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SOL PRESS


"My name is Akira Aoyagi.
Pleased to meet all of you."
SHE SMILED, DESPITE HER OBVIOUS NERVOUSNESS.
AKIRA AOYAGI? ISN'T THAT MY LIFELONG FRIEND'S FULL NAME?!
IS THIS AKIRA?! OR IS THIS SOME SORT OF CRAZY COINCIDENCE?!


YUUNA YANO
CLASS PALADIN
LEVEL 24
THE ACE PLAYER OF REN'S CLASS.
SHE HAS A GAUDY APPEARANCE, BUT SHE'S ACTUALLY A SHUT-IN GAMER.
CHARACTER
KOTOMI MAEDA
CLASS SCHOLAR
LEVEL 18
THE CLASS REP OF REN'S CLASS.
SHE'S SMART AND FOCUSED, BUT SHE'S NEW TO MMOS, SO SHE ACCIDENTALLY CHOSE A WEAK STARTING CLASS.
CHARACTER
AKIRA AOYAGI
CLASS SWORD DANCER
LEVEL 1
A GIRL WHO STARTED SCHOOL A MONTH LATE.
SHE'S ACTUALLY REN'S GAMING BUDDY FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL. ALWAYS BRIGHT AND CHEERFUL, WITH A LUCKY STREAK.
CHARACTER
REN TAKASHIRO
CLASS SYMBOLOGIST
LEVEL 4
A BOY WITH A PASSION FOR VIDEO GAMES.
HIS HOBBY IS USING THE WEAKEST CLASSES AND SKILLS TO REDEFINE THE META AND GIVE THEM A PLACE IN THE SPOTLIGHT.
CHARACTER


CAN THIS FOUR-MAN PARTY
DEFEAT SHADOW DRAGON DIABLO?!
THE KEY TO VICTORY IS, OF COURSE...
REDEFINING THE META!

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Prologue

It all started in the autumn of my third year in middle school. My life had become so busy that I'd begun to lose sight of my future—

"Hey, Ren. Made up your mind on high school yet?"

The chat window on my computer displayed those words. The sender was a bulky beastman-like avatar who went by the name of Akira. An online friend of mine, he joined this MMORPG, Eternal Fantasy (EF), with me—as was tradition with any other game.

"Meh. I guess I'd go with whatever's close," I responded.

My avatar, Ren (taken from my full name, Ren Takashiro), sat atop the summit of a mountain, taking in the spectacular views around him.

You wouldn't expect it from his avatar, but Akira happened to love beautiful vistas like this. He'd bring me here every day so we could chew the fat about nothing in particular. I wasn't much for sightseeing, myself, so I'd sit around, synthesizing items to raise my skill level instead.

Even in that moment, I was toiling away at item synthesis.

"Seriously, man? How boring can you get?"

"What? I'm just trying to forge this level 99 Crimson Hammer. If I mess this up, my wallet's gonna cry."

"Screw the forging, man! This is your *future* we're talking about here!" Akira was a third-year middle schooler, just like me.

"What's wrong with going to an ordinary, nearby high school?"

"Ordinary is boring! It doesn't get much worse than ordinary."

"Really? I think it's good enough for me."

"You know what they say—don't just be another robot! Live a little!"

"I guess I have heard that. In TV commercials." Not that those ads seem terribly unbiased. "So why'd you ask about my plans?"

“Oh, well, I was thinking about going to Yosei Academy. Wanna come with?”

“Yosei? Oh, was that the Gaming Academy?”

“Yeah! That’s the one.”

I was familiar with the name. Apparently, it’s an academy that incorporates gaming into all of their lessons. They’ve advanced past mere MMOs—they’re even using VRMMO technology now, with lessons all taking place in that VRMMO. They really embody the “study hard, play hard“ school of thought, so to speak. I could hardly imagine a better school.

“But tuition is really expensive, right?”

“Not like we have to worry about that. Plus, get this—they say your grades will go up even when you’re gaming all day! Sounds fun as heck, yeah? Come on!”

“Well, I can’t say I’m opposed to the idea.” I just didn’t think VRMMOs were in my budget. On the other hand, this was undeniably an exciting prospect for a gamer like me. To be honest, I was starting to seriously envision myself there.

“Besides, we’re pretty heavy gamers.”

“True.”

“Basically, we’re like addicts. Straight up otaku!”

“I guess the rest of the world would see us in that light.”

“So in an ordinary school, people would think we’re weird. We’d live lonely high school lives.”

“I guess, but that doesn’t bother me much. What about you?” I get that from my parents. They’d always tell me to “find your own interests“ and “forget what anyone else says,” so when I started playing video games all day, they were actually supportive of me. Though I suppose my dad working in game development might play a part in that.

“A normal person would think we’re freaks. But at the Gaming Academy, we’d be surrounded by comrades!”

“Hmm.”

“Gamers in all directions! And we could be kings among gamers. Even *you* could be popular, buddy! Man, what a turn of events that would be.”

“Even me? What’s that supposed to mean?” Was this guy actually Mr. Popular Pretty Boy? Heck if I know. We’ve been friends for years, but we’ve never met offline. “Well? How popular are *you*?”

“Hah! Not even a little.”

There’s one thing I could say with certainty: if things kept going as they were, we’d be virgins for life. Did I honestly care, though? I’m sure there are plenty of guys like us out there. If you’re happy with your life, what’s the problem? That’s not to say I don’t care about girls, mind you, but games before dames is my motto.

“All right, that settles it. Gaming Academy, here we come!”

“Whoa, whoa. This seems like way too big of a plot development.”

“Who cares?! We can keep hanging out and playing games together! C’mon, maaaan!” Contrary to his bulky, gruff avatar, this guy seemed to be either childish or hyperactive. Honestly, I wasn’t sure which. Nonetheless, he’s a good guy, and I do enjoy playing games with him.

Besides, what’s wrong with two guys making a big decision for their future together?! It’s not like I gave it any thought before, anyway; I was just planning to go to any run-of-the-mill nearby school.

“...Yeah, I’m in! I’ll go ask my parents.”

“Woo! You get me, Ren!”

With that, my future was set. I took the entrance exam for Yosei, the Gaming Academy, and passed, as did Akira. I was so pumped to play more games with my bud starting in the spring. But...

Akira, the boy who swore we’d do this together, never came to me.

CHAPTER 1: AKIRA IS... AKIRA?

Ding dong, ding doooong.

The first bell rang throughout the fantasy world's class-like room. Sat beside the window, I stared vacantly at the world around me. It was like the classroom was floating—clouds beside us, people visible far below... and there was a good reason for that. This school was actually set amidst a floating city.

The students in this room were all first-year, class E. Everyone looked different: there were warriors in full armor, leather-clad swordsmen, mages in pointy hats. I was a mage myself, clad in a robe and hood of deep indigo. Being in a game, there wasn't a single set uniform, but the academy did distribute uniforms as rudimentary equipment.

The core of Yosei Academy was the VRMMORPG, Unlimited World (UW). I had logged into UW from my home PC and waited for class to begin. As for the game itself, I was a student of magic in the floating city of Telluna which lay at the center of the game world, high above the sea, where I took normal classes. Hard to beat that commute, I can say that much.

The school was accessible from anywhere in Japan, simply because there *was* no physical school—it was based entirely in cyberspace. Even our textbooks were like in-game ebook items. Paperless, borderless, school-less, futuristic—that's how the teacher referred to it. This school was evidently big into experimental teaching.

Apparently, the funding for this undertaking came from an alliance of gaming corporations. In other words, this was a collaboration between gaming and education, one that would seek out the hidden potential in video gaming. In doing so, the education industry seemed to be gasping for air in a society with declining birth rates that threatened to choke it to death... or at least, that was my impression when I looked at it from a broader perspective.

But I didn't sweat the complex details like that. I was *gaming*, and that was all that mattered.

When school was in session, we were taking classes in this game. Afterwards,

we were free to do whatever we pleased—we could do quests, grind for levels, and other typical MMO things.

It had been a month since I started school, and I'd gotten used to this lifestyle.

"Do you have a moment, Takashiro?" The class rep, Maeda, spoke to me. She came off a bit aloof at times, but she was an elegant, demure girl if I've ever seen one.

To help the motion engine function smoothly, the game reflected your physical body in your avatar design, but you were free to edit your hairstyle and hair color. Maeda hadn't even bothered with that, however. She must be a no-nonsense kind of person. Oh, but I guess I hadn't messed with my hair, either. I just hadn't really felt the need.

"Hmm? Sure, what's up?"

"Your level is looking a bit lower than the class average. Is anything the matter?" I was a level four rune mage at the time.

"Uh? Hey, hold up a sec." I opened the settings window and enabled the simple stat screen.

Kotomi Maeda (1-E) Level 18 Scholar; no status icons.

I took a quick look at my fellow students. Everyone else was around level 15 to 20. Hoo boy, I was definitely bringing up the rear.

"I don't mean to pressure you, but I'd appreciate it if you could catch up and help us on the big quest. I can powerlevel you if necessary."

My first major event involved a competitive quest that was assigned to all first-years. The event was still ongoing. The quest challenged us to travel to Trinisty Island and defeat a boss monster that was spawning tons of mobs. More specifically, it was a race to see which class could slay it the fastest, and the winning class would acquire in-game bonuses.

As the class rep, Maeda was essentially our party leader, so it was up to her to bring us together.

I just wasn't ready to grind levels yet, though. Just before the entrance ceremony, I'd received a message from Akira. He said he wouldn't be around

for the start of classes because he was hospitalized due to an injury. It would've been nice if he could just take his VR device with him to the hospital, but the thing is absolutely huge—you have to lie inside, like a tanning bed, to use it. It probably would've been more trouble than it was worth.

Sure, our promise had been hastily made, but I still wanted to keep it. I had planned to wait for Akira to join the game so we could grind together. After all, the discovery phase of a new game is the best part. I wanted to enjoy that with my good buddy Akira.

But Maeda was worried about me, so I didn't want to make excuses. She wasn't the party leader because she wanted to be, either; she was assigned the class rep role thanks to her entrance exam grade. It naturally followed that she would be the party leader. On top of that, this was her first MMO, since she was mainly an offline gamer. Even so, she was doing her best, so I figured I should cooperate.

"Oh, sorry! I'm just off to a slow start. I'll try to catch up as soon as I can." All I could give her was a vague, unreliable answer.

At that point, someone called from across the room.

"Hey, Kotomi! Kotomiiii!"

Yuuna Yano (1-E) Level 24 Paladin; no status icons.

Wow, now *that's* a high level. She's probably the ace of our class right now. And a paladin, at that. As the tank that holds the party together, she's pretty much the star of the show. Kinda surprising that she's one of those gaudy gal types, though. You don't see many like her with their tanned skin and bleached hair these days.

So yeah, a gaudy paladin. Yuuna had sort of an indifferent demeanor, but she was cute enough.

"Yes, Yuuna?"

"You don't have to powerlevel Takashiro. No worries." From what I've heard, my classmates often party up together after class to grind levels for the big quest. Yano probably joins them every day as their tank.

If you weren't aware, tanks are fighters that can shrug off damage and protect party members from damage. It's easily the most important role in a party. Even if the rest of the party sucks, a tank can carry them. And Yano's one of the best, I hear. She has a ton of experience with online gaming.

While we're at it, Maeda's scholar class is focused on dealing damage. Meanwhile, my symbologist class is supportive.

"Yuuna, how can you not be worried about him?"

"You might not know it, but Takashiro's pretty famous in gaming communities. They call him Ren, the Emperor of Underpowered. In every game he plays, he gravitates to the least-used classes and somehow gets good enough to rival the top players. He did it in EF, Demquest, and more."

Not long ago, the class was idly discussing what games we've played before, during which she recognized my name. *She's just someone who recognizes me from other games*, I figured, and there we were in class talking about it like it was nothing. It was only natural in a school for gamers. Here, there were no unwritten rules that demanded you must hide your gaming addiction. Indeed, this was the epitome of comfort for us gamers, who no longer had to keep our guard up at every moment.

"Really, Takashiro?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say I'm *famous*. It's just a hobby, is all."

I liked giving the hopeless and forgotten their chance to shine in the spotlight, you could say. My parents are baseball nerds, so let me explain it in those terms. Think of it like how Nomura's known for his style of breathing life into benched players, or old southpaws learning new tricks, or athletes making comebacks through tryouts, or an up-and-coming player unlocking his hidden potential. They all have this *drama* to them. Not to mention, other people don't play these classes, so it's easy to be the first to discover new uses for them.

But of course, sometimes it just doesn't work out. Yano brought up my successes, but I've had just as many failures. Most of those were experienced alongside Akira.

"So hey, I guess you went and picked a bogus class for UW too? I think you've

got a good chance of making it work, at least, so I say go nuts."

Even in UW, there are a few underpowered classes. Players refer to them as a whole as "Bummers." The class I chose, symbologist, was known as the pinnacle of the Bummers. It's effective at exploiting enemy weaknesses, but that's about it. I can't learn offensive magic, I can't use weapons other than staves, and my stats are laughable at best.

With the class's poor weapon options, it really sets itself apart as the worst class in the game. Even the cleric class can wield maces while they heal allies, and other classes that can't use strong physical weapons at least have magic to make up for it.



The cherry on top is that you can't exactly say it's even the best at supporting. Minstrels, meanwhile, the top supporting class, can buff allies while debuffing enemies. They also have the advantage of wielding bows, increasing their fighting capabilities. Symbologists, meanwhile, can only debuff, and they run out of MP fast. Minstrel songs don't even require MP to use.

The worst combat ability, and not even the best supporting ability. Symbologists can't solo any bosses, and it's not exactly the best class to take into parties. So that's symbologist in a nutshell. It's honestly kind of impressive how poorly-designed they are. The least popular job in the game and the biggest bummer of all Bummers.

During our orientation, second-year students came to talk to us. They taught us about the class tier list of UW. Naturally, I chose the worst of the worst. *I'm gonna redefine the symbologist meta and give it a place in the spotlight!* After all, what's the point of playing if you're not having fun? That's just my playstyle! I was really pumped to party up with Akira and waste all my time on trial-and-error methods to make this class work out.

"Your methods are unconventional, but as long as I can expect results from you..."

"Just give me a little time." Until Akira arrives, I'm going to avoid leveling up. But thanks to that, I've got plenty of time for trial-and-error, and the redefinition of the symbologist meta is already in its first stages. Plus, I'm free to move to the training stage whenever need be.

"No worries! But that means you might not get a chance to help us clear the mission."

"Oh, speaking of which... how's the raid going?"

"Pretty well. We're like, 80% of the way through."

"We might just be able to get the first clear."

Good. That means I can keep waiting for Akira. On that note, the homeroom teacher finally came in.

"Helloooo! Good morning, my lowbie nooblords."

Her demeanor was lighthearted and frank, and her appearance stereotypical of an academic mage. Her name was Ms. Nakada, apparently 24 years of age. Her beauty and cheerful nature were fitting for someone who was in this school's inaugural class.

"Sorry, everyone! Another day of boring school. But first, an announcement!" Ooh, what's this? Ms. Nakada continues on, grinning all the while. "We've got another player joining us today! I know you're all getting to the climax of the competitive quest, but there are more where those came from, so take a moment, if you will! Now, c'mon in, Aoyagi! Everyone, give her a round of applause!"

Clap, clap, clap. Welcomed by the sound of applause, a girl entered the room —a girl I could only describe as stunning. Long, flowing hair, with perfect features that would put even an idol to shame. She was as cute as a little critter, but wow, her chest was anything but little. I suppose *this* is what perfection looks like.

"My name is Akira Aoyagi. It's a pleasure to meet all of you." She smiled, despite her obvious nervousness. To any other onlooker, this situation was entirely normal. Indeed, one might even be pressed to say that it was a warm, everyday scene, but— "*What?!"* I, alone, hollered in pure shock. Akira Aoyagi? Isn't that my lifelong friend's full name? Is *this* Akira? Or is this some sort of crazy coincidence?

"Is something the matter, Takashiro?"

"Oh, uh... sorry. That's just the exact same name as a friend of mine."

"I get it! You're trying to get on this poor, pretty lass's good side, aren't you? Quick on the draw, eh, little buddy! I won't get in your way." She smirked right at me. She seemed more like a nosy, mischievous lady than an instructor.

The classroom was filled with snickering at this point. Ugh, talk about embarrassing.

"Come now, everyone. Out of respect for Takashiro, let's have Aoyagi sit next to him! Go on, the seat next to him is empty, anyway."

Aoyagi accepted her demands and sat next to me. That was at least partially

my fault, so I figured I should apologize... or would that come off as weird? Before I could say anything, she spoke.

“Are you... Ren?”

“Huh? Why do you know my name? Hey, wait... are you seriously *the* Akira?!”

