Bwooom!

In the next instant, an explosion shook the ship. The nitro had finished its cooldown. Having let our guard down, we couldn’t withstand the sudden acceleration and were thrown overboard.

“Whooooa?!”

I hadn’t expected to go skydiving today! Even in this video game, you could really feel the wind. But damn, it was scary! Even in the game!

“Wow! This is kind of a cool way to take in the sights!”

I turned toward Akira to learn that there was, in fact, a sight to be seen. With her right above me, I could see under her skirt!

Forget all that, though. She looked like she was having fun!

Good to know she’s not worried.

“Nooooo! I don’t wanna die, I don’t wanna diiie!”

Yano’s teary-eyed screaming was a lot more normal.

“Baaawk! I can’t fly, bawk!” Kokoru screamed and clung to Draco, who was unable to support his weight and just fell with him.

As we hurtled through the air with all of our usual liveliness, the Sky Fissure waited below.

When we neared its black maw, we were sucked in, and everything went black.

◆◇◆

After a moment, the darkness obscuring my vision retreated, revealing what appeared to be the walls of a cave.

“Did we warp?! This must be the inside of the Sky Fissure.”

If so, we should be in a randomly generated dungeon right now. That means we’re free to farm the monsters in here without having to worry about any troublemakers.

“Ooh. The inside looks just like a normal cave.”

“Whew, that scared me! I thought I was dead.”

“For real, bawk. What would’ve happened if we hadn’t gotten sucked in here, bawk?”

“Chirp, chirp.”

Looks like Akira, Yano, Kokoru, and Draco all made it in too.

But that was not all.

“Oh? Where are we?” Maeda appeared near us, utterly stupefied.

Was she forced in here because we came in?

“Hey, Maeda! Looks like the Sky Fissure was actually right beneath us.”

“We’re glad you made it, Kotomi!”

“Hey, Kotomi, that was just cruel of you to throw us off with that nitro. Do you know how scared I was?!”

“I’m sorry. But now I know.”

“Huh? Know what?”

“It’s 240 seconds!”

“Umm, what is?”

I understood right away. “Ohh. The nitro cooldown, right?”

“Yes. We need to know the effect duration too! I wonder if there are talents and items out there that can add uses or decrease the cooldown. If so, maybe we could have the nitro on without ever having to cool down. This bears investigation, don’t you think?”

“Ahahaha. Ren, you’re such a bad influence on her.”

“Kotomi’s turning into a monster!”

As long as she’s having fun, more power to her. Everyone has their own way of enjoying themselves. There’s no reason to judge. I would prefer if she was more careful with the nitro, though.

“Anyway, let’s look around, kill what we can, and start raising Kokoru’s level,” I said, eager to change the subject.

With everyone in agreement, we proceeded into the cavernous dungeon. The starting area was a curved passage; we could go either forward or backward.

For now, we decided to go forward.

I rubbed my hands together. “Time to see what kinds of enemies we’ve got.”

“It’s all random, right? Including the layout and monsters?”

“Is there treasure in here? I hope we can find some grub!”

Maeda looked around. “I don’t see an exit anywhere. There *is* an exit, right?”

“Probably,” I said. “If not, we wouldn’t be able to leave.”

We walked for some time, chatting as we went along.

“Still no monsters yet, huh?”

“Maybe you can pull duds without ’em?” Yano offered.

Suddenly, Maeda cried out, “Oh! I see something!”

I followed her gaze. “Mm... Hey, I know that monster!”

“Wow, an Island Bunny? It *is* a dud!” Akira lamented.

“Li’l bugger’s kinda shiny, though.”

Akira squinted. “I can’t see the name from here, but I don’t think that’s a normal Island Bunny.”

“Oh, I think I know what this is!”

I read about this in the UW Guidebook! It’s a monster called a Golden Bunny. From tip to tail, it’s all gold and shiny.

Experience yield from monsters in this game is divided into two categories: normal EXP based on level difference and set EXP from rare monsters.

Golden Bunnies are rare monsters, famous for giving way more experience points than their strength would imply. The Guidebook calls them “bonus monsters.”

This little guy was the absolute king of monsters when it came to grinding experience. It was comparable to one of those gooey metal slimes you’d find in other games.

“It’s a Golden Bunny!”

“Oooh! Good job, Ren! We’re in luck today.”

“Yeah. Seems to me like you’re our lucky charm, Akira.”

Her natural-born luck always comes through for us.

Throughout my entire gaming career, stuff like this never happened to me when I played solo. But when I played with Akira? Happened all the time. Maybe people who had it in real life had it in games too.

“What should we do? Just run after it? I think he’ll try to give us the slip.”

“The Guidebook *did* say they’re very speedy little critters.”

Yano and Maeda were right; these things were quick to flee, just like the metallic monsters they resembled. The Guidebook also said they were super fast, and they didn’t take much damage at all from attacks.

Dead End ignored defense and evasion, so maybe I could knock it down in one hit? Its HP looked pretty low too.

Anyway, the Guidebook suggested chasing a Golden Bunny into a corner, then

trying to take it down.

“Hold on a sec. There should be an exit somewhere, right? If we block that off, we should be able to trap it in with us.”

We should do that first before it notices us.

After that, we could take our time closing in on it.

“All right, girls, let’s go the other way for now. Once we find and seal the exit, it won’t be able to escape.”

“Ooh, gotcha. Okay, cool, let’s do it!” Akira said.

We turned and headed back the way we came in search of the way out.

Standing on one of the cave walls was a tall frame, but instead of a picture, it contained only undulating darkness. It was almost as if a black hole had been put on display.

“Oh! That must be the exit. Okay, someone’s gotta stand guard here.”

“Want me to do it, bawk? Not like I can attack anyway.”

True. We hadn’t tested Golden Sweets yet, so Kokoru’s current power in battle was zero. Might as well let him be a living barrier.

“Cool. We’re counting on you, Kokoru.”

“Bawk. Okay!”

With that settled, we walked back to where we’d found the Golden Bunny.

“There it is again.”

It was still sitting in the same spot. Kokoru had the entrance covered, but how would we actually finish the thing off?

“So, how do we kill the little guy? Maybe I should shoot it from far away?” Yano patted her gun lovingly.

“Mm... Not a bad idea, but if it doesn’t die in one shot, it’ll run off.” The area was essentially a wide cave. The tunnel ahead gently curved to the right and back around. “Let’s hide and have some of us sneak up behind it. Then we can do a pincer attack.”

“Do you want me to do the sneaking?”

Akira *did* have Vanishing Whirl at her disposal. For the low cost of some AP, she could disappear and move in secrecy.

Vanishing Whirl is mainly used to move without drawing aggro from monsters that attack on sight, but it’s also good for hidden potshots in PvP combat.

Since Akira had the talent Breath of Ares, she passively gained AP over time. As a result, her AP bar should already have been full.

“Sure, sounds good to me. Looks like it’s got good eyes and ears, so make sure you’re quiet.”

“Got it.”

“Once she’s on the other side of it, we’ll have her attack. Meanwhile, we’ll wait around the corner so it can’t see us.”

“And then we jump it! Right?”

“Right. Soon as it passes by, wham! Dead End right to the face!”

“I’m gonna head over, then. Good luck!” Akira used Vanishing Whirl and disappeared.

“All right. Let’s get in position to attack.”

I activated a magic circle, emptying my MP bar. Now I was ready to use Dead End any time.

Yano readied her gun and aimed at the faraway Golden Bunny while Maeda prepared to cast offensive magic.

After we waited for a while...

“Bweeee?!” the Golden Bunny cried, sounding uncharacteristically brazen and goofy for a bunny, as it leapt up in surprise and made a mad dash toward us.

“So fast!” everyone in the ambush squad blurted at once.

It’s ridiculously fast!

Yano tried to fire at the bunny, but she wasn’t even close. By the time Maeda finished casting her magic, it had already whizzed past us.

I reacted in time and readied my ultimate.

“Ultimate move: Dead—”

“Bweeee!”

However, the screaming Golden Bunny darted away so fast that I hit nothing but air. In the space of my swing, it had gotten through the cracks and run right by me.

“End! Holy crap, that was fast!”

That speed was beyond abnormal. This thing really *was* like those slippery, slimy fellas!

If I could just smack it with Dead End, it’d probably go down easy. Unfortunately, it was hard to actually make contact with the animation.

“I’ll go after it!”

Yano activated Sprint and chased after the Golden Bunny at max speed—but it was *still* faster than her!

Can we even kill this thing?!

“I’m gonna try too!”

“That is some incredible speed!”

“Yeah, seriously!”

Akira, Maeda, and I chased after Yano and the Golden Bunny.

From afar, we heard a voice.

“Baaawk?! Why me?!”

“Bwee! Bwee!”

“Hey! Cut that out, you little rascal!”

“Bweeee!”

“He got away again! Ughhh!”

“Oww, bawk. I’m dying, bawk...”

“Hold up. I’ll heal you right quick.”

We soon caught up to Yano, who was using healing magic on one torn-up Kokoru. Thanks to the Nurse Ring she got recently, Yano was now able to use recovery magic. Her MP *was* on the lower side, though, since sky pirates couldn't typically use magic.

"Did he beat you up, bud?"

"Are you okay?"

"What happened, Yuuna?"

"Man, that stupid shiny rabbit came over and front-kicked Kokoru right in the face! Then when I attacked it, it ran away!"

"Sniffle... Why does it hate me so much?"

"Maybe it's because you were blocking the exit? But, well, it could've just kept running."

"That bunny's just bullying Kokoru because he's weak. How cruel!" Akira puffed out her cheeks.

"I mean, Kokoru's level 30 now."

We were talking about an enemy monster, so there should have been some logical sequence that made it do that. It wasn't like it randomly decided it didn't like Kokoru.

If we could break down the problem, we ought to be able to figure out the reason. That might tell us how to take it down too.

"For now, how about you and Maeda trade places? We'll see if the bunny attacks her when she blocks the exit."

"Bawk, gotcha."

"Yes, sir."

We left Maeda at the exit and took Kokoru in pursuit of the Golden Bunny. After proceeding for a short while, there it was, in all its golden glory.

"Okay. I'm gonna close in on it." I casually approached the bunny.

"Bweeeeee!"

He immediately noticed me, screamed, and fled.

You find it, it runs. That's a start.

"Okay. You're up, Kokoru. Try to get closer."

We went in even farther to find it again, this time siccing Kokoru on it.

"Got it, bawk."

Kokoru waddled over and stepped into the rabbit's perception range.

"Bwee! Bwee!"

Whoa, it just went in for a kick!

"Bawk?! Bawk, cut it out!"

"Aaah! It's just Kokoru!" Akria cried.

"Let's stop it!"

"I got this!" Yano shouted, taking a shot at the Golden Bunny.

Yuuna attacked.

Dealt 1 damage to Golden Bunny!

Ooh, she landed a hit! Only 1 damage, though. Again, this fella's a metal mob in every way, shape, and form. Its HP ought to be low, so all we need is a few more—

"Bweeee?!"

But of course, after being hit once, it ran off like a coward.

"It really does only attack Kokoru. I wonder if that's because he has Cowardice?"

"What makes you say that, Ren?"

"Well, y'know how characters with Cowardice can't hit enemies with their attacks? Maybe it just attacks Kokoru because it knows there won't be any backlash."

“Huh. Man, that’s scummy.”

“But I bet we can use this to our advantage. Let’s lock it down and clock it.”

“Oh, okay. We use Kokoru to draw it in so I can shoot it.”

“Akira can also hide and stay next to Kokoru, then jump out to attack along with you.”

“Neat! Then we can take it down twice as fast.”

“Yup, we’ve got this! Good job, Kokoru. Thanks to you, we’re having rabbit for dinner tonight.”

“Forgive me if I’m not proud of it, bawk.”

“C’mon, man. Just think of it as tanking. You’re our shield! This is gonna make leveling a cinch.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s just get it over with, bawk.”

With our flawless new strategy in hand, we once again went to find the Golden Bunny.

“Ah, there it is! I’m glad it’s so easy to find. Good thing there aren’t any branching paths here.”

“Huh. Is that Kotomi back there?”

“Bawk, yeah, I see her!”

“I see! This cave is actually round, like a doughnut.”

And that means...

“I’ll go around and block its escape path. Use Kokoru to draw it in on this side while you girls wait in ambush. When it tries to get away from you, it’ll run into me. Then, it’ll run back to you, and we just keep looping like that. Akira, if you use Vanishing Whirl again right after you attack, it should forget you’re there and go back to attacking Kokoru.”

“Yeah, I get it. I think this’ll work!”

“A’ight! All I have to do is hang back and shoot it when he smacks Kokoru, right?”

“Exactly. Thanks! Let’s go, Draco.”

Thus, Draco and I ran the opposite way. I passed by Maeda and got into position.

“Awesome.” I opened the system menu and sent a message to Akira that said *“Ready.”*

As soon as she received it, they sprang into action.

Kokoru waddled over to the Golden Bunny with his ever-comical, exaggerated steps. Once he was within range, the rabbit reacted and charged straight toward Kokoru, hitting him with a front kick.

“Bwee! Bwee!”

Even I found the kick strangely ferocious. Maybe it really wanted to attack for once since it had been running all this time.

This bunny was the kind of monster who’d go out of its way to find someone weaker and really wallop them. If this were real life, it’d be such a piece of trash.

Anyway, good job, Kokoru! Who knew Cowardice had an upside?

It was the perfect way to stop a Golden Bunny so that we could feast on it. Seeing a crappy skill turned into something useful with just a change of perspective really tugged at my heartstrings.

Kokoru was shining like a star now! I loved stuff like this. If I was a drama cannon, Kokoru was the drama shell!

“Gblorfblorgh baaawk?!” Kokoru crouched to the ground after a swift kick to the gut.

The Golden Bunny went for another kick, but Akira jumped in from the side, ready to attack with both swords.

“No more bullying! Ultimate move: Cross Crescent!”

From the invisible Akira, two crescent-moon effects appeared next to each other. Her dual-wielding action didn’t end there, though; after a short beat, a third crescent moon appeared.

With one weapon, this attack was twofold. But now, it was powered up to be threefold.

In her right hand was her main weapon, Skyfall +1. In her left was the steel sword that Yano had painted for her as her subweapon.

Steel swords were made using steel ingots, the next step above iron ingots. It was pretty much the standard for our current level range.

To break down her ultimate in dual-wielding terms, it was basically a normal two-stage Cross Crescent with her main weapon and then another stage with her subweapon.

Tack all that on to Skyfall's shock waves, and it made for a total of five hits.

Akira activated Cross Crescent.

Dealt 2 damage to Golden Bunny!

Of the five strikes, only two landed. The other three missed.

Oh, but the shock waves count as magic damage, right? Maybe this bunny nullifies magic, then. If I imagine it as one of those slimes, it all makes sense! Though, back when my dad was a gamer, you could puff on one of those guys and kill them in one hit!

"Bweeee?!"

Yuuna attacked.

Dealt 1 damage to Golden Bunny!

Just as the bunny jumped up in panic, Yano landed a bull's-eye. It made a mad dash toward me, but upon seeing me, it turned back around.

At that point, Akira had already used Vanishing Whirl again, making it seem as though Kokoru was alone.

Once again, it charged over and front-kicked Kokoru.

“Bawk?!”

“Ultimate move: Cross Crescent!”

And another gunshot!

“Bweeee?!”

Again, it came to me! Again, it made a U-turn! Again, it was just Kokoru walking around alone.

“Bwee! Bwee!”

“Oww, bawk! This guy’s a freakin’ idiot!”

We went through this process several times until, finally, the Golden Bunny fell.

“Bweeeee!”

Then, we all leveled up at once. The level-up fanfare showered upon us.

“Nice, we got him! Ooooh, look at those levels rise!”

“Yay! That was good EXP!” Akira cheered.

Yano was in heaven. “Yes, yes, sooo good! I love you, Sky Fissure!”

Each of us had gained two levels. Kokoru was already a lower level than us *and* he had the Princess’s Skull Ring equipped, so he went up eight.

Now I was level 45, Akira 47, Maeda 47, and Yano 48! Kokoru was up to 38!

“Good thing Kotomi threw us off with that nitro boost, huh, bawk?”

“A lucky break. Sorry about that, though.”

“Don’t let her take all the credit, Kokoru! If you hadn’t been here to bait that rabbit, we would’ve had way more trouble with him. The faster we can kill these things, the quicker we can grind our levels.”

The Guidebook said it takes a lot of effort to take down Golden Bunnies, but that was relatively easy in spite of our small party. That was all thanks to us making use of it attacking Kokoru.

If we can get another Golden Bunny, this’ll be over in a flash!

But the huge EXP yield wasn't all that the rascal had left behind.

"Hey, Ren! We got loot too!"

"Oooh! Let's take a look."

"Huh, Bunnygold. This is a rare material!"

"The Guidebook says that Golden Bunny item drops are very rare."

"Wow! I bet it would sell for a good price!"

"See, Akira? When we have you around, we drown in rare loot. I bet we can make something good with this! Maybe, like, a liquid metal sword or something equally good!"

"I thought of that too! The strongest weapon in the whole game, stronger than the legendary hero's sword!"

"Heck yeah!"

"You guys are babblin' about some real retro stuff, aren'tcha? So hey, since this is a crafting material, should we just leave it to Takashiro?"

"Sounds good to me!"

"Sure, I wouldn't mind."

Everyone agreed to let me take the Bunnygold for now. We'd have to see whether we should flip it for a profit, or if we should mold it into someone's new weapon.

"Okay, gang. Let's leave this place and find a new Sky Fissure!"

We were getting into gear now! Level, level, and level some more!

Leaving in high spirits, we stepped out onto the deck of our airship.

Guess that's what happens when you leave a Sky Fissure.

Maeda gladly whipped out the nitro, sending us off in search of a new one.

In the end, we never did get to enter another Sky Fissure that day. There were just too many other guilds out there hunting for them, just as we were. These black holes were in short supply, and the demand was... well, sky high.

At this rate, we'd only end up with one fissure under our belt—pure

beginner’s luck.

I’d better think of a way around this.

◆◇◆

The next day, I logged in an hour before class started.

Yesterday, we’d been lucky enough to get into a Sky Fissure and even kill a Golden Bunny, but after that, our luck had run out.

We just had way too much competition. Throngs of airships were clamoring over them like moths flocking around a lamp.

It was a mystery how many Sky Fissures could exist at once, but we needed a way to get into them efficiently or else we’d never be able to get Kokoru’s levels up.

With the big-name guilds camping in all the other good spots, Sky Fissures were our only way to grind. Today, I was determined to solve this problem.

“Huh, a system message. Let’s see... Oh, they’re gonna have a big meeting about the guild mission’s final battle.”

Ms. Nakada had accidentally told us it would be a battle royale. We didn’t know any details beyond that, though.

“Next week. All right, all right. It’ll be in the chapel at the royal palace. Each guild has to bring their rep, okay. So it’ll be kind of like an interim report sort of thing?”

Each guild would probably compare their heroes’ progress for clout.

I see, I see. Then I’d like to have some prospects for victory by the weekend.

“Morning, Ren. Bawk.”

I’d made my way from my log-in spot at the guild house to our guild shop, where Kokoru was running the store.

“Morning, Kokoru. Seen any of the girls yet?”

“Yeah, they all came through already. They went to the pier, bawk.”

We guildies had planned to log in early and paint the airship.

Looks like I'm the last one.

Seeing as Maeda was so excited about the airship, she had probably logged in at six o'clock sharp.

"Cool. I'll go catch up with them. Good luck with the shop!"

I made my way to the airship port, where the airship was parked in the same place as yesterday. Except, one thing was different.

"Hahaha... What a mess."

Our airship looked nothing like it had yesterday.

It had been recolored pink all over with the logo of our guild plastered on the side. Lace and cute little ribbons now adorned it as well, making it look very fancy.

As a guy, I'll feel a little embarrassed riding it, though.

Maybe this was just Maeda's aesthetic. She was really fond of cute things.

Nevertheless, she was the one who'd procured us the airship in the first place, so she could decorate it however she pleased.

Our guild emblem was Yano's design, though, so she had drawn that herself.

Hmm, doesn't look like Akira got to add any personal touches.

You'd expect Akira to draw some macho man when given a brush, but there were no rippling muscles to be found.

"Oh, wait. There's one."

The airship had come with a goddess figurehead at the bow, but she was now equipped with Akira's Macho Armor from the guild shop.

This little accent really shattered the airship's elegant vibe.

"She just *has* to put that into everything she does, huh? It's like a disease only she can spread."

"Good morning, Ren! You're so late that we almost finished without you."

"Oh, hey. I'm fine, don't worry."

Yano emerged, twirling Libra's Brush between her fingers. "Since Kotomi

earned this for us, we decided to go with what she wanted."

"I think it turned out rather nicely!" Maeda seemed very satisfied. "By the way, the ship's name is JS Peachy Thunder."

"Uh, 'Peachy Thunder'?"

I guess it is kinda pink.

Seeing as the figurehead was wearing Macho Armor, however, I would've dubbed it the "Peachy Muscle."

"It's supposed to express both speed and cuteness."

With Maeda looking so happy, I figured I shouldn't rain on her parade.

"Speed, huh? Yeah, I guess we will need to boost it a bit if we don't want to get in scraps over Sky Fissures all day."

"Agreed," said Akira. "Our first try went well, but we didn't get a single one after that."

Maeda was especially annoyed by how often people overtook us. She was definitely the kind of person to be emotional behind the wheel.

"In other words, we have to soup up this airship to win the mission, right?! It would be my pleasure! Let's improve the nitro function!"

"Kotomi's breakin' again!"

"Aw, c'mon, she's having fun. I like it!"

Akira rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Ren. You don't have the right to say that."

"How do we power up the thing, though?" Yano asked.

"There *are* power-up items. But the parts wouldn't be on the market, so we'll probably have to either hunt monsters or trade MEP."

Maeda had really done her research.

"Hm. Well, all the grind spots are taken, so we can't farm items."

I nodded. "Right. At this point, we'll just have to trade MEP."

"We've got some time until class starts. Wanna go over to the MEP exchange counter right now?"

“Yeah, let’s go. Early bird catches the worm, and all that. We’ve got to get to those Sky Fissures, or else we won’t even come close to winning.”

Yano grimaced. “I dunno... Seems like all my hard-earned MEP’s gonna get stolen away by a certain somebody who’s always trying to get us to redefine the meta in some weird way.”

“It’s not weird! Speed is king! Now, let’s get going already!” Maeda started yanking on Yano’s arm.

“Hahaha... Kotomi, I feel like I’ve seen a side of you that I shouldn’t have. Okay, okay, let’s go.” Yano was complaining, but there was a little grin on her face. She was a surprisingly tolerant person.

Faced with a side of Maeda she’d never seen and a sudden change in plans, Yano easily surrendered. In truth, she was just happy to help.

The fact that she never got annoyed or anything about it showed she had a big heart, even if her fashion sense *was* a little weird.

With that, we headed off to the Merit Point Exchange Counter.

When we arrived, we saw two familiar faces in line.

“Oh! Morning, Nozomi.”

It was Akabane and Kataoka. As ever, Kataoka was joined at the hip with his Hime-chan. In a way, I guess you could say he was a devoted guy. Not that I particularly cared about him.

“My, if it isn’t Akira. Good day to you.” Akabane smiled at Akira. Smiled!

Hey, whoa. Why aren’t things getting all tense?

“Huh, what happened to you two? Did you become besties behind my back?”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean? I-I just—” Akabane stammered.

“That we did!” Akira interjected. “Let me tell you, fighting side by side on the battlefield really brings people together.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

Did she mean the abduction quest with Princess Lieliz?

“Ahem! Well, err, if you’re being so frank, then I suppose I have to agree!”

As usual, Akabane could turn hot or cold in a flash. Still, I could tell she was doing her best to stifle a grin, as the ends of her mouth were twitching. She looked pretty happy to me; I just wished she’d show it.

“You here to exchange some MEP too, Kataoka?”

“Nah. Not me, anyway.”

“Huh, really?”

“Yep. I came to offer up my points to my lady!”

“Yeah, you would do that. Uh, as long as you’re cool with it, go you.”

He was incomprehensible to me, but if he was happy to do it, I might as well let him.

Maeda approached the NPC girl at the counter and said, “Excuse me. Would you be able to show me a list of the exchanges we can make with our Merit Points?”

“Of course. Here you are. Take all the time you need.” She opened a menu in midair, displaying the exchange list.

It consisted of talents, items, and much more.

“The airship filter is... there!” Maeda tapped the menu, restricting the list to only show airship-related exchanges.

We took a little peek.

“Ohoho, there’s a whole bunch here,” I observed. “Dang, they’re expensive.”

Even the cheapest airships didn’t drop below 3,000 MEP. As for the LHS-13-type airship that we had...

“Whoa, it’s over nine thousand?! That’s a lot!”

It really was the newest model.

Maeda *had* gotten the top score in our grade, though, so I guess the reward had to be incredible to match.

“Even if it *is* the newest model, that’s just crazy.”

Yano was right; it was by far the most expensive of the small-form, high-speed crafts. The second-most expensive one in the same category was only 4,000. But why?

We scanned the LHS-13's specs.

"Hmm... The load capacity and max speed aren't all that different," Akira murmured.

According to the description, our ship's load capacity was 250, while the max speed was 82. The second one had a load capacity of 245 and a max speed of 79.

How does that lead to such a price difference?

"Oh, maybe it's the expansion slots?"

"Huh? Ren, they both have eight expansion slots."

Yes, both had a maximum of eight slots, but there was also a limit on how many of each type of part you could use.

There were three categories of parts: offensive ones like cannon sets and rams, defensive ones like armor and barriers, and movement-related ones like cloaking and nitro. Only so many parts from each category could be equipped at once.

As for the Peachy Thunder, it could only have up to four offensive parts, four defensive parts, or eight parts for movement. With eight slots to fill, those maximums had to be considered.

The second-most expensive ship also had eight fillable slots, but its maximums were three for offensive, three for defensive, and four for movement.

"Look closely; the limit for movement slots is doubled. That means you can make all of your expansion slots movement-based."

In other words, you could min-max your ship when it came to speed or stealth.

By the way, the Peachy Thunder had come equipped with a single Nitro Charger part, which increased nitro uses. That gave us a total of one nitro use,

but we couldn’t take it off.

With one nonremovable part, that meant one of our eight slots was essentially inaccessible.

“So, Maeda. Nitro’s cooldown time is four minutes, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“And how long does the effect last?”

“Thirty seconds. Oh! I get it!”

“Bingo. If we just throw on eight Nitro Chargers...”

“Eternal nitro! How dreamy!” Maeda looked at me with stars in her eyes. She was leaning forward so intently that I had to take a step back.

“Uh, yeah... This is probably the only model that can use eight movement parts. That’s why it’s so expensive.”

It’d be a hell of a bumpy ride, but speed is speed, I say. Even if it is gonna heave us passengers all over the place...

“Wow, yeah. None of the other ones have eight,” Yano muttered as she scrolled through the list.

“Mhm. Looks like this is the first model that could constantly run on nitro,” Akira added.

“Yeah. I bet nobody’s even tried that loadout yet. At least, we didn’t see any like that yesterday.”

As I said that, I wondered if this could be something that would break the balance of the game. Hardcore min-maxing was a thrill, so of course I wanted to try it out.

“If we min-max *that* much, chasing down Sky Fissures oughta be easy.”

“Let’s do it! With my eight-nitro dream, we’ll conquer the skies!” Maeda declared, a fist raised high in the air. Her eyes were alight with ambition. Such enthusiasm!

With regards to the competitive guild mission, this would be an extreme boon for us.

“Has she always been like that? Or has she eaten something strange?” Akabane asked, shaking her head in disapproval.

“Nope. She just started doing this recently,” I replied.

No reason for me to stop her, though! In fact, I was excited to go along for the ride.

“All right. Girls, let’s combine our MEP and buy seven Nitro Chargers.”

There were some talents I really wanted to buy, but I had to prioritize the greater good.

“Thank you all!”

“Ahahaha! We all owe you one anyway, Kotomi.”

“Yep. Might as well letcha have some fun once in a while.”

That’s all well and good, but how much do those Nitro Chargers cost, anyway?

We checked the Nitro Charger item on the request list. They were 500 points each.

Hmm. Let’s see...

Our Merit Points had been pretty close to zilch before, but the most recent test had replenished them a little.

Maeda had 784 MEP, Akira had 704, I had 567, and Yano had 271. In total, we had just over 2,300.

At 500 each, seven Nitro Chargers would be 3,500. Ouch!

“We don’t have enough! Man, these prices are sky-high!”

“Aww. I was so excited...” Maeda’s shoulders drooped.

“Oh, dear. Would you like to use some of my Merit Points, then?” Akabane suddenly cut in.

“What?!” we all blurted at once.

Oh, heavenly fortune! Thank you, thank you!

“Are you sure about that, Nozomi?!”

“I don’t mind, but I do have a condition. Will you let our NPC participate in your level-grinding? We don’t have a private dungeon, so we’ve been at our wit’s end.”

Oh, yeah. Akabane’s guild wasn’t that large either.

Seeing as her brother was a guild master, she was even less likely to be a big player. I mean, who would want to affiliate with *that*?

In her case, though, I assumed she just wanted to keep playing with Akira more than she wanted to train her NPC. She couldn’t bring herself to say it, so she was just coming up with a pretense to hang out.

“So you say, but half of your reason is just to game with Akira, right?”

“Ye—no, don’t be silly!”

Aw, she blushed!

The act she was putting on just made me want to mess with her more.

“So, what’s it going to be?! Do you want the points or not?!”

“Yes, please! Everyone who agrees, show of hands!”

Urged by Akira, I raised my hand. “Yeah, let’s do it!”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes!” Maeda would never refuse this.

“Sure, but I’ve got one thing to say!” Yano was the only one whose agreement came with strings attached.

“Hm? What is it?”

“We can grind together, but... uh, I’d really like it if you didn’t bring your brother. I kinda can’t stand him.”

Yano *did* seem the most terrified out of all of us.

“Oh, yes, of course. That won’t be a problem.”

“Then I’m all in!”

Great, now our grinding should go smoothly.

Still, there was something bugging me; Kataoka had been quiet all this time.

I leaned in and whispered, “Everything all right, man? You chipped in some MEP too, didn’t you?”

Akabane’s condition for giving us MEP was that we’d help level her guild’s NPC, but Kataoka was in Fountain of Wisdom—a completely different guild.

Their NPC, Peater, was probably off training in their private dungeon.

He didn’t have anything to gain from this, did he?

“Hah. What’s mine is Lady Nozomi’s. What’s Lady Nozomi’s is Lady Nozomi’s. My desires are hardly important.”

“Uh, as long as it’s cool with you, I guess...”

There’s no point in even trying with him! Forget it!

We pooled our MEP together and successfully bought seven Nitro Chargers!

With that, our dream of eight consecutive nitros became a reality.

I can’t wait to see how it turns out.

I turned to everyone and declared, “All right. After school, it’s time to start leveling together!”

Once we’d all promised, we made our way to class.

Chapter 2: The Golden Bunny Festival

After school, we headed to the port with Kokoru in tow. Akabane was there waiting for us.

“We’re grinding together, bawk? Who’s their hero candidate, bawk?”

“We sure are. They’re in charge of Selphie Muse.”

She’d been the most popular pick at the draft meet. I think she started at level 60 minimum, and she had tons of magic.

As I recall, she was a beautiful blonde elf and the daughter of a village chief in Mishuria.

After we’d picked Kokoru, Akabane’s brother had won her in the lottery. The moment he did, man, the whole place went silent.

Kokoru had seen the whole thing too, though he hadn’t made the connection yet.

“It’s Selphie, bawk?! She’s the one from that weirdo’s guild, right? Bawk, are we sure about this?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, he won’t be here.”

“That’s a relief, bawk.”

While we chatted on the deck of the Peachy Thunder, Akabane called from behind, “Apologies for the wait. Let us depart.”

There was someone walking alongside her.

Someone wearing a full-face iron mask and a crimson scarf.

There he is! But why?! Didn’t she say he wouldn’t come?!

“Gaaaah! Here he comes! I told you I can’t deal with him!” Yano shrieked, making herself scarce.

“Oh, wait! This isn’t my brother. Take a closer look.”

As directed, I looked at the character's name. It was Selphie Muse.

"How could they do this to you?!" I screamed.

"Baaawk?! Selphie's gone crazy!" Kokoru was likewise incredulous at the change she had undergone.

At the draft, she had been such a normal-looking elf girl. Now she wore a pink, painted mask and that stupid little red scarf.

At the very least, she wasn't wearing swimwear. Instead, she had normal clothes on underneath.

Hey, wait. That mask is the one that Akira gave Akabane, isn't it?!

"When in Rome, you know. I'm just following the fashion of the guild that's helping me out," came a mild-mannered, almost carefree voice from within the mask.

She seemed pretty calm. The girl must've been an airhead.

"What do you think, Kokoru?" she continued. "I say it looks pretty cool."

"G-Good thing I ended up with Ren, bawk."

I didn't think he'd look nearly as terrifying with the helmet on, owing to his roundness. In fact, it might even be cute. A fat, little chicken wearing a silly mask.

"Selphie and my brother have become fast friends, so she's taking after him a little," Akabane explained.

She must be pretty weird if she gets along with someone like him.

I noticed that her level was 62, the same as it had been at the draft. They must have been struggling to grind too.

At least she was already high-level, though. She could fight just fine in her current state.

"Yes! On top of his impressive level, he's also a sweetheart who would never hurt a fly. I think he's wonderful! I want to be just like him!" Selphie said, then crossed her arms in an imitation of him.

Seriously, what is with these people? Different strokes for different folks, I

guess.

For a moment, I thought about the other guilds. Baddest of the Bad's Alfred seemed like a really good, steadfast guy, and he was clearly sad to have to take part in their badness. In a way, maybe Selphie was honestly better off.

Though from our point of view, you just had to pity the girl.

"Yano, you think you'll make it?"

"Uh, yeah. At least she has clothes on. I should be fine." She still looked really perturbed, though.

"Hahaha. Well, how about we get going, then?" Having collected herself, Akira took the lead.

All of us stepped into the wheelhouse. If we tried to station ourselves anywhere else, we'd probably get thrown off the ship.

Gotta hold the handlebars and plant your feet down, or you'll be in danger when Maeda does her thing.

"Draco, make sure you hang on to me."

"I hug Ren!" he chirped.

Little by little, he was learning to speak.

"Akabane, Selphie, you hang on too."

"Very well."

"Understood, sir!"

"Hanging on, bawk."

Then, Maeda put her hands gently on the airship's wheel.

Now that we had thrown all of our Merit Points into customizing the ship, the single red lever around the steering wheel—the nitro lever—had multiplied, leaving us now with eight red levers.

Today's Peachy Thunder was already radically different from yesterday's. It was the Redefined Peachy Thunder! I couldn't wait to see how it performed.

"Embarking now!" Maeda announced, followed by a loud *clunk!*

I knew it! She went straight for the nitro!

Since it was our second time, the rest of us guildies already knew what to do. We kept hold of whatever we could with our feet planted firmly on the ground.

But for Akabane and Selphie, it was their first time. Although I'd warned them, they clearly weren't wary enough, as they quickly lost their balance.

"Eep?!"

"Wagh?! Hey, don't come any closer!" Suffering from Selphie's sudden embrace, Yano looked sick.

Clearly she'd been traumatized by the full-face mask itself and was now terrified by the very sight of it.

"Eeeeek!" Akabane screamed as well, this time trying to cling to me.

Unfortunately, she missed and ended up smooshing her lips against my cheek.

"Sorry! I, erm, didn't mean to."

"Umm, it's cool. You really gotta hang onto those handles tight, or else."

Nice, I guess something good came out of this after all.

However, Akira was glaring right in my direction.

"Wait, Akira, you've got it all wrong! That was just an accident!" Akabane was even more flustered than me.

If she was actually vying for anyone's affections here, it would be Akira's.

"Here I thought we could be friends, Nozomi. But that was just a dream, I suppose."

"Aaaah! No, please! It's reality!" Her panic was truly pitiful.

In the midst of all this, Maeda was yanking nitro levers left and right.

"Baaaaawk! It's going even faster than last time, baaawk!"

"Hahahaha! You can use multiple nitro boosts at the same time! More testing, more testing!"

Upon activating nitro, the ship accelerated for thirty seconds. You could use

them one at a time to have endless nitro, but now we learned that you could also activate all eight at once. It had clearly led to even more incredible superspeed than last time.

Almost instantly, we arrived at an area in airspace where ships were competing over a Sky Fissure, pulling ahead of them in ease.

The rift was directly to our right.

Unfortunately, we had a ton of forward momentum going on! We couldn't just turn directly toward it, could we?

"We're going in!" Maeda spun the wheel, which creaked as it rotated.

The ship lurched to the side as it changed direction, like a drifting car. We all screamed and hollered, clinging to the handrails for dear life.

Our ship was outta control! This was one heck of a thrill ride!

Thanks to Maeda's maneuvers, the Peachy Thunder pulled a slick slide right into the Sky Fissure.

"I did it! Look, everyone! Now we're free to enter any Sky Fissure we please!" Maeda rejoiced as we were teleported into the instanced dungeon. Miraculously, she was perfectly fine.

The rest of us, on the other hand, were uttering some iteration of “Urp... I’m gonna hurl.”

Now that we’d made it inside, it was time to get grinding.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s go level up!”

Urged on by our one healthy member, we looked around the dungeon. Whereas the first Sky Fissure had generated a looping dungeon, this one was more like a big, open room. The walls were made of bare stone, but the ground was green like grass.

It seemed to go on endlessly in all directions. The place really was randomized every time.

“Ooh, this one’s so big and pretty. How many Tokyo Domes do you think could fit in here?” I said, then waited for Akira to snap at me about having baseball on the brain.

However, she said nothing.

Huh? I looked at her next to me, but she turned away in irritation. *What’s got her in a bad mood?*

After a few moments of awkward silence, Yano came through for me. “Examples like that don’t really make sense for people who don’t love baseball. For high school girls, you want something more like Didneyland.”

Maeda tilted her head. “I think it’s about eleven times as large? One Didneyland is eleven Tokyo Domes.”

“Then what’s one Tokyo Dome? Hmm...”

“Point-oh-nine Didneylands.”

Truly, Maeda was a scholar. There was more to her than yanking the nitro lever.

Well, I mean, being a brainiac was her main shtick to begin with. Even honor roll students like her could flip personalities behind the wheel.

“Oh no! I slipped!”

Suddenly, I was pushed from behind—or more like *tackled*. It was Akabane’s

doing, and she was awfully shameless about it. Clearly intentional!

Taken by surprise, I fell over, taking Akira down with me.

“Wha?!”

“Eep!”

As we fell on top of each other, I felt something soft on my cheek.

It was Akira’s lips. My second lucky strike, I guess?

“What the heck, Ren?! Jeez, we can’t do this in front of people!”

“My bad! It’s just, Akabane—”

“Goodness, I am *so* sorry. I simply slipped, I swear. Good for you, though. You must’ve enjoyed that much more than when I did it, right? Right? Say I’m right!” She was seriously desperate.

Oh, I get it. She’s trying to offset what happened earlier. Guess she really wants to calm Akira down. Might as well go along with it, then.

“Well, yeah, I guess?” I said, standing up. I wasn’t exactly lying.

I then held a hand out to Akira, who was still on the ground. She took it with a smile.

“Fair enough. But if you did that with anyone else, you’d be so sued. That wasn’t the first time!”

“Wow, harsh?! Anyway... we should really start grinding already.”

I don’t remember doing anything wrong!

After all that silliness, though, the high-speed airship abuse was a thing of the past.

I took another look at the wide area before us. There were loads of monsters wandering around.

Lots of buffalo, wolves, and other beast-type monsters, huh?

As far as I could see, there were no rare monsters around.

“Look at all those enemies. This’ll be a worthwhile hunt!” Akira said, snapping a few screenshots.

“See any crown marks?”

Her camera’s zoom allowed her to see much farther than the naked eye.

“Nope, nada.”

“Interesting.”

Because they were all normal mobs, the experience yield would be based on the difference in our levels and theirs. Enemies that were too much weaker than us wouldn’t give us any EXP. That was the normal EXP calculation.

Rare monsters gave fixed amounts of experience points, so it didn’t matter what their level was.

Looks like all the monsters here are somewhere around level 50. Pretty much perfect for us, since we’re in our 40s. There’s just one problem, though.

“This works for us, but they’re too weak for Selphie.”

Experience calculation was done based on the highest-level member of the party, so if Selphie was in our party, we’d all be stuck without any EXP.

Maybe we ought to have her wait and watch for a while?

“No need to worry. I have Level Adjuster,” Akabane said assuringly.

“Ooh, nice! You’re a lifesaver!”

Level Adjuster is a talent that does exactly as its name implies. It allows the user to forcefully limit the party’s levels for a period of time.

For example, if she set us to 45, any party members above it would be brought down to 45. Anyone below it would remain where they were.

EXP calculations would be based on 45, then, letting us gain EXP without issue.

The talent was tailor-made to make level-grinding smoother. We never had the extra resources to get it, so it was a huge help that Akabane had it. As long as *someone* did, it would work on everyone.

“Shall I limit it to Takashiro’s level 45, then?”

“Sounds good. Then I can still use my dual-wielding! Thanks, Nozomi!” Akira

happily swung her swords around.

“Haha. You’re really enjoying that new skill, huh, Akki?”

“Sure am! I haven’t used it nearly enough!”

“It’s a pretty good skill. All the moves are so satisfying to watch.”

“You meta-slave...”

But Akira really loved to use it, so I wouldn’t stop her. As the Emperor of the Underpowered, popular skills like that just weren’t to my taste.

Defeating things like dual-wielding was the true pleasure inherent in meta-redefinition. In other words, it was an enemy that had to be destroyed! No mercy!

“Ahaha. No one hates dual-wielding more than Ren.”

“Yeah, it’s my mortal enemy. It’s like the rivalry between the Tigers and the Giants.”

Akira let out a groan. “There you go with your baseball again. Normal humans just don’t ‘get’ that stuff, okay?”

“I sure don’t get it,” Yano said.

“Basically, it’s strong and popular in every game. There’s no ‘drama’ to it so he doesn’t like it.”

“Correct!”

“Haha, I see. You’ve got some weird proclivities, dude.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault. The moment I hold two weapons, I can’t enjoy a game anymore.”

“That’s very like you, Takashiro. *Very*.”

“Heheh. Well, *I’m* not holding back. Besides, that’s what you get for making me pick sword dancer.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t let anything hold you back.”

“Darn right I don’t! Neither do you, though.”

“Yep. Anyway, I’ll make it so that your dual-wielding isn’t even necessary.”

“Ooh, what’s this? Gonna show us something cool?”

“You got it.”

“Very well. I’ll ready the Level Adjuster.”

“Cool. Now, watch me work so fast that it’ll blow your pesky dual-wielding outta the water!”

As long as we were in this competitive mission, level-grinding needed to be an efficient affair. Efficiency, indeed, was justice!

To go faster, to go more efficiently, to get the best EXP-per-hour rate possible!

And so we began our grinding.

“A’ight, here goes!”

First, Yano activated Sprint and ran around the nearest monsters. These aggressive enemies, the kind to attack as soon as they noticed a player, began to follow.

Now, almost a dozen monsters were following behind her as she ran: five Chief Wolves at level 53, and six Blue Buffalo at level 55. Yano dragged them around and back to our party.

It was a quick and easy train of monsters. Normally, this might seem threatening, but we saw them now as nothing but experience waiting to be gained.

We were going to deal with ’em all at once. We had *this*.

“Maeda!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Joint Magic!” we cried in unison.

“Stupefying Circle!”

“Diabolic Howl!”

How long had it been since we last joined our magic?

I created a circle large enough to engulf the entire train of monsters.

A dragon emerged from within and chomped on them with its gaping maw, removing 70% of their health at once.

It had been a while since we last used it, but this combo was so useful when it came to dealing with trash mobs.

Then, it was time for the cleanup act!

“But wait, I say! Grand Freeze!” Selphie, with her pink mask and the same tone of voice as you-know-who, unleashed her offensive magic.

The ground froze in a cone from where she stood, then pushed up sharp pillars of ice. Being hit by the pillars of ice would deal damage and afflict you with the Frozen status effect.

It was very useful offensive magic. This girl was a tough one, seeing as she’d had it to start.

Shame it’s been sullied by his influence on her.

“Grand Wave!”

“Ultimate move: Cross Crescent!”

Akabane’s area-of-effect offensive art and Akira’s area-of-effect offensive ultimate move fired off at the same time!

With that, Yano’s eleven pets were annihilated.

Our EXP bars slowly rose.

“Bawk! I leveled up again, bawk!”

The rest of us hadn’t, but thanks to Princess’s Skull Ring, Kokoru’s yield was being multiplied by three even if he didn’t do a thing.

He couldn’t, anyway, because Cowardice meant he couldn’t deal a single point of damage to the opponent.

Still, we didn’t want Akabane to see all our cards. We would be enemies during the battle royale, after all.

So for now, we were just letting Kokoru tag along and level up passively.

“Nice. Keep on keeping on, Kokoru!”

“Feels kinda bad, bawk. I ain’t even doing anything. It’s like unearned income.”

“Don’t worry about it, bro. You’re earning it through all the work you do in the shop.”

Kokoru wasn’t just shopkeeping; he was even prepping products for us. The rest of us didn’t have to lift a finger; while we slept, Kokoru was turning a profit in our guild shop.

It was huge to get funds even while we were focusing on grinding elsewhere. In that regard, Kokoru’s contribution to us was vital.

“Here you go, Yuuna. Sword Samba!”

Akira’s Sword Samba ended Sprint’s cooldown, making it usable again.

“Nice. Be back in a jiff!” Yano ran off again to collect some more enemies.

Maeda and I assumed the recovery pose, letting our MP refill.

Once Yano returned, we repeated the process.

With this system, there was no need for dual-wielding to make an appearance! All we had to do was drag ’em over and knock ’em down with AoE attacks!

Sorry, Akira. This is just the most efficient way! When you’re in a hurry, efficiency is king!

We rinsed and repeated, extinguishing all life in the Sky Fissure. The creatures here weren’t as much of an EXP feast as the Golden Bunny, of course, but it wasn’t a bad hunt.

“Aww, I can’t flex my dual-wielding skills here? Ren, you bully!”

“C’mon, we just gotta be efficient. Oh, look. There’s one more over there. Feel free to smack him around!”

We had started at the entrance and moved toward the opposite end, exterminating as we went. The exit was a little farther ahead, but next to it, there was one last Blue Buffalo left. Once we killed that one, we were all done.

See, in Sky Fissures, enemies don’t respawn no matter how much time passes.

“Yay! Don’t mind if I do!”

Akira attacked, releasing a shock wave from Skyfall. Once the enemy took damage from it, it headed for her.

“Get over here!”

Akira gleefully showed off her dual-wielding style as she began close-range combat.

“Me too! Me too!”

Apparently having tired of baiting enemies, Yano started jabbing the monster with her bayonet. The rest of us just hung back and watched.

Once we exited, we would be right back on the roller coaster that was the Peachy Thunder. Might as well take a breather while we could.

“You’re done for! Ultimate move: Aerial Crescent!”

She knocked the buffalo up high and sprang after it, doing a somersault in midair. With a mighty swing, she brought her sword down on the monster.

Having finished off her opponent with that flashy move, Akira smiled in satisfaction.

“Mmm, yeah. Much better.”

On to the next one, then.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, however...

“Chirp! Ren, I feel funny!” Draco piped up.

Ooh, it’s time for him to learn a new skill! What’s next?! C’mon, show me!

A system message appeared before my eyes.

```
Draco’s growth level increased!
Please choose a skill for it to learn:
```

Oh, heck yeah!

“Awesome! It’s been so long since he last learned a skill.”

“Ooh! What’s it gonna be?” Akira came over to take a peek, so I expanded the message window.

Regenerator (Passive)

Effect: Pet dragon will heal nearby players’ HP at regular intervals.

Can be used on all members of master’s party.

Heal rate: 5 HP per second.

Baby Breath (In-Battle)

Effect: Baby dragon breathes fire, supporting its master.

Pet will target whatever the player targets.

Pet’s master will take all aggro generated by this skill.

Grow Up (In-Battle)

Effect: Consumes master’s AP to grow temporarily. After growing, pet dragon will be treated as an NPC that attacks enemies based on master’s orders.

Reverts to baby dragon upon being defeated by an enemy attack.

AP Cost: 200

Effect Duration: 900 seconds

Dragon Recorder (Passive)

Effect: Observes all of master’s actions and records them in system log.

Saved logs can be viewed from the system window.

Logs can also be exported outside of the game.

“Ooooh!” I practically squealed in delight.

There was clearly only one real choice. Finally, Draco was really going to shine!

“Wow, this looks fun!”

“Niiice. I bet he’d be nice and strong if he got bigger!”

“How exciting!”

“He’d be a full-fledged pet dragon.”

“Draco can finally fight now, eh, bawk?”

“But wait, I say! It’s so adorable, yet so strong. I adore it!”

Our whole party rejoiced.

Time to make my decision, then.

“Cool. I’m going with Dragon Recorder.”

With a tap, I made my choice.

“Huh?!”

Everyone was shocked.

“Hey, c’mon! I need this! It’ll make testing things so much easier! Real-deal, professional experimentation means more trials and actually recording data! We could even get damage calcs going.”

Logs that mention damage dealt and taken could be found in the “past logs” menu, but once you logged out, they were gone forever. This skill would let me keep them. There were talents that could preserve logs like this, and I had actually been planning to buy one with the MEP I got from our last test, so it was beyond fantastic that I could do the same thing with my pet dragon!

Real-deal experimentation required large amounts of data and a whooole lot of staring at spreadsheets. I still hadn’t done any actual analysis on data from this game. As a lover of testing, I wanted to right away! Thus, I’d chosen Dragon Recorder! How could I not?

“Mwahaha... Now I can analyze thousands, no, *tens* of thousands of logs!”

“Oh, no, no, no! Those are the eyes of a child who’s just gotten his favorite toy!”

I didn’t listen to a word Akira said. Instead, I cuddled Draco and doted on him.

“Good boy! Thanks, Draco. From now on, I’ll be looking at those logs you get for me every day. You’re such a good help, buddy.”

“Chirp! I like helping Ren!”

“Urgh... Well, I guess your addiction wouldn’t allow you to resist a log-harvesting tool, huh?”

“Yeah! See, Akira, you get me!”

“You always say that, but I’ve pretty much just given up on it. Enough about that, though. Let’s get going!”

“Yeah! Data is a man’s best friend. I’m even more hyped knowing I’ll have logs of all this later on!”

We left the Sky Fissure and headed for the next one.

The Redefined Peachy Thunder and Maeda’s driving technique made it easy to secure the next entrance.

Until the game kicked us off at ten o’clock, we continued level-grinding with a few breaks in between.

We repeated this process over and over for days, and at last, the day of the explanation meeting for the final battle royale finally arrived.

Kokoru’s level had surpassed 60, increasing the amount of required experience points for each one. As a result, it was taking us longer and longer to up his level. At this rate, we would be facing the final battle royale somewhere in the low 70s.

Could he win at that level? Eh... It was kind of a gray area. I imagined it’d be difficult. There were some NPCs out there, like Selphie, who’d started at over level 60, so I wanted to squeeze in at least a few more.

Golden Bunnies would make it a lot easier if they’d just spawn, but including

the first one, we'd only found two so far. If we tried hunting Golden Bunnies specifically, Kokoru might even make it over level 100.

But tonight, having logged out and gotten ready for bed, I looked at the Dragon Recorder logs in a spreadsheet on my computer.

Log analysis was so fun. It really soothed the soul. I was just planning to take a quick glance and go to bed when something suddenly caught my eye.

"Oh, whoa. What's this?"

Now this *is interesting.*

◆◇◆

While waiting for class to start the next morning, I turned to Maeda to ask her something.

"Yo, Maeda. Remember how the first time we went in a Sky Fissure, you were checking the nitro cooldown?"

"Yes. Ooh, did you think of an exploit to make it go even faster?! What is it?!" She was overflowing with anticipation.

"No, not quite."

"What? Aww, that's a shame."

Clearly disappointed, she returned to her usual calm and collected demeanor. There was really a stark contrast between her being "on" and "off."

"Girl, the thing's plenty fast already."

"I don't think so. It can be even better."

"Okay, whatever. Anyway, back to what I wanted to ask. You were pulling that lever over and over while you were counting the time, yeah?"

"Yes. I checked once per second."

"Do you remember what time it was when we entered the Sky Fissure?"

"Um, let's see. I think it was 4:02 p.m.?"

"And eight seconds?!"

"Yes, thereabouts. How'd you know?"

“Ohoho! I see, I see! I might just have something here!”

“What do you mean?”

“Take a look at this!”

I opened the past logs that Draco had procured for me and displayed one for Maeda.

It was yesterday’s log. My window detailed our words of excitement as we entered the Sky Fissure and saw our second-ever Golden Bunny.

The important thing here was the log that showed us entering the Sky Fissure. This information wasn’t all elaborated on in normal play, but the system had internally collected time stamps for when we’d entered the area. They were all in a twenty-four-hour format.

The time of entry? 20:05:04. The moment Maeda was talking about before would’ve been 16:02:08.

“Oh, I see! The hour divided by the minute equals the seconds!”

“Yeah. If this holds true, then we’ve hit something big.”

When I checked the other past logs, our entries into other Sky Fissures never matched this formula.

“So we’re going to try to make Golden Bunnies spawn?”

“That’s right! This should lead to a huge leap in grinding efficiency!”

“But doesn’t it sound rather simple? Is this information just hidden from everyone?”

“Yeah. Maybe it’s not always like this. Maybe it’s only this simple because of a bug, or maybe the method changes at set periods. Well, either way, we can’t just *not* use it, right?”

“You’re right. Well then, right after school—”

“Heck yeah! It’s testing time!”

With only two recorded instances, it was possible that this had just been a coincidence. All that meant was that we needed more testing and more data!

Once the school day was over, we rounded up the rest of our guild and got right to it.

“Maeda, we go at 3:05 and three seconds! Ten seconds left!”

“Got it!”

Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

Maeda pulled three nitro levers, piloting the Peachy Thunder toward a Sky Fissure much faster than the other airships.

We had won the race. The fissure was ours! However...

“Two seconds too fast!”

“How about some of *this*?”

Maeda spun the wheel hard. The ship rocked and lurched, diving through the air to evade the Sky Fissure. We swung around in an arc, pointing the bow of the ship perfectly toward the black hole.

Clunk!

Then, she activated the nitro once again with perfect timing. The ship shot forward, piercing into the Sky Fissure.

I checked the time. It was exactly 15:05:03 by the game’s clock.

She had intentionally swung out our arc to manage the time spent getting into it. Now that was skill!

“Nice. Did we make it?”

The dungeon we entered was like an overgrown forest full of light-green trees.

In the midst of it all was a monster with a shiny, golden body.

“Oooh! Look, there’s our Golden Bunny!”

This time, there wasn’t just one. A single glance revealed three—no, four of them. This alone could yield an entire day’s worth of experience points!

“Hooray! We’ve done it!”

“Yeah! Good job managing the time!”

We exchanged a high five over our shared success.

Akira was equally excited. “That’s awesome! I bet we can get Kokoru to the top level of all the NPCs now.”

“Mwahaha. Now you see that Dragon Recorder was the correct choice. Without the proper testing environment, it’s easy to overlook phenomena as simple and beneficial as this!”

We wouldn’t have figured this out without those logs.

Ahhh, how refreshing.

For a mad scientist like me, creating new strategies from the results of my experimentation was supreme bliss!

This would accelerate our grinding even further.

With Kokoru’s skill that summoned helpers based on his own level, level was power! His normal stats were the exact same as they had been at level 1—minus his HP and VIT—but this at least meant we had a chance!

Redefine the meta! Awaken your true power! Topple the giants! Kill them all!

Visions came to mind of Kokoru wrecking the other NPCs in battle.

Finally, I would tell the world with a smirk, “Yes! I raised that boy!”

“All right, girls, let’s kill these guys and move on to the next one! Time for Kokoru to grow, grow, *grow*!”

“Woo-hoo! Time to grind! Wait for me, you tasty little morsels!” Yano was in a good mood. She loved leveling up.

“Here I go, bawk!”

“Go get ’em!”

For Golden Bunnies, Kokoru was the perfect bait. Normally, they would flee when players approached. However, when faced with someone who had Cowardice—like Kokoru—and could never deal damage against them, they’d start kicking away.

Exerting power upon the weak and frail. Truly, if they were human, they’d be the bad guys.

“Bweeee! Bwee! Bwee!”

Kokoru waddled closer. Reacting to him all at once, they stormed him and started kicking the poor guy.

“Oww, bawk. Now, everyone! Baaawk!”

“Nice job!”

“Just another one of his ‘special’ abilities, I imagine,” Akabane muttered, exasperated.

Either way, it was the start of a Golden Bunny Festival!

Chapter 3: Infodump on the Final Battle!

Now that we could feast upon Golden Bunnies, leveling Kokoru didn't seem as daunting.

Today, we would officially learn all about the final battle. The meeting was going to be held in the palace chapel, same as the draft meet.

Each guild was to bring their candidates, so Kokoru tagged along. With Akira and I as representatives, that made three of us.

Kokoru was level 65 now. Selphie was 70, so he hadn't quite caught up yet. As long as we kept grinding together, he'd eventually surpass her. After all, he had the Princess's Skull Ring, which increased his leveling speed threefold.

"Hmm... Nice. We're not losing out in levels, that's for sure."

I scoped out the other guilds' NPCs as we made our way to the venue, but there weren't many who had gotten to level 60 yet.

At this point, Selphie was probably on top. No surprise there, since she had been level 62 at the draft—the highest of all the NPCs.

That girl had so much talent and potential. It was a shame to see that she'd already succumbed to one *very* bad influence.

No matter how promising a rookie was, the team they ended up with could make or break their career.

Akira turned to Kokoru. "We've got this! I know we can win!"

"Aww, bawk, my level's just for show. I don't think I've got a chance, bawk."

I patted him on the back. "Don't worry, bro. Golden Sweets will work as long as you've got the level for it. You've gotta go into this with supreme confidence. Like, 'I'm more than the man I used to be!' A good bluff is vital."

"Bawk? Is that true?"

"Yeah, it's absolutely essential! Talk the talk, bud! We'll have to fix that

attitude of yours before the event."

"I guess you should try doing what Ren says for now. He'll probably make it up to you if things get bad. That okay?"

"Yep, leave it to me! We'll figure out how this battle royale works today, so we'd better start working on a strategy while we're racking up levels."

Eventually, we spotted some Birdmen hanging out in a group, talking. Among them was Peater, who looked to be somewhat of a leader.

He's the one Fountain of Wisdom picked, right?

Right now, he was level 68. He'd started off at 55, so he had made a fair bit of progress.

"Yo, Peater! I see things are going well for you too!" I said, prompting him to turn our way.

He opened his eyes in surprise. "Kokoru, you're level 65 now?!"

The other Birdmen were even lower, so at this point, Kokoru had the second-highest level among them. By the time the main event rolled around, he would probably be number one, even if he wasn't the strongest.

"Impossible! Cowardly Kokoru, of all people?"

"I can't believe this. His level's higher than mine!"

The guys who had once bullied Kokoru were now flabbergasted.

"Heheheh!" Akira let out a delighted cackle; she was even more excited about it than Kokoru and I were. "You can't win against Kokoru now! If you try to bully him ever again, he'll beat *you* up instead!" She whipped a pointer finger in their direction.

Man, the last time she saw them, she was really *mad.*

Still, I liked this side of her too.

"What?!"

"That drumstick, of all people?!"

Kokoru hid behind me to avoid their glares.

“Don’t be scared, man. You’ve grown a lot.”

Level-wise, at least! Not stat-wise!

With his skill, he could at least hold his own in a fight. I couldn’t help but wish he would swell up with pride and declare, “I’m not the guy I was before. I’m Super Kokoru, bawk!”

Oh well. I’ll just make him say it during the main event.

Hopefully, that would scare the opposition into not touching him; in reality, Kokoru was still kind of a weakling.

To attack, he needed to use his skill to summon allies. We needed to make his enemies want to steer clear of him.

Fortunately, enemies couldn’t see his stats, so he’d be fine as long as they didn’t gun for him. In order for him to survive the battle royale, he needed to put up a good bluff.

“Stop right there. If you want a fight, save it for the main event.” Peater stopped the other Birdmen, then returned his gaze to Kokoru. “You’ve done well to raise your level with such incredible speed. I’m honestly shocked.”

“Bawk, I didn’t do nothin’. It’s all thanks to Ren and his guild, bawk.”

It really sucked that all he could do during grinding was stand and watch. On the flip side, that meant Akabane wouldn’t see our trump card.

Kokoru was also making us loads of money in the guild shop, so he was more than useful enough for me.

“Haha, I can’t wait for the main event. I won’t let my guard down either, so continue to hone your strength until then.”

“Bawk. Do I even have strength to hone?”

Kokoru’s style meant relying on the strength of others in the first place. In all likelihood, that was the only way he could hope to win.

“We’re both excited for it, trust me. See you then, Peater.”

“Right. As a fellow Birdman, I must thank you for how well you’ve raised Kokoru.”

“The main event is coming up soon. By that time, Kokoru’s level is gonna shoot above even yours.”

“I look forward to it. It seems Kokoru has found real success under your guardianship.”

“Well, we’ll measure that success in the final battle.”

“Right.”

We ended the conversation there and entered the chapel.

The place was lined with long tables and pews. Again, there was a big empty area, like some sort of crop circle.

But this time, there were two people within: one underwear-clad, iron-masked pervert and one poor, pink-masked girl.

Everyone who laid eyes on the two of them likely thought the same thing: *How could this happen?!*

We wasted no time in sitting next to Yukino and Homura toward the edge.

Yukino greeted us right away. “Hey, guys! You’re doing surprisingly well. You’ve gotten the most level gains out of anyone, yeah? That’s awesome!”

Upon seeing Kokoru’s current level, she praised our efforts. She had no idea that despite his level growth, only two of Kokoru’s stats had risen even a little.

Under the effects of the Princess’s Skull Ring, his only leveling gains had been 1 VIT and the corresponding HP increase.

The other stats’ growth rates were all below 3, so with the ring, they ended up under 1 and rounded down to 0.

“Heyo, Yukino. Yeah, we’ve been putting in work.”

As I answered, I suddenly remembered to look around for Alfred, who had started at level 1 like Kokoru.

Oh, he was up front. Level 53, huh? Progress was going well on their end too. Unlike Kokoru, he was pretty much the embodiment of a late bloomer. Your traditional, up-and-coming hero, basically. I was interested in how strong he had become.

Incidentally, Yukino's NPC was a Wolfman named Mikott Corpul. She had started at level 58 with plenty of skills. Probably the most popular warrior-type candidate.

She and Akabane's NPC, Selphie, had shared the spotlight at the draft.

Now her level was... Ooh, 73! Probably the highest of all NPCs now. She was a favorite to take the win for sure.

Meanwhile, Homura's guild had a merchant NPC named Bruno, who'd started at around level 7 or 8. Really felt like they lost the draft on that one. At the moment, though, his level was 42.

"I'm amazed you leveled up that much despite all the good spots being taken. You don't have a private dungeon, do you?" Homura asked us.

"Nope. We used Sky Fissures."

"Huh. I heard all the guilds without dungeons are vying for them, and the competition to get to them is super stiff."

"Yeah, but we've got a good airship and a good pilot, so we're free to take them whenever we like."

"Hmm. You've put a lot of effort into this."

"Got a problem with that?" Yukino asked.