Upon hearing my response, Aoyagi smiled broadly. “Woo! It really is you, Ren! I hit the jackpot!” She pulled me into a tight embrace. I’d never been hugged by a girl that wasn’t in my family, so honestly, my in-game heart started beating fast and hard.

“Ooooh, that was fast! Kids these days are all about speedruns, huh?” The teacher cheered with glee. The class was as shocked as her, and erupted into an uproar.

When she realized it, Aoyagi backed off and stammered out an apology. “O-Oh, uh, sorry. He and I have played a lot of games together, and this is the first time we’ve ever really met...”

All this time, I never imagined that the Akira I gamed with could be anything other than a guy. What girl would play as a ripped beastman, anyway? Even after all those years, the thought had never crossed my mind... Was I that dense? I was so shocked I thought my heart might explode. Recalling all the times we played together, her mannerisms did actually make sense, and she’d always listen to my problems, no matter what.

Once the class calmed down, the instructor continued with homeroom.

Aoyagi turned and smiled at me. “So hey, yeah, I’m a girl. Surprised, Ren?”

“Yeah. A bit too surprised, maybe.”

“Hah! I figured you hadn’t noticed.”

“Hahaha. But man, what a shock, Aoyagi—” When I said her surname, she looked at me in a huff.

“Don’t treat me like a stranger! We’re friends. Just call me Akira.”

“Huh? O-Oh, really? All right, then... Akira.”

“That’s better!” She gave me that little critter smile. Akira was just the kind of

person to wildly shift the tone of a conversation.

After the homeroom lesson concluded, the instructor spoke to Akira again.

“Hey, Aoyagi? After school, you’ll have to pick your starting class and settings, so you’d best think about it in advance. Sorry you won’t get the full orientation experience like everyone else.”

“All right, thank you.”

...And so went our shocking (re?)introduction. During the rest time between classes, Akira apologized for her month-long absence.

“Sorry! I’m the one who talked you into this, and then you had to start without me. I hope you’re not too mad.”

“C’mon, how could I be mad at you?” I crack my knuckles with a grin. The crackles sound incredibly realistic. The attention to detail in this game never fails to astound me.

“Oh jeez, you really are mad! But wow, this game really is bonkers.” Akira happened to notice the same thing I did.

“Right? VRMMO tech is wild.”

“It’s like we’ve been warped to another world. It’s so fleshed out I’m not sure it *isn’t* real.”

“Well, we can be sure that it’s a game at least, with the backlog window and all the gauges.”

In my peripheral vision, I see my HP/MP/AP gauges. If I lock the backlog window, I can move that to my periphery as well. I know it’s RPGs 101 to explain this, but HP and MP are short for Health Points and Magic Points. AP, Arts Points, is used for special attacks, such as sword and lance arts. Double Slash is one of these attacks. The stronger the art, the more AP it costs. Unlike MP, AP actually starts at 0—when you deal or take damage, the gauge rises. Think of it like a super gauge in fighting games.

After that brief aside, I started to explain my current situation to Akira. When I told her that I chose the worst class and was low-leveled to match, Akira couldn’t contain her smile.

“Aww, were you waiting for me? You didn’t have to do that!”

“It’s not like someone was holding a gun to my head. Plus, it always feels better to share my rise to glory with someone else, y’know?” Besides, Akira told me in advance that she’d be late. Waiting for her was entirely of my own volition. “I’ve had bigger fish to fry than level-grinding, anyway.”

“Oho, really? Does it look like you’ll be redefining yet another meta?”

“I haven’t put it into practice yet, but I’ve got a good feeling about it.”

“Then let’s hop right to it! We may have had some setbacks, but *we* are the chosen Elite Gamers! We’ll catch up in a flash and carry the whole competitive event.”

“Elite Gamers? You might as well just call us hopeless addicts.”

“What?! I thought it sounded really cool!” When I heard that silly response, there was no more doubt in my mind: this really was Akira. That put me at ease, at least.

“So hmm, what kind of class should I go for? Any recommendations? I gotta decide soon!”

“Do you want my personal recommendation, or an actual good recommendation?”

“A good one, please.”

“Paladin, magic knight, wizard, minstrel, cleric...” I listed the top classes for each main role: tank, attacker, buffer, and healer. Front-line and back-line attackers have completely different styles, so I listed magic knight and wizard separately. Those were the highest rated classes according to the strategy guide “UW Guidebook.” One might wonder why there’s a strategy guide for a school, but the more information-oriented upperclassmen gathered a bunch of stats and strats and started selling it as an item in-game.

This game happens to have a guild system too; it was put together by an informant guild. Guilds are similar to normal school clubs, according to the people who spoke at orientation. Naturally, newbies like us would be all over the strategy guide.

Each of the classes I listed were A-rank. By contract, my class, symbologist, is in the lowest tier: E-rank.

“Those are the best of the best jobs for each role.” Personally, I don’t see the fun in picking easy classes and cruising your way through the game, but I guess some people enjoy victory more than the struggle. Whatever floats your boat, I guess.

“Hmm. All right, and which would you personally recommend?”

“Sword dancer, maybe? That or sky pirate.” Both of them are D-rank classes, firmly within Bummer territory. “Neither of them are all that good, but I’d love it if you picked one of those.”

“Hmm, hmm...”

“Sword dancer *does* look really fun, y’know...” Lost in the joy of playing another game together, I decided to take the recklessness up a notch.

“Cool! Fine with me, then.”

“Awesome! A fine choice, my best bud. I’m surprised you agreed to it so quickly, though.” Normally, she’d give me a bit more grief than that.

“I made you wait and worry all this time, so it’s only fair.” Thus, Akira chose sword dancer as her class.

After class, Maeda approached Akira.

“Aoyagi, I’d like to help you level up, if you’d like.”

“Wow, thanks! But our levels are so far apart, and I’m not really into powerleveling. You’re the leader, so you should focus on the expedition. I’ll be leveling up with Ren.”

Powerleveling is when a higher leveled player helps someone lower leveled grind levels at a rapid pace. The practice can lead to monsters being camped and farmed thin, so it’s pretty annoying to others. Not to mention, it’s just kinda lame all around.

“Really? Does that mean you’re finally leveling, Takashiro?”

“Yup. I’m finally gonna do it!”

“We’re gonna catch up and help with that quest! And not just that—we’re shooting for first place!”

“Good! I’m excited to see your results. Meanwhile, take this with you.”

“Ooh, the UW Guidebook! Are you really sure it’s cool giving me your strategy guide?”

“Of course. I’ve already memorized the parts I need. Feel free to do the same.”

“You memorized it?! You’re so smart, Maeda.”

“Y-You think so? It’s at least more interesting than learning English vocab...” Indeed, Maeda is definitely the best in our class when it comes to learning, so it was pretty much the natural conclusion for her to become class rep and expedition leader. She really did seem caring, though; this was an especially generous gift.

“Thanks, I’ll make good use of it. The teacher’s calling me, so I’m off to the class-change room now.” Akira headed off to the class-change room to deal with her class, initial settings, and so forth. Everyone else left to grind levels and continue the quest, leaving me alone in the classroom. I’d planned to wait for Akira to come back so we could grind together, after all.

While I waited, I decided to use the materials I had on hand to grind my crafting skill. I had to take advantage of every free moment I could get.

After nearly an hour had passed, Akira finally returned.

“Ren!” Her face was red, as if she was angry. Her hair was pink, presumably changed via the hair color setting, and her clothing had changed from the uniform she had before. That’s perfectly normal; when you change classes, you get the base uniform for that class. “What the heck?! This is so humiliating! Even *you* won’t stop staring at me!”

Her dress, frilly and fluttery, was honestly adorable—but it also happened to be very revealing. Her underarms and upper chest were bare, emphasizing her voluptuous bust. Her cleavage especially stood out. To match, her skirt could hardly be any more miniature, revealing the entirety of her thighs and almost a little more. It would be an understatement to call this uniform “sexy.”



“Oooh. Nice.” I shot her a thumbs-up. I assumed that all sword dancer gear was probably like this.

As a class, it’s D-rank, one of the Bummers, but it’s also known for its surprisingly useful innate traits. Sword dancers fall under the healer role, but they’re a little special—instead of using healing magic, they actually perform dances that can heal and support. The dances don’t cost MP, so they don’t have to worry about that resource. Instead, they cost AP.

As I mentioned previously, AP is something of a special move gauge. You have to hit and be hit by the enemy to increase it. It becomes a sort of dance of approaching, hitting, and jumping out of the way of attacks—a special kind of front-line healer.

Sword dancers can use one-handed and two-handed swords. They can also spend AP on attack skills instead of dances, so they’re overall well-rounded. Ultimately, it seems like a fun class with a high skill ceiling.

So why, then, is it D-rank? Well, the gear is just *too* revealing. When you’re sitting in front of a computer screen and playing a normal MMORPG, revealing gear makes everything more fun. But when we’re talking about a quasi-real VRMMO world, bold designs like these can be more than a little embarrassing for the player.

The general consensus was that it’s a class only for those very confident in their bodies. There were classes every girl wanted to be, and then classes no girl wanted to be—how sad indeed that sword dancer fell under the latter.

Seeing Akira’s reaction, I could certainly understand—it *did* seem humiliating. That said, wow, what a view.

“Ren, did you make me do this just so you could ogle me?!”

“No, I swear! I wanted you to be a sword dancer even when I thought you were a guy! I thought you’d be fine with it if it meant getting its unique skills!”

“Oh reeeally? I see that smirk.” Her eyes became daggers, glaring at me suspiciously.

“I still figure you wouldn’t mind showing a little skin, but of course I’m a little

biased seeing a cute girl in bikini armor.”

“Cute—?! F-Fine, then. Not like I can go back and change it now, anyway. Let’s regroup and go grind some levels!” Suddenly, she smiled. Akira really was expressive. “It’s still humiliating, though. So while we travel...”

She changed back into her usual school uniform. A shame, but understandable, I guess.

Chapter 2: Dead End

We left the school building and moved to floating Telluna's city proper. From there, we headed toward the airship port.

UW's world was full of magic warp points for quick transportation, but you have to touch them in person and register before you can use them. Afterwards, you can use the warp room in the school to teleport to them immediately. Myself nor Akira had touched any warp points yet, so our only choice was to travel by airship.

We had little time before the airship to Trinisty Island would leave. Shortly after we dashed on board, the airship departed.

There were a handful of others on board, but they were surprisingly few. After all, why bother with the airship once you've registered a warp point or two?

As the port and floating city faded into the distance behind us, the airship continued through the azure. The sky above and sea below were a matching hue. It was fairytale-like beauty.

Akira, ever the sightseer, was ecstatic. She stood on the deck and marvelled at the scenery.

"Woooow! This is the best view ever! The air feels incredible!"

"Yeah, and to think, we'd never have experienced something like this without UW!"

"Even if the rest of school sucked, this would make it all worthwhile! It's so realistic! Oh, hey, Ren! How do I take a screenshot?"

"Here you go." I removed the otherworldly lens from my inventory, handing it to Akira. Design-wise, it was like an antique camera. "There. This takes screenshots of the game. If you fix up the export settings, the school can even e-mail you the image."

"Wow, thanks! You're well prepared, Ren."

“I thought you might want one, so I crafted it in advance.”

“Good job! See, you get me.”

Akira moved here and there along the deck, snapping pictures as she went. It was kinda nice watching her have so much fun. I thought it was cute when her muscular beastman ran around screenshotting things too, but this kind of cute felt way more appropriate.

“Ren, let’s take a picture together! Mr. Sailor, could you take the camera?” Akira spoke to one of the NPCs on deck—I could tell it was an NPC because his name was displayed in green. Player names, meanwhile, are displayed in light-blue. As the NPC’s logic routine sprung into action, the sailor pleasantly accepted the camera and pointed it at us, the fading city behind us.

“A splendid view. Could you two get a little closer together?”

“Okay!” Akira moved closer, grabbing my arm. As she did, her chest pushed into my elbow—a softer sensation I’ve never known. Funny how this game recreates minute details like this with such precision.

“Ren. Rennnn!” Akira looked at me with a mischievous grin.

“Hmm?”

“I said you’d be popular if you came to this school, right?”

“Huh... yeah, I think I recall that.”

“Doesn’t it feel like you’re popular with a girl right now?” Yeah, she was definitely messing with me. But at the same time, I was just a gaming addict who’d never had a single girlfriend. So in the end...

“Uhhh... beats me.” I couldn’t think of a clever retort! All I could do was sit there like a dufus and listen to my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest.

“Aww, c’mon, you could at least play along. Ugh, now I’m all embarrassed.” Looks like I’ve infected her with my nerves too.

“Er, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine... I didn’t say something bad, did I?”

“No, that’s not—” I should have been thrilled to have such a cute girl clinging

to me, but it was such an alien concept to me that I could only be embarrassed.

“Okay, get ready! You’re both looking a little stiff, so smile and say cheese!”

We thanked the sailor NPC after he took our picture. I had to wonder what kind of face I was making in the picture, but I decided I’d be better off not looking.

We took a few moments to calm down, and eventually ended up talking about our stats.

“So, Ren. How’s it going for you?”

“Let’s see.” I summoned the system window and checked my Status screen. A translucent window appeared before me, blending in with the empty blue sky.

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Go ahead.” Akira started looking over my screen. The Status screen is several pages long, so let’s start with the main screen.

PAGE 1/3

[Character Status]

Class: Symbologist Level: 4

HP: 103/103

MP: 41/41

AP: 0/300

STR: 9

VIT: 10

DEX: 11

AGI: 11

INT: 20

MND: 15

CHR: 13

Talent 1: Knifer <Effect> User can equip hidden weapons.

Talent 2: Skill Chain <Effect> User can combine up to three skills/arts to unleash ultimate abilities.

Talent 3: Final Strike <Effect> User has learned Final Strike.

Talent 4: Efficiency <Effect> User skips the crafting animation, but is unable to craft flawless items.

Talent 5: Empty LUB: 12

MEP: 141

Money: 54,338 Mira [Equipment]

Main Weapon: Canesword (OEX) Subweapon: Empty Head: Empty Body: Shaman's Robe Arm: Empty Legs: Shaman's Slops Feet: Novice's Shoes Acc 1: Empty Acc 2: Empty And that's the first page.

LUB stands for Level-Up Bonus; each time you level up, it increases. You use it to increase your stats further. Here's a rundown of each stat: STR, Strength, affects physical power.

VIT, Vitality, affects physical defense and HP.

DEX, Dexterity, affects physical attack accuracy and critical hit rate.

AGI, Agility, affects evasion and movement speed.

INT, Intelligence, affects magical power and MP.

MND, Mind, affects magical defense and MP.

CHR, Charisma, affects dance skills and various other things.

Base stats are optimized for each class's role. From there, it's up to the player how they decide to raise their own stats. At the moment, though, I'm just hoarding LUB.

MEP, Merit Points, can be exchanged to boost talents, arts, and equipment thresholds. As the name implies, there's much merit in having MEP, and you want to have as much as you can get. But... the only way to acquire it is through school exams. My current MEP is from the five-subject entrance exam, minus 100. I'd better study hard for the next test... In case you're wondering, those 100 points went toward my Final Strike talent.

Speaking of which, allow me to explain talents. Each player has five talent slots. These slots can expand your range of gear beyond the class defaults, allow you to learn more skills, make crafting easier, and so much more. One's playstyle can change dramatically depending on talent loadout, so it gives the player a lot of freedom. It also lets the player demonstrate their knowledge of the game, so it's worth going through a lot of trial-and-error to find the best combo. A symbologist might appreciate a Master's Scroll (healing magic), for instance, I think. It wouldn't be as effective as a pure healer's skills, but it would let me use healing magic nonetheless. That would give me more uses for my MP, in situations where debuffing enemies just won't cut it.

"Hmm. Knifer and Skill Chain together? Interesting..." Akira held the UW Guidebook in her hand, referencing it as she looked over my Status screen. "Whoa! Both Knifer and Final Strike are E-rank?! Efficiency is D? And Skill Chain is the *highest* at C?! Looking at the strategy guide, this seems like a really bogus loadout. Are you sure you'll be redefining *anything* like this?"

"I'm planning to start at the absolute bottom."

"Mm... if you think you can cut it, go for it. But ultimates are for attackers, and symbologist doesn't have much in the way of firepower." She wasn't fully convinced yet.

"The way I see it, the strategy guide isn't the be-all and end-all. When the meta changes, those ratings will go up."

"You talk big, but I've seen how it goes when you muck up. I'm not convinced until I see real results, buddy."

I couldn't help but laugh. Yeah, Akira knew me well. But this time, I knew I could do it. This game hasn't been opened to the world at large yet, so it should have less players than the average game. That means there's been less potential for trial-and-error, and therefore the possibility of finding diamonds in the rough is all the higher... and that's where my loadout comes in! I hope.

"This talent system lets you experiment like crazy. Making ultimates with Skill Chain and such seems really neat too. Hey, where'd you get this talent, anyway? I wanna make ultimates!"

"I got it from a quest in the first city of Trinisty Island. The only thing is, you

have to collect three thousand Hare's Flesh."

"Seriously?! That doesn't sound fun at all!"

"It coincided with material-farming, so it was more of a bonus for me." To complete this quest, I had to get item drops from island bunnies, the weakest enemies in the game. Their level is so low that they don't give any EXP to players level 4 or higher. That was actually beneficial to me, since I was trying to stay at the lowest level possible while I waited.

"In the starting zone of Trinisty Island, I devoted myself to hunting bunnies, mining in the rocky areas, chopping wood in the forest, and digging up tombs. My crafting skill is super high now, and I've got enough materials to last me a long time."

"Was that all thanks to me being late? You really do seem to enjoy the mind-numbingly repetitive jobs, Ren."

"Repetitive jobs and searching places from top to bottom are pretty much all I know." I was born for factory work. Not that I'd know, having never worked in one, but I'm good at clearing my mind and focusing on nothing in particular. Plus, I love looking at how my numbers get bigger and bigger as my inventory and crafting levels swell.

"I think I'll find another way to get it. It's 450 MEP, right? Ugh, but MEP's so valuable!"

"How much do you have?"

"Just 465."

"For real? You averaged 93 in all five subjects?!"

"It's all luck. Maybe my test was easier."

I only got a total of 241, out of all five tests... but whatever.

"As for my other talents, Knifer was unlocked at base. I got Final Strike by spending MEP, and Efficiency came from a quest. That quest was easier; I just had to craft 256 wooden tables."

"Of *course* you'd consider crafting 256 items an easy task."

“By the way, what was your base talent?” When a player makes a character, they get a single talent. The talent you get is random, so it’s like a lottery.

“Uh... Breath of Ares?”

“What?! Seriously?!”

“Yep! Heheh, did I get a lucky draw?” Lucky? Ridiculous is more like it. It would probably cost a thousand MEP to unlock.

Breath of Ares is a skill that passively regenerates AP for its user. Considering you can usually only build AP via combat, that’s a pretty big deal. It’s downright essential for classes that rely on arts, especially for sword dancers who can convert AP to healing. There’s no such thing as too much AP for them.

Talk about an absolute bullseye. For as long as we’ve played together, Akira’s had tremendous luck. Even when we’d grind for items together, she’d always get them first.

“Lucky as ever, huh? Here I am, a lowly knifer.” At rank E, my base talent was pretty much garbage. With that said, we moved to page two of my Status screen.

PAGE 2/3

[Magic]

Devitalizing Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds <Effect> Places a magic circle that decreases VIT by 25% for all enemies inside.

Symbologist only Enervating Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds <Effect> Places a magic circle that decreases AGI by 25% for all enemies inside.

Symbologist only [Skills]

Turnover Cooldown: 0/300 seconds <Effect> Swaps current HP and MP.

Symbologist only Final Strike Lv1

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.

Quickdraw (AP: 0) Hidden Weapon Art <Effect> Lightning-fast single hit strike that takes the opponent by surprise. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

And that's page two. Akira took immediate interest in Quickdraw.

"So Quickdraw is a hidden weapon art? It says here that they're strong but difficult to handle, and even more difficult to obtain... and that their main arts are all one-hit wonders with no utility. Is that true?" Strategy guide in hand, she bombarded me with questions.

"Pretty much. The base art is pretty much just a normal attack if you're at full HP, and you can only use it once per battle. But what's nice is that you can let it fly any time, since it doesn't cost AP." Even in real life, hidden weapons like knives are all about taking the opponent by surprise. The game replicates that by making them a lot less useful once you've made your first surprise attack.

"Then you wanna use it at low HP, right?"

"Pretty much. I want to take a lot of damage, but it's hard to get HP too close to zero."

"True. In a real battle, you'd die if you tried to do that, not to mention the stress it puts on the party's healer."

"Yep. So if I want to use it myself, it's best to fight against enemies I can solo. I let them bring my HP down to red, then I look on in joy at the big number my Quickdraw generates. My good friends the island bunnies have been helping out with that."

"Haha! Nice."

"Also, every hidden weapon has the OEX attribute."

"OEX?"

"O means you can only hold one at once, and EX means it's bind-on-pickup."

"Meaning you have to craft it or pick it up yourself?"

"Bingo. Crafting is a must." Put simply, you don't want to give away the fact that you're carrying hidden weapons, so I'm working on being able to craft whichever ones I want. I'd been farming materials on the first floor and working

on my crafting skill for that reason alone. I enjoy working gradually toward a goal, so it's not like I found it boring.

"Mhm..."

"Did you know that not a single class can equip hidden weapons by default? That means you have to dedicate an entire talent slot to it, and you only have five to start with. So essentially, it's like, 'Do I really want to waste a slot on *this*?'"

"I sure wouldn't. It's one of the most notoriously bad E ranks."

"You've got that right, and I should know better than anyone. If it weren't my base talent, I wouldn't be using it." I may have picked it up just to try it out, but it sure wouldn't have been a priority. "All right. Here comes page three."

PAGE 3/3

[Ultimates]

Dead End (Usable after a sequence of Turnover -> Final Strike -> Quickdraw) Since page three is only used for ultimates, it's pretty short. When Akira saw that, her expression changed. I knew she'd be able to pick up on what this meant.

"Hmm... Ah, what have we here? This reeks of meta-redefinition."

"Oho! You've got a fine eye, my good lady!"

"You'll have to give me a demonstration later." Akira pointed behind me. "Huh? Ren, there's a black airship coming this way. What's the deal?"

"Oh? Weird. I've never seen that before." It seemed to be damaged in multiple places. I also noticed it quivering, as if it were a mirage. Whatever the case, it was more than a little spooky and fast approaching us. It wasn't long before the sailor NPCs began to notice.

"Gh-Ghost ship! Crew, it's the ghost ship! The rumors were true!" There are ghost ships in this game? Maybe it's some sort of super rare random event. "Passengers, take refuge inside the ship immediately!"

The sailors desperately shoved us away from the deck and into the ship itself. Even if they're NPCs, seeing people panic leads one to panic in turn. On the

other hand, some tried to make their way back onto the deck, excited for the challenge.

They were other players, just like us. It looked to be a six-man party, all around levels 18 to 20. Their classes were paladin, warrior, hunter, rogue, cleric, and minstrel. I focus on the player marked as the party leader.

Shinichi Kataoka (1-B) Level 20 Rogue Party Leader Looks like they're all from class B.

"The time has come!"

"There aren't any other parties around—this is our chance!"

"We've been training for this moment!" With their excitement mounting, the party tried to move ondeck, but they were stopped by the duty-bound sailor NPC.

"You can't! It's too dangerous!"

"Outta our way, buddy!" He forcefully shoved his way through as Kataoka's group charged to the ship deck.

"Wow, that was rude. Are you okay?" Akira helped the sailor up.

"Y-Yeah, thank you."

"What's happening? I've been on this airship several times, but I've never seen this before." I observed the situation through a window.

"There's nothing about this in the strategy guide."

"Not surprising. Those are made for beginners, anyway."

"But why do those guys seem to know about it? They'd be surprised if it was their first time seeing it, and they definitely didn't seem surprised."

"Yeah, it's like they were hunting for it. Maybe they've encountered it before?" No way to know unless we ask, I suppose.

"I'm guessing we'd just get in their way if we tried to join them."

"Uh, at levels 4 and 1? I'd say so."

"I'll just be taking screenshots in complete safety here, then. I don't think

we'll be seeing *this* every day!" Akira seemed intent on watching the battle unfold.

The ambush party from class B prepared for battle by layering the minstrel and cleric's buffs, granting the entire party numerous beneficial status icons.

"Must be nice to be able to buff your allies. Symbologist can only debuff enemies, after all."

"It's naturally more appreciated, since people can immediately tell when they're buffed."

"Yup, and symbologist circles can't be moved after they've been placed, so they're worthless if the enemy just walks out. But on the other hand, if you can make the enemy move *into* the circle, it'll be hard for them to resist the effect." Resisting is when, for example, *X attempted to cast a sleep spell, but it failed!* If the enemy has high resistance, you'll see this a lot.

"Sounds like aggro management is important to you, then."

"That's right. If the tank can keep aggro, the enemy won't move out of the circle."

Aggro is essentially how much the enemy wants you dead. Enemy monsters will target whichever player currently has the highest aggro level. Aggro increases based on how much damage you deal, how much you heal allies, and so on, but will decrease over time, or if you take too much damage from the enemy. If the tank wants to keep on taking hits for the party, they have to maintain higher aggro than the others, even while their aggro decreases from enemy attacks. Tanks have their own ways of generating aggro, so that's an important part of playing the role. As long as they can keep it up, monsters will stick to them like glue. The symbologist aims to cast spells at the tank's feet to take advantage of this.

"But in player-versus-player combat, they can just walk out of the circle."

"Right, of course. This game has PvP too." As Akira suggested, enemies in player versus player battles need only avoid the circles, so a lot of people say symbologist is useless against real people.

"That sounds... less than useful."

“There are ways to increase the radius of my circles, but the larger they get, the more MP they cost.” The biggest circles can reduce your MP from full to zero in seconds. That’s just how valuable increased range is.

“But with Turnover, I guess you don’t have to worry about that too much.” As she suggested, Turnover makes it a little easier to let loose with spells. It’s a five minute cooldown, symbologist-only skill that swaps current HP and MP. Even if the MP gauge is empty, as long as I have HP, I can recover my MP. A pretty solid skill, in my book. “But wizards and clerics have MP recovery skills too. Pure MP recovery, without the HP cost. And minstrels don’t even use MP.”

“Yet another flaw of the class. When people call it the king of the Bummers, they aren’t kidding.”

No sooner had I finished that sentence than the airship shook violently. I turned to see that an anchor had been thrown from the ghost ship, attaching to our airship. Using the anchor as a bridge, enemies began to flood the ship. They were all armed for battle—faceless, pure-black apparitions with eyes of red. I recalled this brand of undead being called specters.

There were about ten specters in total, all level 16. We’d have been no match for them. Thus, the battle between class B and the specters began.

“Bind their legs!”

“Got it!”

The minstrel ran out in front, leading with Requiem for the Dead. All of the specters within range became unable to move at all. This song was a sleep spell, especially strong against undead monsters. Oh, how I wished I could do that. The majority of the specters fell asleep, but some of them continued their charge toward the party’s minstrel.

“Just you try!”

The paladin, tank of the party, activated his area-of-effect taunt skill, Challenge. Accordingly, the specters changed course toward him. Seems like his aggro management was working out. Even as he was attacked by three monsters at once, his suit of armor guarded him such that he didn’t even take a scratch.

In that moment, the warrior, hunter, and rogue focused their attacks on one enemy at a time, carving them down effortlessly. The minstrel's buffing songs were putting in work too—each kill was nearly instant.

Their cleric fell back, healing the paladin and the attackers as necessary. But a paladin with his guard up shrugs off any and all physical attacks, so if the cleric bothered to heal him, that must have meant he wasn't wanting for MP.

Once the three mobile enemies were taken down, the sleeping ones began to awaken. But at that point, Requiem for the Dead had already finished cooling down. Thus, the minstrel played his song once again.

Just as before, the paladin taunted any awake enemies, and the attackers continued their one-by-one slaughter. They continued in this loop quite successfully.

"Pretty smooth run, huh?" Akira chimed in as if she were watching mere spectacle.

"I'd say so."

The area of effect on the minstrel's sleep song is large, so it's easy to stop a great deal of enemies in their tracks. But he can also buff his allies on top of that. It's a modest class, but the difference between having one and not having one in the party is huge. Thus is the life of a supporter.

The party from class B finished off the specters with no major issues. Another wave of enemies came, slightly larger than the last, but it was dealt with all the same.

I expected another wave of specters to come, but this time, it was different. Only one enemy appeared. But compared to the specters that came before, this one was clearly at least twice as large. Its gear was more elaborate than the others as well, and it resembled a ship's captain.

When I looked at the name above its head, it read "Ghost Captain Gilgea." It was level 27, with a crown icon next to it—a rare monster. Some might even call it a boss battle.

It wielded a translucent, gem-like sword that reflected the blue of the sky.

“Whoa! This guy looks tough! Time for some screenshots!” Akira took shot after shot with her camera, excited at the boss’s appearance.

I had to wonder if we were safe. If the party from class B went down, we would be mowed down in short order. That said, even if you “die“ in battle, the only penalty is losing a bit of EXP.

The party from class B reapplied their buffs while Gilgea approached, preparing to fight it with full force. The paladin moved in front, attempting to taunt it with Challenge. It worked as expected—except, for some reason, Gilgea stopped moving. Then, he brought his sword down. Of course, since he was too far away, he was just fruitlessly smacking the floor below him. Or so I thought—but I soon understood there was a method to his madness.

A shockwave, brought about at the tip of his sword, moved straight toward the paladin. In his surprise, he assumed his defensive stance instead of attempting to dodge. The attack plowed through his guard, dealing immense damage—checking my Log window, it was a total of 137 HP. That single hit left him with only 30% of his health bar! Maybe the shockwave was a magic attack? Though paladins excel at physical defense, their magic defense is somewhat lacking to balance it out.

The boss moved away and generated another shockwave, but this time the paladin successfully dodged it. The party’s attackers seized this opportunity to approach and overwhelm the boss with short-range attacks. Kataoka and the warrior attacked the boss from either flank, and the hunter bombarded him with arrows from afar. Each of the attackers’ regular blows dealt about 10-20 damage, and each art activation dealt about 50. He was a boss, after all; of course he’d be hard to damage. He was also adept at evasion, thanks to his high AGI stat.

The paladin began to close the distance between them, dodging shockwaves as he went.

At this point, the boss gave up on long-distance shockwaves, opting for direct attacks on the tank. The tank was taking immense damage—with the constant assault of arts from the boss, he was in the red at 25% HP. With the cleric’s help, they were able to maintain that level of health. But since he was taking so

much damage, he was also losing a great deal of aggro, nearly letting the boss change targets.

Kataoka's rogue skill, Scapegoat, kept them from disaster by putting even more aggro on the paladin. Scapegoat allows the player to transfer all of their damage-based aggro to an allied player by attacking the enemy from behind the ally. It also increases damage, boosting the effect further. Scapegoat's duration also increases with each art activation, balancing aggro management and damage. At this point, the boss had 70% of its HP remaining. Could they really make it?

The situation continued until he was left with 50%—but then, the boss unleashed a new art. In the Log, it was called Crescent Slash, a cleave attack that hit enemies in a crescent pattern in front of the boss. As an untargeted attack, it naturally hit the paladin standing in front—but unfortunately, it also hit the Scapegoating rogue behind him. Once they were hit, the paladin was left in the red again. Meanwhile, the leader lost all of his health and fell where he stood.

"Gah! He ate the hit too!"

"Oof, that's bad news."

The support they were receiving from Scapegoat was now lost. That meant the tank's job was about to get a lot harder. My fear continued to mount.

The cleric's healing aggro suddenly overcame the paladin's aggro, which led the boss to charge at the cleric. His party was helpless to stop him, forced to watch as their healer was next to fall. Without their healer, it was about to get even worse.

From there, class B was taken down one by one until the entire party was wiped. The whole turning point of this battle was the rogue's defeat at the hands of Crescent Slash. If it weren't for that, they might've made it... Either they were unlucky, or the devs outsmarted them. What insane timing.

"Aww, that's a shame. I wanted to see them win." Akira sighed in disappointment.

"But what happens now? Is he gonna come for the rest of us?"

“Oh, look, he’s already headed this way!”

“Whoa! Seriously?!”

Ghost Captain Gilgea moved toward the cabin, walking over the fallen bodies of the party from class B.

“W-We should hide deeper inside!”

We moved to obey the sailors, but then the boss vanished into the thin air, warping to block our path.

“End of the line, I guess! Then there’s only one thing to do!” Akira’s expression became fierce as she gripped her camera tightly. “Before I die, I’m gonna get a super intense close-up screenshot!”

“Still obsessed with your screenshots, huh?”

“I don’t have even a single point of EXP, so it doesn’t really matter if I die. Here, I’ll act as bait so you can escape, Ren. But you don’t have long before he wrecks me“

“No, wait. I want to test something.”

“Oh? Might it be that ultimate of yours?”

“Yup. Since we’re stuck in a boss battle anyway, don’t you want to see the fruits of my meta-redefinition?”

“Heck yeah! My camera is ready!”