"A *big* problem! All the best spots are taken, so we can't farm rare monsters! And that means we can't collect items! I don't care about this event at all. I wish it would just end."

"Hah! Sore loser. You're just sulky because you know you're gonna lose. You've always been like that."

"Excuse me?!" Homura fumed at Yukino. "Don't get all uppity just because you got lucky and pulled a good NPC! This stuff's all luck-based. You get a good pull, you win. No skill involved! Yet here you are acting all tough. You stupid musclebrain! You can't even think for yourself!"

"Naaah. You just think that because your brain has such crappy specs. Take a page from Ren's book. His weak-looking, little chicken guy might actually stand a chance now!"

“C’mon, girls. We won’t know until the event,” I said, prompting a grin from Yukino.

“Heh, you’re pretty confident. Going for first place, are you?”

“Of course! If we win, that’ll be the most delectable serving of giant-killing you’ve ever seen! How can I *not* go for first?”

“Make sure you crush Yukino’s candidate first, then. I for one would love to see it. In fact, if you do, I’ll give you another Peregrine Stone.”

“Ooh.”

“Is this bribery? Damn you, item addict!”

“Shut up, musclehead! I’m over here playing 4D chess since I had bad luck!”

These two truly never change.

This was everyday banter for them, so I wasn’t gonna butt in.

“Hello, everyone! Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to come here today.”

Ooh! There’s Princess Lieliz!

You could never tell what was gonna come out of her mouth. I was preoccupied with the thought that this supposed beauty didn’t seem like much of a beauty anymore.

Maybe that was partly because I was so used to being with Akira. Having such a gorgeous girl at my side made all the other ladies look much less attractive.

When I glanced at Akira next to me, she met my gaze and smiled.

Aww, she’s always so cute.

“What’s wrong? You’re blushiiing.” She poked my cheek, something I was subjected to often.

“Cut it out!”

Then, Princess Lieliz looked out into the crowd of players and cocked her head in confusion. She was looking at the crop-circle-like hole in the center, where the two masked pervs sat.

“Well, that is unusual. You two there must be cater-cousins of some sort. Are those masks the hip, new trend?”

“Of course!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Akabane’s brother and Selphie stood right up and responded with vigor.

I was painfully aware of why Akabane herself hadn’t come here.

“My. Maybe I should try it on.”

“Don’t do it, Princess! Perish the thought, I beg of you!”

Whew, Anita put the brakes on that. Thank you.

It was even scarier because I knew the princess would actually do it.

“Well, carrying on... You are gathered here to learn the details of the final battle in the guild competitive mission. Dun’s the mouse, okay?”

That means “be quiet and listen,” right? I hope?

“You’ve all been raising your hero candidates, yes? A hail of my gratitude upon you! To conclude your mission, next weekend we will be hosting a battle royale that pits the heroes against one another. Get in a festive mood and have some fun with it!”

Yep. That’s in line with Ms. Nakada’s leak. But what are the rules?

“Now, you may be wondering what this battle royale might entail. Worry not, as I will explain the details. Anita?”

“Here, Your Highness.”

Anita handed Lieliz a little poster-board-looking thing.

“And... Here!”

She turned the board to face us, revealing an illustration of countless airships in the sky.

Hm? No way...

“That’s right—it will be an airship battle!”

Ohoho! This sounds exciting! It'll be my first time doing one of those!

The representatives of other guilds reacted with similar interest.

"We'll be erecting a wide barrier around the skies near Telluna to create a battlefield, where you can all duke it out! Each guild will be loaned an airship, but you're also allowed to bring in airships that you've procured yourselves. The choice is up to you, but you can only bring one ship."

I see, I see.

Then we were at an advantage! This meant we could use the Redefined Peachy Thunder. We'd rule the battlefield with our monstrous speed!

But we didn't have any offensive parts attached, so that was a minor issue. Either way, though, I was excited.

"Kotomi's gonna love this."

"Yeah! Sounds fun."

"Telluna has a tight grip on airship manufacturing, bawk. This is the only place you could ever do something like this."

Oh, yeah, true! Might as well do something we can only do here.

"Also, each guild can only field up to six members of their fighting force, NPC included. However, you're able to switch out non-NPC fighters at will and without limit. Additionally, there will be a level limit while you're on the battlefield; each guild member will be capped at the level of their hero candidate."

Ooh! Yeah, I can see that. Otherwise, someone like Yukino or Homura could just dominate the battle with their ridiculous specs, instead of leveling their NPC.

Limiting the fighters' levels to those of their NPCs would give the NPC the optimal opportunity to show off their growth.

"Furthermore, victory will be based on each guild's kill score. Defeating a player from another guild yields one point, while defeating an NPC yields five points. You can revive endlessly whenever you fall, but deaths will be subtracted from your total score. After one hour has passed, the four guilds with the most points will progress to the finals, which will be held on a

specialized battlefield. The rules for that will be determined in a discussion with the finalists."

Huh, okay. So it's all about the kill score.

The rules for the finals would be decided on the spot, so there wasn't much point in thinking hard on it now. For now, the priority was to make it there.

"Finally, the guild that makes it to the end can choose from these fabulous prizes!"

Princess Lieliz flipped another board.

There, a catalog of rewards was displayed: a guild-exclusive personal island in the Lagoon, a guild-wide Breath of Ares, three items of your choice, or a guild-wide +20 level boost.

Dang! A chance to get our very own island!

"Guild-wide" in this case meant the effect applied to each member of the guild.

Getting Breath of Ares on every single guild member without using up talent slots would be very powerful. Breath of Ares was a coveted talent that a lot of people already had.

Applying it with this method would free up the talent slot for something else. Essentially, picking that reward was like getting a freebie.

Receiving three items potentially meant outfitting members with superstrong weapons or armor too.

A second Skyfall would definitely be neat.

Finally, a guild-wide level boost of 20 would probably save a *ton* of grinding time for high-level players, since they had much higher EXP requirements. That was more attractive for third-years than for first-years like us.

"Heheheh! Nice, they know what the people want! But I want more than just three items!" Homura seemed the most excited.

"Hmph. You won't be getting it, anyway. Might as well give up now!"

"I dunno. This time, the fight's not all hand-to-hand combat."

Princess Lieliz continued, “Now we shall bewray another new plot that will make you all alike bewitched! Take it away, miss!”

Suddenly, Ms. Nakada appeared out of nowhere.

Oh? What brings her here?

“Hello, hello! I’m Ms. Nakada, teacher for class 1-E. I’ll be the announcer for the airship battle, but apart from that, the school has an announcement to make. This battle royale will also serve as the testing ground for a new mechanic we’re trying out. If it doesn’t pose any issues, we plan to implement it permanently.”

A new mechanic? What’s it gonna be?

“Now, what is it, you might ask? It is... parental supervision! We’re making it so your parents can log in and watch the battle royale too!”

Parental supervision?! Well, this is a school. I guess they would have stuff like this. I bet my parents would be happy to watch. I think Dad said he had a hand in this game too.

My old man *was* a developer, after all.

“P-Parental supervision?! But...”

Akira had gone white as a sheet.

◆◇◆

When the meeting ended, we returned to our guild house. We then explained to Maeda and Yano the gist of the battle royale.

“Huh. Parental supervision and airship battles, eh? Only at this school. I think my siblings would be a lot more interested than my parents, though.”

“Maybe you should ask if they can come. Airship battles, though? That’s where I can show off my mad skills! Can we use Peachy Thunder?”

“Yep, they said we could. That’s convenient for us. We’ve got our airship redefined, and our level restriction is whatever we can get Kokoru up to. Level-wise, he’s sure to be at the top of all the NPCs the day of.”

Though I’d like to prep his skill and do some combat simulations while we still

can.

Especially since we hadn't done any airship battles yet.

"It's not convenient for *me*!" Akira cried.

She seemed really shaken by the idea of her parents coming to watch.

"What's wrong? It sounds fun. It'll be like a virtual track and field day, or something."

"Not that. The problem is the whole parental supervision thing! I've told you a few times that my family's *really* strict. If they see me wearing this outfit, they might pull me out of school!"

Oh, yeah. The sword dancer gear.

It seemed normal to me since I was so used to seeing it, but yeah, it did show a lot of skin.

Her class's gear caused most players to steer clear of it, making it a pretty uncommon choice.

Akira had gradually gotten used to it too, even going to class in it once in a while. I'd stopped noticing it myself, but she was right. Strict parents with high expectations of their daughter would be absolutely shocked when they saw her wearing that.

Short skirt, visible armpits, and very pronounced cleavage. Thinking back on it again, mmm, that was good stuff. But I couldn't say that when her parents were watching.

Both her normal gear and Angelic Charm were ridiculously revealing.

"Guess you gotta wear the normal uniform, then."

She'd at least look normal in that case.

"But that's too weak. I'd have to play with a restriction at our big battle royale."

"Well, it is the level 1 gear. It's just for show anyway."

"Isn't there any *real* gear out there that's less revealing?"

“Hmm. We’d have to check the info brokers or Homura’s museum. Otherwise, I’m not sure.”

We *could* try to switch her class for a while, but Wings of Rebirth cost 800 Merit Points, and we were bone-dry. Had to count that one out.

“Yeah, I guess. Ughhh, this sucks.”

“Well, we’ve been leveling up really fast so far; might as well try to look for new gear along the way. If we can’t find any, we’ll have to go with the school uniform. I guess you could also use Vanishing Whirl to get around it with invisibility, or I could hide you with circle magic.”

“Yep... Those are pretty much our only options.”

“The main event is next weekend, so we have nine days. Let’s keep our focus on leveling for now, and once we’re caught up, we’ll think about that new gear. Then, we’ll prep Kokoru’s skill at the very end.”

We were already doing a little bit of testing on his skill along the way. At the very least, we knew that he could recruit normal mobs with ease. It just cost money every single time.

The number of monsters he could keep in stock increased by one every 20 levels, so at level 65 now, he had four available. Though he could only ever have one monster out at once.

He could only recruit monsters up to his level, so the best course of action was to raise his level as much as possible, then find monsters close to his level immediately before the battle.

It depended on how much we could raise his level. Maybe 100 would be a good goal?

“We’re not planning to go out grinding today, right? Mind if I take a little break? I’m kinda tired,” Akira said with a sigh.

“Yeah, sure. Good work today. See you tomorrow!”

“Good work out there, Akki.”

“Good night, Akira.”

“Cheer up, bawk.”

“Yeah. Good night, everyone.” With a sad smile on her face, Akira logged out.

Man. Is her family situation that bad?

If she stayed like that, she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the main event at all, no matter how much we prepared. As her best friend, I had to do something about this!

“Okay! I’m heading off to Homura’s museum!” I declared.

Maeda and Yano immediately piped up.

“You’re going to find her new gear? I’ll go too.”

“Me too! We’ve gotta help her!”

Kokoru was quick to join in. “I’m going too, bawk! Let’s do it for her, bawk!”

“Chirp chirp! Me too!”

Aww, my friends are so nice.

In games and in life, you’ve gotta have friends.

“Awesome. Let’s get going!”

We left the guild house and went on our merry way to Homura’s museum.

Chapter 4: Akira's New Groove

At last, we arrived at the Item Museum! In the worst of times, even this could be an info broker. Our goal was to find some gear for Akira so her parents wouldn't see her revealing sword dancer attire.

It proved to be more challenging than we thought, however.

"Hmm... They all kinda have an issue."

"We've looked everywhere, but they're all skimpy! Poor Akki."

"I'd certainly be embarrassed if my parents saw me wearing these. They'd probably give me a good scolding too."

In the entirety of the Item Museum's collections, every single piece of sword dancer gear was revealing. All of them were even worse than her usual outfit, and none of them better. Some of them made Angelic Charm look conservative!

Why do these things get stronger the less material they use, anyway? Just another fairy-tale rule of video games, I guess? Normally, I'd be all for it! Just not right now.

"Gah, this sucks. Seriously, we've checked the *whole* place and found nothing?"

Where's the modest yet powerful gear?!

Sword dancer sure was fearsome! You could tell that one of the devs had made this his... personal project.

Still, I had to respect the way the creators put their souls into the work! The girls probably didn't feel the same, though.

"Hey, Ren! How about this one, bawk?" Kokoru called my name from a spot rather far from the Sword Dancer gear displays.

"'Sup? Find something good?"

"Here. Looks like it's called the Mimic Fan, bawk."

Inside the showcase was a pretty, silvery fan made of iron.

Why'd they name it the Mimic Fan? It's clearly made for fanning, but where's the mimic part?

It really just appeared to be a normal fan.

"I don't see any mimic here. At least make it look like a treasure chest," Yano said.

Did they mess up the name? Was there a manufacturing error?

"It's referring to the act of *mimicry*, not some video-game monster that pretends to be a treasure chest. Mimicry is a real-life biological phenomenon that refers to creatures that resemble other organisms."

What?! I had no idea! Maeda's coming in to school us as usual.

"The fact that we're even having this discussion makes me think it's one of the school's tricks to help us remember vocabulary. The school picked a good name for the item."

"Aww, man! They made me learn?! This is *so* embarrassing."

"Ahaha, it's okay. Maybe try to study a little more, though?"

"Boooo."

Uh, I'll just keep quiet.

"It's okay, bawk. You're a good artist, Yuuna, so you can still make a living being dumb."

"Thanks, Kokoru! You're a real nice guy."

Hah! She had to be consoled by an NPC.

But yeah, Kokoru was a pretty good dude. I wondered if he would come back to us after the guild mission. It'd be lonely without him.

"So, what's it do?"

"Hold up, Takashiro! You just kept quiet because you didn't know either!"

"No comment! Let's see what it does already!"

"Argh, no fair!"

I ignored Yano’s protests and read the item description.

Though fans were a type of item, they could also be used as weapons. They were one-handed, so they could be dual-wielded as well.

How were fans different from other items? Well, only girls could equip them.

Stat-wise, they typically had low attacking power but surprisingly high guard capabilities. Of course, they weren’t better than shields, but they were better than other one-handed weapons. It might be really valuable as a sub-weapon when dual-wielding, for more defensive players. There were some pretty fancy fan arts, so it sounded like fun to play.

As for this Mimic Fan, it had a special effect.

Allows the user to Mimic the last enemy that was attacked. The user can also Mimic other party members and NPCs.

AP Cost: 50

Effect Duration: 600 seconds

“Ohoho!”

“I see. So it lets you change form!”

“Do that, and nobody can see your sexy clothes!”

“Yeah, bawk. Maybe Akira can actually go all out with this?”

“It requires level 55. Yeah, this might work!”

Our levels were already beyond 55. If we could get our hands on one, we could use it right away.

I also had to wonder what would happen if you changed gear during the Mimic effect. Would you lose the effect? You’d start the battle in a school uniform, Mimic, change gear for the stat boost... and then what?

It’d be a shame if the Mimic effect canceled immediately.

Well, that didn’t matter too much. If it did work that way, I could use my circle

magic to hide Akira at the start of the match so that she could change into the sword dancer gear and then Mimic.

“Sick! Now, where can we find one of these?”

I was about to suggest we go to the info brokers, but Homura arrived just in time.

“What are you all up to? Find something you’re interested in?”

“Hey, good timing! Where can we get a Mimic Fan?”

“You want one of these?”

“Yes!” I nodded vigorously.

“Then I have a way,” Homura said with a smirk. “An instantaneous one at that.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“How about I give it to you? It doesn’t have an EX designation, and we have a few in stock.”

“You mean it?!”

To summarize item attributes again, O means you can’t hold more than one at once, while EX means you can’t give it to others.

My hidden weapons were all OEX, so they were pretty annoying in that I had to craft them all myself no matter what. The O meant that I couldn’t make a bunch in advance either.

That said, hidden weapon arts were typically only usable once per battle, so there wasn’t much point in having multiple.

If I could hold dupes, then I could craft more without having to break them one at a time with Final Strike. Then, I’d be able to rattle off more hidden weapon arts, which could be more economical in its own way.

But I didn’t do much damage without Final Strike, so I’d have to use it no matter what in service of getting dramatic damage.

It didn’t matter how much money I had to spend. I was forever working for those crazy-big numbers! Big damage was justice!

“Not for free, of course. In exchange, how about we work together in the final battle?”

“An alliance, eh? Interesting.”

This was an airship battle with every guild present, so there were sure to be at least a few guilds that would work together.

Even if it wasn’t set in stone, the promise to stave off killing each other was its own kind of alliance. There weren’t any rules against it. They’d be too hard to enforce anyway.

“Essentially. We don’t hurt each other, and when possible, we help each other.”

“Fair enough.”

Well, that wouldn’t impose too much of a restriction on our actions.

“Also, if either of us wins, we must choose the ‘receive three items’ prize. The winner gets two of them and gives one to the loser. How’s that sound?”

“Hmm...”

I wonder about that one.

For her, this was essentially insurance. Even if we won, she’d still be able to get one item. That meant she wasn’t too sure if they could win. If she were, she would’ve gone for all three items.

In other words, she believed we *did* have a good chance of taking the win; otherwise, this would be a pointless proposal. It had to be enough for her to go out of her way to offer us the Mimic Fan in exchange for an alliance.

Still, there were options other than the items... Among them was the free Lagoon island. To be honest, I figured we would choose the island if we won. Getting an island was the whole reason we’d formed a guild, after all. Intentionally delaying that would be a weird choice at best.

“Err, by the way, what would it normally take to get one of these?”

“It’s a drop from the Crystal Falcon Lord in the Crystal Forest. He’s about level 150, by the way. The drop is far from guaranteed too.”

Level 150? Dang.

I vaguely remembered Kataoka saying there were some pretty tough conditions for entering the Crystal Forest too. There were some quests you needed to do first to get permission to enter or something.

It'd be difficult to do all that on such short notice, and I doubted whether we'd manage to kill a level 150 monster. Not that we could try anyway, since all the farm spots were taken right now.

"Otherwise, I guess you could just buy it. But this is pretty rare, so it's expensive. Market price is around fifty million Mira."

"Whew!"

It was ridiculously expensive! Thanks to Kokoru, we were raking in profits, but we didn't have fifty million saved up.

Besides, since we were leveling up so ridiculously fast now, we needed to renew our gear before the final battle. We'd need funds for that as well.

"What do you think?" I asked the other guildies.

"If that's what we need to help Akki have fun, then why not? I don't see any other way."

"I thought we'd all want the free island, though."

"I'd like an island too, but it defeats the point if we have to ruin someone's fun in the process. So let's leave the island for later and bring Akira a Mimic Fan."

"I think that's for the best too, bawk. Seeing you all have fun is the best."

"Okay, then we'll do it. Thanks!"

I'd been hoping to take this home to Akira. It was my duty to help my best friend have fun, y'know?

Especially seeing as her smile was just so adorable. I felt like one of those cool guys who say stuff like "I want to protect that smile."

"Hear that, Homura? Let's form an alliance!"

"Cool. I'm expecting big things from you, then!"

Thus, tantalized by the fan, we formed an alliance with Homura. We didn't have a formal alliance with Akabane's guild, but it might as well have been one, seeing as we were leveling our NPCs together.

At the very least, we wouldn't be smacking each other around in the main event.

Anyway, I could hardly contain my excitement. I was ready to give Akira the fan the very next day!

◆◇◆

"Morning, everyone."

About thirty minutes before the start of class, Akira logged in and appeared at the guild house. Sadly, she was still pretty down in the dumps.

"Hey, Akira. Still not feeling so hot?"

"Huh? Um, no, I'm fine."

"Liar! It's written all over your face."

"Yes, you're clearly unhappy."

"Mm... Yeah, it's the whole parent thing."

"Are you struggling with the extreme skimpiness of the sword dancer outfit?"

"Well, yeah, I guess. But you're the one who—"

"Boy, do I have the solution for you!"

"Wha?"

"Here. Use this!" I handed Akira the Mimic Fan.

"Uh, what's this? A fan?"

"Read the description."

"Okay... Hm? Mimic? Hey, this might work!"

"You've got it. If you just Mimic someone throughout the battle royale, then nobody will see your gear."

"Wooow! Yeah, it's true! I might be okay after all!" Akira's face lit right up,

making her all the more radiant. “Can I really use it?”

“Of course! We went looking for it just for you.”

“Where’d you find it?”

“After you logged out yesterday, we went to Homura’s Item Museum and found it there.”

“You all did that for me? Wow, thank you so much!”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s more fun for us if you’re having fun, so we were more than happy to.”

“Yeah! If you’re not smiling, that messes with us too, Akki.”

“Same, bawk. Akira’s smile is extremely important! Ain’t that right, Ren?”

“I totally agree.”

“Heheheh! Well, let’s go try it out right now! C’mon!”

“Right now? But class is about to start.”

“It’s cool! Just a little, okay? Let’s go!”

Thus, we moved to the usual stomping ground: the first floor of Trinisty Isle. The other guilds had overlooked this place in their effort to suppress grinding spots, so my beloved Island Bunny friends were hanging around in a fluffle.

“Okay! Here goes!”

By the time she finished speaking, Akira was already off smacking a bunny with her fan.

Fwap! The Island Bunny fell to the ground.

“Bwee?!”

It let out a cry I’d heard many times by now. With the huge level difference, the bunny died in one hit.

“Nice. Now, Mimic!”

She activated Mimic, which was treated as a weapon art. With a little *pop!*, Akira was enveloped in white smoke.

What emerged from the smoke was an Island Bunny dual-wielding Skyfall and the Mimic Fan.

So the weapon graphics stayed, huh? It didn't copy the rabbit's stats—just its appearance. I guess the way you attacked would be different if it didn't leave the weapons. Fair enough!

"Ooh! I'm so soft and cuddly!"

The voice was hers too. She started hopping around excitedly to show off her new form.

"Wooow, bawk!"

"That looks fun!"

"Right? This does seem rather fun."

"Hey, Akira. Your stats are still the same, right?"

Better make sure she'll be good to fight.

When I asked, Akira opened her status window and checked the contents.

"Yep, they're normal. All that changed was my appearance."

"I see, I see."

"Hey, Kokoru, can I try turning into you?"

"Sure, bawk."

Akira lightly touched Kokoru with the Mimic Fan. This was what let her change the Mimic target.

"Next up, I'll be Kokoru!"

Pop! This time, a dual-wielding Kokoru appeared.

"Ooh. You really do look like me, bawk."

Kokoru looked on in amazement as Akira ran around in his body.

"Ahahaha! It's kinda hard to run like this, bawk."

Kokoru's legs were short, and his body was round. It was probably hard for Akira to move how she wanted too.

Oh, she bawked!

“What happens if you unequip it mid-Mimic?”

Does the effect end? I need to know.

“I dunno. Yuuna, hold this.”

“Gotcha.”

Akira handed Yano the Mimic Fan, but the effect remained active.

Interesting! So once activated, it continues even if you change gear.

“Okay, what if you try using Mimic on Akira while she’s mid-Mimic?”

“Dunno! Let’s give it a shot!”

Yano activated Sprint and rushed into the fluffle of Island Bunnies. There, she smacked down a whole bunch of them with the Mimic Fan. They were sacrifices for the sake of her AP gain.

She didn’t have Breath of Ares like Akira, so taking down enemies to get the required AP was a necessary crime.

“I’m quite interested myself.”

Maeda cast some offensive magic on a lone Island Bunny in the distance. Her Tactical Magic talent allowed her to gain AP just from consuming her MP.

“Here goes nothin’!”

Yano returned and touched Akira-Kokoru with the Mimic Fan, targeting her for Mimic.

Pop! The result was that same super beauty that I had come to know.

“Ahh, you turned into Akira. I guess it copies the original.”

“Whoa, I’m Akki now! Dang, girl, look at this cleavage! These things are super heavy!” Yano-Akira cupped her breasts in her hands.

Hoo, boy. This was a pretty fantastic sight in itself.

“Hey, cut it out!” Akira-Kokoru blushed.

Yeah, that looks pretty weird.

“Kotomi, you should try turning into Akki too.”

“Huh?! Me?”

“Having big boobs is an important experience. Especially for you.”

Maeda was more on the thin and slender side. On a scale of Maeda to Akira, Yano was closer to Akira.

“Okay, maybe just once.”

Seeming somewhat interested herself, Maeda transformed into Akira. Looking at her new body, she suddenly cried, “Goodness, no! I can’t stand this!”

“What’s wrong, Kotomi? Heavy, right?”

“Erm, I don’t care about that. But this outfit is dreadful!” Teary-eyed, she squatted down to hide herself.

“Ahaha, I get how you feel. It’s embarrassing for me too. Takashiro, stop gawking so much!”

“Right! Don’t look!”

“Okay, my bad. True, it’s not really Akira I’m looking at.”

“Ugh, you’re all so mean! I have a sense of shame too!”

Whoops, now she’s mad.

At the same time, Mimic’s effect ended. This resulted in one angry Akira and two bashful Akiras. It was seriously surreal.

“Hey, it’s okay! The clothes look good on you, Akira. At least *I* don’t have any problems with it.”

I was telling her the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

“Yeah, okay. Good thing you keep saying that each time, Ren.”

“All you gotta do is fool everyone with Mimic Fan. This solves all of our problems!”

“You think so? I still can’t believe you all got this just for me. Thanks a lot.”

“Aww, yeah! Let’s get through this parentally supervised battle with fan in hand!”

“Yeah. Let’s do it!”

With that taken care of, there were just a few more things we needed to do to prepare for the big battle.

Chapter 5: Return of the Deadly King

A few days later...

“Bring it on, bawk!”

“Bweee! Bwee!”

Once again, Golden Bunnies flocked to Kokoru and started striking him with front kicks.

“Haaah!”

“As brainless as ever!”

Akira and Akabane appeared out of nowhere to cut them down. At the same time, Yano fired her gun.

Maeda and Akabane’s NPC, Selphie, were the ones herding the Golden Bunnies back toward Kokoru.

We worked our butts off with this strategy to grind up more levels.

“Nice, nice. This is going great!”

In the meantime, I was hard at work crafting. By making products for our guild shop, I could also raise my crafting level at the same time, killing two birds with one stone.

I had to get good enough to make gear for everyone to use during the final battle. Otherwise, our gear would be long-outdated by then.

I was stuck watching them farm either way, so I figured I might as well use this time productively!

Typically, one couldn’t craft while in battle, but I kept enough distance from where the battles were taking place that the game determined that I was out of combat.

Being *too* far away meant that I wouldn’t gain experience points, so I was standing between those two ranges while crafting away, successfully gaining

experience points and crafting skill at the same time.

My talent, Efficiency, would allow me to craft while in battle, but it meant that I wouldn't gain crafting skill. In this situation, it was outright pointless.

Managing this sweet spot would've normally been a real challenge, but Kokoru's aptitude for being Golden Bunny bait was a huge help once again. If they were corralled in his direction, they would always attack him. Thanks to that, I didn't have to move a single step.

At this rate, Akira would be able to power up Skyfall soon too.

"Okay. Next, I'll start crafting a nice stock of damascus ingots!"

These were the even higher-quality versions of the steel ingots I'd used before. I already had the ore required to make the ingots.

Kokoru can work with this too, which is great.

We'd be able to outfit everyone in damascus gear. Naturally, the weapon inside my Canesword would also become a damascus sword. The price of a single Dead End was going up and up!

As I continued to chug away at crafting, the level-up chime reached my ears.

Ooh, my level went up!

Incredibly, I was already level 71.

"Bawk! I went up again!"

"That's awesome! You're level 100 now!"

From afar, I could hear Akira and Kokoru cheering.

Nice, nice. His level's probably high enough by now.

"Hey, Ren! They're all dead. Let's get going!"

"Gotcha!"

Thus, we withdrew from the Sky Fissure and returned to the deck of the Peachy Thunder.

"Phew. Will that be it for the day?" Akabane asked.

It was almost 10:00 p.m.—time for the forced logout.

“Well, not just for the day. I think we’re done grinding levels in Sky Fissures, period. We’re already pretty up there,” I replied.

We’d crossed “get Kokoru to level 100” off our list, so now our group had to shift gears.

“We’re stopping? Does that mean all that’s left is our equipment?” Akira asked.

“Pretty much. If we do nothing but level up, we won’t be able to get Kokoru’s skill charged.”

Kokoru was essentially going to be a general in the battle royale, and a general needed troops! We had to give him strong subjects to summon with Golden Sweets, and for *that*, we couldn’t just go around killing Golden Bunnies.

Sky Fissure enemies were typically random, so they wouldn’t always generate the enemies you wanted. If he could only summon Golden Bunnies, he wouldn’t be of much help.

Basically, we needed to go to a normal area so we could find something guaranteed to set him up. All the farming spots were taken, yes, but I had the perfect idea to break through the farming blockade.

“How about we tell other guilds how to start Golden Bunny Festivals?”

In other words, we’d fill them in on the whole time-stamp gimmick. This was the key to turning the monsters in the fissure into Golden Bunnies.

“Whaaat?!”

Everyone was shocked.

That’s fair, though. It would mean leaking the info we’d figured out on our own.

“But we worked so hard for that!” Yano protested.

“Wouldn’t it be a waste?” Maeda asked.

Akira nodded. “Yeah! We used all our MEP to min-max the ship, and you even picked a boring skill for Draco.”

“It’s cool. We got what we needed out of it. Someone else is gonna figure it

out eventually, and what happens if the method changes? Then our info's useless. Might as well squeeze one last use out of it. This time, it'll clear out the normal farming spots for us."

"Then... if we tell other guilds about this, they'll all flock to the Sky Fissures?"

I nodded in response to Akira. "Yep. Then their vise grips on farming spots should ease up, yeah? Even if you compare our leveling pace to the other guilds', the Golden Bunnies are clearly the best. Everybody will leap at this opportunity, hoping to level up as much as possible. If we tell Homura, and she latches on to it, others should follow. Her guild's pretty big, after all."

The battle royale was close at hand.

Even if the interference with grind spots loosened, and weaker guilds started rapidly leveling up, it would be beyond difficult for them to recover the difference. Therefore, it wouldn't really be a problem for us if they did.

Once this info got around, the gears ought to start turning all at once. While everyone else was off hunting Golden Bunnies, we would swoop into the empty grind spots and get Kokoru ready for battle.

"Wow, I get it. You sure are sneaky, Ren!"

"I'll take that as a compliment." I turned to Akabane. "Are you cool with that?"

"I do not mind. But I would like to see what you'll do with these empty spots."

"No prob. Actually, it'd be great if you could help us out."

With that, our Golden Bunny Festival finally came to a close.

If we could get Homura's help with spreading this info around, the big-name guilds would all gather around Sky Fissures almost immediately... just as I intended!

◆◇◆

We were just two days out from the battle.

By now, most of our gear was updated, so we were taking up the endeavor of preparing Kokoru's skill. We had gotten his level about as high as it would get,

so we just had to recruit allies close to the level limit. Again, Golden Sweets worked based on level.

To that end, we'd made our way to Almishr's Burial Ground.

Everything had gone according to plan, and the grind-obstruction had been loosened. The inside of the tomb was essentially back to normal.

We killed off monsters on our way down, just like before. We'd made it to the bottom floor at a low level last time, so our descent was smooth this time around.

By the way, the level breakdown was as follows: me at level 71, Akira at 72, Maeda at 72, and Yano at level 73. Kokoru was a dignified level 100!

Tagging along were Akabane at level 74 and her NPC Selphie at level 81.