I took a couple paces ahead of Akira and confronted Gilgea. I wasted no time in casting Devitalizing Circle. A large, runic circle appeared at my feet, stretching to envelop the boss as well. Its duration was one minute, and it decreased the VIT of any enemies standing inside. Since I maxed out the range of the skill, that left me with only 1 MP. There was hardly a point in making the circle bigger in itself, except as a preface for what was to come.



Now, my weapon appeared to be a regular cane, but it was actually crafted to hide a blade within. I wielded the hidden weapon, Canesword. It was made by placing a bronze sword within an oak staff. The tip of the staff was able to rotate, giving way to the sword within. I unscrewed the tip of the staff, finishing my battle preparations. All that was left to do was wait for his approach.

Gilgea began to close the distance between us with slow steps. He wasn't using his shockwaves this time. Was he toying with me? Did he have cockiness programmed into his logic routine? This game never ceased to surprise with its details. But that was lucky for me, meaning I could cast my circle in safety.

Gilgea's HP remained chunked as a result of his battle with the party from class B—he was at about 50%. Adding up the total damage from the battle log, the party dealt a total of about a thousand damage. If a thousand cuts the bar in half, that means he had about a thousand remaining. That's a pretty low amount for a boss monster like him. It was probably meant to offset his high defenses. As long as that judgement was correct—I could probably take him down!

"All right, I'm gonna kill him with just one attack! Ultimate ability!" In response to my voice, my body was enveloped in a soft light. It was even accompanied by a quiet sound effect.

Gilgea continued to approach me, weapon readied. He moved into range of my ultimate. Now's the time to show the fruit of the Ren-style redefinition of the symbologist!

"Dead End!"

The sword hidden within my Canesword glowed with a pale, yet bright purple light, emblematic of hidden weapons. The humming generated by that flash rose to become a sudden, loud boom as the light struck Gilgea. He raised his sword to strike me in turn, but I was faster. Dead End had already taken hold of Gilgea. His HP bar, previously halfway full, dropped all at once. How much damage did I *do*?!

I observed Gilgea, who was frozen with his sword still raised in the air.

C'mon, die, die, die already! That was my only attack! Almost as if the game

had read my mind... after a beat, Gilgea fell slowly onto his back.

I turned my attention to the log window to see two lines: Ren activated Dead End. 1,123 damage dealt to Ghost Captain Gilgea!

Ren has slain Ghost Captain Gilgea.

Oho! It worked! It really worked! This is insane! A level 4 lowbie has taken down a level 27 boss! Ah yes, there's no better feeling than when the underdog comes out on top.

"Whaaaat?! Seriously?! How'd you do that much damage?!" Akira's eyes were wide with shock.

"Woooo! Did you *see* that ridiculous firepower?!"

In the thrill of the moment, I pumped my fist into the air and struck a triumphant pose. At the same time, my Canesword shattered to pieces as a result of Final Strike, one of the components of my ultimate move. The cost of increasing my damage was the immediate destruction of my weapon.

"Heheheh! This is a new beginning for symbologist! A developing player on the brink of being benched has been granted new life, a second chance to awaken to his latent power!" The fanfare playing between my shouts was the level-up tone. It repeated itself over and over. I was a lowbie, after all, and rare monsters give bonus EXP.

The ceaseless fanfare wasn't just playing for me, though. Akira, who I was in a party with, gained the same EXP, and we were both graced with the sound of repeated level-ups.

"Whoa! Look at my levels go!"

In the end, I gained nine levels, while she gained ten. Suddenly, we were 13 and 11.

"How about that? A pretty satisfying meta-redefinition, eh?"

"Absolutely! That was crazy high damage, like you were using some kind of cheat code!" Akira looked on at me in awe.

"My hidden weapon art gets stronger at low HP, after all." I was in critical condition after my ultimate left me at 1 HP. Prior to that, I had drained all of my

MP. Using Turnover, I reversed my gauges to make my HP 1.

“Neat! So instead of using it as an MP recovery skill, you used it as an HP reduction instead! Rather than an inferior MP recovery, it’s actually an HP management skill!”

“Yep. 1 HP makes Quickdraw unleash its maximum damage, and since it ignores defenses and can’t be evaded, his stats couldn’t save him.”

It did about the same damage to Gilgea as it did in my test runs. Honestly, I was a little worried that it somehow wouldn’t work out. After all, I’d only ever tried it against my good island bunny friends.

“On top of Turnover and Quickdraw, Final Strike just made my damage even more busted, y’know? Shame it had to bust my Canesword too, though.”

“Yeah! It’s busted in all kinds of ways!”

“Symbologist can get to 1 HP easily, thanks to its high-cost magic and Turnover. It’s got great synergy with hidden weapon arts.”

Other classes don’t care about hidden weapons too much, but they’re a godsend for symbologists. And since both of the components in question are low tier, nobody but me would bother to try this combination. When you’re told in advance that they’re garbage, one would naturally be biased against giving them a fair chance. That’s one of the drawbacks of strategy guides.

“Wowwww, I’m loving this meta-redefinition!”

“It’s a shame I end up with 1 HP and weaponless after my big attack. If it doesn’t kill the enemy, my ultimate leaves me completely vulnerable.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty self-destructive. Talk about a glass cannon!”

“It felt so good when it worked! Big numbers are justice, and my one-shot wonder is the judge!”

That’s exactly the attitude I was going to face this game with! Symbologist wasn’t just an iffy-at-best supporting class—it was also an attacker that can let out a single devastating blow.... And when it did, it didn’t even stop me from resuming my supportive role. I was a multi-role man! A jack of two trades.

“I almost feel silly getting so excited over big damage numbers, but this really

is a dramatic redefinition! It's like a one-shot drama cannon!"

As we laughed and shared our joy, I came to a sudden realization. At the edge of the Log window, the loot icon was glowing.

"Oh? Looks like we got some loot, Akira. I wonder what he dropped."

"Really now? It's this icon here, right? Let's see what we've got here." We opened our loot lists, which displayed the following.

Skyfall (O) Type: One-Hand Sword Level: 10

Might: 20

AP gain: 12

Poise: 44

Guardbreak: 51

Effect: Creates shockwaves with each attack when user's HP is at 100%.

Remedy of Murgleis (O) x2

Type: Consumable Item Nullifies cooldowns on all skills, making them immediately usable.

This Skyfall sword must have been what the boss was wielding... and we got two Remedy of Murgleis on top of that. I loved those things.

"Ooh! Is this that pretty sword the boss was holding?"

"I think so. It's got high might for the level requirement, and a nice passive too. Not too shabby!" I guess his shockwaves came from his weapon's effect, then. Since it required full HP, he was only able to use it at the start of the battle, and that's why he couldn't hit me with shockwaves. I get it... very cool. "You should take this, Akira. Your class can equip it."

"What? Really? I was just gonna take a screenshot of it."

"I can't equip it... and if I did anyway, I'd just end up breaking it. Plus, it'd help me more if you had a better weapon. We can split the Remedy of Murgleis between us."

"Okay! I'll take it, then." As soon as we finished dividing the loot, Akira

equipped her new Skyfall. The translucent, sky-blue blade appeared in her hand. “How’s it look?”

“Now that I can get a safe look at it, it really is a pretty sword. I bet it’d look nice as a fashion gearset too.”

“Yeah, totally! I love it! Thank you, Ren!”

“No prob.”

“I’m ready to go try it out! Let’s go!” She was like an impatient child.

Suddenly, an announcement rang through the ship. Trinisty Island, made up of multiple floors that sliced through the mountains, was coming into view. From here, we would focus wholeheartedly on the expedition.

“Since we got that unexpected level boost, we can burst straight through to the upper floors!”

“All right! We’d better go help Maeda and the rest of the class! New goal: absolute victory!”

When we arrived on Trinisty Island, we immediately set out on the expedition. Since we were levels 13 and 11 respectively, the first floor was easy. Registering at warp points along the way, we completed quest after quest to advance to the upper floors. As for Akira’s test run with Skyfall, she had plenty of fun launching shockwaves at our bunny friends.

At the end of the expedition quest, a boss awaited us. Each floor had a specific route required to advance to the next, and each of those routes were guarded by floor bosses, all with the same crown icon. But with our advanced levels, the first floor boss was an easy victory. We charged through the second floor and arrived at the third floor before we reached the daily stopping point.

We wanted to continue onward, but the game forcibly ends at 10:00 PM. From there, login was disabled until 6:00 AM. That was a very school-like level of concern. It really did feel like an education-focused online game.

“All right, good games. Good night, Ren.”

“Yeah, g’night. See you tomorrow.”

Akira waved at me with a cute smile before logging out. It reminded me just

how strange it was to realize that such a cute girl really was my friend... The world is full of mysteries, and today was no different. But I won’t look a gift horse in the mouth! I decided to consider it a reward for my everyday greatness.

Chapter 3: My First Duel

Three days later...

I logged into UW and returned to my seat in the classroom, suppressing a yawn. Akira was already sitting in the seat next to mine.

“Good morning to you, sleepyhead.” I sensed some irritation within her sweet smile. The day before, I had promised that I’d log in at 6:00 AM for some pre-class grinding. Needless to say, I didn’t wake up in time. All I could offer was an earnest apology.

“Sorry... I overslept.”

“You promised! I guess I can’t be *that* mad at you, since I was a whole month late. But if you do it again, you’re gonna get it.”

“Yes, ma’am...” I wondered what punishment might await me. While I pondered the possibilities, Yano walked over to us, surprised.

“Whoa! What happened to you, Takashiro?!”

“Hmm? What do you mean?” Akira and I exchanged looks, confused.

“Your level! How’d you level up so much in just three days?!”

“Oh, that...”

I was level 14, Akira level 13. We had both leveled up a bit during the island expedition the past two days. Crown-marked bosses gave fixed EXP no matter what your level was, so they were a nice treat.

In this game, there were two ways of gaining EXP. First, the normal method was through calculating the difference between the enemy’s level and the highest level in one’s party. There’s a cap for each, but generally, the greater the difference in level, the more EXP you got. This was the category where typical level-grinding mobs fell. The cap was the same whether you partied up or not, so partying was better overall.

On the other hand, crown-marked boss monsters give fixed EXP. The EXP they give is a specific amount, chosen by the devs. When the monster dies, that EXP

is divided among the party, meaning you're better off defeating them with fewer people. That made our situation with Gilgea on the airship all the more lucrative. It's not everyday you run into him, so his rare spawn status puts him in the fixed EXP bracket.

Each floor boss in the expedition has fixed EXP as well. Normally, they would take ten people to defeat, but since it was just me and Akira, we'd been gaining EXP like crazy.

"What'd you *do*?"

"Well, you see..." As I told her about my fast-leveling tactics, Yano's eyes went wide with surprise.

"Oh, wow! There's an airship ambush event?! I had no idea!"

"You really didn't know? The guys from class B sure did."

"Class B, huh? I heard they were a bunch of goons."

"Really?"

"Yeah! They're notorious for training others to death. It's really a bad deal when we have competitive missions."

"Huh. So they're a bunch of griefers, then."

Training is the unsavory practice of leading a "train" of monsters onto other players, killing them in the process. Yano's not wrong when she says it's a bad deal. Directly PKing (that is, player-killing) people is limited to only certain areas. Trinisty Island, where the competitive mission takes place, is not one of those areas.

"I'm not saying it was your fault or anything, Takashiro, but try to avoid any other griefers like that."

"Yeah, I will."

"But hey, even if they did weaken it for you, it's pretty awesome that you beat him at level 4!"

"That's just because of my big damage spec."

"Ohh? Do tell." So I did. "That's all it takes to dish out that much damage?!

You’re not the Emperor of Underpowered for nothing!”

“Heh. Go on, sing my praises.” I decided to act a little cocky.

“But he only has about a 50% success rate. You just don’t hear about his failures because it’s another example of a bad class doing badly.” Akira swooped in to burst my bubble.

“It’s fun to give it a try, though, so I never get bored of doing it together every game.”

She smiled when she said that. I was glad she felt that way.

“Have you two always been gaming together?”

“Yeah, ever since our first year of middle school. And now we’re in our third year. Right, Ren?”

“Totally. Man, so much has happened.” But the most surprising happening of all was this Akira’s reveal as my Akira.

“If you’ve seen me in other games, you’ve probably seen Akira too. She usually plays burly beastmen.”

“Oh! I think I have! Wow, but the player herself is so cute!”

“It was a surprise to me too. I didn’t even know until we came to this school.”

“Ooh, does that mean you’ll be dating soon?”

“Hah! Yeah, right...” I’d only just learned that he was in fact a she. Not happening.

“Wh-Wh-What he said! We’re platonic gaming buddies! We’d never see each other as love interests, or stumble head-first into the love trap, or, or... I mean, our relationship is pure, so... that is to say...” Akira was blowing steam like a kettle at this point. She didn’t have to be *that* embarrassed. It was just a joke, anyway.

“I heard you got a rare weapon, Aoyagi! Can I get a peek?”

“Huh? Oh, of course.” It was rather surreal to see a schoolgirl in uniform reveal her sword. Again, she wouldn’t dare equip her sword dancer gear anywhere outside of the battlefield.

“Whoa! It’s so pretty!”

Our other classmates noticed, creating a bit of a stir in the room. Akira really showed off her luck. It was unbelievable for someone on their first day in battle to already have such a rare weapon. But I think I’d been pretty lucky in UW too. After all, my starting talent so perfectly matched up with my chosen class.

The bell rang, followed by Ms. Nakada’s entrance into the classroom.

“Hello and good morning, gamers! Hey, what the heck?! Is that Skyfall?! Good stuff, kid!”

“You knew about this weapon, Ms. Nakada?”

“Of *course* I do! Remember, I was in the inaugural class. That’s a really famous rare weapon!”

“How rare, exactly?”

“Hmm? Ah... sorry, I’m not at liberty to give out hints. But let’s just say it’s about one in a few thousand.”

“Whaaaaaat?!” The class erupted with cries of shock.

“The boss is already rare, and the drop is even rarer. Some even call it legendary. And the shockwaves it emits are pretty darn cool too! You’d better take good care of it, Aoyagi. Even chance item drops are part of fate.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I really shouldn’t be telling you this either, but... you can make that into an even higher level sword through crafting. That’s a rare case of ‘use it for life’ at work.” So much for not giving out hints. She probably just couldn’t contain her desire to tell us. A teacher from the inaugural class is bound to be a huge lover of games. Why *wouldn’t* she want to leak the deets?

“Okay! Time for roll call.”

From there, homeroom was as routine as ever. The usual, bland school day continued, the first hour of which was world history. I wasn’t great at the subject, but I was ready to try my hardest.

When the teacher came in and class began, the mood in the classroom took a

complete 180. A hush came over the room, such that nobody even whispered. The lecturer's voice alone resounded in the classroom. Everyone was deeply focused.

Why was that? Because our test scores were reflected as MEP in-game. We all wanted every last drop of MEP we could get so that we could grow stronger. But we also didn't want to eat into our time in-game to study, since the game was so intricate and fun to play.

That left only one path forward: stay hyper-focused in class, so much so that you don't even need to study to get a high grade. Keep in mind that the game forcefully ends at night. This was the most effective way to make use of our time in-game. Everyone came to this same conclusion—thus, the classroom was dead silent. The school was effectively fostering our efficiency-minded gamer mentality. No surprise that a gaming society would have bugs in it. I wouldn't be surprised if people said student grades go up after they enter this school.

When the teacher asked if anyone had questions, hand after hand shot up. We were all diligent. Morning classes ended on a quiet, bland note, though they were serious nonetheless.

Then came lunch break. Naturally, it didn't take place in-game. Everyone logged out at once to tend to their empty stomachs.

"Whew! Everyone here sure is serious about school." Akira let out a deep sigh.

"MEP is a great carrot; we can't help but chase after the stick."

"And as long as we keep our grades up, our parents might be so kind as to let us stay enrolled."

"We get to play a fun game, our parents get to see good grades. It's a win-win situation."

"I'll say. All right, I'm off to eat. Later!"

"See ya." I logged out as well, returning to my real bedroom. Lunch time.

◆◇◆

Afterward, afternoon classes came and went. Now that school was over, the

real fun began.

Our expedition was up to the sixth floor boss. As usual, I partied up with Akira and warped over to the sixth floor warp point where we'd registered previously.

"What should we do today, Ren? Keep climbing?"

"You got it. I'm ready to reach for our limit."

"Then we're off to rent us a dragon!"

"Yep! Let's go."

Traveling on foot was slow, so dragon rentals existed all over the virtual world, lending out dragon mounts in place of horses. From there, we could go straight to the boss guarding the path to the next floor. Plus, when one rides a dragon mount, they won't be noticed by active monsters.

Speaking of which, there are some monsters that won't attack players even when they notice them. Monsters that attack on sight are hostile, while the others are passive.

There are several ways for a hostile enemy to notice players. The most straightforward: if a player crosses its line of sight, they're noticed. Monsters can also react to the sound of footsteps, as well as noticing players in the yellow zone of 50% HP. Finally, there are plenty of monsters that respond to the use of arts and skills. There may be even more ways that I'm not aware of.

Dragon mounts are a fast, safe travel option, so they're highly recommended to players looking to ascend—pun intended.

We headed to the rental shop when we were stopped by someone yelling out to us rudely.

"Hey, you two!"

"Hmm?"

It was the party from class B that we met on the airship. The fellow in question was the belligerent rogue leader of the party, Shinichi Kataoka.

"Do you want something?"

"Don't give me any of that! I want *this*!" He pointed at Skyfall, the sword

attached to Akira's still-in-uniform hip.

"You ninja'd our loot!"

"Ninja'd what?"

"Don't play dumb! You finished off Gilgea after we wiped, didn't you?! Your Skyfall is proof of it!" Kataoka began to approach Akira, so I stepped in between them.

"We didn't ninja anything. It was attacking us, so we defended ourselves. Besides, you wiped against it anyway. Don't complain about it after the fact."

"You wouldn't have gotten that sword if we hadn't weakened him!"

"Still, you died and you know it. But I get where you're going with this. When you saw this in our possession, you wanted to extort it from us with threats."

Isn't he the least bit embarrassed of how childish he's being? I wouldn't dare do what he's doing.

But Skyfall is incredibly rare, and it would be faster for them to steal it from us than to get another. After all, Ms. Nakada said it was one in a few thousand.

Do rare drops pit people against each other? Or is this guy just a thug, through and through? I remembered how Yano called class B a bunch of goons, but I wanted to believe he just lost his mind momentarily over something so rare. I wanted to believe that all gamers were good at heart, deep down.

"Shut up! You stole it from us after he weakened him, and that's that!"

"So you're suggesting that it rightfully belongs to you and to hand it over? That's a little selfish, I'd say. We got the loot, and that's that, yeah?"

"Then how about we settle it right now?"

"How?"

"A one-on-one duel, of course. That's the fairest method."

My level was clearly far lower, so no, it was not fair in the slightest. If he seriously thought it was fair, then he was a complete idiot. And if he was trying to bluff by pretending not to notice our level difference, he was a stupid fool. So which one was he, a complete idiot or a stupid fool?

I gave him the silent treatment.

“Hah! Scared, kid? You’re just a chicken! All talk!”

The latter, I’d guess, in which case it wouldn’t look all that odd if I played along with him.

“I’m no chicken, buddy! Put up or shut up!” There we go. My “fall for an obvious provocation“ performance went pretty well. He wasn’t actually pushing my buttons; it was just strategic posturing.

“Hey, Ren! Calm down for a sec! We can call a GM to mediate, so there’s no need to fight...” Sorry, Akira. I didn’t mean to make you actually worry about me.

I whispered to Akira, out of Kataoka’s earshot. “I’m a calm guy, remember? Readily accepting such a hopeless-looking duel would be suspicious. I just did this to catch him off guard. Now watch, this’ll be an easy win.”

“Oh, really? You little hustler! I’ll be watching you.” With her approval, I continued my impression of an angry man.

“When you put it that way, I can’t refuse! Watch me mess this guy up!”

“All right, it’s a duel then. If I win, you hand over Skyfall.”

“If I win, then, I want all of your money! If you want the duel, you gotta take the risk!” If I have to win either way, I might as well make this guy suffer a bit. I’ll overwhelm him with my instakill and get rid of him for good!

“Yeah, of course.”

“Can I take your word as consent to the aforementioned terms?!”

Suddenly, a familiar face stepped between us.

“Whoa! Ms. Nakada?!”

“Helloooo! We teachers take turns as GMs after school.”

“W-Wow, you sure are busy.”

“We get overtime pay. Plus, it’s just fun! I’m here to make sure the terms of the duel are properly carried out afterward. If you break the rules, I’ll use my GM powers to punish you!” Ms. Nakada was as cheerful as ever. I appreciated

the presence of a GM to oversee the duel, though.

“All right. Thank you.”

“Let’s get to it, then!”

Kataoka and I stepped several paces away and turned to face each other. Since the setting was a city, rubbernecking NPCs stopped by to watch, further raising the tension of the duel. He equipped a Shortsword, while I equipped my Canesword, with the appearance of a simple staff.

“Ready, set... begin!” Ms. Nakada signaled the start of the duel.

“The king of the Bummers can’t win to an attacker like me! Stupid kid!” Kataoka insulted me, as confident as one would expect.

I began to cast Enfeebling Circle at my feet. As its name implies, it decreases the STR of enemies within. I learned it at level 11. I unleashed it at its maximum radius, reducing my MP to 0.

Then, I defended myself against Kataoka’s charge using my Canesword. I took 11 damage despite my attempt at guarding, but that was preferable to the full brunt of the attack.

Dealing damage to an enemy who’s guarding is known as guardbreaking. In short, his might was higher than my poise.

I continued to guard his second and third attacks. With each attack, I continued to take damage, but I shrugged it off. I wasn’t ready to unleash my ultimate yet.

My ultimate was a one-hit kill. If I used it, I’d win; if I didn’t, I’d lose. So I waited for the perfect opportunity to use it.

Would he attack a fourth time? I waited, eager to receive his attack. Why was I so eager to be hurt? Well, this game’s attack animations are dependent on the weapon being used. With its semi-automatic motion system, this game generates dynamic attack animations, even when you can’t make the motions yourself.

But it also means that one can predict an enemy’s next attack animation. The shortsword’s fourth attack starts with a jumping slash, leaving the user prone to

a counterattack. I'd learned this beforehand.

"Are you just gonna let me guardbreak you to death?! C'mon, fight back!"

Kataoka let his fourth attack loose, attempting to provoke me all the while. *There's that jump slash*. I guarded against that as well. Since I knew the animation, guarding was easy.

That left him hanging in the air during his attack animation. He probably figured a whack from a staff wouldn't hurt too much, so he left himself open.

"As you wish, allow me to counter with my Dead End."

Smaaaaaaash!

"Huh? Ngaaaaaah?!"

With a purple flash, I sent Kataoka hurdling through the air. Seeing him suddenly knocked away was almost surreal. His body was bound the moment he slammed into a nearby three-story wall. When he hit the ground, his body was still convulsing. With one strike, Kataoka's HP went from full to 0, ending the duel.

Duel complete! Ren is the victor!

Ren's duel record is 1W / 0L.

Thus declared the system log.

Once Duel mode ended, Kataoka's HP returned to 1, preventing him from taking the on-death EXP penalty. In exchange, his duel record was changed, which would really annoy anyone who cared about that.

"Gh... How...?"

I began to explain my victory to Kataoka, who was still dazed and confused from his crushing loss.

"Let me just say: even the symbologist can fill an attacker role. It's a one-shot wonder." I was raising public opinion of the symbologist. Shining the spotlight on it. I, the Emperor of Underpowered, was overjoyed beyond belief to grant symbologist its moment. I seized the opportunity to show off.

"No way! What the heck?!"

“How did he do that much damage? That was over a thousand!” Kataoka’s party was as shocked as he was.

This is exactly where the one-shot wonder shines. If you hit once, without holding back, you’ve won.

“Takashiro has won! Good job! Even I’m a little surprised!”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I knew I was going to win, so I was still pretty calm, but I was quite satisfied having put Kataoka in his place.

“Who knew this trick would be discovered this early into the game? You’ve got promise! How lucky for me to have someone like you in my class!”

“Were you aware of this strategy?”

“Well, I *am* a GM. This is a pretty simple damage source, and I think it’s the highest damage output this class can achieve. But it’s still not great compared to others, and it’s difficult to set up.”

“It’s not in the guidebook, either.”

“Students wrote that, and it’s not like they know everything! But that also means there’s still plenty that nobody’s tried yet. When people have strategy guides, they tend to avoid the uncertain, so good job experimenting! Another big challenge for the Emperor of Underpowered.”

“You knew about that?”

“Us teachers are gamers too! But I didn’t know you were so young. You’re fun to watch, so keep it up! Kids these days are all focused on cookie-cutter builds, y’know? It’s kinda dull.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay! As promised, Kataoka, you gotta hand over all of your cash! Takashiro’s wallet is gonna be heavy today!”

With that announcement, I heard the sound of Mira being added to my inventory. Looks like 20,000 Mira. Not a ton. I guess this guy wasn’t carrying much money.

“I’ll take care of the rest, Takashiro, so you’re free to go.”

“All right, thank you.” From there, I decided we ought to continue on our expedition. “Let’s be off, Akira.”

We finally went on our way to the dragon mount lender.

Akira seemed to be in high spirits. “Thanks for fighting for me, Ren.”

“I had to! I couldn’t keep my mouth shut with an opportunity like that.”

“Heheh, you were Mr. Manly And Reliable back there.” She poked at me playfully. I could hardly look at her cute face without blushing.

“Wh-What are you talking about? I’m always reliable.”

“Hmm. Usually you’re more... *interesting* than reliable.”

“Hah. Really?”

“Yeah. An odd kind of interesting, in the sense that I never know what you’re going to do next.”

“Kinda like a rare wild animal?”

“Yeah! Just like that. I can’t get enough of seeing you work.”

“Well, as for *me*, I can’t get enough of seeing you in that sword dancer gear.”

“D-Don’t say that! I’d rather not be reminded...”

“It looks good on you. I’d say you should wear it day in and day out.”

“Absolutely not! I’ll never get used to that thing...”

We eventually made it to the dragon mount rental.

“Sorry, been a busy day. This is the only one left.”

Unfortunately, we couldn’t get two mounts. Was that really something that could happen here? The game must have been fiddling with the numbers. It was actually kind of neat.

“One will do, then. Two people should fit, right?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for your business!”

I sat in front and took the reins, while Akira sat in the back, and... *Whoa, whoa, whoa! I’m being crushed!* Crushed by Akira’s chest, that is. With the two

of us riding, I was sandwiched between dragon and bosom. To make matters worse, I could feel her movement with each bob of the dragon. An endless cycle of squishing, shaking, squirming... How couldn't I have been keenly aware of it? I couldn't even concentrate! Why did this aspect of the game have to be so realistic?! But hey, good job, I say! Keep it up!

"Riding together is so much fun!" Akira was smiling innocently behind me.

Meanwhile, my vision was practically going hazy thanks to the euphoric sensation I felt against my back every moment of the ride.

In the end, we cleared both the sixth and seventh floors.

Chapter 4: Iron Gemini

Two days later...

We had continued the expedition until just before the eighth floor boss. I'd heard that Maeda, Yano, and the rest of the class were on the ninth. Just a little bit more and we'd be caught up, so we decided to challenge the eighth floor boss immediately.

We found the route to the ninth floor, along with the boss guarding it, but there was one problem.

"Oh, this floor has *two* bosses."

"Well, that's new."

The crown-marked floor boss was actually a duo of monsters, dubbed Iron Gemini. They sat protecting the magic circle that would activate the path to the next floor. They were both level 18 giant golems that seemed to be metallic. As for us, we were level 17.

"If it were only one, I could take it down with the usual Dead End routine. Darn shame."

That was how we'd dealt with all of the previous floors. My one-shot wonder symbologist loadout was devilishly strong against single enemies, but for everyday grinding, I usually needed to party up.

Once I've burned my once-a-battle art, and with it my Dead End combo, it's over; I'm left with my questionable-at-best support magic. In the worst of situations, I'm the worst. In the best of situations, I'm the best. Whether I make the most of things or throw in the towel is up to me, so it's all in good fun. I wouldn't have it any other way.

"You should be able to one-shot one of them with Dead End, right?"

"If I couldn't, I'd be at a dead end myself."

"Then that takes care of one of them. As for the other... I could solo him for five minutes until your—no, wait, you can only use it once per battle."

“Pretty much. I can support from the back, but it’s up to you from there.”

“Looks like it. But hey, how about we give it a try? If it doesn’t work out, we’ll try thinking of something else!”

We dismounted from the dragon. It chirped once, as if thanking us for our patronage, before turning to head back to the city. If you get off of it just once, then that’s it, huh? I wish I had my own personal dragon.

“O-Okay... All set! I’m good to go when you are!”

Akira had changed out of her school uniform and into her sword dancer gear. She had bought this costume on the seventh floor, but of course a lot of it was skin-colored, so she was still plenty embarrassed.

“Good to see that you’re still basically naked. Thank you, man in the sky.”

“Don’t act like you’re thanking God! Don’t look at me, either! Eyes on the enemy!”

“Fine, fine. You stay at a distance and focus fire on one of them. There are two, sure, but I’ll kill the full-health one. Then I’ll move to support you.”

“Got it.”

We approached the floor bosses, but only close enough that Skyfall’s waves would reach them. This happened to be just outside of their detection range, meaning we could get the first strike.

“Here goes!”

“Do it!”

At my nod, Akira unsheathed Skyfall and pointed it toward the sky. “Let’s goooo!”

Shockwaves emitted from the tip of her sword as it struck the earth. It only worked at full health, just like the boss from the airship event. The shockwaves quickly traveled through the ground, approaching one of the Iron Gemini. Once the boss took damage, the twins both aggroed and charged toward us. Akira continued firing off shockwaves until they got too close to safely use it, at which point one twin had already lost around a quarter of its health. The effect was incredibly convenient—I guess that’s what goes into such a rare item.

When the bosses were close enough, they simultaneously punched at Akira with their iron fists. She skillfully parried both attacks, but she was damaged by their guardbreak. She would have been steamrolled at that rate, but it was my turn to step in next.

“It’s all you, Ren!”

“Leave it to me! Tremble, monsters, at my impeccable batting prowess!” I turned my staff toward the full-HP boss and began to cast Enfeebling Circle at my feet.

“Wow! I approve of the smack talk!”

My magic circle extended all the way to Akira. As per usual, I emptied my MP bar. *And we’re ready to rock!*

“Ultimate ability, Dead End!”

Slaaaaaaaash!

The usual demonic flash, followed by the boss’s HP bar falling... but not all the way.

“Huh? It’s still alive?!”

At that point, my HP was at 1, and I was unarmed, to boot. *This is really bad!*

The metal golem, heavily damaged by the might of my ultimate, stumbled backwards. *Maybe I should take a swig of an HP potion?* But potions have a long wind-up time, so it’s tricky to use them when my HP is dangerously low and I have aggro. There was a high possibility I’d get hit before I finished drinking, leading to me eating dirt.

There’s a talent called Medicinology that reduces the wind-up time, but of course, I don’t have that one. There are also Prayer potions that I could use when the enemy is stunned for an ample duration of time... but that would rely on luck.

Akira should be keeping an eye on my HP. For now, I can leave it to her and run away in order to buy some time...

But just as I was pondering my next move, my HP was suddenly restored.

“Hang in there, Ren!”

Akira had activated her Healing Dance, a sword dancer skill with an AP cost of 30. As the name implies, it heals. By the way, while the dance is active, the player avatar does little twirls. It was pretty darn cute. Well done, Akira! She really did react fast! The moment I was hurting for health, she was already working on helping me out.

After she finished healing me, Akira wasted no time in dashing for the twin at low health. The boss had finally recovered from its stun and began to move toward me. I leapt away from him, but his approach speed was much faster than my jumps.

Motions for evasion and other such actions are closer to your actual input. But in terms of actually attacking the enemy, the game’s semi-automatic motion system corrects your movement so that you’re always facing the enemy. Some attacks have wind-up animations or leave the enemy vulnerable, so these can be dodged. But there are also attacks that follow the target, so even if you see them coming and try to dodge, they’ll usually hit you anyway.

On the flipside, those attacks have less guardbreak power, so you’re better off guarding in that situation.

In short, there are attacks that you can dodge, while the others you can only guard. I figured it would be difficult to evade his short-range punches while he pursued me.

Ren receives 20 damage (guarded) from Iron Gemini’s attack!

I continued to guard, taking his second attack. Eventually, my HP dipped into the single digits... but then, Akira activated her art. It was just as I had planned in my head.

“Hawk Strike!”

This art began with a powerful leap, ending with a direct downward stab into the enemy’s head. It was a direct hit, shaving off the rest of the low-HP boss’s life. She followed-up perfectly.

“Whew, good stuff! Thank you!”

“No problem!” Akira grinned broadly before focusing on the other boss.



Naturally, Akira was highly skilled at MMOs, but she also had a powerful boon in the Breath of Ares talent. Thanks to that talent, she started the battle at a full 300 AP. This allowed her to both heal me and clean up the boss from the outset. To top it all off, she had the incredible Skyfall weapon at her disposal.