My equipment had been updated too. Stats included, my setup looked like this:

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[Character Status]

Class: Symbologist
Level: 71
HP: 2,442/2,442
MP: 771/771
AP: 0/300
STR: 111
VIT: 452
DEX: 144
AGI: 202
INT: 301
```

MND: 255

CHR: 210

Talent 1: Knifer

<Effect> User can equip hidden weapons.

Talent 2: Skill Chain

<Effect> User can unleash ultimate moves that combine up to three skills/arts.

Talent 3: Final Strike

<Effect> User can use Final Strike.

Talent 4: Efficiency

<Effect> User skips the crafting animation, but is unable to craft flawless items.

Talent 5: Skill Chain

<Effect> User can unleash ultimate moves that combine up to three skills/arts.

LUB: 0

MEP: 0

Money: 334 Mira

[Equipment]

Main Weapon: Canesword (OEX)

Subweapon: None

Ranged Weapon: Blowgun (OEX)

Ammunition: Sleep Darts

Head: Damascus Circlet

Body: Damascus Robes

Arms: Damascus Gloves

Legs: Damascus Trousers

Feet: Damascus Shoes

Acc 1: Equip Ring

Acc 2: Rush Ring

I was still throwing all of my level-up bonuses into VIT. Even I was starting to think it was a little silly at this point, but giving up now would be admitting defeat.

Gotta keep on min-maxing to the very end! I go my own way!

My talents were the usual drama-cannon setup, but I had set two Skill Chains.

Along the way here, I'd had Joint Magic equipped. We weren't going to be using it anymore, though, so I'd moved things around in favor of two ultimates.

I was once again impoverished, so I made a mental note to procure some cash. That was thanks to the painful cost of preparing all of this new gear. I'd crafted all of it myself, so it was much cheaper than buying it outright, at least.

I hadn't just worked on my own gear; I'd done some stuff for Akira and the others as well. We had souped up her Skyfall twice, making it a Skyfall +3.

With the higher-grade materials available to me, I improved my Canesword to be a damascus sword wrapped up in a damascus cane. When I wanted an emphasis on guard, I would switch to my Fanatic's Staff.

The damascus cane was starting to catch up in usefulness, but that high guard was still putting in work. However, damascus ingots were far from cheap.

Suddenly, the unit cost of a single ultimate was exploding upward! I could see why my forefathers had given up on the symbologist drama cannon.

Draco was occasionally bringing materials with his Pickup ability, but he just couldn't keep up. I hadn't gotten another Peregrine Stone since the last time.

Sure would be nice to find a damascus mine somewhere. Once this guild

mission is over, maybe I'll go on a trip to find some materials.

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[Magic]

Enfeebling Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Devitalizing Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Clumsifying Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Enervating Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Stupefying Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Debrain Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

Repugnant Circle (MP: 5~∞)

Cooldown: 0/10 seconds

[Skills]

Turnover

Cooldown: 0/300 seconds

<Effect> Swaps current HP and MP.

Symbologist only

Final Strike

Cooldown: 0/300 seconds

<Effect> Greatly increases damage of next attack, but breaks weapon afterward.

[Arts]

Charge Spells (AP: 100)

Staff Art

<Effect> Recovers 20% of max MP.

Stinging Shot (AP: 50)

Staff Art

<Effect> Smacks a faraway enemy by using magic to manipulate one’s staff. Hits once.

Windmill (AP: 50)

Staff Art

<Effect> User swings equipped staff in a wide arc and leaps upward. Hits once.

Roundhouse Staff (AP: 100)

Staff Art

<Effect> User swings equipped staff in a circle, protecting self. Hits a random amount of times.

Explosive Tackle (AP: 75; HP: 10% of max)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> A high-speed tackle that envelops the user in flames. Hits an area in front of the user.

Falling Leaf (AP: 100)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> User leaps high into the air, then propels downward at a targeted enemy. Hits once.

Tortoise Guard (AP: 125)

Martial Artist Art (Strikes)

<Effect> Renders user immobile, but greatly reduces physical damage sustained.

Effect Duration: 30 seconds

Quickdraw (AP: 0)

Hidden Weapon Art

<Effect> Lightning-fast strike that takes enemies by surprise. Hits once. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

Shadow Dart (AP: 0)

Hidden Weapon Art

<Effect> Fires a single dart from the enemy's blind spot. Hits once. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Extra effect rate and potency increase as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

I had added several arts thanks to my Rush Ring, along with the large level boost.

Actually, there was a lot of magic I could learn at my current level, but I

couldn’t afford any of it. Without the magic, there wouldn’t be much point in being a Symbologist, so I figured I’d better get that going soon.

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[Ultimates]

Dead End (Turnover -> Final Strike -> Quickdraw)

Descending Azure Dragon (Turnover -> Falling Leaf -> Quickdraw)

With these new arts, of course, I had much more variety when it came to ultimates. This was going to be very useful against our next opponent!

I took notice of a monster enshrined in front of the treasure room at the lowest level of the dungeon. Golden armor with gaudy ornamentation, a firm build, and a red glint in his eyes. His huge, obsidian, two-handed sword was just as ominous as ever.

Yep. He’s still one cool dude.

Level 99 Deadly King

Crown Icon (rare monster)

There he is!

He was the whole reason we had come here. The Deadly King was the ideal servant for our level 100 Kokoru!

Now, time for a revenge match!

Kokoru gasped upon seeing the Deadly King. “W-We’re gonna recruit *him*, bawk? Err, I guess he does look strong.”

Golden Sweets could only recruit allies equal to or lower than the user’s level, so he was perfect for it as he was so close to our current limit.

Fortunately for us, the skill even worked on rare monsters. However, they

would be pretty heavily nerfed when you summoned them. If they were unleashed at full strength, they would've been ridiculously overpowered.

It was pretty much an unspoken rule that when bosses joined you, they'd be weakened. Too bad.

In some robot-based video games, you recruit enemies with tens of thousands of HP... and they'd end up with less than half that.

Even if rare monsters were weakened, they still ended up a lot stronger than normal mobs of the same level, so this would be just fine.

If this big guy joined us, Kokoru's fighting power would skyrocket. Now, the only question was whether we could bring him to our side.

Golden Sweets occasionally worked in one go—and therefore would be only one sugarcoated waste of Mira. But just as often, the enemy would refuse and start attacking. Sometimes, they would demand more before they would be swayed.

That made them basically mercs for him to hire. Not that they were gonna help him save 80,000 gold coins for retirement or something.

"Here we go, Kokoru. If he attacks, just run away immediately."

"Yes, sir, bawk!"

Leaving the girls behind, I held Draco in my arms and approached the king with Kokoru. I was here to cast Enervating Circle right away in the case that Kokoru was attacked. The circle came with a slowdown effect, so we could escape safely if we needed to.

If we were attacked, fighting here would be disadvantageous, as there were monsters buried within all the walls that aggroed based on your health. Any loss in HP would cause the monsters to attack all at once, killing us with sheer numbers.

Thus, if we needed to fight, we had to try to drag the Deadly King above ground. Last time, we'd lost even *after* we dragged him up. But what would happen this time?

Anyway, I was with Kokoru just in case we needed to start an impromptu

marathon.

“Ren, how much should I give him?” Kokoru was able to choose how much he gave in his bribes.

“Might as well give him all you’ve got. We definitely want him on our side.”

Kokoru was holding 500,000 Mira. Spending that much just to summon him once was pretty darn expensive, like a foreign pinch hitter who charged 500,000 yen for a single swing.

The contract would expire after his first summoning, so if we wanted to do it again, we had to come back and bribe him once more. It took a lot to entice top-performing players!

Normally, it was probably meant to be used to grab enemies in a heavily populated area and use them as on-the-spot escorts. That was very much the way a powerless merchant would survive. With enough time and money, it could also be used in pursuit of instant, full-on firepower.

No problem, though! Dead End V cost me a whole two million Mira to use, so this was nothing.

Splurging on personnel expenses to get an edge was a thing not just in baseball, but in MMOs as well.

Was there a problem inherent in that? I would say nay.

“Ah! Here he comes, Kokoru!”

The Deadly King started moving the moment he noticed our presence.

“Yeah. I’ll do it now, bawk!”

`Kokoru activated Golden Sweets.`

When he did, a wooden gift box fell before the Deadly King, accompanied by a sparkly effect.

The Deadly King instantly stopped and looked at it, opening the lid of the box to find, bizarrely, a golden coin inside!

It was like watching a period play.

That's Golden Sweets for you!

It was a surreal sight to see purely Japanese-style effects in a game with this aesthetic.

For some reason, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Want it? Then lend me your strength, bawk!" Kokoru shouted.

The king grabbed the box and tucked it into his armor. Basically, he had accepted the bribe.

"VERY WELL. BUT I WON'T LEND MY STRENGTH TO THE WEAK. SHOW THAT YOU HAVE THE POWER TO DEFEAT ME!"

With that, he held his sword aloft and charged straight at us.

"He's attacking, baaawk!"

"Mngh?! How dare he! We've gotta take him down, or else all that money just went down the drain!"

When we last fought him, he had seemed like one of those guys obsessed with battling, so it wasn't altogether unexpected that he would demand a fight first. Think of him as an Esper in one of those big-name fantasy RPGs.

What the heck, man? Don't just take the money too! If you're a battle maniac, don't take the money. If you want money, don't start a fight. It's that easy! You can't have both!

"Enervating Circle!"

I quickly activated my circle, targeting the dragon in my arms.

With the effects of the skill Target Marker, my normally immobile circles could be cast on him and thus move wherever he went.

While I held Draco in my arms, this meant we could bring the movement-slowing effect along with us. As such, no matter how long the enemy chased us, they wouldn't catch up. The moment they stepped into the circle, they would be slowed down. As long as they didn't attack from a distance, we could indefinitely run a marathon without getting caught.

“Kokoru, don’t leave my side! We gotta drag him above ground first, so come with me!”

“Wait for me, bawk!”

Kokoru and I started sprinting for the surface.

Enveloped in the Enervating Circle and its enemy-slowing effects, we ran all the way up the path from the very bottom to the very top.

Along the way up, normal mobs like Deadly Generals and Ancient Dolls saw us and tried to attack, but the slowdown was too much for them, allowing us to evade them with ease and continue on our way. Once we passed by, they would never catch up, as long as I left the circle up.

Better yet, I had a much higher level and much more MP than the last time. Even without using Turnover to refill my MP, I had more than enough to make it to the surface. If I *did* run out of MP and use Turnover, the HP/MP swap would bring my HP way down.

At that point, all the Crimson Mummies buried in the walls of the tomb would wake up. Health-based aggro is one way that monsters decide when and who to attack. In this case, they went for players whose HP was under a specific percentage.

In Almishr’s Burial Ground, the big tourist attraction is the mob of mummies that will come and kill you if you don’t watch your HP carefully.

“Enervating Circle!”

Before the effect ran out, I overwrote the circle. It meant stopping for a second, but no enemy weapons reached me. I started running again, recreating that set distance between us.

“This is going well, bawk!”

If we kept going like this, I wouldn’t be leading that huge train of Crimson Mummies from last time. However, I started to wonder if this was the right choice.

It’s not like they’ll kill me if I start the train. Last time, I survived just fine.

“You can do it, boys!”

“If you die now, that’s five hundred thousand down the drain!”

“You’re halfway there. Keep it up!”

“I see. That’s quite a convenient way to use circle magic, even if it requires a pet dragon.”

Akira and the others followed from a bit behind the Deadly King.

The enemy was focused on Kokoru and me, so the rest of them were pretty much just on a field trip—like cheerleaders at a sports game.

It’d be kinda fun to scare the heck out of them.

Last time around, they had gone to plunder the treasure room while I distracted the enemy, so they hadn’t seen what I’d seen.

I think they deserve to witness that ridiculous train of enemies!

It was worth seeing. Worth screenshotting, even!

“Enervating Circle!”

I developed my circle with a pretty large radius. A pointlessly large circle like this was, in essence, a waste of MP. My MP was down to 11 now.

“This circle’s really big, bawk.”

Poor Kokoru knew nothing of what was to come.

Okay. Time for the show!

“Turnover!”

It was a success. Now, my HP was 11 and my MP was at max.

Groooooan...

Level 78 Crimson Mummy Army

There it is!

Hands reached out of the wall like a haunted house—the greeting of an army of red mummies!

“Bawk?! Bagaaawk!” Kokoru screamed like he was watching the end of the world.

“Eeeeek!” The group of pretty girls behind us did the same.

I was the one who was taking the health-based aggro, so as long as I didn’t fall, they were completely safe—though they *were* getting jostled around by the mob of Crimson Mummies.

“Don’t stop running, Kokoru! As long as we escape, everyone’s gonna be okay!”

“I’d run without you telling me to, bawk! This is just crazy!”

“Ren, you did that on purpose, didn’t you?! You totally had enough MP!”

“Isn’t the view great, though?! You don’t get to see trains like this every day. Figured I might as well let you all see it too.”

It was still an incredible sight. I had to laugh. This was one of the things you just had to see in this game.

“Bwahaha! It’s just as crazy as the last time! Ahahaha!”

“Jeez, Ren! Okay, yeah, it is kinda crazy! I’ve gotta take some screenshots of this.”

Yep, thought as much. She ended up enjoying herself. That’s our sightseeing maniac for you!

“B-But what are we gonna do about this?!”

“W-We can’t possibly beat this many, can we?”

“No worries! Once we make it out, only the Deadly King will follow us. Already tested!”

Even I wouldn’t do something this silly if we couldn’t escape. Just a bit of messing around because I knew I could get away with it.

The true battle would begin on the surface. Last time, we had suffered a complete defeat at the hands of the Deadly King.

“Bawk! I see the exit!”

“Nice! Let’s get going!”

We leapt out of the tomb and up to the surface.

Once we made it out, all the enemies except for the Deadly King seemed to be blocked by an invisible wall, remaining stuck within the tomb. Same phenomenon as last time.

Having escaped the mob, Akabane turned and gasped. “You were right. They stopped!”

Only the shiny-armored Deadly King had run outside with us.

“Here we are! At last, the true battle begins!” I joked.

However, Akira poured even more drama onto my declaration. “Yeah! We’ve come this far; now it’s time to put an end to it!”

“Kokoru, move to a safe distance!”

“Yes, sir, bawk!”

The Deadly King’s targeting was on Kokoru now because he was the one who had used Golden Sweets. It wasn’t a major amount of aggro, so first, I was gonna pull the aggro away from him.

“Sword Samba!”

In perfect harmony, Akira activated her Sword Samba on me.

This made Turnover available for use again—and my ultimate as well.

“Enfeebling Circle!”

This magic reduced enemy strength. I cast it at a wide range, reducing my MP to zero immediately. By weakening him, I would sustain less damage from his attacks.

Then, I got in position and unsheathed my Canesword.

“Ultimate move: Dead End!”

Smaaaash!

A flash of bright, purple light!

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,279 damage to Deadly King!

Nice. My damage is rising!

My stat boosts on level-up and my weapon upgrades were keeping pace too.

I had another ultimate at my disposal, but without AP on hand, I couldn't use it. Dead End's 0 AP cost was incredibly convenient. Not only was it the most basic piece in the drama cannon loadout, but I was kinda attached to Dead End. I didn't think I could ever let it go.

"Guilty Steal!"

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren's aggro!

Shield in hand, Yano raised her guard as she stole all the aggro from me. Then, both Maeda and Yano used their recovery magic, healing me almost completely. Despite him breaking Yano's guard somewhat, she was still taking every hit like a champ.

Nice, things are stabilizing! At the very least, I won't have to fight him one-on-one. Might as well let Yano do the tanking.

I swiftly crafted my next Canesword with a damascus cane and a damascus sword.

"Let's do that one more time to really get him stuck on Yano!"

Log messages flowed in, showing that Akira and the others were making moves.

Akira activated Sword Samba.

All of Ren’s skills are now available for use!

Nozomi activated Sword Samba.

All of Yuuna’s skills are now available for use!

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,279 damage to Deadly King!

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren’s aggro!

Then, more healing magic came from Maeda and Yano. Now that Yano had taken aggro from two Dead Ends, Deadly King would never take his eyes off her. We could just let her tank while we whittled him down!

“When his health falls to about half, he’s gonna use his ultimate. Until then, keep this up!” I said, crafting my third Canesword. Money was flying away like dust in the wind.

As the Deadly King continued to attack Yano, Akira and Akabane flanked him with attacks to whittle him down. I also threw in a few normal attacks to build up AP. It didn’t deal much damage, but I just needed those Art Points.

Akira readied herself and shouted, “Hah! Mimic!”

A cloud of smoke appeared around her.

At present, she was dual-wielding Skyfall and Mimic Fan. The result of her Mimic, of course, was that she had become a Deadly King—one who held both Skyfall and Mimic Fan, smacking the original around with them.

“Okay, AP’s full! Here comes Sword Samba!”

Eww. A shiny-armored skeleton knight with Akira’s voice doing the cute Sword Samba? This is giving me the creeps.

Akira activated Sword Samba.

All of Ren’s skills are now available for use!

Still, it did the job. Whether the receiver liked it or not was unimportant!

Akira did that on purpose, didn't she?!

Anyway, now that Akira and Akabane had full AP, they used Sword Samba on both of us again. I used my ultimate, and Yano removed aggro. Things were running smoothly.

The battle continued at that pace for a while until his HP finally fell to half.

"HEH HEH HEH... YOU ARE FORMIDABLE, INDEED."

Though he was a skeleton, he kinda seemed to be grinning with glee.

"Everyone, be careful! He's gonna do it!" I warned the girls.

This is where he gets serious!

"I MUST REWARD YOUR STRENGTH—WITH MY ULTIMATE ATTACK!"

Deadly King raised his sword with both arms before stabbing it straight down into the earth.

There's Crimson Calamity!

Crimson Calamity is a wide-area ultimate that bathes the surroundings in a tempest of flames. When it's used, flames billow forth from the sword.

Last time, me and the lads had been obliterated by this. It was the first I'd seen of it, after all. But this time, we all knew about his ultimate. We had come in with a plan!

"GAZE UPON ME! CRIMSON CALAMITY!" The Deadly King's voice echoed through the sky as he raised his sword aloft.

Just as he moved into his stance, we all leapt into action. The log window came up, overflowing with new information.

Yuuna activated Sprint.

Yuuna became fleet-footed!

Akira activated Hawk Strike.

Nozomi activated Hard Slash.

Ren activated Final Strike.

Yano used her speed boost to dash away from Crimson Calamity's area-of-effect, successfully evading it.

Akira and Akabane pivoted, activating their arts to leap up and away. Ever versatile, these sword dancer arts could be used as an evasive maneuver to escape his ultimate.

With my Final Strike, I was the only one who couldn't evade it with a skill activation. Nevertheless, I had a way.

"Here we go! Ultimate move!"

I drew my Canesword and lobbed it high into the air. Then, I followed it with a high jump! This launched me about twice as high as an ordinary Windmill would. The ultimate I had used took advantage of this leap. It was the combination of Turnover, Falling Leaf, and Quickdraw!

The Falling Leaf animation began with a high jump into the air, followed by a diving body press that used the momentum of the fall to attack the target. As it was a striking art, it naturally consumed HP. Knowing that I would have to use it, I left enough MP in advance to convert into the HP required for Falling Leaf.

We had planned all of this in advance because we knew he was guaranteed to use Crimson Calamity when his HP fell to half. Just taking advantage of our experience.

The jump was kind of ridiculously high, but this *was* a video game. It was so much fun to be able to perform such unrealistic feats while still feeling it as if it were real—a joy only possible within this game!

Fwoooooom!

He used Crimson Calamity, coating the earth in a burning red.

Akira, Akabane, and I flew through the sky while Yano made enough distance with her dash.

Instantly after everyone's dodge, the billowing red flames burned away the places we had just stood.

Nice. A successful evasion!

During my jump, I caught up with the Canesword I'd thrown. Next, I got on top of the hilt of my sword.

Docking complete!

Then, the sword and my body were enveloped in an azure aura in the shape of a dragon—one might call it an azure dragon.

"Go, Descending Azure Dragooon!"

Enveloped in this aura, I began a high-speed descent directly toward the Deadly King!

Whoa! This is so fast, it's kinda scary!

Pshoooooow!

The falling dragon struck the Deadly King right on the head.

It was like a direct hit from a meteorite. If this kind of thing had happened in real life, it would have been against virtually all odds.

Combining Falling Leaf's diving body press with Quickdraw's unsheathe, making sure to throw the sword high up into the air first *and* riding the hilt of the sword on the way down to stab the enemy right in the head. I had to marvel that such a combination even existed!

I don't get it at all! What is it, a diving sword press?

Regardless, I sure liked it! It was cool as heck, and it could be used as an evasive maneuver as well.

Y'know, I bet it'd be even cooler if I struck a cool pose with my arms crossed on the way down. I couldn't do it this time because I'm not used to the skill yet, but if possible, I'd like to practice.

Meanwhile, as for the all-important damage...

Ren activated Descending Azure Dragon.

Dealt 5,735 damage to Deadly King!

Mmm, that is one tasty number!

It worked as an evasive action while outdoing even Dead End in damage. Falling Leaf required 100 AP to use, but I thought it gave a good return on the investment.

“Here comes the usual! Man, that damage is as crazy as ever!”

Yuuna activated Guilty Steal.

Yuuna stole all of Ren’s aggro!

Yano quickly followed up and stole my aggro away.

The only reason we could rattle off skills like this was because of our sword dancer duo, Akira and Akabane, throwing Sword Sambas our way. Regardless of the problems the players themselves had, sword dancers really were useful.

They added a ton of flexibility in battle, especially when there were two of them.

“That was cool, but I saw that grimace on your face, Ren! You’ve gotta be cooler. Maybe throw in a cool pose on the way down or something,” Akira suggested, still in the body of the Deadly King.

It’s a lot less cute when it comes from a skeleton!

“I wanted to!”

“It’s lovely that you’re such good friends, but our enemy still stands!”

Akabane was correct.

“Yeah, I know! Let’s keep it up!”

We continued to pile on the damage, staying wary of any more Crimson

Calamities. A few more of them came, but every time, we dealt with them the same way as before.

“Ultimate move: Descending Azure Dragooon!”

Pshooooow!

Ren activated Descending Azure Dragon.

Dealt 5,735 damage to Deadly King!

Aw, yeah. I nailed the pose that time!

The damage from my attack reduced the Deadly King’s remaining health to zero. Finally, he fell to his knees.

“NGH... VERY WELL. I HAVE WITNESSED YOUR STRENGTH. I WILL LEND YOU MY AID.”

With that, he began to flicker and disappear.

Kokoru’s Golden Sweets was a success.

Kokoru can now summon Deadly King!

Heck yeah, we did it! Now Kokoru’s usefulness in battle has skyrocketed!

There was just one problem.

We didn’t get any EXP, gold, or drops at all?!

“Huh. Looks like recruiting them doesn’t count as defeating them, so you don’t get rewards.”

Here I had thought we could look forward to some awesome EXP and loot. We’d killed a rare boss monster, but here we were with no rewards.

But hey! Throwing it all away for the sake of our min-max was dramatic in its own right! I’m cool with it.

Either way, Deadly King, I choose you!

Chapter 6: Parental Supervision

At last, the big day had arrived! The competitive guild mission's final battle royale, complete with parental supervision!

Our rendezvous point was an island in the Lagoon. There, a port was prepared as an anchorage for all of the guilds' airships. Furthermore, there were also monitors on the island for the spectators to watch our battles.

I had taken my parents to the port to show off our JS Peachy Thunder.

We were apparently free to look around as much as we wanted until the start of the battle. People from other guilds were here showing their parents around the port, so it was quite the bustling scene.

"Gosh, this one really stands out. It must be easy to find it with that flashy color."

My mom, Reika Takashiro, looked JS Peachy Thunder up and down. She was thirty-seven years old, though she looked more like she was in her midtwenties. Heck, sometimes she looked closer to her *early* twenties. I almost had to wonder if she was casting spells in secret to keep her face youthful. People often mistook her for someone much younger.

Incidentally, she was an author. One might have thought from her slow and gentle tone of voice that she was an airhead, but she was actually a very dynamic person with surprising wit. Not that she was devious or anything, but she was definitely shrewd and a quick thinker. Otherwise, she would've had trouble making it as a writer.

"Games these days are incredible, aren't they? It's like a whole different world. If I didn't have to work, I would enroll here myself! It seems like it would inspire some really good stories."

"At least wait until I graduate, Mom. That's just weird!"

"I'm just kidding, don't worry. Wouldn't want to get in the way of your education."

You really never knew what she was going to say. I started to worry she might *actually* enroll at some point.

“So, think you can win this thing?” Dad asked me.

“Yeah. All the testing and preparations are done, so I’d say we’re a favorite to win!”

“Go get ’em, tiger. Games are all about winning, no matter what it takes. Remember, history is written by the winners, so you can do whatever you want! Might makes right.”

“Uh, Mom? I don’t think that’s something you should say to your son.”

There she goes, saying radical things with her silly tone of voice.

“It’s okay. I know you’re a good boy. You’re my pride and joy, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’ll do my best to meet your expectations.”

Just then, Kokoru emerged on the deck of the JS Peachy Thunder.

“Ren! Good morning, bawk!”

“Yo, Kokoru! The day has finally come.”

“Did you get lots of rest, bawk? I was so nervous that I could barely sleep at all.”

“Heh. Yeah, same here, but only because I stayed up late analyzing data. Just the usual, though.”

“So you’re in top shape, bawk. You’ve got nerves of steel.”

Looking at Kokoru, my dad was awestruck. “Is that boy your NPC? The AI quality is just superb. It’s like he’s really alive.”

“Wasn’t your company involved in the development?”

“Well, we just do VR motion. We haven’t had our hands in anything AI-related.” He continued to mumble to himself in amazement.

Rightfully so, I supposed. Typically, NPCs didn’t seem nearly as dynamic as Kokoru.

“Aww, he’s cute! He looks delicious too. Mmheehee.”

“Bawk?! You tryna eat me?!”

“No, she’s just kidding. My mom’s just a big ol’ jokester... I think. Anyway, where are the girls?”

“Akira and Yuuna aren’t here yet. Kotomi’s over there.” He gestured to the wheelhouse.

Oh, I do recall seeing some Maedas around! Serious faces, freshly pressed suits... They must be scholars too. University professors, no doubt.

I could see her parents listening with studious expressions as she explained something with stars in her eyes.

Hey, that’s the nitro lever. Is she telling them about that? She just can’t get enough of it, can she?

They chuckled to themselves as they watched their daughter flail about excitedly.

Aww, they look kinda happy. Maeda’s typically pretty collected, so maybe seeing her this hyped up is refreshing for them.

Kokoru, my parents, and I crossed the pier and stepped onto the deck of the JS Peachy Thunder. Just as we did, Maeda and her parents left the wheelhouse.

“And if you look over here, you’ll see our trump card for this battle royale on the bow of the ship.” She pointed to the front, her eyes still aglitter.

Aah, she’s telling them about our new part.

For this battle, Akabane’s guild was using a loaner airship, but they could still fit it with extra parts. Since she had paid up to help us get our Nitro Chargers, I had given her two parts in return. That had freed up two of our slots.

We’d filled one of those slots with a hunk of pure Bunnygold, the rare material we had obtained during the Golden Bunny Festival! The bow of the JS Peachy Thunder was now fitted with a shiny new weapon.

It was an offensive part: the Golden Drill!

Maeda was practically drooling at the thought of using this to destroy other ships left and right. While she was jabbing her finger toward the Golden Drill,

Maeda finally noticed that I had arrived.

“Good day, Takashiro.”

“Heya, Maeda. Hope you’re ready to smash some ships with that drill.”

“Yes! Just leave it to me. You went through the trouble of crafting it for us, so I’ll be sure to make good use of it.” She was thrilled.

Maeda was probably the most excited out of all of us for this airship battle. And why shouldn’t she be? She’d get to smash ships to her heart’s content.

Back when I had crafted the Golden Drill, she had enjoyed watching the whole process.

In an airship battle, having only Nitro Chargers left you without many offensive options. It was great that we had obtained the materials for offensive parts just when we’d needed them. Apparently, this was also the highest-ranked of all the ram-type weapons.

Thank you, O Great Golden Bunnies.

Our strategy was basically to use the nitro to drill other ships into extinction, though we would be careful not to go after Homura’s or Akabane’s ships. We had an alliance with Homura, and we didn’t need to go out of our way to make an enemy of Akabane.

Secretly, I didn’t really want to get too close to the Akabanes, anyway. Nozomi Akabane herself was fine, but *he* was sure to be there for today’s event.

Even Selphie had been taken in by him. I really didn’t want to associate with them while my parents were watching; that would just be embarrassing.

“This your team’s ship right here?! Ugh, look at them colors. You did this, didn’tcha?!”

“N-No! I painted it, yeah, but Kotomi’s the one who chose the color!”

“You fibbin’ to me?! Izzat the kid who was toppa the class in middle school? What’d y’all do to her?!”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s cute!”

“Naw, too flashy. Looks like some punk got ’er hands on it.”

Yano stepped onto the deck with a middle-aged lady sporting some impressive muscles.

That's Yano's mom?! I guess she's from Kansai.

Noticing us, Yano gave us a cheerful wave. "Kotomi, Takashiro, Kokoru! Good mornin'!" She was just as lighthearted as ever.

Her mother gave her head a little shove. "Hey, you gotta greet folk properly! Sorry my kid's such a pain, boys 'n' girls. Thanks for keepin' her company."

The rest of us bowed our heads in greeting. She seemed like a sociable lady who apparently cared a lot about etiquette.

They own a beauty salon, right? She has that "retail friendliness" vibe about her.

"Ow, ow! C'mon, I'm not in elementary school anymore!"

"Pah! Your brain sure is!"

"Shut up! I've been getting better grades!"

My mother perked up at that. "Yeah! Our little Ren's been doing better on tests too. I wasn't too convinced that his grades would go up when he's gaming all day, but it looks like it's really working."

Put the Merit Point carrot on the stick, and even a gamer would be hard-pressed not to do his best. We had only gotten this JS Peachy Thunder because we'd studied so hard. Same with the full array of Nitro Chargers, actually. That was what let us start our Golden Bunny Festival too. Basically, our test results gave us a huge leg up in the game.

I'd need to keep studying from now on. There were so many talents, equipment, and items that I wanted!

"Oh, yeah! Your kiddos helped my girl study, right? Thanks a ton."

Maeda's father shook his head. "No, no, please. Our daughter said it was even more rewarding and entertaining than her usual studies, so I'd say it all worked out."

It seemed the adults were gradually getting acquainted. It was just kinda

uncomfortable to have them talking about us when we were right there.

“Huh. Akira’s not here yet, is she?” I asked Maeda.

“I don’t believe so. There’s not much time left either...”

“She was pretty spooked about the parental supervision stuff. Maybe she’s not in the mood? You know how Akki’s family is.”

“Yeah, true. I’ll go take a look.”

I jumped off the deck of the ship and surveyed the area.

Akira was nowhere to be seen, but there *was* someone who saw us and piped up.

“Bawk! There they are, bawk! Heeey, Kokoru!”

It was another chicken Birdman, a size larger than Kokoru and with what looked like a fake mustache.

“Guh? Bawk? Daddy?!”

Next to him was a female Birdman, though I could only tell because she was lacking a comb.

Following the two chickens—or people?—were a bunch of little, tiny Birdmen. I counted four of them. Since they were children, they were probably more like chicks than chickens.

“Hi, Kokoru! Cheep, it’s been so long!”

They all ran up to him, cheep-cheeping as they went. I wondered if they were his little brothers.

“Oh god, they’re so cute!” Yano gushed.

“They certainly are! Might they be your siblings, Kokoru?”

“That they are, bawk! Bawwwk, you guys all grew up so much while I was away.”

This was just adorable. Even a manly man like me wanted to just cuddle ’em all.

“Chirp! Cheep, cheep!”

Draco, who had been on my head, flew over to play with the kids. He attempted to play-bite a couple, but...

“Aaah! We’re being eaten, cheep!”

The little cheepers scattered in all directions out of fear.

Even baby dragons can be scary, I guess. Though he’s cute in his own way.

“Chirp? Tag? Taaag!”

Apparently thinking they were playing a game, Draco started chasing the little cheepers around.

“Cheep?!”

Things were getting crazier by the second, but it was still adorable.

D’aww. Chicks are so cute.

“C’mon, Draco, you’re scaring them. Cut it out.” I stopped him and pulled him into my arms. “Huh. Your parents came to watch too, Kokoru?”

“Looks like it, bawk. I had no idea either.” Kokoru looked happy to see his family again.

“Thank you for taking care of our Kokoru. Bawk.” Kokoru’s father bowed his head to us.

They’re tradesmen, right? I think I remember Kokoru mentioning he was the son of a merchant.

“Has he been a bother to you at all?” his mother asked worriedly. “He’s not much of a fighter, I know.”

“Oh, no, not at all! He’s leveled up a ton since he joined us, so I think we can make it to the top! Just watch us.”

“Do you mean it, bawk? Kokoru, what level are you now?”

“Yeah, Daddy. I’m level 100 now, bawk.”

“Bagaaawk?! Level 100?! You’ve grown so much!”

“Goodness, you’re that strong now?!”

“Kokoru, you’re so cool!”

His whole family looked thrilled.

“Th-Think we’ll be okay, Ren? Nothing’s really gone up but my level, bawk.”

“All good. We got your skill ready, and everything. We’re gonna make it, so just be cool.”

“O-Okay, bawk.”

Then, a horde of Birdmen passed by. Peater didn’t seem to be among them; I could only see the guys who had bullied Kokoru.

“Hrm? Aw, man, it’s the drumstick!”

“Oh no...” Kokoru hid slightly behind me. He really couldn’t stand those guys.

Don’t blame him, though. I might as well act big here to help him out.

“’Sup, nerds? How’s it hangin’?” I asked.

“Uh, what? Why do you care? I ain’t givin’ the enemy info, buddy,” one of the Birdmen replied.

“Yeah, what he said. You talked crap last time, but we’re gonna crush you today.”

“Get it in your head! That’s Cowardly Kokoru right there! Raise his level all you want; he’s still nothing!”

The Birdmen were furious. They were totally gonna gun for us in the battle.

“Ulp. I think they have it in for me, bawk.”

“Don’t worry, man! Hey, c’mere for a sec.”

He leaned in as I whispered something to him.

“Bawk?! Are you sure?”

“Yeah, bro, let’s do it! Hey, you guys!” I thrust a finger in the direction of the Birdmen. “Feast your eyes on Kokoru here. You wanna know somethin’? He’s level *100*! You’re never gonna catch up to that. Nah, you don’t even have a chance!”

Heck, even *we* hadn’t caught up to Kokoru in level. The level limit for this battle was set at each guild’s NPC’s level, so we were allowed to be up to level

100. Unfortunately, I was only level 71. It felt like a bit of a waste, but I figured we ought to be at least on equal footing with other guilds, if not better.

“Wh-What?!”

“That’s real uppity for a coward!”

“Bawhawhawk.” Kokoru stepped out of my shadow with a meaningful laugh. Then, he pointed at himself, confidence blazing in his eyes. “Me and the past me are two different guys, bawk. I’ve changed since I met Ren.”

“Huh?!”

“Yeah. I’m not just Kokoru anymore. Bawk! I’m Super Kokoru!”

“Get a load of this guy!”

“Wipe that smug look off your face, drumstick!”

“Wow, Kokoru! You’ve become so awesome! Cheep cheep!”

Nice, nice! They’re quaking in their boots!

Making them wary of us was our strategy to avoid getting targeted. Kokoru may have been level 100, but it was all fake muscles. Though we had prepped Golden Sweets in advance, Kokoru himself would be in big trouble if he came under focused fire.

To ensure that nobody figured it out, we had to make Kokoru look like he’d actually gotten way stronger. They had to think that they would be in big trouble if they weren’t careful around him.

Furthermore, in order to hide Kokoru’s weakness throughout the ship battle, we needed to do this without letting anyone lay a hand on him.

That battle had already begun. A battle of psychological tactics, so to speak.

At that moment, someone else joined the conversation. “Hmph. Well, I look forward to it. Give me a nice workout today.”

Oh, it’s Peater. He’s level... 75. That means his guild is gonna be restricted to 75 too. In that case, we’re pretty evenly matched. When it comes to levels, that is.

Kataoka had come with him. “Whoa, your NPC’s level 100? Hot damn!”

Right, Peater got picked by Fountain of Wisdom.

“Yo, Kataoka. Not orbiting Akabane today?”

“Heh. Even if we’re on different teams, I’m still putting my all into helping Lady Nozomi. Each guild has a limited number of people today, so it’s actually better to have followers mixed into other guilds.”

He had a point. Each guild was limited to six people, including NPCs. We were free to switch people in and out, but excluding NPCs, only five people could fight at a time. It *would* be advantageous to have followers in other guilds to add to your five.

“Sir Kataoka, I would caution you against revealing your treachery so openly,” Peater said.

I didn’t care either way, so I just let it slide.

“Aah, c’mon. All I gotta do is help Lady Nozomi while still making sure we make it into the top four. It’ll be fine. Anyway, I’m here to say hello to my queen. She here yet?”

“Uh, no? But her ship should be moored two spots over.”

Then, just in time, another NPC came to greet us.

“But wait, I say. Good morning, everyone!”

There’s Selphie. Ugh, she’s still wearing that weird mask. That pose makes it even creepier.

“Heeey...”

Man, I really don’t wanna talk to her. If my parents see that, it’ll be so embarrassing.

Kokoru’s little brothers, who had been watching, were now shivering and cheeping in fear.

“Hello, everyone. Good day to you all,” Akabane said as she passed by our little crowd.

There were a bunch of men in black suits with her; I assumed they were her family’s bodyguards or something.

I guess that counts as supervision?

Immediately behind them was a very intimidating couple in formal attire.

Are they her parents? They really have quite the aura.

Akabane herself was wearing the usual sword dancer gear, but they said nothing of it. Next to her, there was a ridiculously handsome, tall guy.

Is he another family member here through the parental supervision system? No, wait, there's a player name above him.

Ryuutarou Akabane (3-A)

Level 208 Sword Dancer

Guild: True Form (Guild Master)

"What?!" We couldn't help but yell.

“What happened to you?!” I blurted.

Normally, I thought of him as so dangerous that I dared not even touch him. Seeing him like this, though, I couldn’t just stand there.

I can see his face! He’s hot as hell, what the heck?! And he has clothes on! What happened to the pervert who only wore swim briefs, a scarf, and a mask?! Now he’s just another pretty boy! Where did the man we knew gooooo?!

“What troubles you, my good friend? Oh, but first, allow me to thank you for helping my sister. Let us battle fair and square today. I pray you’ll put up a good fight.”

Him being normal is actually terrifying! I mean, he was always terrifying, but I really don’t like this.

“Akabane! Psst, get over here!” I beckoned her closer.

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

We huddled up around her and started whispering.

“This is just weird! What’s with him? He sick or something?”

“Yeah! And nobody told me he was actually good-looking!” Yano hissed.

“It’s a bit difficult to look past his usual persona, however.”

“More than a little, I’d say, bawk.”

“Nice that he’s actually hot, though. Eeheehee.”

“I can certainly appreciate his aesthetics.”

“Bawk. You girls all fall for pretty faces.”

“That is why my brother typically hides his face,” Akabane chimed in.

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“Exposing his features attracts too many women for his taste. He much prefers when people are disgusted by him, so he chooses to conceal his face.”

“A staunch exhibitionist, if I’ve ever seen one.”

“It’s truly only in video games. Normally, he is kind and intelligent. One might

call that half nudity the one sin he bears in this world.”

“Uh-huh... So why’s he acting normal today?”

“Obviously it’s because our parents are present! He can’t let them see him like that. He is an intelligent person, so of course he knows the right time, place, and occasion for his indulgences.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d cry if my son was like that. Akabane, are they okay with your, uh, ensemble?”

The sword dancer gear showed a lot of skin already.

“Hm? What is there for me to be embarrassed about? My mother and father said it looked very nice on me.”

In other words, they were okay with her sword dancer gear, but her brother’s blatant perversions would be too far. Every family drew a line somewhere, I supposed. His near nudity must have been a “no” no matter what.

Again, I would legitimately burst into tears if I saw my son like that.

“B-But wait, I say! I cannot accept that!” cried the only person in the iron mask.

Oh, it’s Selphie. I guess she would *be upset by that.*

Selphie had been influenced by the Akabanes’ guild and had become a Daughter of the Mask. And now, on the most important of days, her master had shed his own uniform.

It was as if she’d been betrayed, the ladder pulled out from under her. Now, left high and dry alone with the mask, the embarrassment was too much for her to bear.

“Ryuutarou, open your eyes! You’re the one who taught me that no matter what anyone says, the only thing that can move you is true beauty! Please, don the mask! Return to your true form!” She removed her own iron mask and tried to hand it to him.

Wow! That elf is a beauty behind her mask. Man, she’s adorable.

The fact that she had been so thoroughly tainted was the most deplorable

thing ever.

“I’m sorry, miss. I don’t understand. Though I suggest you change out of that silly outfit so that the viewers can enjoy a nice, clean fight without having to blush.”

Whoa, he just destroyed the girl! Even after he was the one that lured her on that path.

“Urk! B-But... then what was the point of all this? Waaaaah!” She started bawling. I really couldn’t blame her. “I’m going home!”

With that, Selphie ran off. Then, after she got to the edge of the pier... she leapt right off of it!

“Excuse me?!”

“Bawk! Is she gonna die, bawk?!”

“Whaaaat?!”

“Oh no!”

We looked down from the pier to find that Selphie had mounted something like a broom and was riding it through the sky.

Ooh, very witchy. Cool that she’s safe and all, but are we gonna be able to get her back?

“Whoa! Uh, wow, she actually left,” I said.

“Selphie’s gone, bawk.”

“What should we do?” Yano asked.

“Erm, I don’t think we can do anything.”

Do they get disqualified, or what?

“What’s the plan, Akabane?”

“I... I wouldn’t know. We can’t fight like this; the rules state that you must fight with your guild’s NPC.”

“We leveled her up so much too. That’s a shame.”

“But, well, since this battle involves parental supervision, I had a vague feeling

this could happen. I feel awful for what we've done to Selphie, though."

"Come now, sister. There's nothing to worry about," said the culprit himself. "Our guild may be disqualified, but you can participate as part of their guild. Your thoughts, Takashiro? I trust you don't mind."

"Well, we are kinda short on hands. If she wants to help, we could use her."

The teams were limited to five people and an NPC, and we could switch freely. Our guild was only four people, so we had room for one more. If we could get Akabane to fill the space, I'd be all for it. The double sword dancer setup was flexible and easy to combo with on the fly.

"Well, sister, you heard him. Our parents and I will be watching your fight from the sidelines."

"But won't our parents be angry that I'm fighting alongside Akira?"

"I admit, relations between our families have been less than amicable. But that doesn't mean that things need to continue being that way. You must follow your heart. I won't let them get in the way of your friendships. Now, leave them to me so that you may enjoy the event."

"Ryuutarou, I..."

Cool that he was being such a good guy, but I just didn't buy it! Especially not after seeing him half-naked all the time!

"I am off to find a place in the stands, then. Until next we meet."

Akabane's brother turned and left with their parents to find some seats.

"We should be off too, bawk. Good luck, Kokoru."

"Do your best, everyone!"

"Go get 'em, Kokoru! Cheep cheep!"

Seems like Kokoru's family was leaving too.

"Bye, Ren! We're going to grab some seats too!"

My parents also got off of the JS Peachy Thunder and followed everyone else.

Suddenly, Ms. Nakada's voice echoed all around us. "Everyone, we'll soon

begin the competitive guild mission's final battle royale! All parents who are here to watch, please head to the stands! Contestants, gather at your airships!"

She did *say she was doing a play-by-play, didn't she?*

"Akira's still not here, huh?"

"Reeen! I'm here, everyone! Sorry I'm late!"

I turned around at the sound of Akira's voice to see her running our way. She was wearing her school uniform, and tagging along behind her was a young man in a suit.

Good timing! Is that guy her guardian? He looks kinda young, though. Her brother, maybe?

Wearing her usual smile, Akira waved.

"You're rather tardy. The rest of us have been here for some time."

"Oh, uh, Nozomi? What's going on?"

"Well, some stuff happened, and now Akabane's on our team for the day."

"Um, okay."

"At least, that's what we decided. Are they gonna let us do that, though? We should go ask—"

I was interrupted by another announcement from Ms. Nakada.

"Hm? Um, so we've just been informed that Nozomi Akabane of True Form is requesting permission to fight with Hell's Crafters. Well, consider yourself permitted! The battle royale rules can be found in the system menu, but each player will be automatically placed in the team of whatever airship they're in at the very start. Anyway, you have ten minutes before the battle begins! Players, stand by on your airships!"

Oh, did Akabane's brother let her know?

Despite his proclivities, he was at least considerate.

Akira shrugged. "Well, there you have it. Let's get on the airship and get ready, then! Arima, you go on over to the stands, okay?"

“Yes, milady,” the young man replied reverently.

He was definitely some sort of guardian, but not quite her brother, it seemed. Maybe someone who worked for her family?

“Milady,” though? Akira really is a big deal. Should she be gaming every day with someone like me?

“Who’s he?”

“That’s Arima. Ever since my granddad’s generation, his family’s been working in our household.”

“Are you her school friends? Thank you for all you’ve done for her. Good luck in your competition today.”

“Oh, heya. Thank *you*, man.”

Even toward us, he offered a warm smile and a polite bow.

Urgh. This is too much for me. It feels weird!

“Everyone at home was too busy to come today, so they sent Arima with me.”

“Huh.”

“Are you sure about this, milady? Is that not Nozomi Akabane among your group?”

“A mere coincidence,” Akabane said. “There’s nothing wrong with forgetting the real world and enjoying our game, is there?”

“Of course not. If she doesn’t mind, then it is of no concern to me.”

“I definitely don’t mind. Don’t worry about me, Arima.”

“Understood. Well, I suppose I shall head to the stands, then. I pray for your victory. The master of the house has ordered me to watch all of your exploits in battle to the very last.”

“Thanks. You might not care about games, but try to have fun, if you can.”

“Gladly. I look forward to it.”

Arima offered one last polite bow before leaving.

“Welp, we’re outta here,” Kataoka said. “Later.”

“We won’t hold back. Let us fight with all our might.”

“Lady Nozomi! I may be on an enemy team today, but say the word and I’ll turn on ’em! Just order me around any time.”

“Again, don’t just announce your betrayal in front of me. We should be going.”

Kataoka and Peater left, leaving only our guild’s team.

Akira let out a sigh. “As you can see, my family didn’t come; they sent Arima instead. If anything happens, he’s gonna tell my dad. So I gotta fight carefully, okay?”

“Can’t be seen in your sword dancer gear, then?”

“Definitely not.”

“All right. Looking back, I guess it’s my fault for pushing you to choose sword dancer. I never thought it’d turn out like this. Sorry for only thinking about stats.”

“Huh? You don’t have to apologize. I made the choice myself, and I like the sword dancer style anyway. But just for today, we’re gonna mix things up!” She flipped open her Mimic Fan. “We can make it through with this. Thanks, everyone.”

That’s right! The Mimic Fan should really help us out here.

“What a bother that must be. One’s in-game appearance is nothing to be strict about. That’s just going straight into ‘stuffy’ territory.”

“Pssh. You just don’t stand out because you have Ryuutarou in your family.”

“Actually, Akira, he’s wearing normal clothes today.”

“What?! That must have been a shocker.”

“Yeah, for real.”

“It was! Can you believe that gross perv is actually hot?!”

“It’s true.”

“I’ll pass, though. I knew him in real life before I saw him like *that*. The first

time I met him in-game, I could hardly believe what I was seeing!”

“Fair. If you knew the real guy at first, you’d be doing way more than a double take.”

“Oh! But if Ryuutarou’s wearing normal clothes, what about Selphie? Is the poor girl now the only person wearing a mask?”

I nodded gravely. “Yeah. Ryuutarou pretended not to know her, and she got so mad that she went home.”

“Yep. I think she said she was going back to her village.”

“Then they were disqualified because they can’t fight without their NPC.”

“Wooow, so that’s why Nozomi’s here! Poor Selphie, though.”

“Yes. Now we must win, not just for ourselves, but for our fallen comrade, Selphie!”

“Well, she didn’t really ‘fall.’ And I’d really rather you not put the weight of Selphie on our backs.”

“Yeah, bawk. It’s your weirdo brother’s fault anyway, bawk.” Kokoru’s logic was irrefutable.

“Three minutes until the battle royale begins! Players, stand by on your airships!”

We heard another announcement from Ms. Nakada.

“Hurry and climb aboard, everyone! My skills are dying to be put to the test! Mwahaha!” Maeda’s eyes shone as she beckoned us onto the ship.

Thus, our crew boarded the JS Peachy Thunder.

“Attention! It is time to begin the competitive guild mission’s airship battle royale! Ready... Set... Go!”

All right! Let’s do this thing!

Chapter 7: Who Doxxes Themselves during an Airship Battle?!

At Ms. Nakada's signal, the world before our eyes warped. In the next instant, we were teleported into the sky above the island. The other guilds' airships were also transported so that we were all in battle-ready positions.

I surveyed the area to see that a barrier had been erected around the island, marking this as the range of our battlefield.

Aboard the JS Peachy Thunder, we all waited in the wheelhouse. If we were anywhere else, we'd fall and die when Maeda inevitably activated the nitro. In that case, I would be really worried about our points.

As I recalled, defeating players yielded one point, while defeating hero candidates like Kokoru yielded five. If you or your NPC were defeated, you would lose the respective amount of points.

At the end of the time limit, the four guilds with the most points would proceed to the finals.

Since NPCs were the biggest source of points, they would be the first ones targeted. We wanted to conserve Kokoru's power even when others gunned for him to make sure people didn't realize he was actually weak.

We also only had six monsters that he could summon with Golden Sweets. One of those was our trump card, the Deadly King. But each summon was a onetime merc contract, so we couldn't use them flippantly.

This battle royale wouldn't have any monsters for us to recruit, so we had no way to refill. In short, we needed to keep our six monsters all the way through to the end.

The final battle would probably rely more on NPC strength than this one, so in this round, we would protect Kokoru and carry him to the finals.

We also had to maneuver in a way that Akira's sword dancer gear wouldn't be

seen by the guy who had come with her. Arima, was it? Akira herself would probably be careful enough, but she would have to keep Mimic Fan up at all times.

I felt a bit guilty for pushing sword dancer on her, but my best friend couldn't just get pulled out of school for something this lame. We had to protect her!

"We can start now, right? Right?! I'm going to go ahead and pull the lever! That okay with you?!" Maeda's eyes were now ablaze with excitement.

I kinda wanted to watch what the other guilds do first, but Maeda's acting like a dog waiting for a treat. Guess all we can do is just go, then!

"Yeah. Go for it!"

"Excellent! Here goes!"

Clunk!

Maeda yanked a lever on the wheel, activating the nitro!

The JS Peachy Thunder began its wild charge through the sky, aiming for a nearby enemy ship.

All of us had expected her to activate the nitro at the very start, so we had already braced ourselves against the handrailings for impact. As a result, nobody fell.

"There's a ship ahead! I'm not certain which guild it is, but they're about to taste my drill!"

"We're already charging at people?! Isn't that supposed to be a self-destructive, last-resort sort of tactic?!" Akabane was clearly shocked.

She had originally planned to be on a different team, so she didn't know about the special equipment we'd gotten for the JS Peachy Thunder.

"The drill's the only weapon we've got! All our other slots are nitro!"

"Huh? You don't have any cannons or anything?!"

"We used our money on other stuff. This was all we could get!"

"Nothing to worry about! We're optimized for speed and power! Mweheehee... Ahahaha!"

“Well, *I’m* worried! You really do change personalities when you’re behind the wheel!”

Akabane was rather perturbed, but Maeda clearly didn’t care one bit.

“I’m going to hit them! Brace for impact! Chaaarge!”

Craaaaash!

The JS Peachy Thunder slammed right into the belly of the enemy ship at high speed, literally running them through with the Golden Drill.

Naturally, our targets took a hunk of damage, but our nitro-infused drill attack also put *us* through some pain.

```
Dealt 250 damage to Ren!
Dealt 250 damage to Akira!
Dealt 250 damage to Kotomi!
Dealt 250 damage to Yuuna!
Dealt 250 damage to Nozomi!
Dealt 250 damage to Kokoru!
```

Rngh! So the impact deals damage to us too.

Our HP was already in the 2,000 range, though, so it wasn’t much more than a scratch.

“Bawk... Cheep, cheep. Cheep, bawk...”

Whoa! Kokoru’s cheep-cheeping!

Unlike the rest of us, Kokoru didn’t have much HP. If we kept this up, he’d be dead before long.

“Are you okay?!” Akira rushed over to heal him.

“Phew. Thanks, bawk! That really hurt!”

“If one blow doesn’t kill him, we can just heal him over and over while I keep charging!”

“Cheeeep?! Bawk!”

“What the heck, Kotomi?! This isn’t Sparta!”

“I’m not doing anything more reckless than Takashiro would do.”

“Urk! I dunno how to defend myself!”

“Well, you kinda can’t. But it’s okay; I’ll make sure to heal him.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can heal him too. We’re pretty overloaded with healing options in this party, anyway.”

Fair. Everyone besides Kokoru and I can heal.

“Nothing to concern myself with, then. Time for another charge!”

Maeda turned the wheel to prepare for a second nitro attack, but a single person emerged from the other ship’s wheelhouse.

From the deck of their ship, she yelled with incredible rage, “Heeeey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Oh, crap! It’s Homura! We’ve really done it now.

We had promised her an alliance, and here we were battering them with friendly fire only seconds in. The hole in their ship was so big, it looked like it would break in two.

I let out a groan. Homura was seriously pissed.

“Get out here right now! You promised to be our ally!”

In a flash, I went out onto the deck to apologize. “Sorry, sorry, sorry! We didn’t realize it was you! We didn’t mean to break the alliance at all, honest! It was seriously an unfortunate accident! I’m so sorry!”

“You’d better mean that! Next time, this thing’s actually gonna snap in half!”

“We won’t do it again, I swear! Sorry again!”

I bowed over and over again, feeling absolutely terrible. Akira and the others came on deck as well, apologizing with me.

“Sorry, Takashiro. This is my fault.” Having removed herself from the wheel and returned to her senses, Maeda now looked guilty.

“You didn’t know. Besides, I told you to do it. We’ll be more careful next time.”

We should’ve seen Homura’s airship once before, but it was easy to overlook in the flurry of airships we’d found ourselves in.

Plus, we’d gotten a little overeager at the start too. The nitro speed had made it even harder to make hers out.

“Thanks. We won’t mess up again.”

“Bawk. You’re a nice guy, Ren.”

“Nah, bro. Sometimes, I get too excited and make problems for other people. Gotta give and take, y’know?”

After all, I *was* a guild master. Tentatively, anyway.

“Anyway, sorry, Homura! Let’s go co-op from here on out!”

“Uh-huh. Make sure you pull your weight!”

Nice. Back to the wheelhouse we go!

Just as I thought that, a series of loud sounds assaulted my ears.

Boom! Boom! Bwoosh!

Someone had fired off a long-range cannon attack. It was a direct hit on our deck, and the resulting explosion sent flames blooming all over our ship.

We were tossed aside by the explosion, smashing us against the outside wall of the wheelhouse.