Akira continued to attack, casting Healing Dance on herself along the way to keep her HP topped off. With her HP maxed, each shockwave emitted by Skyfall effectively doubled her attack power. It was somewhat of a burden to heal herself every time she got hit, but she was also getting hit less and less often since she'd gotten used to the enemy's attack animations. She'd guard the short-range punches, but the two-fisted hammer slam was slow and telegraphed, so she dodged it.

She couldn't possibly fail at this point. I should know, having played so many games with her in the past. She wasn't *just* a lover of sightseeing—she also lived for intense action. That's just how my bestie was. She was there when you needed her.

I monitored the situation between casting circles. The AP she used for HP maintenance and the AP she gained from attacking were starting to reach equilibrium. In fact, she actually seemed to be *gaining* AP! At this rate, she ought to be able to burn him down. Normally, floor bosses would take six to ten people to beat. And she was about to do it all alone! Impressive.

The boss's HP fell to 50%... 40%... 30%! Could she do it?! But at this point, the boss prepared for an attack that we hadn't seen yet. It appeared in my log as such: Iron Gemini prepares to unleash Blaster Knuckle!

That must have been the boss's art. He began to toss out a powerful punch, but then... his fist detached! Not only that, but it changed directions to follow Akira, like a guided missile!

"Whoa! Aaaah!"

Caught by surprise, she took the full brunt of the attack. And it did a ton of damage! A whole 70% of her health bar had disappeared.

"Akira!"

"I'm still going, don't worry! I just gotta heal—"

With 140 AP remaining, she attempted to start her Healing Dance animation—but she couldn't.

"Uh, what the heck?! I can't move!" Akira's movement halted midway.

When I looked at her status icon, I realized she was paralyzed. As it turned out, that was a secondary effect of the boss's art. Paralysis has a chance of completely stopping any of the afflicted target's actions.

"Akira! You're paralyzed!"

"Paralyzed? Fine, I'll just try again!"

This time, it worked—she was healed. That was all well and good, but when a player's dance is canceled mid-cast by paralysis, she'll still lose AP. That meant her AP balance was worse-off, which in turn meant she might not be able to top off her HP.

The boss continued its attacks. Akira tried to fight back as best she could, but her attacks and dances were gradually thwarted by paralysis. She was dealing damage much slower than before. Eventually, she didn't even have enough AP to dance.

Akira fell to 30% HP again, with only 20 AP to spare. She'd go down at this rate. I immediately opened my item window and started to craft a particular item. The ingredients: oak staff and bronze sword. The result: a Canesword.

Normally, a player can't start their craft animation in the middle of combat, but thanks to the talent Efficiency I was able to skip the animation altogether, going straight to the result and bypassing the restriction.

I started and finished crafting immediately. Then, I equipped my Canesword and dashed over to the Iron Gemini. Twisting off the cap of my Canesword, I activated Quickdraw!

Thanks to my single-digit HP, my art dealt massive damage. With a flash of my blade, I reduced the boss's remaining health to zero. He began to stagger heavily before shattering to pieces and disappearing.

"Woohoo! We really did it!"

"Whaaa?! Hey now, wait a sec!" Akira seemed unsatisfied, despite our

victory.

“Hmm?”

“You can only activate hidden weapon arts once per battle, right? Why’d you get to do it again after your first Dead End?!”

“Ahh, a fine question, my pupil! It has to do with how the game’s internal systems handle the ‘once per battle’ condition.”

I loved to investigate how game mechanics worked and then take full advantage of each little quirk. Since she asked, I was glad to give an explanation!

“Oh, you can skip all the boring math stuff. You always get stuck on it for so long. I’ll take the condensed version, good sir!”

“Tch. Well, that’s good enough. So, let’s say I have hidden weapon A and hidden weapon B.”

“Right.”

“So, I’ve used the art with hidden weapon A. At this point, we can assume—but *only* assume—that the ‘already used’ flag has been raised for both hidden weapons, A and B.”

“Go on.”

“But what if I obtained a new weapon, hidden weapon C, in the middle of the battle? From what I can tell, that flag hasn’t been raised for the new weapon. Therefore, I can use it again.” Essentially, the “arts unusable“ flag is set on a per-item basis.

“Wait... so you obtained a weapon C, then? I thought you couldn’t craft mid-battle.”

“With the Efficiency talent equipped, I can bypass that restriction.”

“Whaaaat?! Seriously?! So it is useful, then! It lets you slip right through the ‘arts unusable’ flag!”

“Yes, that’s right. Canesword has the OEX designation, so I can only make a new one if I break it with Final Strike. So of course, the first thing to do is to

break it. It's pretty much throwing money away."

The weapon is broken with every ultimate, so it takes a lot of materials to make, therefore people call it throwing money away. To keep up with this playstyle, one has to stock up on hidden weapon ingredients. But I've got plenty of funds to keep me going, since I stockpiled for the entire first month I played. Fundraising will probably be a major hurdle down the road, though.

"Wowwww, I can't even tell if that sounds more like a bug or a feature! Good work figuring it out, though."

"I've had plenty of time for experimentation." I happened to notice it while I was trying out a bunch of combos with my good buddies, the island bunnies. As it turns out, play is a driver of innovation.

"How many island bunnies have been sacrificed for the sake of progress?"

"Heheh... If this weren't a video game, I probably would've driven them to extinction. But either way, I believe in going above and beyond."

"So as long as your skills are off cooldown, you can use your ultimate again?"

"Yep. I also could've done it if I used my Remedy of Murgleis, but I cheaped out and just used Quickdraw instead."

Akira lit up and raised her hand in response. "I get it! That's why you wanted me to be a sword dancer! You wanted me to learn Sword Samba!"

Akira was referring to a level 22 sword dancer skill. It had the same effect as Remedy of Murgleis, taking all of the target's skills off cooldown. This effect costed 200 AP.

"Yep! Now you get me."

The once-a-battle limitation of hidden weapon arts can be subverted by breaking and recrafting the weapon. As long as my cooldowns can be cut short, I can use my entire ultimate twice in the same battle. And for that purpose, sword dancer has a skill that ends all cooldowns in an instant. With the ability to use my ultimate twice, I could effectively double my burst damage. When I figured out that sword dancer was so synergistic with this strategy, I couldn't let that opportunity slip by.

“Neat! I finally get it! You really weren’t trying to ogle me!”

“See, I *told* you that wasn’t the point.”

“But you’re always staring at me when I wear these costumes.” She looked at me reproachfully.

“Honestly, I just picked it for the synergy. But if I get to enjoy such a beautiful sight as a bonus, can you really blame me?”

“Ugh. If this were any other online game, I wouldn’t care if you messed with the camera angles and looked up this character’s skirt or something.”

“Hah! I remember when we did that.” Everyone in EF would do that to a popular NPC, Magical Girl Melolin. “Thinking back on it, I gotta apologize. I thought for sure you were a guy.”

“I thought it was pretty dumb, but maybe it was valuable experience; it taught me the truth about boys. But in this game, it just makes me feel like *I’m* being ogled at! It’s so humiliating!”

“Don’t worry so much. It looks good on you, *and* it’s cute. What’s the issue?”

“Jeez... At least we’re friends, so I don’t mind if you look at me.”

“But hey, great job in that boss fight. Nobody else could have done that much damage solo! You got used to evading his hits in no time too. I see you’re showing off your twitch action skills.”

“Aww, I don’t wanna hear that from you.” She forced a smile and I cocked my head in response. “If I’m so good at twitch action, who was it, exactly, that chunked the boss for nearly 80%?”

“Oh, forget about that part! You looked flawless to me.”

“C’mon. If you were the sword dancer, you’d have been able to do it all yourself.”

“Me, a sword dancer? In that getup? Nah, even I have standards.”

“Rude! So you’re just gonna make me do it?!” She got in a bit of a huff.

“I don’t think anyone deserves the mental image of me wearing that. Anyway, let’s look through our loot.”

“Oh, yeah! What’d we get?”

“Ooh, we got six whole Iron Ingots!”

“Just materials? Lame. I wanted gear.” Akira may have been disappointed, but I was intensely excited.

“No, this could be really big. Do you think they drop this every time?”

“Who knows?”

“All right. Let’s wait for them to respawn so we can farm more.”

“What?! Why not just go to the next floor?”

“If we can get six of these every time, we’ll hit the jackpot. My Canesword has a lame bronze sword inside, but I’m thinking I want to upgrade it to an iron sword. That’s gonna require a lot of Iron Ingots. Besides, we’ll get fixed EXP between us, so this is good for level grinding too. Let’s keep this up until we hit level 22!”

I was hoping to find a good place to grind levels until she got Sword Samba at level 22. Once we reached that point, Akira and I would unlock our full potential as a duo. Collecting ingots for the iron sword upgrade would kill two birds with one stone.

“If the boss’s respawn time is long, or if we don’t get as many ingots as I expected, then I’ll reconsider. But we should at least give it a shot. My gamer spirit demands that I test everything I can!”

“Oh, *there* it is. Your silly obsession with testing everything.”

“C’mon. Let’s just wait for them to respawn, and we’ll kill them one more time. Cool?”

“Suuuure, that’s fine. Let’s take a breather while we wait for it then.”

Akira sat lightly atop a fallen rock nearby. I used my foot to draw a memo at the base of the rock in order to mark the current time. This would let me count the time until the bosses respawned.

“Hey, Akira. Do you mind if I grab these ingots?”

“Nah. Go for it.”

“Thanks!”

I opened the system menu and unequipped Efficiency. From there, I opened the crafting menu and began to craft an iron sword with four iron ingots. With Efficiency equipped, I wouldn’t gain crafting skill from this. It’s a little annoying to remove it every time, but that’s just part of the process, I guess.

I activated the Simple Forge toolset. I began the process by melting the ingots and re-molding them. My hammer struck the metal over and over until it assumed the shape of a sword.

These manual controls make the smithing experience all the more realistic. In fact, if you mess up too much, you fail the crafting attempt and lose your ingredients. But if you do well, you can actually make flawless items.

Tink, tink, tink. Tink, tink, tink. The sound repeated over and over...

Abruptly, Akira’s face appeared right in front of mine, interrupting my work. She was making one heck of a strange face.

“Buh?! H-H-Hey, watch it! ... Gah, I missed!” The metal rang sharply as my ingot was crushed to bits. Crafting failed...

“Uh, Akira?”

“Ahahaha! Sorry, I was bored.” I can’t really get mad at her; I’ve always known she was a bit of a mischief maker. “Mmm, they still haven’t respawned.”

“It’s only been a minute.”

“Ooh! This is a prime opportunity.”

I opened my own status window. I then clicked the LUB—Level-Up Bonus—button to look at my distribution.

With each level-up, your LUB increases, allowing you to freely increase any of your stats. They’re meant to be distributed, but I hadn’t spent any of mine yet. I was currently sitting at 64 LUB. My current stats: STR 30

VIT 33

DEX 35

AGI 41

INT 72

MND 60

CHR 49

Typical of a back-line class, my stats leaned toward INT and MND. Meanwhile, my physical stats were very, very lacking.

“You gonna boost your stats? I haven’t spent any of mine, either.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t finish him in one shot so I’m thinking about it. Maybe this will make all the difference. By the way, Akira, how are your stats looking?”

“Oh, me? Take a look.”

This time, I focused on Akira’s status window.

STR 52

VIT 44

DEX 61

AGI 63

INT 37

MND 42

CHR 74

Her DEX, AGI, and CHR were the highest. DEX is an essential stat for front-line melee fighters. AGI, meanwhile, affects movement speed and evasiveness, so it’s very useful to have. As for CHR, the amount of healing from her dances is based on that stat. The devs must be implying that cuteness is justice.

On the other hand, her STR was mediocre, since her class wasn’t that STR-focused. Her VIT was on the low side for a front-line class, meaning she’d take a lot of guardbreak damage if she got hit. Really, apart from her CHR being a bit higher than usual, she fell into the light infantry stereotype.

Now, as for where should I put my LUB... there was really only one choice. I went ahead and moved the slider to put all 64 points in VIT.

“Wha?! Wait! Wait, wait, seriously? Are you *sure*?!” Akira, flabbergasted,

moved to stop me.

“Hmm? What’s wrong with VIT?”

“VIT is like, symbologist’s worst dump stat! Why *wouldn’t* I stop you from wasting all your points on it?!”

“Did you forget that I’m trying to make it a one-shot wonder?”

“Shouldn’t you put it all into STR or DEX, then?”

“Well, STR would increase my physical damage and guardbreak, and DEX would increase my critical and hit rate.”

Regarding guardbreak: the attacker’s weapon’s guardbreak stat is added to their STR, while the defender’s weapon or shield’s poise stat is added to their VIT. Guardbreak happens when the former result is higher than the latter.

Guardbreak and poise are higher for two-handed swords and axes. Of course, shields have the highest poise.

Evasion happens more often when the defender’s AGI is higher than the attacker’s DEX. If you can boost your AGI a lot, it’s possible to evade most attacks that come your way. As a result, players that rely heavily on weapons shouldn’t neglect raising their DEX as well.

Both STR and DEX are essential for the physical attacker. Finding the right balance is an eternal source of frustration for many.

“Exactly! Both are important for attackers.”

“But I won’t be using any normal attacks. I’ll just be using arts and ultimates, and since my arts can’t be evaded, my hit rate doesn’t matter at all. But VIT dictates my max HP! And the higher my max HP, the more damage Quickdraw does at 1 HP.”

“Huh? So you’re *never* going to use normal attacks?”

“Staves suck for attacking, anyway. There’s no point in wasting points on them.”

“What about using your Canesword’s blade, then?”

“If I use that, I can’t Quickdraw. Can’t reveal my hand to the enemy, after all.”

Hidden weapons are all about catching the enemy by surprise, so... you get it by now.

“Really?”

“Besides, unsheathing the blade would leave me worse off. I don’t have any sword arts, and since symbologist has a low affinity for swords, all of my attacks would miss. If I really wanted to, I could equip a Master’s Scroll for one-handed sword and raise my DEX a bit, but... see where this is going?”

“Yeah, I get it. If you were gonna go that far, you might as well just use a normal sword.”

“Yep. And if I tried to use both parts of the Canesword, smacking enemies with the staff and waiting for my chance to use Quickdraw, I’d be doing less damage than I would with a regular sword. It would essentially defeat the purpose of it. And even worse, symbologist’s base stats are way too bad for a front-line class, so I might as well have just picked a different class.”

“Truly, the Canesword is a harsh mistress.”

“Agreed. Honestly, I think a Symbologist with his HP reduced to 1 with Turnover is the only one who can really use it properly... then if that symbologist winds up giving up and uses it in some half-baked way instead, the weapon becomes useless anyway. It’s all about how much you can optimize your use of Quickdraw and Dead End, which can’t even be dodged anyway; you’re guaranteed a hit as long as you make the right motions. Being a half-baked generalist is missing the point; I need to devote myself wholeheartedly to becoming a one-trick specialist!”

As I spoke passionately at length, a grin spread over Akira’s face.

“What’s got you so happy?” I started to get a little nervous from the way she stared at me.

“Ah, it’s just... whenever we played games before, I could never really see the emotions behind the chat window. I never realized you looked like this when you talked about this stuff.”

“Then what do I look like?”

“You look really content! It’s kinda cute.” She poked my cheeks.

“Cut it out! You’re gonna make me blush.”

“Aww, what’s the problem? You’re always doing the same thing to me.”

“Hey now! You’ll ruin my reputation if you tell people that.”

“Heheh. Now, back on topic: would increasing VIT over STR increase your damage more?”

“I don’t expect a major difference in damage, but VIT has more applications for me, especially since it’ll make me better at guarding. Not to mention the HP increase. The worst thing that could happen to me is dying before unleashing my ultimate, so increasing my survivability is the best thing I can do. And it’d be a useful countermeasure if someone tries to take me down before I can fight back. So VIT is a two birds, one stone sort of deal.”

“Oh, yeah! Someone in PvP would try to kill you before your ultimate, wouldn’t they?”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“I see! But just increasing your attack power seems like overkill, doesn’t it? Like, when you fought that guy from class B, you did way more damage than he had HP.”

“Fair point. But if you’re gonna shoot for a home run that requires 100 meters of distance, you might as well plan to hit for 500 meters, right?”

“I don’t recommend using those baseball analogies on anyone else, by the way. I only understand them because I know you so well.”

Sorry, it’s just a habit. Blame my parents.

“But anyway, that’s what I want. Sending it out of the park is cool and dramatic! If it’s a home run either way, the cooler, more dramatic home run gets people talking and makes a man popular... and that’s exactly what’ll help me shine light on the king of the Bummers. Remember what you said? Drama cannon!”