```
Dealt 310 damage to Ren!
Dealt 310 damage to Akira!
Dealt 310 damage to Kotomi!
Dealt 310 damage to Yuuna!
Dealt 310 damage to Nozomi!
Dealt 310 damage to Kokoru!
```

Damage logs came up for all of us.

“Oww! Everyone o—”

“Baaaaawk?!” Kokoru screamed before I could finish asking.

He hadn’t been stopped by the wall, and instead was being blown off the deck.

Is he gonna fall?!

“Kokoru!”

Akira had been blown near him, so she extended a hand to try to catch him. She was able to grab a wing, but he was so heavy that he put her off-balance, threatening to take both of them down.

“Ren, hurry and help me!”

“Gotcha! Nice catch, girl!”

I sprinted over to Akira's side, put my hands around her from behind, and pulled. We were really close together, and she was unbelievably soft, but it wasn't like I was trying to cop a feel! It had to be done!

However, I wasn't given the chance to savor the moment.

Bwoooosh!

Another nearby cannon fired!

`Dealt 310 damage to Ren!`

`Dealt 310 damage to Akira!`

`Dealt 310 damage to Kokoru!`

This time, only the three of us got hit, but the impact was enough to actually send us off the ship.

"Gaaaaah!"

"Eeeeek?!"

"Baaaaawk!"

With no way to save ourselves, we were on a skydiving trip without a parachute! The wind pressure was awful! The sensation of falling was awful! My body was trembling!

Free-fall rides at amusement parks can't hold a candle to this! The realism of this game is amazing!

"Aaaaah!"

Even I had to scream in fear.

"Woooow, the sky's so pretty! This is so inteeense!"

My best friend, on the other hand, was having a blast.

Look at you, keeping your cool!

“It’s so fun! Almost like skydiving! Even if I wanted to do this in real life, I wouldn’t get to!”

“Well I don’t wanna do it here *or* in real life!”

“We can’t stop now. Might as well just enjoy it, right? And look at the view! I wonder if I can get some screenshots.”

Akira tried taking some pics midair. She was hungry for new sights all the time.

That’s our girl!

Still, this conversation with Akira led to a flash of inspiration.

We can’t help it? That might not be so true, after all!

“Hey, Kokoru! Try calling the Frost Eagle!”

That was one of the monsters we had recruited using Golden Sweets. It was a level 77 normal mob. Very weak compared to the Deadly King, but it could fly.

The Frost Eagle was also capable of carrying players on its back. We had recruited it just in case we’d need a flying monster.

Short notice, but it might be able to help us out!

However...

“Momma, Daddy... forgive me for leaving this world before you...”

Kokoru’s body started to flicker!

“What?! Hey, Kokoru? Kokoruuu!”

I checked again to find that there was more to the damage log than I had first seen.

Dealt 310 damage to Kokoru!

Kokoru is exhausted...

He died from the cannon damage! That low HP was his downfall.

Kokoru disappeared, and we received a system notification.

Kokoru Sanders of Hell’s Crafters has fallen.

Your guild has lost 5 Battle Points.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently -5.

Your rank is 48 / 48.

Argh, last place?!

It wasn’t just placed in the log window either; my shame was visible in large font at the edge of my field of vision too. Kind of like in racing games, where it shows your current place at the corner of the screen. I figured it was convenient enough, but seeing that we were coming in last made me a little impatient.

“Aaargh, we can’t do anything!”

“Ahahaha! Just let it be! If we just rally our strength, we can still do it.”

Akira was really having fun.

How do you enjoy this sheer terror?!

Before long, my vision turned black.

Ren Takashiro of Hell’s Crafters has fallen.

Your guild has lost 1 Battle Point.

Akira Aoyagi of Hell’s Crafters has fallen.

Your guild has lost 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently -7.

Your rank is 48 / 48.

Yep, and we’re out of the park! Couldn’t do anything about it.

In my darkened field of vision, the death logs came up. In the next instant, the world changed entirely, and I was staring right at Maeda and Yano.

“Ooh! Did I respawn?”

Akira and Kokoru were next to me. All three of us were back on the deck of the JS Peachy Thunder.

There you have it, then. When you die, you respawn back on your airship. What happens if the ship itself gets destroyed, I wonder? Not that I wanna find out.

"Huh. So you come back here if you die."

"Bawk, that was awful. Chickens can't fly, bawk."

Kokoru hadn't died from the fall, anyway. He had died from the cannon damage. From afar, however, it would've seemed like he'd died from fall damage. Some lucky camouflage for us.

Now we had -7 points. We had to rally the troops; there was still time!

"We're already in last place!" Yano whined.

"That won't be a problem if we turn things around now. The battle has only just begun!"

"Akabane's right. If we just sit around, people will keep hitting us. Let's get away for now."

Cannons were still firing at Homura's ship and the JS Peachy Thunder—not just from one enemy ship, but several.

"Understood. Let's hurry!" Maeda ran into the wheelhouse.

Despite all the damage it had sustained, Homura's ship was still mobile as well. They kept on going, trying to open some distance between us.

"Everyone, get in! I'm gonna nitro us out of here!"

Obeying Maeda's order, we headed inside. If we were on deck when she pulled the nitro, we'd be knocked out of the park again.

"Here goes!"

Clunk!

At the same time, something huge came flying toward the bow. It looked to be a humongous chain with a pointy, metallic end.

That's an anchor!

It wrapped around the JS Peachy Thunder, causing the ship to lurch. Though

we'd activated nitro, we weren't going anywhere.

"Ugh! We can't move!"

The anchor can stop our dash, huh?

I looked at the other end to see a big, heavy fighter ship coming between us and the ships who were firing their cannons at us. It had thrown anchors in all directions, stopping multiple ships.

Their ship was large enough that it had stopped our vigorous nitro charge. Ours was a lightweight, high-speed model, so it didn't have the strength to tug the large one.

Something about this seems familiar...

"This reminds me of that airship event on our first day," Akira commented.

"Oh! Yeah, that's it!"

Back then, enemies had invaded our ship with an anchor, just like this. After we had defeated the invading rare monster, he'd dropped Akira's beloved Skyfall.

I took a good look at the anchor. "So basically, it's an offensive part you throw at an enemy ship to stop them in their tracks before you come in to smack them down in person?"

"Must be for people who wanna skip the whole airship battle part and fight at close range."

"That part is called the Assault Anchor. It's used exactly as you surmised," Akabane chimed in.

"I see. Well, I have a feeling I know who's at the other end."

Akira laughed awkwardly. "Ahaha... Yep."

"Our resident PvP lover?" Yano suggested.

"Bingo! Since each guild has the same amount of personnel, throwing anchors in every direction isn't gonna let Yukino use numbers to her advantage. But she's still doing it."

Without the ability to outnumber anyone, turning each ship she targeted into

a battlefield wouldn't necessarily end in her favor.

"The fact that she's doing that means she *wants* to—so it's gotta be someone who loves PvP. And her guild is all about that stuff! So yeah, it's definitely Yukino's doing."

Her guild was a gaggle of PvP-lovers, after all.

"Hehe. That's Snow for you!" Akabane said with a grin.

Huh? Wait, uh, I don't think you should bring that up right now!

"What the—?! Nozomi, you know Yukino's name from EF? That must mean you played it too!"

"Um, err..."

Aww, man! Akira latched right on to it! Akabane is actually super scatterbrained!

At this point, she might have already been outed as Scarlet. However, they had been playing nice recently, so it might not have been *that* big of a deal.

"Erm, let's talk about it later! We need to focus on the fight right now!"

I backed her up. "You're right. Good idea!"

Akira didn't seem to have any complaints, as she said nothing.

"Maeda! Turn around and charge right into their ship! If we can't run away because of the anchor, then we'll go straight to 'em! A big brawl like this is a good chance to farm some points!"

"Got it! Let's go!"

Maeda spun the wheel, and JS Peachy Thunder turned to face the behemoth of a ship.

"Charge!"

Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

She pulled three of the nitro levers in quick succession. With the speed of three nitros, JS Peachy Thunder surged toward its mark. The Golden Drill on our bow made a direct hit.

Dealt 420 damage to Ren!

Dealt 420 damage to Akira!

Dealt 420 damage to Kotomi!

Dealt 420 damage to Yuuna!

Dealt 420 damage to Nozomi!

Dealt 420 damage to Kokoru!

More recoil from the drill attack! It was even more this time because of the three nitros.

“Bawk! Aah, I’m seeing stars...”

Kokoru was in trouble again, but he hung on by a thread. As long as he didn’t die, though, we would come out ahead. Akira and the others started rattling off healing magic.

Soon, we were fully healed!

More system notifications popped up.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently -5.

Your rank is 48 / 48.

Ooh. I dunno if that attack knocked people off their ships or if it just finished them off, but we got some points!

“Awesome! Let’s keep it up! Invade their ship!”

“Aw, yeah. Time for some combat. Now I can whip this out!” Akira raised her Mimic Fan.

Until now, we had kept the fight to airship-versus-airship, so she was still wearing her school uniform. It didn’t seem like her current defense was affecting the damage she received from airship attacks, so that was nice.

When it came to face-to-face fights with other players, however, defense from her equipment was actually important. If she didn’t change into real gear, she couldn’t fight. As we all knew, though, sword dancer’s real gear showed too much skin.

Less fabric meaning more defense was truly a concept that only worked in video games. For Akira, things would be even worse if Arima saw her wearing it, so she had to fight while maintaining Mimic.

Each guild’s fights could be seen from monitors placed in and around the audience stands. We didn’t know what angle they were seeing this from, but it was best to assume that Akira being seen in her usual garb was a definite “no.”

If they couldn’t directly monitor us, though, they wouldn’t know what was going on.

“Akira, turn into Kokoru!” I said.

Anyone would’ve been fine if it was just about tricking Arima, but leaving it at that would have been a waste of Mimic. By having Akira Mimic Kokoru and go out for him, though, we could preserve his image. In other words, we could continue to hide the fact that his defense was paper-thin.

We had to keep Kokoru from using up his allied monsters, anyway.

“Okay. Might as well be some good bait!”

Akira lightly thwacked Kokoru with the Mimic Fan. This had recorded him on the fan, as the item specifically transformed the user into the enemy they had last attacked with it. The effect lasted 600 seconds, so it was pretty darn long. If the effect was about to run out, we could just reapply it too.

“Ren, what should I do, bawk?”

“Hide here so nobody sees you. We’ve gotta conserve your power! If anyone

finds you and they try to attack, call the Frost Eagle and escape into the sky. You dying is the biggest point loss we can take, so it's safety first for you."

"Gotcha. Bawk."

NPCs yielded five times the amount of points that players did, so no doubt our enemies would prioritize him. The key to this battle was protecting our own NPC while defeating the ones from other guilds.

"Here I go! It's Kokoru time!" Accompanied by a puff of smoke, Akira transformed into Kokoru. "Equipment Set A!" Akira called out, changing her equipment.

For this battle, we had procured another Equip Ring for her.

Equip Ring

Type: Accessory

Level: 10

Effect: Allows the user to change equipment quickly through speech.

[Same effect as the talent Quick Change]

The skill would allow you to change clothes on the fly. I loved using one because it made things way smoother when I broke my weapon and crafted a new one.

Akira changed her weapons to two swords, signaling that she had donned the whole sword dancer getup. She still looked like Kokoru, so the weapons were the only visible change.

If the Mimic effect ran out, or if she was in danger for any other reason, she just had to change back into her uniform. Doing it from the system menu would be too slow, but using the Equip Ring would be just fine.

This Equip Ring was essentially insurance to give us all peace of mind. It had been a relatively hefty expense, but that was a small price to pay for my best friend's happiness.

Maeda and Yano had also said we'd be better off having it anyway.

"Okay. Let's do this, everyone!"

"Woo-hoo! Time to invade!"

"I'll support you!"

"Now *this* is what I call bein' a sky pirate!"

"This is very rude, but kind of fun!"

"Good luck, bawk!"

We left Kokoru in the wheelhouse and leapt out to the deck. Then, we boarded the deck of the ship connected to us by the Assault Anchor.

There were launchers for the Assault Anchors placed on the deck with HP bars visible above them.

"Hm? What's with the HP bars?"

"If you attack those and bring their HP to zero, it rescues your ship from the anchor."

"You sure know a lot about these, Akabane."

"Yes. We were planning to use one ourselves, so we procured one in advance. In the end, I guess it turned out to be useless."

"Yeah, since Selphie went home."

"Right. It's in my inventory right now, so if you should need it, you're free to borrow it."

"Ooh. Maybe I'll do just that!"

We *did* still have one free slot. But for now, we had to focus on direct combat.

"Heheheh! Some nerve you have, coming to face us! That's Ren for ya!"

As expected, Yukino emerged.

"Hey, Yukino! I thought that might be you."

"Oh? Good thinkin'."

"Well, I mean, who throws Assault Anchors in all directions when it wouldn't

even give them an advantage? It had to be someone who loves face-to-face combat."

"Heh, you're right! Fighting under special conditions like this is pretty fun. And now, we can enjoy a fresh fight with a different level restriction! C'mon, Ren. Let's dance!" Yukino excitedly brandished her dual axes.

A cute-looking wolf Beastman came out and stood next to Yukino. "Leave Kokoru to me!"

Ooh, it's Mikott Corpul. She's level... 78! Not bad at all.

She was one of the two most popular picks at the draft meet, along with Selphie. Despite how, uh, Selphie had turned out.

Really, no matter how much attention a newbie might get at the draft, you never knew how they would turn out once they went pro. There were a lot of comparisons to draw to real-life baseball here.

This one had actually grown up well under Yukino's supervision, though.

"Level 100. Good job, Kokoru! Now, show me just how much stronger you got!"

"Hehehe. Don't cry to me when you regret it, bawk!" Akira-Kokoru whipped out her dual swords.

Dang, she's imitating his voice pretty well, considering Mimic didn't do it for her. Did she practice for this?

"You're quite confident. Maybe you've really matured," Mikott said, readying her massive, two-handed axe. It was even longer than she was tall.

That confidence is solely because it's Akira, though.

Still, it was incredible that Mikott could swing that thing around with her tiny, slender build. Yukino also favored axes, although hers were one-handed. They were a good match.

At the tournament, Yukino had wielded two axes with the same designs. But this time, they were different. The right one especially was a translucent, emerald green. Very pleasant to look at. It seemed like a pretty rare weapon.

Well, maybe that was a dangerous assumption. There are plenty of MMO weapons out there that have flashy designs but shoddy stats—essentially, polished garbage. In fact, it's probably rarer for good equipment to also look good.

Equipment with good stats is usually ugly or otherwise lame. Easy-to-obtain equipment circulates much more, so it's common for everyone to strut around the world with ugly equipment.

Not to talk about other games too much, but I had once put on this ridiculously ugly but very useful turban that made my attacks way faster. At that point in time, just about every player in the world had worn full body armor and a turban. Looks couldn't beat usefulness, though. Thus, everyone had worn the turban, despite how ridiculous it looked!

Akira had complained about it, but seeing as she had been a big, hunky beastman at the time, the turban had actually complemented her appearance.

I had told her just as much, of course. "It actually works on you, so you don't get to complain."

But yeah, MMOs like that are common. This time, though, I was up against Yukino. She would never go into battle with a weapon that looked flashy without the stats to match. No doubt she had picked top-tier weapons for this battle. I couldn't underestimate her!

"Let's go, Kokoru!"

"I'm already on it, bawk!"

Akira-Kokoru charged toward Mikott. There was a loud clang of metal against metal as her swords met the two-handed axe. While Akira had gotten a head start, Mikott had guarded it well. There wasn't even a bit of guard break either.

Two-handed weapons can't match up to shields, but they have good guarding capabilities. Meanwhile, one-handed weapons have low guard break. It's incredibly difficult for a single attack from a one-handed weapon to break through a two-handed weapon's guard.

"Akira ain't around, huh? Hey, get back to the wheelhouse and keep on throwing out anchors!"

“Gotcha, boss!” One of Yukino’s guildies fell back and returned to the wheelhouse.

“Heheheh. I’ll help even out the numbers, Ren! Hope you’re ready!”

“Thanks! I’m not gonna hold back either, y’know!”

“Of course! Here goes: Shadow Slave!”

There’s her cloning move! Dual-wielding and *clones. Truly, magic knights are blessed.*

Last time, Yukino had only spawned two clones because of the level restriction. Now, she had *three*. If I didn’t get rid of these clones and hit her with an ultimate, I had no chance of winning. But just like last time, I still had a plan!

This is gonna be awesome!

As the king of the Bummers, defeating a top class like magic knight was my whole reason for being.

“Haaaaah!”

Yukino threw her left axe at me. It was a Tomahawk-style art!

The axe whizzed through the air, prompting me to guard with my Canesword.

Yukino attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 12 damage.

It resulted in some guard break, but this was paltry.

However, Yukino had already taken this into consideration. The tomahawk throw was only a feint; as she threw it, she also began to sprint forward, charging at me just after I finished guarding.

Once she was within striking distance, she came at me with a high kick!

I can guard this if I keep up my guard stance, but...

“Haaah!”

Instead, I boldly went for my one and only, body-striking normal attack: the simple shoulder charge!

Yukino attacked.

Dealt 45 damage to Ren!

Ren attacked.

A Yukino clone faded.

Yukino's attack was a clean hit, while she evaded mine with a clone. But that worked just fine for me!

"Rgh! My clone! Oh, so striking techniques ignore evasion?!"

"That's right!"

With my complete lack of DEX, normal attacks would have no chance of hitting Yukino with her already-high AGI.

Evading an attack wouldn't consume a clone, but with my shoulder charge—which ignored evasion—it was a different story. As long as I could approach her, just attacking once would be guaranteed to remove a clone!

"And my damage is lower than before too!"

"I threw all my points into VIT!"

Catching her axe after it came back to her, Yukino chucked it again. I went with another shoulder charge to match it.

Yukino attacked.

Dealt 67 damage to Ren!

Ren attacked.

A Yukino clone faded.

"That's a pretty nifty combo! Only you could find a use for strikes, eh? You're always full of surprises!"

"Thanks!"

Yukino followed through with the axe-swinging animation, using the momentum to transition into a roundhouse kick.

Fearlessly, I went for another shoulder charge! That was all I could do, anyway.

Yukino attacked.

Dealt 62 damage to Ren!

Ren attacked.

A Yukino clone faded.

“You’re a lot stronger than last time, but we’re just gettin’ started! Shadow Slave!”

More clones! They were annoying to deal with, and with her Breath of Ares talent, she could pump them out forever.

“You won’t get through my guard that easily!”

“Maybe not!”

It wouldn’t be easy to break through clone after clone and still find an opportunity to hit her with an ultimate in one-on-one combat.

I could have Akira and the others take down clones while I went for an opening, but she and Mikott were still locked in a duel. Maeda, Yano, and Akabane were stuck in a three-on-three fight with some of Yukino’s other guild members.

It was up to me to do something about this.

Yukino hopped back, putting some distance between us. “Ren, I’m about to show you my favorite ultimate in this whole game. Get ready! Last time, I couldn’t use it because of the level restriction.”

I certainly was excited. If Yukino loved it, then no doubt it would be amazing.

I watched as Yukino raised her axe high, high into the air, poised to throw. Her body began to glow, enveloped in the ultimate move aura.

“Infinite Reversal!”

Her brightly shining axe flew out of her hands.

“What the heck?!”

That’s her favorite ultimate?! The effect is flashy, yeah, but isn’t the throw just the same as the one from before?

I could evade it if I wanted, but I decided to go ahead and block it. Intentionally taking this guard break would allow me to build up AP. I hadn’t brought my Parry Ring today, so I wouldn’t gain AP if I fully guarded an attack. I needed to take a little guard break damage, which was why I hadn’t whipped out the Fanatic’s Staff.

Even just one point of damage was fine; that would be judged as taking a hit, and I would get a bit of AP. AP gain was unrelated to damage quantity, so the ideal situation would be a lot of attacks that only dealt one damage each. Things weren’t going too badly so far.

I occasionally glanced over at the Parry Ring’s true owner, Yano, who had it equipped as she guarded enemy attacks. She could equip shields thanks to her talent Master’s Scroll (Shield), so she had better synergy with the Parry Ring than I did right now.

“And... guard!”

With my damascus cane, I guarded against the glowing tomahawks.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Nice, nice! Hey, wait a sec...

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Ooh! So, this one doesn't go back to her hand after one hit!

Stopped by my Canesword, it continued to spin and spin, hitting repeatedly!

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

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Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 17 damage.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

It was a great source of AP, but it still wasn't stopping. My vision was filled from top to bottom with guard-break log messages!

This is terrifying! Does it just keep going until you die?!

My HP was in pretty bad shape; I only had a little over 1,000 left. My max HP was over 2,000, so it was already halfway gone!

"Whoooa?! Hey, buddy, hold on!"

I was being forced backward by the axe. With no other choice, I jumped to the side to evade. When I did, the axe changed directions and again started following me.

"It's a guided missile?!"

The axe wasn't *that* fast; if I wanted to evade, I could. But it just never stopped coming. Even if I dodged, it would correct its path and continue coming at me.

"So? Cool, right?! That thing'll just keep on chasing you, no matter what! Hence the 'Infinite' part!"

"I see! Yeah, uh, it's a pretty cool ultimate!"

There had to be *some* way for it to end, whether the effect ran out or whatever else. Unfortunately, it was kinda hard to figure it out right now!

Is defeating Yukino my only option?!

"Heh! I'm not just gonna sit back and watch either!"

To make things worse, Yukino was coming in to attack. She was aiming for the very spot I would land after I jumped to evade Infinite Reversal.

“Try blocking this!”

She swung her emerald-green axe for the first time. Still, my guard was at the ready.

The axe smashed against my Canesword with a loud *clang*.

“Wha?!”

But my guard was smacked away with ease by some overwhelming force.

Just being touched by the thing knocks you away?

“This axe is called Boreas! It’s a rare weapon with a knockback effect!”

“That’s very—whoooa!”

My body, blown away by her attack, connected with the Infinite Reversal in midair. Yukino had calculated the angle just so she could knock me into it. Her love of PvP knew no bounds!

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Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
Dealt 117 damage to Ren!
Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
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Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
Dealt 117 damage to Ren!
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It was a direct hit on my back, with damage to match.

“Gaaah!”

I needed a way to evade, but Yukino was preparing for another attack.

“I’ve got you now, Ren!”

I have to guard, now!

Once again, I was blown away by the knockback. As I had already been teetering at the edge of the deck, I was thrown off and into the sky!

“Knocking people back with every blow has its advantages and disadvantages, but here, I can put it to good use! Gotta choose the optimal equipment for each battlefield—that’s the PvP way!”

So *that* was what she had been aiming for. Yukino seemed very satisfied.

“Aaah! Again?!”

Am I seriously gonna fall off and die a second time?! No, I still have a chance!

“Windmill!”

My flaming uppercut art launched me into the air, despite my lack of footing. A feat only possible within a video game, but I was still glad to have it!

Leaping up high, I just barely managed to cling to the chain of the Assault Anchor that linked our ships together.

“Chirp! Ren, I help! I help!”

Draco flew over and desperately tried to lift me up. Thanks to him—even if it was just a little—I was able to climb onto the chain.

“Whew. That was a close one!”

This fighter had just barely managed to avoid getting thrown out of the ring!

“Thanks, Draco!” I said, standing up.

The Assault Anchor was pretty unsteady, but I could hardly complain; it had kept me from falling to my death just now.

Due to the short distance between our ships, the chain hung low in the middle. Any higher, and I might not have been able to grasp it.

It seemed like Infinite Reversal wasn’t chasing me anymore, though I wasn’t sure whether I had been blown out of range or its effect duration had run out. There was no way it could go on attacking forever without *some* kind of restriction.

Yukino leaned over the side of her deck. “Heh! You’re pretty stubborn, Ren.”

Is she gonna come after me?! Well, I've got a plan, so it doesn't matter what she does.

"Final Strike! Enervating Circle!"

I let off a solitary Final Strike. The circle that followed wasn't for the sake of reducing my MP to 1, so I made it rather small. Now I could go at her any time!

To Yukino, I must have seemed like I was preparing to retaliate. "A counterattack, eh? It's too late for that!" She walked over to the base of the Assault Anchor, stopping at the launch platform. "Haaah! Ultimate move: Shooting Star Rush!"

Facing the platform, she unleashed an intense, luminous kick! It seemed to be one of those attacks meant to overwhelm the opponent with the amount of hits, as it looked to be divided into a hail of high-speed kicks.

There were undoubtedly plenty of guys out there who would've loved to get kicked by her, though. Half of her guild, Mystic Arts, were made up of her groupies. Clearly, she had plenty of fans with her.

Yukino's ultimate wasn't just flashy; it was also plenty powerful, bringing the anchor's HP down to zero in no time.

"I get it!"

She was here to destroy my footing. The launch platform burst open, causing the chain to lose its support and fall. I was thrown off by the impact.

"Now, you're really out of the ring!" Yukino shouted, guarding the edge of the deck.

If I used Windmill to get back up there and grab the edge, she'd just smack me back down with the knockback on that axe. At this point, I had two choices: die by ring-out, or get wrecked by her attacks.

At least, that was what she would expect.

"I say this makes us even for what you did at the tournament. The point I'll get from crushin' you is special!"

"Nuh-uh! We're already in the negative!"

We can't afford to lose any more! You're not getting my points, woman!

It was time to shift to the offensive.

"Ultimate move!"

I unsheathed my Canesword and lobbed it high into the sky. Then, I used the air itself as a foothold to jump just as high!

Look at this nonsense! I can do anything I want! That's how it works in video games!

I intended to put my full arsenal to use in order to kill some giants!

At the apex of my arc, I boarded the hilt of my damascus sword.

Docking complete!

"Go! Descending Azure Dragon!"

Descending Azure Dragon sent me twice as high as Windmill. I was easily high enough to sail over Yukino's head and then some. Covered in the dragon's aura, I rapidly descended.

"A new ultimate?! Well, it won't work!"

Yukino braced herself. She was being protected by her Shadow Slave clones.

However, I flew way over her head.

"Huh? Dude, your aim sucks!" Yukino smirked, thinking that I had failed to control my ultimate.

I shot back a grin from overhead. "Not quite!"

"What?"

That's right! I haven't missed at all. I'm going right where I want to!

"Raaaagh! Gimme those five poooints!"

I swooped right down in the middle of the match between Mikott and Akira-Kokoru.

Pshooooow!

“Whoa! Eeeeep!”

Ren activated Descending Azure Dragon.

Dealt 5,735 damage to Mikott Corpul!

Ren has defeated Mikott Corpul.

You have defeated an enemy NPC.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 5 Battle Points.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently 0.

Your rank is 26 / 48.

Woo-hoo! Just as planned!

“Thanks for the points!”

“You were going for Mikott?! Dang it, Ren!”

“It’s way more efficient, y’know!”

There had been no need to take Yukino down; all that would’ve granted me was a single point at most. If I were to put it in baseball terms, it made more sense for me to let her take the walk and instead go for the five points all at once.

I wasn’t a born PvPer, after all. I was a born giant-killer! While I *did* like PvP, I had to keep my priorities straight—and right now, our goal was to win this thing!

I’d let the enemy have five intentional walks in a row for the sake of my team’s victory!

“Haha! I can never be too careful around you, Ren!”

“Bawk. In terms of ethics, he’s like the darkest of grays.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment!”

“Yeah, bawk! It’s like, ‘Good job, you idiot!’” Akira-Kokoru said, dancing to help recover my lost HP. She was *really* good at imitating Kokoru’s voice.

“Argh, they got me! I’m so mad!” Now revived, Mikott stomped in frustration.

Oh, yeah. The respawn point is your own airship, so she’s back already.

“That won’t be happening a second time! How about we sock you a good one too?” Mikott growled.

“Yeah. Then we’ll be even!”

Now that she knew what I was after, Yukino and her guild wouldn’t let me do that again so easily.

I had been hoping to quit while we were ahead and search for new prey, though.

“Better idea! How about I wipe you all out at once?!” Yukino got ready to unleash Infinite Reversal, but this time with her emerald-green axe, Boreas.

A guided missile with knockback that strong?! What’s gonna happen here? If we’re not careful, we might all get knocked off!

“Not on my watch!”

Nozomi attacked.

Dealt 92 damage to Yukino!

Nozomi attacked.

Dealt 86 damage to Yukino!

A voice accompanied by a slash came from behind Yukino, followed by damage logs. Akabane, having approached stealthily with Vanishing Whirl, had attacked Yukino.

Nice shot!

Her normal attack hit twice, probably due to the Peregrine Stone on her two-handed sword. She had the power of a thirsty follower on her side!

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently 1.

Your rank is 23 / 48.

Looks like Akabane took down someone on her own.

She had then ridden that momentum and set about attacking Yukino.

That’s Akira’s rival for you! Our Scarlet knows how to get the job done!

“Ngh! You’re just gonna get in my way?”

“Everyone, staying here any longer would be pointless. Let’s fall back and find our next foe!”

Akabane was right. Now that our strategy to ignore Yukino and kill Mikott was out in the open, we could end up getting beaten down by Yukino and end up with a net loss. Better we give up and secure our profits. Then, we could go find another guild who didn’t know our strategy. That was clearly the easiest way to farm points.

“I’ll act as bait! The Assault Anchor has been removed, so just return to the airship!”

Dang, she’s even gonna act as bait for us.

We’d give up a single point in the process, but the rest of us would safely be able to fall back.

“Got it. Thank you!”

Just to help her out, I threw out an Enervating Circle on my way out.

That ought to slow down the enemy.

“Okay, everyone. Let’s go!”

“Hold up!”

“Stop right there! I am your opponent now, Snow!”

“Urk!” Hearing that raised my blood pressure.

Girl, I get that you’re fired up and all, but you seriously can’t say stuff like that!

“Heh! All right, then, Scarlet! It’s been a while since we last fought!”

Yep! Of course Yukino had to go and expose her! Poor Akabane’s been trying to hide the fact that she’s Scarlet too! It’s all clear to me now—this girl really is an airhead!

“Oh! Err, wait a moment! Shh!”

It’s too late! Gah, and at a time like this too!

“WHAT?! Nozomi, you’re Scarlet?!” Akira-Kokoru shouted.

Naturally, she didn’t make the effort to imitate Kokoru’s voice this time. It was very clearly Akira’s voice.

Now two secrets are out! Darn it!

Yukino whipped her head toward Akira-Kokoru. “Hey, that was Akira’s voice. Akira, is that you? Did you change form?! Wait a sec, that’s Skyfall you’re holding! It really *is* Akira! That Kokoru’s a fake!”

“What?! That’s not Kokoru? Then where’s the real one?!”

“He must be on their ship. That’s the only place he could hide!”

Aaargh, they know everything now! We gotta get away ASAP!

“Nozomi, is it true?!”

“N-Now’s not the time to talk about that! Hurry up and return to the ship!”

“But—”

“Yukino! Let’s invade their ship and beat Kokoru up!”

“Yeah! This time, we’re gonna get him!” Yukino was clearly ready for another Boreas Infinite Reversal.

Oh no! We’re gonna fall off, then they’ll board the JS Peachy Thunder and kill Kokoru before we can come back. Our rank is gonna drop like crazy!

Suddenly, there were numerous voices from another direction.

“Joint Magic!”

We turned toward the sound.

“It’s Homura!”

Homura’s airship moved in close. Wizards lined the bow, activating their Joint Magic. They had also been victims of the Assault Anchor, so they had probably come to remove it from their ship.

“Heheheheh. Yukino, you’ll be a stepping-stone to our success! I’ll use your points to climb to victory!”

“Are you kiddin’ me?! Tch! They’re using Joint Magic! Everyone, retreat into the cabin!”

Yes! Her timing couldn’t have been better!

“Takashiro, take your guild and escape now!”

“Gotcha! Everyone, back to the ship!”

We all ran at full speed and slipped back onto the JS Peachy Thunder.

“I’m pulling away now!”

Maeda gripped the wheel.

“Grand Thunder!”

Kaboooom!

The Joint Magic ripped through the air, followed by the sound of thunder. We’d seen it before, but the combined magic of many people was truly awe-inspiring.

A thick bolt of lightning descended from the sky, dealing massive damage to Yukino’s airship. Even the people hiding inside probably couldn’t avoid that damage.

While its range was shorter than an airship cannon’s, the spell surely surpassed any cannon in damage. Wizards were well suited for airship battles like this because they could deal heavy damage without weaponry. By obliterating an airship all at once, they could get ring-out kills on entire guilds.

They might pose an actual threat.

I saw Yukino and her guild regroup on the deck of their smoky, smoldering ship. That blow had destroyed the anchor that connected their ships, and they seemed ready to unleash another.

If Yukino invaded their ship for close combat, she could probably grab a whole bunch of points, but Homura's guild knew this and therefore kept their distance. Yukino tried to chase after them, shifting her attention to their guild. That left us free to move as we pleased.

"What do we do now?" Maeda asked me.

"Good question."

Akira turned to Akabane. "Nozomi, about that stuff from before..."

"This really isn't the time. We're still in the heat of battle! We should leave it for after the event. Isn't that right, Takashiro?"

She had hastily pushed it on me.

Aah, she wants me to back her up again. Seems like she doesn't know how to handle it by herself.

Akabane may have seemed formal and even-tempered on the outside, but she was actually an awkward and sensitive soul.

Honestly, Kataoka being her follower was the perfect combination. He was clearly devoted, and a quick thinker to boot. If he didn't have such a lame fixation on Hime-chans, he could've been a more threatening rival.

"So, Akabane. You have an Assault Anchor, right? Mind if we borrow it and toss it on now? We've still got one open slot."

"Sure. I don't mind."

Thus, we instantly had a brand-new weapon!

Launch platforms appeared on the JS Peachy Thunder's deck.

Hmm, okay. So putting one in gives you two launch platforms. One slot, two anchors. Noted. Now, where should we go on the hunt?

Chapter 8: Kokoru Awakens!

“Bawk. What do we do, Ren?”

This time, the question came from the real Kokoru. It seemed like he was unharmed, so that was nice.

“I wonder...”

Yukino had gone off to chase Homura’s guild, and now that Grand Museum’s Joint Magic had destroyed all of the other Assault Anchors, the rest of the guilds were scattering freely. At present, no one was coming to attack us.

From the wheelhouse, we saw a group of airships gathering directly to starboard. It looked to be a brawl between several guilds. Cannon fire and magic were flying in every direction.

To the port side, airships were sparse. Guilds were probably just waiting to see what would happen.

Now, should we leap into the fray, or aim for the isolated ships?

“Sorry, everyone. I can’t even help, bawk, so I’m stuck here watching the ship. But I’m rooting for you! Good job getting more points, bawk!”

Hmm. Was I wrong to make him wait here?

In this battle, we couldn’t replenish any of his monsters once they’d been summoned. After all, there weren’t any monsters on the field for him to hire. Kokoru was essentially a rifle with six shots that couldn’t be reloaded, so my plan had been to keep them in reserve. Having him wait and hide in this battle made strategic sense, but it might have been a blow to his mental state.

If he failed to use his full strength in the final battle because he lost his confidence here, that would be an even greater strategic failure. The ideal strategy didn’t always lead to the ideal outcome.

People were illogical beings at heart! Kokoru may have been an NPC, but he seemed much the same. I wasn’t about to discriminate against him for being an

NPC, anyway.

For now, we needed to boost his confidence. He was weak due to his monster-minion fighting style, but he could fight well if he played his cards right. He could even take down Peater if he tried.

Still, we couldn't just *tell* him to believe in himself. Experiencing success firsthand was vital. A great person once said, "Success breeds confidence," although I couldn't recall whether it had come from a real person or a video game character.

"Okay, then. To the right! Let's get in on the action!"

Yano looked skeptical. "You sure? That might give us the most points, but it could also make us lose the most, y'know."

"If we want to get in the top four, we've gotta get tons of points. The more enemies, the better!"

"Agreed. Meticulous motions will breed neither victory nor defeat."

"All right, bawk! Let's go, go, go!"

"Bagawk?! Akira, you sound just like me!"

"Yep. I've been practicing in secret, bawk!"

So she did *practice.*

"Okay! To the right we go!"

Clunk!

Maeda pulled the nitro lever.

I had only just noticed, but the Assault Anchor launch switch was also a lever on the wheel. Nitro was red, while the Assault Anchor was blue.

As we plunged into the brawl at high speed, Maeda added, "I'd like to try out the Assault Anchor as soon as possible."

"Hm? Up for some close combat, eh?"

"No. I'm going to use it in tandem with nitro and the Golden Drill. With the anchor attached to someone's ship, we could use nitro and charge into them

drill-first, right?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Well, then we could quickly pivot, use another nitro blast, and charge in again. Then we just rinse and repeat. The maneuvers will be tricky, but the anchor will keep our enemies close. It’ll also make turning back around much easier. I think we can do it!”

“So we go in for the kill, airship and all?”

“Yes. If it’s possible, then that would be our best option, right?” Maeda’s eyes sparkled.

Where is this girl’s passion for violence coming from?!

Her plan sounded like something from a mecha anime, where a robot would transform and batter the heck out of the enemy.

This idea is crazy, but it just might be crazy enough to work.

I could tell just by looking at her that she was itching to do it. While I didn’t mind giving it a try, this nitro-drill charge was going to deal a lot of damage to us too. We were fine, but if Kokoru got hit two or three times, he’d be off to the big chicken coop in the sky. Even if we grabbed a ton of points, it would be meaningless if Kokoru died as a result.

It would be hard for us to weave heals in between charges, but stopping the whole operation just to heal would weaken our assault.

Nevertheless, I really did want to try Maeda’s strategy. If it went well, we could expect a huge point yield. In that case... well, we had to try it!

“All right. Then we’ll split into two groups. Kokoru, Akabane, and I will leave the airship. The rest of you, go with her plan.”

Kokoru couldn’t be in the airship for this plan, so he would come along with us. We wouldn’t just jump off and die, of course; we’d have Kokoru call his Frost Eagle. With that, we would act separately as a mobile force.

Ability-wise, Kokoru was vital for this. The Frost Eagle could fit three people, so I decided to go with him.

Might as well let loose a few ultimates here and there!

I wanted a sword dancer on our team to get the most synergy possible, so the choice had been either Akira or Akabane. Considering Akira's aptitude for being bait, she would attract more attention if Kokoru wasn't around. Thus, I'd chosen Akabane.

"Get this, Kokoru: we're a mobile strike force now! Let's get on the Frost Eagle and go nuts!"

"Bawk! Yes, sir!"

"I'm counting on you too, Akabane!"

"Right!" Akabane nodded, full of confidence.

Then, just before we entered the fray, we left the wheelhouse.

"Frost Eagle, come to me! Bawk!" Kokoru called.

Out of nowhere came a huge bird with blue wings. It landed right next to Kokoru.

"Caaaaaw!"

The bird almost seemed to neigh.

Ooh, he's ready! It's like he's saying, "I got this!"

"Now, bawk, let us on!"

The three of us then leapt onto the Frost Eagle's back.

"Okay," I said, "we can meet up later! If anyone dies, we'll end up back on the ship anyway. Good luck!"

"Understood! We'll do our best!"

"Good luck to you too!"

"You got this, Kokoru! I know you can do it!"

"Bawk! Thanks, Akira!"

After that, our mobile strike force flew off the deck of the JS Peachy Thunder.

Cannon fire and magic was flying all over the place. Duels were unfolding on

almost every ship.

Whew, this is quite the party!

Completely ignoring the awesome sight, Akabane turned to me and squeaked, “What do we do?! She knows I’m Scarlet now!”

“Wow. You’re still not over that?!”

Evidently, she had been keeping up appearances while Akira was still watching.

I’m impressed she could keep a straight face, but now she’s way too flustered!

Akabane may have acted like a stern, high-class lady, but on the inside, she was extremely fragile and clumsy. She was a troublesome one indeed.

“We can think about that later. For now, we’ve gotta clear out some of these other guilds! Try to stay calm, all right?”

“But don’t you think she’ll be mad that I didn’t say anything about it? What if she thinks I’m just lying to her about who I am so that I can figure out her weaknesses? Oh, dear! I don’t know what to—”

“It’s fine! If anything, I bet she’s happy about it. We can explain it to her when all this is over. Now, get your head in the game, okay?”

“Err, all right. I’m counting on you, though.”

How much could one person fear Akira’s ire? Nevertheless, I made a mental note to back her up later.

“Where should we land, bawk?”

“Good question.” Suddenly, something caught my eye. “Oh, wow!”

Three airships were moving together like a fleet. They flew in a triangular formation, linked together by Assault Anchors.

“Guess that’s one way to use Assault Anchors.”

That reminds me of the Battle of Red Cliffs, when Cao Cao chained his ships together.

By chaining the three ships together with anchors, they increased overall security. Should enemies come, the other two ships could focus their fire to help counterattack. Guildies could also travel between ships with ease, making them able to focus their manpower and get an advantage in numbers. That was the ideal pattern for a three-guild alliance.

I see, I see. Keep your friends close like that, and no matter the situation, you can always maintain an advantage.

There were alliances like ours and Homura’s, where you just promised not to kill each other. Then there were alliances like this, where these three ships could essentially take shifts. Either way worked, really. No matter what method you used, it was all about getting in the top four guilds.

“Those three ships probably have a ton of people.”

“Do we plan to rush them? Wouldn’t we be severely outnumbered?”

“If we just charged straight in, yeah. But if we can position ourselves just right, I’d say we can maximize our chances of success.”

The three-ship fleet was currently in the middle of shooting at an enemy to their right. As such, the crew’s eyes were on starboard, and everyone was gathered on the rightmost ship.

By contrast, the left and frontmost ships were shorthanded.

This might be the perfect opportunity!

“Okay, Kokoru. Let me and Akabane down on the left ship. You go ahead and launch a Blizzard from the Frost Eagle at ’em!”

“You got it, bawk! Let’s go, Frost Eagle!”

While the Frost Eagle flew toward our destination, I checked my menu screen. I decided to swap Dead End out for Vermilion Wing. Now, my readily available ultimates were Descending Azure Dragon and Vermilion Wing. I still had AP, so I could use either one.

“Here we are. Off we go, Akabane!”

“Yes, sir!”

We landed on the shorthanded ship to the port side.

“Right here!” I headed for the Assault Anchor’s launch platform on the edge of the ship and climbed on top of the anchor. “Watch my back so I don’t get attacked from behind! You too, Kokoru!”

“Right!”

“Yepper, bawk!” Kokoru shouted from overhead.

One of the guildies showed up on deck.

“Here to fight, are ya?!”

Huh? Wait a second...

“Oh, if it isn’t Lady Nozomi! And hey to you too, Takashiro!”

Kataoka?! Darn it, this is his guild’s ship?!

“Oh, uh, heeey. This is where you’ve been the whole time?”

“Yeah, well. As an underling, I’m stuck here watching the ship. All the upperclassmen are over there having fun.” He pointed at the rightmost ship.

They were in the heat of battle, with plenty of players tossing out cannon fire, magic, bows, and other myriad long-range attacks at approaching foes. But they couldn’t just leave the ship vacant, so they’d left Kataoka alone here. Dumping guard duty on the underling, in other words. Fountain of Wisdom was a very large-scale guild, so they had naturally developed a pecking order.

“So, what are you here for? I’m supposed to alert them if enemies come.”

“My, Kataoka. Are you saying I am your enemy?” Akabane asked him with a

cold glare.

When she had the upper hand like this, you could really feel the spoiled rich girl vibes coming off of her.

“No, not at all! Order me around as you please! If you need any points, just knock me right off the ship! That’s still one point for you!”

This guy was really irredeemable. There was no room for anything in his mind except serving his Hime-chan. Right now, he was handing her points on a silver platter.

“Shall we?”

“No!” I cried. “No way! That’s cheating!”

“Is it? If we consider my popularity to be our weapon, I believe we’re fighting fair and square.”

“It’s not even your popularity; it’s just Hime-chan power. But either way, it’s a hard no! Kataoka, if you sound the alarm, they’re all gonna start coming back, right?”

“Probs. It lets them know we’ve got enemies aboard, after all. They’re running out of opponents, so there’s not much reason for everyone to stay there.”

“Cool. Sound the alarm!”

“Are you sure? We’ll be surrounded. It may end with us being blown away, and we won’t get many points in the process.”

“We’ve just gotta get as many points as we can before we die. Leave it to me!”

“If you say so.”

“Go do the thing, man!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m goin’!”

Kataoka retreated into the wheelhouse. Before long, there was a loud noise as a ball of smoke was launched into the air.

Recognizing the signal, all the players on starboard turned their attention to this ship. About half of them ran up the Assault Anchor that connected these

two ships, heading this way.

“Now’s our chance! Final Strike! Enervating Circle!”

The typical ultimate pre-prep rite. Truly an art form!

Preparations were complete. I then headed to the right, joining the group atop the Assault Anchor.

“Kokoru! Pick up Akabane and fly alongside me!” I ordered him.

By the time I was about halfway down the Assault Anchor, about seven or eight players had boarded it.

Woo-hoo! All my targets are lined up and ready for me!

I squatted down and turned, assuming the Quickdraw pose. Then, my entire body was enveloped in bright-red flames. They took the form of a bird, making me a living statue of Suzaku.

“Ultimate move: Vermilion Wiiing!”

Finally, I charged!

“Waaargh!”

“Bwuh?!”

The flaming bird soared along the anchor’s chain, prompting many simultaneous cries. My Vermilion Wing had sent every other player on the chain flying. On a straight line like this, there was nowhere to escape! It was the ideal situation for a forward charge that damaged enemies as you went, such as Vermilion Wing!

This was just why I’d had Kataoka bring people over.

Whether you’re Cao Cao or a gamer, chaining ships together is a no-no!

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

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Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently 9.

Your rank is 17 / 48.

I cheered. “Woo! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

“I see, so you made him gather a line of targets! There’s no escape on the anchor, after all!”

“Well, they could’ve gotten away if they went up, but it’s kinda hard to think of that on the spot. Even if they’d guarded and survived, they would’ve been pushed off.”

“That ultimate certainly works well on this terrain.”

“That was awesome, bawk! We shot way up in rank!”

“Yeah. Let’s try it on somebody else!”

Seeing my technique once would let people plan around it, but if we found people who hadn’t seen it before, we ought to be able to bag more. There were plenty of enemies around. It was time to go hunting.

“Awesome. On to the next one!” I jumped on the back of the approaching Frost Eagle. Then, I received some unexpected log messages.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently 14.

Your rank is 13 / 48.

“Ooh! Akira and the others must be getting some kills! Our strategy must be working!”

“Seems like it.”

“Wow, bawk! We might make the top four after all!” Kokoru yelled in excitement.

“We’ll see about that!” came a voice from above.

“Huh?!”

Oh, yeah. Kataoka’s NPC can fly!

“Bawk! It’s Peater!”

I grinned. “Heyo! There you are!”

“You’ve done it now. But at the very least, you are a worthy opponent. Allow

me to return the favor!”

“Heh. How convenient for the top Birdman to make his appearance. Hope you’re ready to bow down to Kokoru when he takes your spot!”

“Bagawk?! Ren, what are you talking about, bawk?!”

“Hah! I’ll believe that when I see it!” Peater smirked fearlessly and readied his favored weapon, a spear.

“Go on, Kokoru! Show him your true strength!”

In order for Kokoru to experience success, he had to defeat Peater in a one-on-one fight. I decided to watch over their battle.

“I-I can’t, Ren! I can’t even—”

“Yes, you can! You’ve grown plenty by now, so test your skills! Your family’s watching, remember? Show ’em what you’ve got!”

“But, Ren... I don’t have any confidence, bawk!”

“Battles aren’t just about stats. Even the weak can use their brains and come out on top in the end! Right now, you have one trick up your sleeve! You should know what that is!”

“Right now, bawk?”

Kokoru was a smart guy. He had talent as a merchant, and a merchant couldn’t have a dull mind. Though he may have been at a statistical disadvantage, he should’ve known what tactics he had available to him.

I mean, he could also cheat by summoning the Deadly King. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he did. This was an important moment to instill confidence in him, after all.

“Let’s get off so they can do their thing,” I told Akabane.

We both jumped off of the Frost Eagle’s back.

“Peater, we’ll be watching! Fight to your heart’s content!”

“Very well! Kokoru, show me how far you’ve come!” Peater flapped his wings powerfully, rushing at Kokoru through the air.

“Baaawk?!” Kokoru steered the Frost Eagle away, dodging the first spear blow.

That was fast! Maybe they have some bird telepathy going on?

“You won’t escape!”

Thus, the midair chase began.

Peater charged and stabbed with his spear, while Kokoru dodged and kept his distance, attempting to attack with the Frost Eagle’s ice breath.

Although Peater moved much more fluidly, Kokoru was still managing to fight back.

I watched their dance, arms crossed and cheering him on in my mind. *You can do it, Kokoru!*

He didn’t necessarily have to win here; when it came to points, we could get them ourselves. But he needed self-confidence!

You’ve got this, buddy!

I couldn’t just force him to gain confidence, after all. He had to find it himself!

“This is a surprise. You shied away from a one-on-one fight with Snow earlier,” Akabane commented.

“It depends on the time and the place. Right now, I’d say he needs this.”

“If anyone tries to get in their way, we can stop them.”

“Of course.”

Akabane seemed to understand the importance of this fight.

The battle between Kokoru and Peater raged on with no end in sight.

“I see your weakness!” Peater shouted unexpectedly, charging right through the Frost Eagle’s ice breath.

He ignored the damage and thrust his spear toward the eagle.

“Ultimate move: Lightning Torpedo!”

Spinning around his thrust-out spear, Peater charged forward with incredible speed! His spear was enveloped in a pale-blue glow. It was as if a powerful bolt

of lightning was striking from the side. This high-speed, rotating spear charge was made possible only by Peater's ability to fly.

Turned into a spectacular bolt of lightning, Peater struck the Frost Eagle in the torso.

"Caaaw!"

It cried out in pain.

"Oh, no! The Frost Eagle's going down!"

Its HP bar fell all the way down to zero. Kokoru was still safe, but without the Frost Eagle, he couldn't fly!

"Hmph! Because your eagle stopped to use its breath weapon, I knew just when to strike."

"Lose the battle, win the war!" I shouted.

The fallen Frost Eagle began to flicker and fade away. As a result, Kokoru was left hanging in the air.

"Baaawk?!"

He flapped his wings helplessly. Kokoru was just barely able to correct his course as a result, barely clinging to the Assault Anchor.

"Nice! Hang in there!"

"You fool. You're wide open! It won't be long before you fall!"

Peater's spear sped toward Kokoru as he tried desperately to hang on! He was going to get knocked off at this rate!

Just then...

Crash!

"Mrngh?!"

Before Kokoru could be knocked off the anchor, Peater was blown away by a giant metal fist!

I was so proud of my boy. “Good job!”

Kokoru had already called his next monster—a huge, living suit of armor. This gaudy orange creature was a level 79 monster called Infernal Armor. Now Kokoru had four more merc-monsters at his disposal.

However, the fact that he hadn’t called upon the Deadly King yet meant that he was still using his head. If he was panicking, he would be more likely to rely on his ace.

“Pull me up, bawk!”

The Infernal Armor obeyed Kokoru’s order and lifted him up from the Assault Anchor. It wasn’t as powerful as the Deadly King, but this Infernal Armor synergized well with Kokoru. Naturally, I had been the one to recommend it. Why, you might ask?

“Okay... Now! Assemble, bawk!”

The Infernal Armor lightly bowed, then dismantled itself, its separate pieces floating in the air.

Clink, cling, clang!

Then, with a bunch of cool metallic sounds, each part covered Kokoru’s body! His body shape didn’t quite match up, but fortunately, the parts reshaped themselves to fit him.

Now, Kokoru’s round body was covered in full armor!

Fullmetal Kokoru was complete!

“Baaawk! All suited up!”

The Infernal Armor was able to use a special skill, Armor Possession, which allowed allied monsters to wear it. Kokoru had made the monster use it on him. Ordering it to activate this ability cost AP on Kokoru’s end, but he had more than enough built up from fighting.

When his allied monsters gained AP, a portion of it would be given to Kokoru. In short, he had used the Frost Eagle to build up the necessary AP to use Armor

Possession.

From the outset, this had been his goal.

Armor Possession meant that all damage would go to the Infernal Armor instead of him, leaving him unhurt until the Armor died. It was a perfect ability for a low-HP, low-defense guy like Kokoru.

“My, so all he needed was armor. I see!”

“Yep!”

“Hmm. So you’re wearing an armored monster. Interesting!”

Peater righted himself and once again attacked with his spear. Fullmetal Kokoru did the same with his own spear now. It was a weapon he had kept in his inventory. The two of them clashed, trading blows.

```
Peater attacked.
Dealt 72 damage to Infernal Armor!
Infernal Armor attacked.
Dealt 91 damage to Peater!
```

When it came to a single hit, we seemed to come out on top. Perhaps that was because we had higher defenses? Either way, it was good!

Incidentally, in the above logs, Fullmetal Kokoru had been treated as Infernal Armor. That was the beauty of this combination. Normally, Kokoru’s Cowardice trait meant he could never deal damage, but Fullmetal Kokoru was an Infernal Armor, as far as the game was concerned.

As long as he used Armor Possession, even his stats were those of an Infernal Armor, so Cowardice wasn’t applied.

Being turned into Infernal Armor could be taken as either a huge downgrade to the level of a crappy mob monster, or a dramatic upgrade to the level of the Infernal Armor, depending on who wore it.

In Kokoru’s case, he was definitely the latter. Not only was he fighting without

showing off his endless weaknesses, but he even got to avoid Cowardice.

“Well, then. Fireball!” From a faraway point, Peater unleashed his magic.

Oh, wow. I remember! At the draft, it said he was a magic knight.

As Kokoru couldn’t fly, all he could do was stand on the Assault Anchor and wait for the attack. If Peater attacked from afar, he could only evade while keeping careful attention on his footing. Then, while Kokoru was occupied by that, Peater charged again!

```
Peater attacked.
Dealt 76 damage to Infernal Armor!
```

This time, Kokoru couldn’t smack him back! He couldn’t keep on taking hits like this.

“This is bad! It’s too one-sided!”

Peater had around 70% HP, while Fullmetal Kokoru had about 20%. Our boy was already at a terrain disadvantage. Worse yet, Peater was akin to a hero among the Birdmen, and he was a seasoned warrior.

The difference in their battle experience may have been too great; Kokoru was hardly used to fighting, after all.

“It’s okay. This isn’t the end!”

“But... No, you’re right. He really did his best. I see Kokoru in a new light now.”

“Nah, that’s not what I mean.”

“Then what *do* you mean?”

“He can still win this!”

If I were Kokoru, I probably would’ve done the same thing up until now. But the way to turn the tables was still in Kokoru’s hands... err, wings? Did he realize it himself, though?

C’mon, man! I know you can figure it out!

“You’ve done well for yourself. But now, you fall! Lightning Torpedo!”

Once again, Peater activated his finisher ultimate. The potentially fatal blow spiraled toward Kokoru.

“Purge, bawk!”

At the last second, Kokoru removed his Armor Possession.

“What on earth?!” Akabane gasped in surprise.

If Fullmetal Kokoru took the blow, then only the Infernal Armor would suffer the hit. But if he took the blow himself, he was sure to die and give up five points.

Akabane’s reaction was deserved, but I couldn’t help but give him a round of applause.

“Nice one! Atta boy!”

This was just what I wanted him to do. Kokoru knows what’s up!

“Armor Possession, bawk!”

Yes, yes, yes!

This time, the armor didn’t attach itself to Kokoru—but Peater instead!

Clink, cling, clang!

Now, Peater had been turned into a Fullmetal mech.

“Nraaagh?!” He screamed as he lost his balance and started wobbling in the air.

Akabane finally realized what was going on. “Oh, I see! Now that he’s wearing armor...”

“Yep! Thanks to the Armor Possession, he’s now an Infernal Armor!”

That meant Peater’s ability to fly was gone. If you wanted to spin it as in-game lore, you could say the armor was just too heavy for his wings to lift.

Either way, the idea was that if it could remove Kokoru’s Cowardice trait, then

it ought to do the same with Peater's ability to fly.

Now that he was just a hunk of metal hanging in the air...

"Aaaaah!"

Fullmetal Peater dropped like a stone.

It was probably the first time he'd fallen since he had learned to fly. No doubt this was a terrifying experience.

As he disappeared from sight, a system log came up.

```
You have defeated an enemy NPC.
Hell's Crafters has gained 5 Battle Points.
Battle Point total for Hell's Crafters is currently 19.
Your rank is 10 / 48.
```

That had been the perfect battle strategy for this environment. I had to praise Kokoru for being so resourceful.

You're a real man now, buddy!

"Bawk?! I did it? I... won?" he muttered, bewildered. "I'm so used to being useless... I can't believe I beat Peater!"

I gave him a hearty pat on the back. "Good work, man! What did I tell you? You got this!"

I was feeling pretty smug myself! After all, Kokoru had just done the giant-killing thing, but against Peater! Nobody back at the draft could've expected this wild turn of events. It was truly satisfying to see weaklings use their brains to conquer the strong! This was true drama! Oh, how fulfilled I was!

"Thanks for the hint, bawk! That really was a dirty move; this is the only place I could've pulled it off."

"Hey, that's perfectly fine. The battle's over, and you're the winner! Besides, there's nothing dirty about using the situation to your advantage. That's called skill! Either way, you defeated Peater. You've got what it takes. Believe in

yourself!”

“Bawk! Thanks! I’m so glad you guys picked me!”

“Same here, bro. Now I can brag to everyone about how I raised you. Anyway, let’s get back to racking up points!”

“Yeah, bawk! Okay!”

“But be a little more stingy, all right? If you keep using up your monsters, we’ll run out too fast.”

“Gotcha, bawk!”

Two of his six monsters had already been consumed. If possible, I wanted to preserve all four of the others until the finals, especially the Deadly King. He’d blow everyone away!

“But how will we travel?” Nozomi asked. “The Frost Eagle died. Do we have another?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, yeah. Baaawk!”

“Huh?! Then what are we going to do?”

I shrugged. “We jump off, die, and respawn on the Peachy Thunder.”

“I suppose we could, but we’ll lose all of the points we gathered!”

“That’s all right. It’ll dock us seven points, but we still have a net gain when you factor in all the points we farmed here.”

I had grabbed eight, while Kokoru had earned us five. That made for thirteen, so even if we lost seven, we would come out ahead by six.

“It just feels like such a waste.”

“Nah, it’s fine. We got something more important than points.”

After all, Kokoru’s newfound confidence was priceless!

“True enough. Very well. Shall we make the leap?”

“Yeah. But first, I’ll have them stop for a sec. Otherwise, we might get blown off the ship by nitro the moment we respawn.”

“That’d be awful, bawk.”

“Let me send a message real quick.”

As I was trying to send a message to Akira, something suddenly zipped past us.

Fwoom!

It was a fireball.

Oh! A magic attack!

“They’re aiming for us!”

Akabane was correct. Magic and arrows were flying at us from both sides.

The players we had defeated before had respawned and were now attacking us again. But this time, they were using long-range attacks so that they wouldn’t need to get on the anchor and fall victim to my Vermilion Wing again.

An obvious countermeasure, perhaps.

Once you’d been outdone by a creative strategy once, you would devise a countermeasure and use your own creative strategy to outdo *them*. Eternal, mutually assured improvement was the essence of PvP combat.

Baseball, soccer, and other sports were similar.

“Heh! Well, while we’re at it, we might as well grab a point or two before we die!”

“A sound plan!”

“Bawk!”

Thus, we attempted to launch a suicide attack on the gang to our left. But then...

Claaang!

An Assault Anchor smashed into the leftmost ship.

The intrusive ship suddenly began accelerating with incredible speed, charging straight toward the one it had anchored!

Its hull was a blinding pink all over. On the bow was a shiny, dangerous-looking drill. It was our very own JS Peachy Thunder!

The JS Peachy Thunder gouged out a hole in the hull of the ship as it whizzed past. That was the nitro, in all its glorious speed.

Thanks to the connection granted by the anchor, it came to a sudden halt once it got far enough away. The momentum as it passed by became centrifugal force when it was pulled by the anchor, allowing our airship to spin around and once again target the other ship with its drill.

Although it had successfully changed course, its current vector took them away from its mark.

But then, the nitro went off again!

Vrooom!

The outward-pointing vector was erased with brute force by the nitro. Now, our ship was back on track!

It tore another hole in the leftmost ship, then turned and charged once more!

“Dang! Maeda steers like a pro!”

Each nitro canceled the rigidity of the ship’s motion, leading to a beautiful Golden Drill combo. Its sheer mobility was even more terrifying than I had expected!

After the fourth consecutive drill attack, the target ship was completely destroyed, falling down and spewing smoke.

“Ooh. They sank the whole ship! Wow!”

Kataoka’s in there, isn’t he? Poor guy!

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

You have defeated an enemy player.

Hell’s Crafters has gained 1 Battle Point.

Battle Point total for Hell’s Crafters is currently 24.

Your rank is 7 / 48.

“They’re doing good work up there!”

“Awesome job, Kotomi. Bawk!”

There was just one problem: because the leftmost ship had been sunk, the three of us had lost the support of the anchor. We clung desperately to it as it hung from the rightmost ship.

Thankfully, after felling the enemy ship, the JS Peachy Thunder came our way.

“Heeey, Ren! Nozomi! Kokoru!” From the deck of the ship, Akira waved to us in her school uniform.

Oh, so they’re coming to rescue us!

“Heeey! Over here, over heeere! We’re saved!”

Lucky us! We get to go back to our ship without losing points!

Once we had regrouped, we continued to farm points. Along the way, Homura’s guild appeared again, so we actually fought to help her out this time.

We were so into it that we didn’t even notice the time passing, and before we

knew it, the battle royale was over.

In the end, we were in second place.

Awesome! We made it to the final round!

Chapter 9: The Final Battle and a Secret Event

“Kokoruuu! You were so cool, cheep! That was awesome, cheep!”

Once the battle royale had ended and we returned to the pier, Kokoru’s cheepy little brothers greeted him with glee. Having seen Kokoru defeat Peater, they had a whole new level of respect for him.

“Hahaha. Bawwwk, I just got lucky.” Kokoru was bashful.

A shadow was cast over him from above. When he looked up, he saw Peater there. The Birdman clapped a hand on Kokoru’s round shoulder as he landed.

“Luck is another aspect of strength. You were victorious over me, and that shows how far you’ve come. You’ve done well to grow so much. As a fellow Birdman, I’m overjoyed to see strong youth like you. One day, you’ll surpass me in both name and deeds.”

“Um, thanks, bawk.”

“Now, it does not behoove a loser to prattle,” Peater said. After that, he turned and left.

What a good sport. Peater really has the spirit of a warrior.

“You did so great, bawk! As your father, I couldn’t be more proud!”

“I hardly recognized you, bawk. I’m so happy for you, darling!”

“When we get home, we’re having a party to celebrate, bawk! You’re a hero among chickens!”

“Yes! We’ll throw a superb party, bawk!”

I was perfectly satisfied with my all-out meta-redefining work coming to fruition! It was lovely that everyone else was so happy too.

“Daddy, you’re exaggerating, bawk. That was just the preliminary round. Besides, Ren’s the one who deserves to be celebrated, bawk. He’s the one who picked up a guy like me, took me under his wing, and trained me.”

Kokoru's statement prompted all the little cheep-cheeps to look at me.

"Master! Make us strong too, cheep cheep!" They surrounded me.

Awww, so cute!

"Heh, all right. If there's a second time, come find me. You all get to have Skull Rings!" I answered, cuddling the little chicks.

"Takashiro!" Akabane tugged at my sleeve.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Do not 'what's up' me! You promised that you'd help me with Akira, remember?!"

"Oh, yeah, I did say that."

I doubted Akira would be angry at this point, anyway. She'd probably accept Akabane with a big ol' smile. At worst, she could just offer a small apology, and that would probably be enough.

I dunno what she's so afraid of.

"Okay, let's get to it, then."

We made our way to my guild, where Akira was talking to the other girls. Akabane hid behind me the whole way.

"Hey, Akira?"

"What's up?" Akira turned to me with a smile.

But before I could talk, someone came to interrupt us.

Hey, that's the guy who works for Akira's family. I think his name was Arima?

"Milady, your play was excellent!"

"Oh, hey, Arima," Akira answered before glancing at me. She shot me a meaningful wink, as if to say, *Looks like he didn't notice a thing.*

Thanks to the Mimic Fan, Akira had made it through the whole match without being seen in her Sword Dancer gear.

And since Maeda had been so successful in sinking other ships, Akira hadn't had to do much close combat at all.

Welp, she made it through and had a good time doing it. That's what counts.

"It was all so moving, despite this being a video game. I enjoyed watching you. Thank you for allowing me to watch."

"Oh, no problem. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"That I did. Likewise, you seemed to enjoy yourself—so much so that I daresay you were shining out there. I've never seen you having so much fun, milady."

"Heehee. Are you implying that I'm usually rather gloomy?"

"Hahaha, absolutely not."

They sounded like two friendly celebrities chatting it up.

Huh. Is that how Akira is in real life? She practically acts like royalty!

Arima then turned to me. He seemed to look at me with wariness in his eyes. But then I realized that he was actually looking at Akabane behind me.

"Are you certain this is acceptable, though? I do believe that's Nozomi Akabane over there."

Their families are at odds, right?

Because of that, Akira and Akabane had started off on poor terms.

Akira looked at her as well. I sensed Akabane holding her breath. Not because of Arima's glare, but because she was afraid that Akira would be angry with her for hiding her EF identity.

She really, *really* wanted to be friends with Akira.

Akira put on a bright and cheery smile as she said, "What family she's from doesn't matter to me. We're friends, and my friend just *happens* to be an Akabane. If we know that we can be friends, I don't see any reason we shouldn't. So yes, I'm certain. How about you, Nozomi?"

Yep. Akira would say something like that.

I knew she would never get mad. I had been playing beside her for years, after all.

“Erm, yes! Same here! Even if our past relationship was sour, that doesn’t mean the future has to be the same. The young must look toward the future!” Akabane swept her hair back, probably thinking she looked super cool. But her lips were curled into a grin, kind of ruining it.

Arima laughed. “Hahaha. I’m in my twenties, so I’m not exactly old.”

“You’re not young either.”

“You really think so? Well, that certainly stings. Anyway, yes, I see your point; I have said too much. Please forgive me.”

With that settled, it was time for us to turn our attention to the finals.

The four finalists were as follows: our guild, Hell’s Crafters; Baddest of the Bad, with Alfred and his top-tier growth rates; Yukino’s guild, Mystic Arts; and finally, Homura’s Grand Museum.

Alfred making it to the top was pretty much the natural course of things.

There was also Mikott, who had the power to vie for first or second place. And the fact that she was with Yukino’s PvP-loving guild meant she was a shoe-in too.

Grand Museum’s NPC was Bruno, an old merchant guy who’d started at around level 7 or 8, so he was a surprise contender.

Then, there was us! We had picked Cowardly Kokoru! In fact, we were probably the greatest upset.

Suddenly, we all heard Ms. Nakada’s voice. “Okay, here we go! All guilds who made it to the finals, please come to the meeting point! We will now discuss the final battle!”

Woo-hoo! Time to go to the finals!

◆◇◆

“At last, it is time for the final battle of the guild competitive mission! For this year’s event we have tasked your guilds with raising an NPC from zero to hero! But who will be the last ones standing?! We’ll see soon enough! Now, here are the four NPCs who remain at the finish! Come on out, boys and girls!”

Ms. Nakada's spirited announcement echoed through the venue. This time, we were in the audience stands, where our parents had been during the battle royale.

The area was like a stadium, with fantastically huge monitors facing all directions in the middle. Presumably, everyone had been watching the airship battle with Ms. Nakada's commentary.

In response to her speech, the monitors disappeared. In their place, a circular stone ring slowly rose from the ground.

Pop, pop, pop! Psheeew!

Suddenly, there was an explosion of fireworks!

This is just like a pro-wrestling intro! Ms. Nakada's playing the part perfectly too!

On the rising stage were the four hero candidate NPCs: Kokoru, Bruno, Mikott, and Alfred.

The stadium erupted in cheers.

This was quite the lineup. Many people probably expected Selphie and Peater to be up here instead of Kokoru and Bruno. But Selphie's team had made a fatal error in her development, and poor Peater had been brought down by those five points we stole.

Fountain of Wisdom had ended up just three points shy of Homura's guild. If Kokoru hadn't defeated him, they would've actually made it here.

Kokoru had better do his best as the final remaining representative of the Birdmen.

"Kokoruuu! You can do it! Believe in yourself!"

"Go get 'em, Kokoru!"

Akira and I cheered for Kokoru from the VIP section.

“Bop ’em good, cheep cheep!” His little brothers were getting hyped too!

Kokoru shot a nod at us with a cool look on his face.

Ooh, nice. Not an ounce of fear! That fight with Peater gave him the confidence he needed!

It would be no exaggeration to say that Kokoru had awoken.

Now win! Win, and let me say the thing! The legendary line I’ve been waiting to say all this time! I’m just about dying to say it, man!

“Mwahahaha!”

“Whoa! Ahahaha... You really want Kokoru to win right away, huh?”

“Oh? How’d you know?!”

“How would I *not* know? That laugh was so sus, and ‘I raised that boy’ is written all over your face. You’re practically drooling!”

“Hmm, was I that obvious?”

“Yep. You know why I can tell? ’Cause I wanna say it too!” Akira’s eyes sparkled in anticipation.

Hah! So we’re in full agreement!

“I’m really happy that Kokoru’s so strong now. I was pretty worried when we first met him.”

Back then, Kokoru had been getting bullied by the other Birdmen, and Akira had been absolutely livid about it. But now, that would never happen again. Kokoru had grown up big and strong.

“Master? Cheep, can he win?!”

I was now in the position of master among these little cheepers. If I could raise those boys one day too, then I would gladly accept the position!

“Yeah, he can! Kokoru’s still got an ace up his sleeve.”

“Yep. He can totally do this, so don’t worry, little guys.” Akira happily petted the chicks.

They really were so cute that you just had to touch them.

“She’s right. Have faith in your big brother.”

“He really does have quite the trump card.”

“This is gonna be a piece of cake for him. Just watch.”

Akabane, Maeda, and Yano jumped into the conversation, also petting the chicks. Everyone wanted to touch ’em.

Baby chickens had incredible magic. Even I was spellbound with the desire to stroke these adorable creatures. The girls never had a chance against them.

Draco was still number one in my heart, though, so he kept his position in my arms!

By the way, as for the battle itself, we had decided on a full-on brawl between the heroes in order to get a result clear to everyone outside the ring.

The PvP-loving Yukino had wanted the guilds to be able to get in on the action, but I’d proposed an NPC-only battle royale, as I figured it would be the most likely win for us.

Alfred’s tiny little guild master, Aiko Hijirisawa, had been fine with either one. Meanwhile, Homura had agreed with me.

Thus, Ms. Nakada had put two “NPCs only” and one “include players” ballots into a randomizer. As a result, the majority won, and it had been declared an NPC-only battle. This way, there was the least amount of uncertainty; the more people involved, the more unknown elements and unpleasant surprises.

In an NPC-only battle, Kokoru could summon the Deadly King and win! One smack from the King, and bam! Battle over and we all go home.

“Now, let the finals begin! Ready... Gooooo!” Ms. Nakada’s voice echoed high.

With the signal given for the final battle, the four contestants took their fighting stances.

Were they sizing each other up? Not quite; our boy made the first move.

“Bawk!”

He immediately revealed and used an item!

Kokoru used Tizona’s Remedy.

Kokoru gained 100 AP!

Mmm, some good ol’ doping!

Tizona’s Remedy (OEX)

Type: Consumable Item

Grants the user 100 Art Points.

[Same effect as the skill War Cry]

Kokoru needed AP to summon his allied monsters, but his attacks couldn’t hit enemies, so his only way of building up AP was to be a punching bag.

However, Kokoru’s HP was very low. One wrong move, and he could go down before he even charged his AP. I’d entrusted him with this item to use it at the very start of the match.

However, the item was designated OEX; the O meant that you could only hold one at a time, while the EX meant you couldn’t give it to others.

In other words, he had had to kill the monster that dropped it himself. Thus, after the Golden Bunny info leak, we had gone to the now-emptied farming spot to grab it.

He couldn’t charge his own AP in today’s tournament, so we’d had to preserve this until now.

“Come to me, Infernal Armor! Baaawk!” Kokoru summoned his monster.

The orange Infernal Armor appeared, but this wasn’t the same one that had dragged Peater to his ring-out death.

Kokoru had six monsters recruited with Golden Sweets, but three of them were Infernal Armors. We had put so many on his roster because they had great synergy with him.

Besides these three, there were the Frost Eagle, the Deadly King, and a Cleric

Bunny—a monster we had hired just in case we needed help with healing.

Probably because he'd been battered by those Golden Bunnies so much, Kokoru had a hefty dislike for rabbits by now. In his own words, "Just looking at the Cleric Bunny makes my body hurt, bawk."

"Armor Possession, bawk!"

Clink, cling, clang!

This could be straight outta that one anime about saints! Let's ignore the fact that the armor's bright orange and sticking to a little chicken.

"Come at me!"

Kokoru made his way to the middle of the ring. I knew what he was after: gathering everyone in one place.

Keep it up, Kokoru!

Upon seeing his boldness, Alfred's expression hardened. "You've really grown. I can tell you're nothing like you were before. But you're not the only one!" He then unsheathed his swords.

Ooh, when did this guy learn dual-wielding?!

"Haaah!"

Alfred's swords were enveloped in a white glow.

Hey, is that light magic?

It seemed very on-brand for the NPC who'd grown the most. He may have been weak at first, but he had merely bloomed later than the rest. Alfred was very much like a hero—or maybe even a protagonist.

Kokoru, don't lose to a "good" character like him!

"So this is the real Kokoru, eh? I don't have any problems with you, but your guild master gets my blood boiling! You go down first!" Mikott shouted.

Fair. I did steal five points from her when she wasn't looking. She probably hates me for that. Sorry, Kokoru! Do your best!

“Erm... I suppose I shall join in too.” Bruno also readied his weapon. He was seriously just a generic-looking old guy.

Both ends of the staff he wielded were tipped with steel balls covered in spikes.

Though we had an alliance with Homura’s guild, the final battle was just a beatdown between NPCs, so they were free to fight as they pleased.

Alfred, Mikott, and Bruno all moved to attack Kokoru. As they closed the gap, a three-on-one battle began.