“You’re always so silly. But when you put it that way, VIT *does* seem like the optimal solution. Maybe your silliness is what helps you come up with these

crazy ideas.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

As I thanked her, I threw all of my LUB into VIT. My VIT rose from 33 to 97. Woo, I was tankier than ever!

“Where are you planning to put your points, Akira?”

“Maybe DEX would be best, since my healing is based on AP. After all, if I can’t hit anyone, I can’t keep up my AP maintenance.” No sooner had she finished speaking than... “Oh, there’s the boss! How long was the respawn time?”

I checked the current time in my system menu. About five minutes had passed.

“Five minutes is pretty fast. This should make for efficient level-grinding too. Now watch this, Akira.”

I equipped Efficiency and crafted another Canesword. Then, I turned toward the newly-spawned Iron Gemini twins.

“Huh? What are you doing?”

“I want to test something. Join the fight when the timing seems right.”

I stepped into their aggro range, causing them both to run toward me. As they punched me, I raised my staff to defend.

Thunk. They didn’t guardbreak at all! All that VIT was already paying off! As long as I didn’t mess up my guards, I could get through this unscathed.

“All right, that does it! Let the battle commence!” I yelled out to Akira, who was standing far away.

After we defeated them a second time, we once again obtained six Iron Ingots. With my increased VIT, along with boosted max HP as a result, my ultimate did more damage. Enough to kill one of the twins with one shot, in fact.

This was quite the discovery for future grinding. There’s no point in just advancing up the floors—high-efficiency grinding spots must be thoroughly utilized. Thus, we aimed for level 22 and the ingots required for the upgraded

Canesword, to be made from iron staves and iron swords. Once I used up all of the oak staves and bronze swords in my inventory, I would replace them with the aforementioned.

It was time to get our grind on! We chose this location as our temporary training ground.

CHAPTER 5: A CLASS QUEST AND A FOUR-MAN PARTY RESTRICTION FOUR DAYS PASS...

We had grinded at the Iron Gemini Training Ground for three days and spent the remaining one day on the ninth floor. We had finally caught up to the vanguard of the expedition.

With my ample supply of ingots, I had replaced my Canesword materials with their new upgrades. Weapons have to be upgraded eventually, so being able to do so while grinding levels was a big deal for us.

Though I must admit, it was a little terrifying to see Akira slaying Iron Gemini after Iron Gemini in stone-faced silence as she had grown bored of the grind. But she made up a month-long absence in only ten days, so good job to her. Her Skyfall and my burst damage were instrumental in our being able to take down powerful enemies as a duo.

As for the tenth floor, according to Maeda and Yano, there's a barrier in the center of the map that houses the final boss of Trinisty Island. To challenge the boss, a party must hunt the monsters outside the barrier in order to acquire the materials necessary for the Bell of Light, which will dispel the barrier.

According to the vanguard party, they would soon have the necessary items to challenge the boss. The entire class gains access with just one bell, so we'd be able to assist the vanguard party as well.

Akira and I were excited to join them today, but... when I logged in, the class's morale had taken a nosedive. They always seemed to be having fun. I wonder what happened?

"Oh, good morning, Ren."

"Morning, Akira. The mood seems a little different today. I wonder what's going on."

"I dunno either, but I noticed it when I logged in too."

“Really?”

When I looked over the classroom, I realized that everyone had the debilitated debuff, a condition that reduces all stats by a large amount. Specifically, all stats are reduced to 20%, even including HP and MP. Most often, people will receive this status after they’ve died and been revived with magic. Some of the highest level resurrection magic will leave the target with no negative side effects... but that clearly wasn’t the case here.

“Everyone’s debilitated. I wonder how they all got that condition at the same time?”

While Akira was looking around the room, Yano logged in. She wasn’t affected by that status, so her stats were fine. Like us, she looked confused before asking me about it.

“Uhhh? Hey, Takashiro? What’s going on here? Everyone’s debilitated.”

“No idea. Sorry.”

“Aww. Oh hey, there’s Kotomi! Kotomiiii!”

Maeda had the status effect as well. “Oh, good morning, Yuuna.”

“Hey, Kotomi, why is everyone debilitated? Did something bad happen?”

“You could say that. We were gathering materials for the Bell of Light, when suddenly, some sort of artillery flew at us. It exploded, leaving everyone in the blast radius debilitated.”

“Yesterday? Oops, I was out running errands. So it still hasn’t worn off, then?”

“That is correct. We summoned the teacher with the Call GM function, and she told us that it was the doing of an item called the Gem of Emaciation. It has a very long duration.”

“Huh. Maybe another class used it to mess with us. How long does it last, exactly?”

“Its natural duration is about 48 hours.”

“48 hours?! That’s ridiculous!”

I gasped in surprise as well. Only the most annoying griefers would stoop to

using something like that.

“She even said that you can’t acquire that item until after Trinisty Island. There are faster ways to heal its effect in later areas, but for now, we can only wait for it to end.”

“Whaaaat?! What kind of low-life would do something so filthy?!”

“I can’t say for sure, but class B was nearby. So maybe...”

“But they shouldn’t be able to obtain it either, right?”

“Aoyagi is correct in that regard, but they very well could have received it from upperclassmen as well. GMs can dispel the effect if they find evidence of cheating, but for now, we can only wait for the investigation... which will take a long time too.”

“But Kotomi, if we just sit around, won’t the other classes beat the boss before us and win the quest? What should we do?”

“There’s no way for us to beat the boss while we’re debilitated. I believe the only thing we can do is wait.”

Everyone must have been so down because they realized this too. It must have been a real punch to the gut for this to happen when the summit was within view.

“Everyone’s given up at this point, so the class feels like a funeral right now. Makes sense. But honestly, it makes me really mad! We were doing so well too! Grr!”

“It really is a crying shame. As expedition leader, I wish I could have led everyone to a proper conclusion. I’m sorry, Yuuna.”

“It’s not your fault, Kotomi! I know how hard you’ve been working. Good girl, good girl.” Yano started to pat Maeda’s head.

“Heehee. What a surprise that we ended up at the same high school, and that you’d end up consoling me like this.”

“Oh? Did you two know each other before coming to this school?” Akira was always excited to gossip.

“Yep! We knew each other from middle school.”

“We couldn’t claim that connection when we actually *were* in middle school, though.”

Quite a surprise that a class rep and a gaudy gal would be friends, even if they were classmates.

Putting all that aside... I did agree that Maeda was doing her best to be a good expedition leader. She worried about me when my level fell behind, and she even gave us a strategy guide to help. I was still thankful for all that, so I wanted to find some way to reciprocate. This was the best possible time to reveal my power as one of the chosen gamer elite!

“‘There’s no time to give up!’“ Akira and I declared, at the same time. Our faces met, and Akira let me speak.

“Myself, Akira, and Yano are still unaffected. Let’s see if the three of us can clutch it out!”

“What?! Just the three of you?!” said Maeda.

“Consider it a party size restriction. Me and Akira are specced for skirmishes, so if the stars align, we might have a chance! I think it’s at least worth trying.”

“I think Ren’s the only one built for skirmishes, but I agree with the rest of it! We can’t let everyone’s effort go to waste without at least trying!” said Akira.

“Specs aside, I’m willing to give it at least one try just to see whether it’s really doable or not,” I added.

“I agree with that too! Do we have the Bell of Light yet?”

“We should have a few of them ready, right, Kotomi?”

“Yes. We have three of them, as of yesterday.”

“How about you let us have one, then? Call it recon!” *Ooh, looks like Yano is on board.* “A party size restriction with the Emperor of Underpowered sounds like a heck of a lotta fun! I’m getting psyched!”

Her motivation seemed to be infecting Maeda, even. “You’re right. Instead of sitting around doing nothing, you should—no, *we* should go. Even if I can’t help

much with this debuff, I'm coming too."

With that settled, we decided to venture to the tenth floor boss after school for reconnaissance.

◆◇◆

Here we are, after school. With the rest of the class powerless thanks to the debilitation effect, they logged out. They really had given up hope.

The four of us gathered in the warp room before heading to the tenth floor boss. I guess they were afk for a bathroom break, because I was left waiting for them alone in the warp room. While I waited, I noticed Kataoka from class B, the guy I had bet Skyfall on a duel against.

When he noticed me, he spoke. "Yo. I'm guessing you guys are suffering from the debilitation bomb too."

Did he just say "too"? Does that mean he too was on the receiving end of that legendary debuff item? Was Maeda wrong to suspect class B? If not them, then who could it have been?

"What the heck? Don't try to ignore me, buddy!"

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't ignoring you."

"Anyway, my bad for all that stuff before! I got a little ticked off because that item was so rare. Now that I look back on it, I was picking a fight for nothing. Sorry." He put his hands together and lowered his head in apology.

Maybe this guy wasn't so bad after all. I was a little happy about this, since I wanted to believe all gamers were good at heart.

"Aww, c'mon. I'm not mad at you, anyway. So does that mean your class got hit with the bomb too?"

"Yeah. Eight of us can hardly even move. It's a serious blow since we're looking to fight the final boss."

"It hit almost all of us, so our final boss plans were interrupted too. Everyone's down in the dumps."

"That's a real shame. We were gonna try to fight it with our remaining

members, but—” Someone spoke from across the room, interrupting Kataoka.

“Come along now, Kataoka. I shall not suffer dullards.”

Nozomi Akabane (1-B) Level 28 Sword Dancer; no status icons.

Whoa. This girl was really something. To call her beautiful would be an understatement. She had slim, long legs like a model, and... well, I digress.

She played the same class as Akira, but she wore it even more boldly, equipped with the nearly-naked sword dancer gear in a very public place as if it were no big deal. People nearby glanced at her here and there, but she gave no sign of caring. She seemed to be a person of high culture, which was reflected in her manner of speech.

“Oh! No prob, Lady Nozomi! I’ll be right with you! I hope you don’t mind the wait!” Kataoka plastered a cordial smile on his face.

When she heard his response, so-called “Lady Nozomi“ sighed and turned her attention to someone else.

“...”

As I watched the scene before me, a thought crossed my mind: why did Kataoka want Skyfall that much in the first place? He’s a rogue. He can’t even equip it himself. That fact combined with his practically begging to be the dirt beneath Lady Nozomi’s boots...

“Hey. By any chance, did you want Skyfall so you could offer it up to her?”

“How’d you guess?” He just nodded at me! Do these guys really exist?!

In gamer terms, people like these two would be called Hime-chan and her follower. Hime-chan basically means “my dear, sweet princess,” and refers to a gamer girl that other players will pamper and spoil, as if she were a princess or something. They’ll help her with anything she wants, offer rare items to her, and stick to her like glue forever. That’s why they’re called followers. Thanks to them, the Hime-chan gets to play the game on easy mode. She’ll start to think that’s the normal state of things, so she’ll never get better at the game.

If you can’t tell, I’m not a big fan of people like that. I just can’t imagine enjoying the game like that. Honestly, I wish they’d go be weird somewhere

else. Not that I can speak for how much fun Akabane is having, I guess.

But wow, Kataoka... I didn't know you were *that* kind of guy. My opinion of you has changed yet again, and definitely *not* for the better.

"But I guess you'd catch on quick, since me and you are doing the same thing. Sorry for getting your 'friend' caught up in the whole mess."

"Huh?! What do you mean, 'the same thing'?!"

Kataoka was obviously confused.

"Aren't you a follower for that sword dancer girl? See, we're the same."

Oh God, no! I didn't even realize! Did Akira and I really look like that?

"After the duel, I was talking to Ms. Nakada. She said that even if I'm a loser, as long as I can make just one Hime-chan happy, that's all that truly matters. You were so right, teach! I never realized how narrow-minded I was!"

"..."

What in the world is he going on about?! All I want to do is be the cool, aloof guy who redefines metas! Do I actually look like a drooling follower in the eyes of others?!

"What was her name... Aoyagi? She's pretty cute, yeah. But I like the bossy princess types, so Lady Nozomi is the only one for me."

"Whoa, whoa, stop. You've totally got the wrong idea!"

"Heh. That's what they all say at first. But when you get used to it, being twisted around a Hime-chan's little finger and making her offerings is kinda nice, y'know? And then, suddenly, you start seeking out more Hime-chans!"

"I don't care! Please, don't lump me in with guys who destroy video games for their real-life fantasies!"

"Those nice guys who try to get in her pants IRL aren't *real* followers! Honestly, as long as I have a good Hime-chan, I don't even care if it's actually a guy behind the screen! I'll still bring her offerings! A real follower isn't looking for acknowledgement! A real follower just wants to be wrapped around his Hime-chan's little finger! Do you feel me, man?!"

I definitely do *not* feel you, man. You're a moron, and you're way too passionate about your depravity.

"Uhh... I get that you have weird interests, but don't go bringing me into them."

"I wouldn't mind having you as a follower, Ren."

I suddenly realized that Akira had been standing behind me.

"Hey there, Akira."

"Yo, Aoyagi. Sorry about that stuff before. I really regret it."

"Oh, no. You're fine. I don't really care anymore."

Then, Akabane once again accosted Kataoka. "Kataoka! Did I not just tell you to hurry it up?! Or do you *enjoy* making ladies wait?!" She was getting pretty mad.

Upon seeing her, Akira let out a little "Eep!" and hid behind me. I wonder why?

"Oh! I'm coming! I beg your forgiveness! All right, later. Good luck out there." Kataoka said his goodbyes and left.

"Why are you hiding, Akira?"

"Oh, um... I might know that girl in real life."

"You mean Akabane?"

"Whooooa. Yeah, that's her."

"Why didn't you say hi, then?"

"Look, she's not my friend or anything... I don't want to be friendly with her, anyway."

Did they know each other in school or something? But Akabane seemed more princessy and prissy to me, so I doubt they'd have gone to the same school, right? Or maybe... Akira's a princess too? I think she said she lived in Yokohama. Maybe she lives in one of those huge mansions there.

...While we're on the subject, I live in Tokyo.

We'd always gamed together, but we never really talked at length about school. Other than the fact that it was always boring, anyway. But she didn't seem all that eager to talk about it, so I decided not to pry.

Changing the subject, I summarized the new information I had heard from Kataoka.

"By the way, it looks like it wasn't class B that used the debilitation bomb. According to Kataoka, their class was affected by it too."

"Really? I wonder who did it, then. But hey, instead of pointing fingers, we ought to focus on the four-player expedition."

"Right. He said class B is going to fight the boss despite their decreased firepower, and that we also have to think about the other classes."

"Sorry to keep ya both waiting!"

"All four of us are here, then. We should depart immediately."

Yano and Maeda approached us. Now that everyone was present, we were ready to go. A lot of people were using the warp room, so we had to wait in line. We used this delay to organize our party setup.

Our class composition was as follows: me as symbologist, Akira as sword dancer, Yano as paladin, and Maeda as scholar. Our levels were 23, 23, 29, and 25, Yano being the strongest of all of us.

"Good job catching up so much, though. You two are crazy."

"Crazy *lucky*, maybe. I had a month to prepare too."

"Hey, Maeda. Why did you choose scholar, anyway?"

"I was wondering about that myself."

Yano's choice, paladin, was the best tank out there. No surprise on her end. But scholar was one of the weaker classes; a Bummer. I had to wonder why she went for that one. Maybe she enjoyed weak classes like me. Was she one of the chosen few?

"Both of my parents are academics, so I wanted to be like them." Her response was surprisingly innocent.

“Wow. I get it, though.”

“I know it’s not the greatest class, but even the teachers told us to choose what we liked the most, so...”

“If I did the same, I guess I would choose merchant? Nah, it sucks.”

“Oh? Do your parents sell things?”

“Yep! They run a little beauty salon.”

“Ooh, cool! Do they do your hair?”

“Nah. We don’t really see eye to eye on fashion, so I go to other salons. They think teenagers should go natural, or something.”

“I’m guessing your parents don’t exactly approve of your gaudy style, Yano?”

“Yup, not in the slightest. Oh, but Aoyagi, you can just call me Yuuna. Mind if I call you Akki?”

“Sure! I’m fine with that.”

The two of them smiled at each other.

“Hmm. I can’t think of any classes that would fit that criteria for me.” My dad worked in game development, while my mom was an author.

“Same for me, Ren.”

On that note, we reached the front of the line and proceeded to the final floor. The tenth floor had no cities; instead, the warp point was just outside of the central barrier. *The last boss is in here, huh?* I wondered what it was like.

“If we use the Bell of Light here, we should be able to enter and fight the boss. Takashiro, Aoyagi, what should we watch out for?”

“We should be able to tell at a glance whether we’re able to do it with just the four of us. If we think we can, we’re free to challenge it again; if not, then all we can do is give up and wait for the rest of the class to heal up.”

“It looks like it’s all up to your ultimate, Ren. Whether we can win or not depends on if you can kill it in a few hits.”

“Right. If I can kill it in one or two hits, we can probably win on the first try.”