```
Alfred attacked.
Dealt 66 damage to Infernal Armor!
Mikott attacked.
Dealt 97 damage to Infernal Armor!
Bruno attacked.
Dealt 21 damage to Infernal Armor!
Infernal Armor attacked.
Dealt 71 damage to Alfred!
```

The logs showed that the Infernal Armor was clearly being pushed back, even if Bruno’s damage was lagging behind. He wasn’t that much of an attention-grabbing NPC, anyway.

Level-wise, Kokoru was 100, Mikott was 78, Alfred 75, and Bruno 73, so the enemy NPCs weren’t that far apart. Just a difference in talent, I guess. Mikott and Alfred were the elite, after all.

Meanwhile, Kokoru had overcome the wall of talent by redefining it!

The fact that Bruno had made it far was thanks to the fact that Homura’s gang of wizards was perfectly geared toward airship battles. Of course, Grand Museum had also received our help.

Infernal Armor attacked.

Dealt 187 damage to Bruno!

“Gah! He really packs a wallop!”

Bruno was the only one who looked like he might fall before Kokoru. If anything, I hoped he would outlast the other two so the final battle could be Kokoru versus Bruno.

Hang in there, gramps!

“I will best you, Kokoru! Ultimate move: Stardust Slash!”

“Me too! Ultimate move: Grand Breaker!”

The two elites’ ultimates were a direct hit on Fullmetal Kokoru. As a result, the Infernal Armor died and disappeared into thin air. Kokoru emerged naked from within.

“Now!”

Alfred and Mikott leapt in to attack Kokoru himself. Bruno was nearby, as well.

This was the ideal positioning! His AP was in good shape too.

“Deadly King, heed my call! Bawk!”

“WHOOOOO DAAARES...”

A loud, infernal groan boomed throughout the stadium.

Out comes the ace! The Deadly King we labored so much to obtain!

He was just as cool as ever with his firm build, shining armor, and crimson-red eyes!

Alfred and the others were appalled, but it was too late to run now!

“Bagawk! Attack them!”

Receiving Kokoru’s order, the Deadly King stabbed his sword into the ground.

“GAZE UPON ME! CRIMSON CALAMITY!”

Fwoooooom!

With the sword at the center, ferocious flames billowed forth. They spread outward, engulfing the three enemies. Having been countered like this when they tried to attack, they had no time to react.

```
Deadly King activated Crimson Calamity.
Dealt 2,525 damage to Alfred!
Deadly King has defeated Alfred.
Dealt 2,525 damage to Mikott!
Deadly King has defeated Mikott.
Dealt 2,525 damage to Bruno!
Deadly King has defeated Bruno.
```

Aww yeah! Everything went perfectly!

“What’s this?! We’re seeing quite the upset! Kokoru of Hell’s Crafters summoned a Deadly King to the arena and conquered the competition!”

Ahahahaha! Did you see that, everybody?! This is exactly why we kept his trump card a secret!

“Heck yeah! Just as planned!”

“We did it, Ren!”

Akira and I shared a high five.

“Well, that’s a wrap, folks! You saw it happen! With Kokoru Sanders as the last man standing, Hell’s Crafters is the winner!”

“Kokoru, that was awesome! Cheep, cheep, hooray!”

The cheepers were in a frenzy of excitement.

“See that? Your big bro’s crazy strong!”

“He is, cheep! You’re the best, Master!”

Darn right I am!

“Now, Ren Takashiro, guild master of the victorious Hell’s Crafters... Would you like to share your comments with us?”

A winged microphone fluttered its way over to me.

My comments? Hah! There’s only one thing I can say now!

“I RAISED THAT BOOOY!”

“And there you have it. Thank you for sharing!”

After receiving my commentary, the winged microphone flew back into the announcers’ booth in the middle of the stands.

Then, it stopped in midair.

A light-purple barrier had suddenly materialized, blocking its path.

“Huh?”

“Ren, look!” Akira pointed upward.

Suddenly, the purple barrier became a dome that encircled the arena.

Maybe I’m jumping to conclusions, but that color has to belong to an enemy! I feel it!

As it turned out, my assumption was correct.

“Mmheehee... Mwahaha!”

Alfred and Mikott were still fallen from the damage of Crimson Calamity, but Bruno slowly stood back up. Looking as though nothing happened, he let out a suspicious laugh.

Then, his appearance changed.

Bruno revealed himself to be a tidy, blue-haired young man with a fastidious air about him.

Level 80 Froi Jasin

Crown Icon (rare monster)

“Aaah! Froi?!”

Froi was an executive from the Holy Kingdom of Karanaught, a land at war with Mishuria, where Kokoru and the other NPCs were from.

He had appeared in Telluna during the outbreak of Prison Turtles before. But now, he had infiltrated the ranks of the hero NPCs!

Froi glared at us from inside the ring. “Been a while, eh? You might’ve gotten in my way before, but this time, I’m getting rid of these damned heroes before they can interfere with Karanaught.”

He strode toward Alfred, who struggled to pick himself up.

“I won’t let you hurt them, bawk! Deadly King!” Kokoru attempted to sic the Deadly King on him, but nobody was there to answer his call. “Bagawk?! Where’d he go?”

Argh, Deadly King! You went home because you thought the fight was over?! I can’t believe this happened at such a crucial moment!

While he had come through for us with Crimson Calamity, his wages were way too high for the work he was willing to do.

“Hmph!” Froi turned and seized Kokoru by the scruff of his neck. “How about I end you all forever? I’ll get all the top three at once!” His face twisted in an evil grin.

“Ren, we’ve gotta help him!”

“On it!”

Akira and I weren’t the only ones either.

“Heheh, count me in too! My dumb little sister might’ve made this mess, but I’ll be there to clean it up. I’m never gonna let her hear the end of this one!”

“Nobody asked for your help! You’re the one who put that Prison Turtle egg in our Grand Museum, aren’t you? Do you even *know* how long it took us to rearrange the exhibits after that? And how dare you trick us?! I’m gonna knock you into next week!”

Yukino and Homura were here with us.

Two level 200 upperclassmen to the rescue! Froi might be a rare monster, but he's only level 80. He doesn't stand a chance.

We even had Alfred's guild master, Hijirisawa, on our side!

"Ugh, what do I do? Alfred might be in real danger, but as the Baddest of the Bad, I'm dying to be the bad guy here!"

Oh, uh, do we have her? I'm not even sure anymore.

Worst-case scenario, either Yukino or Homura could detain Hijirisawa while the other sibling defeated Froi. Akira and I might not even have to lift a finger.

However, Froi's composed grin did not falter.

"Mwahahaha! Not happening!"

Accompanying Froi's voice, the venue surrounded by the dome was filled with a purple haze.

```
Froi activated Hadean Mist.
Ren's level was limited to 80!
Akira's level was limited to 80!
Kotomi's level was limited to 80!
Yuuna's level was limited to 80!
Nozomi's level was limited to 80!
Yukino's level was limited to 80!
Homura's level was limited to 80!
Aiko's level was limited to 80!
```

"Gah! He can restrict our levels?!"

None of our guildies were over level 80 in the first place, but for Yukino and the other guilds, this was a major downgrade.

"I'll personally send these so-called heroes to the underworld! They'll never see the light of day again!"

A magic circle with an ominous design appeared at Froi's feet.

"Cocytus Fall! Any heroes who fall into the underworld can never return! What a shame, after you wasted your time raising them!"

`Froi's Cocytus Fall will activate in 180 seconds!`

Oh god, it even has a countdown! Are they seriously gone forever after three minutes?!

"Oh, nooo! This is terrible! Even I didn't know about this event! What will happen to our heroes?! The barrier prevents me from helping in any way! All we can do is hope that the four top guilds sealed inside can save the day!"

Is this, like, a secret event? I guess this only happened because Froi-Bruno made it to the finals.

That meant we had helped him unknowingly. Regardless, he had to be stopped, or this would end in disaster!

Leaving all the other details aside, Kokoru was our friend!

"Three minutes! We've gotta get in there and fight!"

Level 80 or not, Yukino was still Yukino. She boldly leapt into battle first.

"Oh, I don't think so. Did you forget about me?"

Hijirisawa blocked Yukino's path and swung her huge scythe down!

"Argh, seriously?!"

"A PvP battle with the lives of your precious heroes at stake. Delicious, isn't it? Do you feel it stoking the flames of PvP love within you?"

"Quit being an idiot! There's a time and a place, Aiko!"

"Bwahaha. Taste my vengeance! Oh, and I apologize in advance!"

"Alfred's up there too! Are you really okay with him disappearing?!"

"Even I am not that much of a monster." Hijirisawa glanced at Alfred.

"Aiko, help!"

“You there, Froi. Sorry to bother you while you’re mid-cast, but might you let Alfred free? If you do, I’ll cooperate with your evil machinations.”

“What? Shut the hell up, you little brat! I don’t need your help. Run home and suckle on your mommy!”

To be fair, Hijirisawa looked like a little girl. On the worst of days, she looked like an elementary schooler. It seemed like Froi’s words ticked her right off.

“Grr! I’ll have you know that I’m eighteen years old! Fine, then! Yukino, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. For now, we cooperate! But only because we have to, got it? Let’s get ’em!”

I didn’t see the point of all these theatrics, especially seeing as relief was written all over her face.

“Ugh, you’re way too much. If you wanna help, just say so from the start!”

“Huh?! Erm, no, of course I don’t! I told you, I’m just doing this because the enemy of my enemy is my friend!”

Guess she was trying to find a way to play co-op while also role-playing the bad guy?

Seeing as Froi was so intent on getting rid of Kokoru and the rest, it wasn’t like he would’ve agreed. She probably knew he would refuse and just pretended to try to negotiate with him. Even Hijirisawa had to feel for Alfred in some way.

Now, it was great that she would help out, but an entire minute had been wasted on this exchange!

`Froi’s Cocytus Fall will activate in 120 seconds!`

Two minutes left!

“I’ll have this wrapped up in no time. Volcanic Flames!”

Homura’s flame magic rained down on Froi!

“Hmph. Arise, accursed frozen ents!”

Chakatachakata!

Frozen trees started to rise from the ground all over, each coated in shimmering ice! Faces formed on their trunks, and they moved with their branches as arms and roots as legs. They fit pretty well into the Treant archetype.

Level 68 Cocytus Treant

Crown Icon (rare monster)

There were a lot of them! Ten, at the very least.

Chakatachakata!

Homura activated Volcanic Flames.

The Cocytus Treant protected Froi.

Dealt 122 damage to Cocytus Treant!

As the log said, the Cocytus Treant had protected Froi from the attack and took it in his place. About half of them encircled Froi to protect him, entangling their branches to create a defensive wall.

“He’s just trying to buy time!”

“We’d better hurry!”

Chakatachakata!

The other half, meanwhile, came to attack!

“Everyone, gather together! I’m going to buff us!” Homura called out, and we

immediately ran over to her. “This one’s expensive, so you’d better thank me later!”

She revealed a lamp-like item and held it aloft. Red particles flowed from within and washed over us.

Homura used God of War’s Incense!

Ren’s attack and magic increased!

Akira’s attack and magic increased!

Kotomi’s attack and magic increased!

Yuuna’s attack and magic increased!

Nozomi’s attack and magic increased!

Yukino’s attack and magic increased!

Homura’s attack and magic increased!

Aiko’s attack and magic increased!

Ooh, an attack buff. Now’s the time to strike!

“Thanks, Homura!”

“Pfft, don’t thank her. It’s her fault!”

“Wha?! Thank me, darn it! You meatheads couldn’t dream of having items this helpful!”

“Hah. I’ll break their wall! Ren, you think of a way to deal with the ones coming over here!” Yukino said, charging toward the impenetrable wall.

“Oh, I can take care of that!” Yano interjected. “Spitfire, can you use some AoE magic to hit the ones comin’ at us? After that, I’ll take all the aggro!”

Homura uses AoE magic, then Yano uses Guilty Steal to take all the aggro. I get it.

“Draco, stick close to Yano!”

“Chirp! Yes, sir!”

Might as well throw in my Enervating Circle to help her run a marathon!

This would drag the enemies away.

“Allow me to add my support!” Akabane shouted.

“Count me in as well!” Maeda added.

I turned to Akira and Hijirisawa. “You two, come with me! We’ll help Yukino deal with that wall!”

“Gotcha!”

“Very well. For once, I’ll play along with you.”

“Let’s get started!” Homura said as she battered the enemy with her wide-range magic.

Chakatachakata! Chakata!

The Cocytus Treants in the blast all turned their attention to her!

“Guilty Steal!”

Then, Yano dragged all aggro away from Homura! Now she had the whole group’s attention.

“Enervating Circle!”

Likewise, I wasted no time in targeting Draco with a movement-slowing field. I made the radius rather large, partly to help prep for my ultimate.

Yano readied her shield and spoke with confidence. “Cool! Leave it to me now!”

She had picked a tank job when she started off, so I imagine she delighted in these kinds of situations.

“You got it,” I said. “C’mon, girls!”

We needed to give Yukino a hand.

“Hey, Hijirisawa? Mind if I turn into you?” Akira asked her.

As of right now, she was still in her school uniform. Even in a tense situation

like this, she couldn't be seen.

"What? Uh, sure?"

"Thanks! I'll go right ahead."

She gave Hijirisawa a little smack with the Mimic Fan and immediately activated Mimic.

With a *pop* and a puff of smoke, there were two Hijirisawas.

Akira gasped in surprise. "Whoa! You're so light, haha! It's so easy to move like this."

"You're insulting my bosoms, aren't you?! Are you that proud of your size?!"

"Oh, um, sorry. This is just so easy that I—"

"No time for that! We're down to ninety seconds!" I interjected.

Yukino was already at the wall of trees. With her combined dual-wielding and kicking attacks, she attacked the wall relentlessly.

```
Yukino attacked.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 40 damage.
Yukino attacked.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 52 damage.
Yukino attacked.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 44 damage.
```

Man, these things are annoying!

They didn't even care about dealing damage; they just guarded. They weren't even moving out of their guard stances! Even with Homura's buff, it was too much.

I'd better start attacking too, so I can grab some AP!

Four of us were attacking through one tree's guard, but its HP bar didn't even fall 30%.

This is really bad!

Froi's Cocytus Fall will activate in 60 seconds!

At this rate, we weren't even gonna make it through the wall.

"All right, fine. Infinite Reversal!"

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 77 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 73 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 75 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 72 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 77 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 74 damage.
Cocytus Treant guarded the attack, taking 76 damage.

We were grinding it down faster now, but the knockback wasn't working at all. It remained rooted to the spot.

Even strong knockback doesn't work on them?!

As if things couldn't get any worse...

Chakatachakata!

Cocytus Treant began glowing!
Cocytus Treant activated Sunbathe.
Cocytus Treant recovered 1,348 HP!

The one we were attacking replenished all its HP!

“What?! Recovery, seriously?!”

Though it wasn’t coming back at us, the tree was gaining AP steadily from our attacks. It then used that AP to heal, which meant that no matter how much we whaled on it, we would never kill it!

At this rate, the tree could use the AP gained from our attacks to maintain maximum HP by using its recovery skill. We had to grind it down while reducing our number of attacks, to keep it from gaining AP!

Chakatachakata!

Then, more Treants started moving! The ones on either side of the fully recovered Treant glared at us, their eyes glowing like spotlights.

Cocytus Treant activated Sapping Light.

The special effects on Ren faded!

The special effects on Yukino faded!

Yukino groaned. “They can remove buffs too?!”

“Looks like it!”

We squinted at the bright light as the Treant on the left zapped us. The one on the right activated the same skill, targeting Akira and Hijirisawa.

At the very least, I was grateful we’d been hit with it first so I could warn her. “Akira, change your gear! They’re gonna see you!”

“Equipment Set C!” she shouted.

The light hit her not a second later.

Cocytus Treant activated Sapping Light.

The special effects on Akira faded!

The special effects on Aiko faded!

Bathed in the light, Akira returned to normal. She had made it in time, however, so she was wearing her uniform.

Phew! That was close!

“Thanks, Ren!”

“No prob!”

I looked back at the trees, wondering if they had intentionally activated once the one between them had healed. But then, the eyes of the Treants even farther away from the center lit up in the same way.

Whoa. Do they all just do it in a row?!

At this rate, even if Akira transformed again, she’d lose the transformation in seconds!

`Froi’s Cocytus Fall will activate in 30 seconds!`

Gah! Not good, not good!

With our attack buffs dispelled, they were getting even harder to take down! As long as they guarded, even my ultimate wouldn’t do much.

What to do, what to do?!

No matter how much I thought, only one answer came to mind.

“Hey, Ren! Akira! I’m just gonna say it now, bawk! I’m glad you two chose me, baaawk! Thank you, and farewell!” Kokoru called to us, trapped and immobilized by the magic circle.

“Kokoru!” we shouted back, nearing tears.

Mikott likewise shouted to her guild master, “I had lots of fun! Thanks for everything, Yukino!”

“No way! You can’t give up yet!” Yukino yelled back.

Alfred piped up, “Erm, me too! Aiko, you made me do some rather strange

things, but I appreciate your taking care of me! I'm eternally grateful!"

"Alfred, I... Argh, bad guys don't need thanks!"

I can't let this be our last goodbye!

Truthfully, I hated depressing endings like this. I just *had* to do something about it. In that case, we had to use our secret weapon!

"Akira, I know how risky it is, but we have no other choice."

"Yeah, I getcha. We can't sit back and let this happen!" As the Sapping Light flowed over her, Akira shouted, "Equipment Set B!"

Then, she emerged wearing Angelic Charm.

Normally, I would have been all for this, but it was bad news for us that her family's representative was watching.

Still, this was all we could do!

Honestly, its defensive capabilities were kinda lame compared to other equipment available to us at this level, but Angelic Charm had a special effect that more than made up for it: guard nullification! Their ridiculous guard was ineffective against Akira when she wore Angelic Charm.

“Here goes! Follow me, Ren! Yukino, Hijirisawa—you do the same!”

With that, Akira closed in on one Cocytus Treant.

Akira attacked.

Dealt 140 damage to Cocytus Treant!

Akira attacked.

Dealt 152 damage to Cocytus Treant!

Akira attacked.

Dealt 144 damage to Cocytus Treant!

Now her normal attacks really packed a wallop!

“Take this! Ultimate move: Aerial Cresceeent!”

Scooping the enemy up as she slashed with a crescent moon effect, Akira sent the Cocytus Treant flying up near the ceiling of the dome. Then, she unleashed her second crescent moon strike! Thanks to her dual-wielding, she also got a third shot in.

It was hidden by the graphics, but there was yet *another* hit due to Skyfall’s shock waves. Big damage was sure to result.

“Now’s your chance! Slip through!”

With an enemy thrown into the sky, there was now a hole in the wall.

Nice job, Akira! Things have improved dramatically!

Yukino, Hijirisawa, and I broke through the enemy defenses.

Chakatachakata!

Once we had infiltrated their defenses, the Cocytus Treants gave up on their incessant guarding and moved to remove us from the circle.

Hijirisawa activated her art. “Move aside! Cyclooone Scythe!”

A cyclone whipped up, blowing away the Cocytus Treants!

So knockback does *work when they aren't guarding!*

Then, Yukino unleashed her ultimate on Froi!

"Ultimate move: Infinite Reversal!"

"Tch!"

Froi guarded, stopping the Infinite Reversal in place. It broke his guard a little, but as long as he kept guarding, it wouldn't do much damage. Maybe 50 guard break per hit. Froi was even tankier than his trees!

"But your back is wide open. Allow me to chop you in half! Ultimate move: Reaping Double-Cross!"

Her ultimate attack struck four times, creating two overlapping Xs. She landed a powerful direct hit on him from behind.

```
Aiko activated Reaping Double-Cross.
Dealt 1,640 damage to Froi Jasin!
```

"Nnngh! Damn you! Only cowards attack from the rear!"

"Hah. You flatter me! Thanks for the compliment!"

Seeing this, I activated my own skill.

"Final Strike! And here comes my ultimate!"

I unsheathed my Canesword, threw it up high, and then sprang into the air.

As Froi bent backward and stopped guarding from the pain of the strike to his back, Infinite Reversal started dealing direct damage.

```
Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
Dealt 187 damage to Froi Jasin!
Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.
Dealt 187 damage to Froi Jasin!
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Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Dealt 187 damage to Froi Jasin!

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Dealt 187 damage to Froi Jasin!

Yukino activated Infinite Reversal.

Dealt 187 damage to Froi Jasin!

But we weren't even close to done!

"Eat this! Descending Azure Dragon!"

Ren activated Descending Azure Dragon.

Dealt 5,735 damage to Froi Jasin!

"Gaaaaah?! Damn yoooou!"

His HP bar was below half now.

Froi's Cocytus Fall will activate in 15 seconds!

He was still up, though, and we didn't have much time. We had to finish him off all at once. I speedily forged a new Canesword and moved to change my equipment. Meanwhile, Yukino heaped on even more attacks.

"Haaaah! Ultimate move: Shooting Star Rush!"

On top of the effects of Infinite Reversal, she began her shining, consecutive-kicking attack! Damage logs gushed like a waterfall, filling the log window!

While I was more of a maximum-damage one-shotter, Yukino was more of a rush attacker. What a ridiculous amount of hits!

As a result, her ability to grind him down was just disgusting.

Froi's Cocytus Fall will activate in 5 seconds!

But he *still* hadn't fallen!

Hijirisawa was attacking as well, but we needed one more hand on deck. I finished my preparations and charged Froi.

This is when Akira does her thing.

"Ren! Sword Samba!"

Akira activated Sword Samba.

All of Ren's skills are now available for use!

Yeah, I knew she'd come through! That's my best friend!

I wanted to watch her dance in Angelic Charm, but I didn't have the time. Sadly, I wouldn't be able to gawk at this one.

Now, it was up to me to land the final blow! I crouched down, unscrewed the top of the Canesword, and unleashed a Quickdraw.

"It's over! Ultimate move: Dead Eeend!"

Smaaaaash!

A purple glow covered the sword as I swung it, tearing through Froi.

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 4,279 damage to Froi Jasin!

Ren has defeated Froi Jasin.

“Damn you all! You’re not half bad, let me just say that!” Froi shouted.

His body began to flicker and eventually disappeared. At the same time, the magic circle of Cocytus Fall faded.

“Bawk? Hey, I can move, bawk! We’re saved! Thank you, everyone, baaawk!”

Nice. We were just in time.

I sighed in relief. “Man, we were cutting it close.”

Akira came dashing over. “We did it, Ren! Kokoru and the NPCs are all safe now!”

“Yeah, we did!” High five! “Oh, uh, sorry we couldn’t keep you hidden.”

As much as I loved Angelic Charm, this was surely gonna ruffle her family’s feathers.

“Ah, well. This was the only way we could win. I don’t regret it!” Akira said with a smile.

My best friend is such a good girl.

◆◇◆

“I’m so sorry!”

Akira swiftly bowed her head to Arima in apology. We had met up with him in the audience stands.

Arima sighed and looked at her with disdain. “Milady, even if this is a video game, a daughter of the Aoyagi family mustn’t dress like that in front of others. I’ll have to report this to the head of the household. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Akira hung her head in silence.

Akabane was furious. “Now, you hold on right there! Akira did that only to protect the lives of others! Don’t you think that makes it worth turning a blind eye to?!”

“I have no particular issue with it myself, but the Aoyagi family has standards for their daughter’s attire. Unlike yours, her family values modesty and celibacy,” Arima answered, not faltering in the slightest. His tone was sharp.

I figured it was because Akabane was wearing the sword dancer gear. For the Aoyagi family, that was a hard no.

“Excuse me? Do you mean to call my family a bunch of shameless attention-seekers?! Even when it’s merely a video game?!”

I mean, your brother definitely takes it too far!

“It may just be an item in a video game, but the fact that you keep something like that on hand begs the question of whether you lack self-awareness. That sort of issue extends beyond a virtual world.”

“What a blockhead. You’re far too close-minded!” Akabane angrily turned away.

“I am here to represent the head of the Aoyagi household, and thus I serve as an extension of their values.”

Put simply, Arima believed that Akira’s family would be enraged to see her like that. This was bad. Akira herself had said that if she wasn’t careful, she could be pulled out of school.

I couldn’t just let that slide after all she’d done for Kokoru!

I stepped forward, taking Akabane’s place at the bat. “Er, excuse me. Can I butt in?”

“You are... Takashiro, correct?”

“Uh, yeah. So, about the clothes, I’m the one who told her to use them. I’m the one who told her to use the class I wanted too. So basically, it’s all my fault! Sorry for that! Don’t get mad, please!”

“You?”

“Yeah. She was against it at first, but I begged and begged.”

“Then I suppose there won’t be an issue if you stay away from her from now on?”

“What? No, that’s not fair! It was my choice to be a sword dancer, anyway!” Akira turned sharply toward Arima. “Arima, please! Don’t tell Daddy and the family about this! And it’s not Ren’s fault either, so don’t do anything crazy!”

“Milady, listen—”

“Please! Just this once! If you don’t, then...”

“Erm, yes?”

“I’ll... I’ll do whatever I can to get you fired!”

Incredibly, she invoked her power over him! I had to wonder about how ethical this was, but Akira was very serious. She stared him down, as if daring him to defy her.

“Milady... Ahahaha. Hahahaha!” Arima burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?! I’m serious!”

“Ahaha, nothing, I’m sorry. You’re normally so passive when it comes to family matters, so I thought you were just trying to avoid dealing with them. But for you to go so far, to use your family’s power to try to keep my lips sealed, you must have really come to love this establishment.” He seemed happy; he must’ve been worried about Akira in his own way.

“Yes! I have more fun here than anywhere else, so I want to stay!”

“I always thought you so despondent at home, like a caged bird. But here, you’re so very lively and excited. It’s wonderful, honestly.” He sighed. “Very well, your secret is safe with me. But this is my own arbitrary decision, so do not expect others to do the same. Be careful.”

“Thanks, man!”

Arima looked at me. “I imagine she’s this outgoing because of your presence. I could tell as much from watching. Therefore, allow me to offer my thanks. But don’t make her wear such embarrassing outfits, please.”

“Uh, okay.”

And with that, it seemed Akira’s family situation would be okay after all. We could live happily ever after!

A closing ceremony was held, putting an end to this competitive guild mission and the parentally supervised battle royale.

It had been one heck of a day.

Just before the forced logout time of 10:00 p.m., I relaxed on the balcony of the guild house and gazed at the sky.

“Man, so much happened today. I’m beat.”

“Good work out there, Ren.”

I heard a voice from behind me. Upon turning around, I saw Akira standing there with a radiant smile.

“Oh, hey, Akira. I figured you’d logged out by now.”

“I did. But I figured *you* were still here, so I came back.” She sidled up next to me. “Thanks for earlier. I’m really happy you covered for me.”

“Nah. It was you who made it work, anyway.”

“I did have to force it, though... but at least Arima has some sympathy. That wouldn’t have worked with Daddy. Besides, I bet the only reason Arima listened to me was because of you.”

“Huh? Think so?”

“Yeah! He saw us having so much fun and decided it would be too sad to put an end to it. And, well, the reason it’s so fun is because you’re here. That’s why I’m so thankful to you.”

“Hey, no prob! But I gotta say the same to you. I can only have this much fun because you’re here, Akira.”

“Then let’s keep going on adventures together!”

“Yeah!”

We exchanged another high five.

“We really should think about a way to deal with the sword dancer gear, though. I never thought it’d be that big of a deal.”

“Yep. But we’ll figure it out.”

Instead of pulling her hand away from mine, she gave it a squeeze. My heart skipped a beat at the sensation.

“Uh... What’s up?”

“Hm? It’s fine, isn’t it? We’re gonna get kicked off soon, so let’s just stay like this until then.”

The two of us held hands until the clock struck ten.

Afterword

First off, thank you so much for buying my book. You've just read volume 4 of *Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy*!

This is sudden, but there's something I have to apologize for. I wanted to write another extra story in this volume, but the book was already so long that I couldn't squeeze it in. Sorry about that; I'll make adjustments to the next volume to ensure that one gets included.

Though I'm still not sure *what* to write in the next volume, so that's... a minor issue. Everything except for "having fun playing games" is kind of made up on the spot. When I think about how I could write anything else as long as I stick to that, it actually gets even harder.

For stories with solid objectives, you can work backward from the end to figure out the story's progression. But not so much when it comes to this one. I'd say that anyone who's made it this far is probably okay with that, so as long as this work continues, I'd like to keep going with that general feel.

I have an idea of how it all will end, but how we get there, nobody knows!

I started off on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* with this work, but now I've started writing other things on the platform as well. It feels like everything I do lately is just me flying by the seat of my pants! It's kinda scary!

At some point, I'd like to write a tightly planned war story. Is there any demand for it, I wonder?

That aside, as I mentioned before, this marks the fourth volume of this series. This is officially my longest-running series now, which is very exciting. In sports terms, you could call it a personal record. I'll keep working harder and harder to break my own records!

Finally, to my lead editor N, my lead artist Hika Akita, and everyone else involved, I thank all of you for your considerable efforts.

The illustrations in this volume are wonderful too! I'm always so excited to

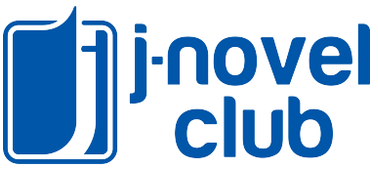
see them. Hopefully, I'll get to see even more.

Well, see you next time!

Hayaken
Illustration: Hika Akita
"Hey, can I really pilot? Huh?!"
"I'm ready to grab some screenshots."
Maeda's eyes were aglitter. Akira already had her Otherwordly Lens in hand.
Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy 4

“Now, Mimic!”
With a little *pop!*, Akira was enveloped in white smoke.
CHANGE!
What emerged from the smoke was an Island Bunny dual-wielding Skyfall and the Mimic Fan.

Now
she wore a pink,
painted mask and
that stupid little
red scarf.
She had been
influenced by
Akabane's guild.
"How
could they
do this to
you?!"



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Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy: Volume 4

by Hayaken

Translated by Benjamin Daughety Edited by teiko

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