“Is your ultimate really that powerful?”

“Yup, he’s not kidding! But it only works for one attack. It also takes an annoying amount of prep, *and* it’s a big cash drain, since it breaks his weapon in the process.” Akira spoke for me. She definitely understood the drawbacks.

“Yano, you start off by aggroing the boss. I’ll attack with Dead End, and we’ll judge based on how much of his HP bar is lost. That’s the most important thing here.” Everyone nodded in agreement. “I doubt one hit alone will finish him, so we’ll keep going for as long as we can. Once Akira pops Sword Samba, I can attack again. Since Samba costs 200 AP, she’ll have to get AP as fast as possible.”

When we enter boss battlefields, all support effects end, making her start with 0 AP. We could only assume this would remain true for the final boss.

“Then the basic plan is to start the battle with Yuuna and Aoyagi fighting the boss alone and building up AP, right?”

“If it attacks us without provocation, that’s the only thing we can do. But if it doesn’t attack first, then there won’t be any problems with us waiting. Then, Akira can gather AP with Breath of Ares.”

“For real?! Lucky! That’s like, the best starting talent! I just got Master’s Scroll (Shield), and I don’t even need it!”

Ouch. Poor Yano. It’s not a bad talent, but it’s wasted on paladins, considering they can already equip shields.

“That’s one of the highest ranking talents, right? I must admit, I’m a bit envious.”

“Heheh. What was your starting talent, Maeda?”

“Oh, me? I started with Tactical Magic.”

“That’s pretty good too, yeah? When you use magic, your AP increases based on MP consumption.”

“That’s right. It’s certainly not a bad talent.”

“Anyway, when Akira has enough AP, she’ll Samba so I can attack again.”

“How about using your Remedy of Murgleis? You still have it, right?”

“Depends on the situation. If it looks like we can win, I’ll use it. The main problem is whether I survive or not after using Dead End; it’s possible that I’ll die before I can get a second hit in.”

“Ohh, right. When you do a ton of damage, you get a ton of aggro. That’s no good for someone at 1 HP. I’ll try healing you as soon as you attack, like last time.”

Yano and Maeda’s classes both had recovery magic as well. With everyone but me wielding recovery magic, we had quite the hospitable party. But if the boss normally required the coordinated effort of an entire class to defeat, it probably had a ton of attack power too.

“Oho! I really am vital to the operation, then. You’re counting on me to pull the aggro and keep Ren safe.”

“That’s exactly what we need. Try to hold aggro for as long as you can, please.”

“All righty! I’ll do what I can.”

“So, let’s outline our final strat.”

I began to organize all of our information thus far: If the boss doesn’t attack us right off the bat, we’ll wait for Akira to gain AP. But if it does, Yano and Akira will fight him off while she does. Once Akira has ample AP, I’ll hit him with Dead End. Then, we check how much HP the boss has left. After that, Akira will Samba for me so I can use Dead End again. All the while, she’ll continue to fight the boss, using Samba on me as soon as she hits 200 AP again.

I should note: If I generated too much aggro and the boss stuck to me, it was likely that I’d die. All we could do about that is hope that Yano could out-aggro me.

Maeda was debilitated, so she’d just have to sit back and watch the battle, occasionally tossing out recovery and buffing magic.

“And that about covers it. This is our first try, so there’s no point in making a calculated, airtight plan.”

I wasn't normally one to wing strats, but ah well.

"All right, then. Onward!"

"Ooh, I'm so excited!"

"I'm going to use the Bell of Light now."

Maeda activated the bell, creating a hole in the barrier. Our party was sucked into the hole it made, bringing us inside. Suddenly, all around me was darkness. After the warp was completed, I saw a single, black-scaled dragon lingering in the middle of the circular arena.

I observed the dragon. Its name was Shadow Dragon Diablo. That's a punchy name. I felt like I had seen it in some giant monster movie before.

Then it struck me: *wow, I'm standing in front of a giant monster!* It stood about three stories tall. The dragon's body was massive, with long, sharp, sword-like claws on each of its four legs. Deadly-looking barbs covered the entirety of its tree trunk-sized tail. With each breath, flames erupted from the dragon's great maw.

Hoo boy, this is a little too scary. I couldn't even imagine how strong it would be.

"Wowwww... VRMMO dragons are so awe-inspiring!"

"This is so cool! I gotta take some screenshots!" Akira started an impromptu photo-op with the boss, grinning all the while.

"It doesn't look like it'll attack without provocation." So it would just let us buff and prepare for battle, then.

"All right, let's wait for Akki's AP gauge to fill."

"Yep. I'll go ahead and change my gear too."

Even now, Akira was in her school uniform. Akira had only just then changed into her (intensely revealing) sword dancer battle gear.

"Whoa. That's a little *too* sexy, don't you think?"

"I-It is rather bold for a school-based game. Is this supposed to be educational?"

Both of them seemed as though they wouldn't be willing to wear it themselves.

"Yeah. Now I see why nobody wants to play sword dancer."

"Right... They say a picture's worth a thousand words."

"Aww, I don't like it either, y'know, but this one is the best in battle. If there was gear that's up to par and didn't show as much skin, I'd be using it."

"Sorry to hear that, Akki. But I think you rock it well, girl! I think your boobs look really good when they're emphasized like that."

"Yes, I must agree. It doesn't look bad on you at all. But..."

"But you wouldn't wear it."

"Correct."

"Uggggh! Ren made me do it!" Akira glared at me with regret in her eyes.

"Ren's the one who told you to be a sword dancer? Jeez, what a horndog!"

"And here I thought he was more of an honest boy."

"I was just thinking of her potential combat synergy, okay?! It was necessary! Necessary for us to win, I mean!"

We talked among ourselves, waiting for Akira's AP to fill up to 300. In the meantime, Maeda cast Protection on us one by one, increasing our defenses.

Scholar is a class that combines wizard's offensive magic and cleric's healing magic. Of course, she couldn't learn all of either class's magic, and her spells were limited to a single target. This was a major bottleneck, making her unable to hit multiple enemies at a time. And with no area-of-effect healing, she would fall behind in healing per second too. She also doesn't have the MP preservation skills of wizard and cleric, and her physical attacks are just as weak as mine.

The scholar's most unique feature is its access to draconic magic. Draconic magic can't be obtained from scrolls in shops; instead, it has to be looted from dragon bosses. As such, it's rather difficult to obtain. To top it all off, all of scholar's most important stats are rather low. If the player has yet to reach the

class's main selling point, they can only act as an inferior wizard or cleric.

Thus, it is a weak job. A Bummer. But hey, at least it can use more recovery magic than symbologist.

"Ready! I'm at 300 AP."

"Woo! All right, let's do it. We're counting on you, Yano!"

"Okay! I'm gonna tank my butt off!"

Paladin's basic playstyle involves a shield and a one-handed sword. The class can also learn taunt skills and recovery magic. Compared to other shield classes, paladin's recovery magic makes it the most durable by far. The stability of the paladin makes it one of the best classes all around. It even has respectable attack power.

Yano moved to the front of our party, approaching Diablo. The boss noticed Yano and roared, attempting to intimidate her. The air began to reverberate with his roar. *Yikes! He just gets scarier and scarier!* It was too late to turn back now, but personally, I was pumped and ready.

"VRMMO dragons are insane! All right, I am ready to rumble!" Like me, Akira seemed to be swelling with anticipation for the battle ahead. "Let the battle begin!"

As soon as Yano was within skill range, she immediately activated her taunt. For now, she'd be his sole target.

Akira approached the dragon's forelegs at his flanks and began her Skyfall assault. Maeda moved away, careful not to carelessly enter his attack range.

Meanwhile, I moved between Yano, who stood in front of the dragon, and Akira, who stood to his side. First, I activated Enervating Circle at the maximum possible radius. As usual, my MP gauge was emptied. And then it was go time!

"Let's skip the introductions and give him a one-shot wonder! Everyone ready?!"

"We're ready, Ren! Do it!"

"All set!"

“I’ll watch over you!”

Here I go!

“Ultimate move: Dead End!” The malicious purple glow enveloped my blade and then struck Diablo.

The dragon roared in anguish as it was knocked backward. How effective was it? I did 2,148 damage. How much did his HP bar fall?

“About 25%! That was incredible damage! I can hardly believe it!” Maeda yelled from far behind me, confirming what I saw.

This meant we could win, if only I could use Dead End four times. There was hope yet! On top of Akira’s Sword Samba, we also had two Remedy of Murgleis. That meant two more activations: a total of four. If I could get all four off, victory would be ours!

“I’m healing you now, Ren!”

With my HP reduced to 1, Akira immediately cast Healing Dance. At the same time, Maeda and Yano cast Exheal on me. Suddenly, I was at full health again.

With the dragon recoiling from the shock of how much damage it took, we had a brief moment of respite. In that moment, I put as much distance as possible between myself and the dragon. So far, so good. But the real trouble was yet to come.

The dragon, no longer stunned, turned toward me with a fiery glare. *Yep, he’s targeting me now.* It was hardly a surprise, considering how much damage I dealt.

Groooaaaar!

Diablo roared, even louder this time, and twisted his body. As he turned such that his back faced me, he brandished his supermassive barbed tail like a flail.

This attack has a long wind-up! I can trick him!

When his tail reached its maximum height, I began evasive maneuvers.

Craaaash!

I dove to the side and rolled away. At that very moment, there was an

incredible impact where I was just standing. I had just barely timed it right. Despite the wind-up time, his speed was no joke!

As I stood up and tried to make more distance between us, the dragon howled thunderously.

Roooooar!

His booming roar generated a gust of wind so strong that I could hardly keep my footing. In that moment, the dragon approached with ferocity.

He brought the claws of his foreleg down on me. Despite his size, he was too fast! There was no way I'd be able to dodge this!

Still without a Canesword, I was forced to try to guard with my bare hands. But symbologist was nowhere near suited for hand-to-hand combat, so my guard was about as useful as holding up a sheet of paper. Despite putting all of my points into VIT, his guardbreak still brought my HP down to half in a single swipe.

"Ngh... I've been hit!"

If I hadn't guarded, I might have been one-shot. But these tense sorts of situations were what I lived for. This got the blood pumping!

Akira restored my lost HP almost instantly. She always had great reaction time.

"Sword Samba!"

Then, she used her cooldown-resetting dance as well. I could attack again—but I was still the dragon's favored target. I wouldn't be able to open the item window like this! I badly needed to make another Canesword.

The next swipe forced me to guard with my bare hands again. With the crushing weight behind the impact of his claws, my HP bar was brought down to half yet again.

"Takashiro, stand back!" Yano stepped between me and Diablo.

"Guardian Force!"

This skill lets the user take attacks in place of the player behind them,

allowing us to keep the situation under control. Yano was tanking each of the attacks that came toward me.

A paladin with plate armor and a shield was no laughing matter—she hadn't even taken a third of the damage I took. Even as she withstood the boss's attacks, she continued to heal me between hits.

Enemy aggro can also be built up by healing; fittingly, it's referred to as healing aggro. Paladins aren't just about direct provocation; they also need to heal their allies to maintain maximum aggro. As long as she could keep the boss from targeting me...

I opened the item window and began crafting. Iron staff and iron sword combined to make a Canesword. All right, it was done. I wasted no time in equipping it. Instantly, a staff reinforced with metal appeared in my hand.

"Guardian Force's effect just wore off!"

"Got it!"

The boss went for another melee attack against me, but I guarded it with my staff. It didn't hurt as much as before.

"Get over here and fight *me*, you stupid dragon!" Yano activated her taunt skill again, followed by another healing spell, but the boss continued to attack me.

"Flashing Spear!"

That was one of Yano's one-handed sword arts. It was a light-speed thrust with a sword enveloped in light.

176 damage. But even with the added damage aggro, I was still his target. That just goes to show how important damage aggro is, I guess. That's the biggest drawback of my burst damage. Yano was trying as hard as she could, but I had already pulled more aggro than she ever could.

But I couldn't stop now! I'd just have to attack faster. With only four people, we wouldn't have enough MP for a prolonged battle. Our chance of victory would only go down over time.

"Yano! How long until your next Guardian Force?!"

“Two minutes!” She yelled back, panicking. Could we hold out that long?

“I’m going to hit him again now!” I yelled to my allies as I took more and more of his attacks. Between two of the boss’s blows, I activated Dead End!

Gggaaaaaah!

Once again, the boss was stunned for an instant. Amidst the shower of healing that brought me to full health again, I saw Diablo’s HP was at 50%. But with ever more damage aggro on my end, he continued to target me and me alone.

While he was hitting me, I couldn’t open the item window. Until Yano was ready for another Guardian Force, I could only guard and try to bear it. But even if I guarded, I sustained immense damage.

With Maeda debilitated, she was running dangerously low on MP. Yano didn’t have much left, either. Akira used AP instead of MP, but she had only a sliver left herself. I just had to survive until the next Guardian Force—and somehow, I did.

“The cooldown ended!” She activated the skill immediately and stood between me and the dragon. This gaudy paladin really was reliable. *While she’s taking the hits, I’d better get to crafting!*

But then— Shadow Dragon Diablo is preparing to unleash Dark Breath!

That was the boss’s special skill, in which he breathed a wave of fire from left to right. It was an area-of-effect skill, instead of the usual single-target. The two of us took the full brunt of the attack.

“Whoa! Ugh, it hit me...” Yano, with full-body plate armor and a shield to protect her, lost 60% of her health bar.

Meanwhile, I, with only light robes to protect me— *Pop!* Yep, I was one-shot. When you die, you can’t even move your body... so I fell to the ground with a thud. Alas...

After an instakill like that, even Akira’s catlike reflexes failed to heal me in time.

“Uh, guys?! Our ace just died!”

“Aww man! This sucks!”

“I-Is this the end for us?” Maeda was right. One by one, the party was slaughtered by Diablo.

Well, that was that. The time had come for me to put my secret plan to work. When I respawned, I’d talk to everyone about it.

Chapter 6: Class Change

Thoroughly defeated, we returned to the classroom.

“Aww, we lost,” Akira said, disappointed.

“We did, but we were also able to bring it below 50% health. That was incredible damage.”

“I thought we could do it when I saw how much his ultimate dealt.”

“Sorry! I can’t believe I died first.” I put my hands together and bowed in apology before everyone.

“There wasn’t much you could do once he targeted you. Either way, it was originally meant to be just a reconnaissance run.” Maeda reassured me.

“So how did we do? Do you think we can win next time?”

“Hmm... As things stand now, it’ll be difficult, at best.”

“Agreed. Your burst damage was so high that he didn’t even look my way!”

“If we tried again now, it would end up the exact same way.”

Yano and Akira shared my thoughts. Being able to hammer out so much damage at once was very satisfying and dramatic, but it also became too much for the tank to handle.

The apprehensions I had felt before were finally taking shape. A good attacker can control his damage output in a way that allows the tank to maintain aggro. So when I was out there going ham on the boss, I was actually making things worse.

The simple truth was that we couldn’t win with this four-man restriction while using orthodox methods. We would run out of healing sources and be forced to watch helplessly as we died. There was no other way but to fire off four Dead Ends in quick succession. But with the damage aggro I built up, I would die before my fourth shot. We were stuck in a catch-22.

When she heard our thoughts, Maeda hung her head in disappointment.

“Oh... Then I suppose all we can do is throw in the towel.” As the expedition leader, I know she wanted to make things right for the class. Maeda really was a responsible girl.

“Sorry, Maeda. We might’ve set our expectations too high here.”

“Besides, it’s not your fault, Kotomi. Whoever used the debilitate bomb on us is the problem.”

“Not so fast, girls. I said ‘as things stand now.’ That doesn’t mean ‘throw in the towel.’“ I decided to step in.

“Oh?! Do you still have some dirty tricks up your sleeve?!”

“Seriously?! C’mon, tell us!”

“We’re all listening, Takashiro.”

“All right. Before I explain, how much MEP do we all have? I, uh, only have 141.”

“465 here.”

“I have 480 right now.”

“Akki? Kotomi?! How did you both get so smart?!”

Our only source of MEP so far was the five subject tests from the entrance exam. Those two were crazy good.

“Ooh, nice! I was hoping we could make it to 1,250. So far, we’re up to 1,086.” 164 left to reach our goal.

“How about you, Yuuna? You haven’t spent them yet, have you?”

“Nah, I haven’t yet. Uhhh, how much did I have, again? Just a sec. I think it was a hundred-something—”

“Wha? Huh? Seriously?!”

“Another member for the hundred club! That’s a surprise. My heart was racing in anticipation.”

“You got a problem with it? If I were smart, I wouldn’t dress like this, y’know?”

“I don’t think that’s related to your intelligence. Have you tried studying, Yuuna?”

“Yeah, yeah.” That was hardly a meaningful answer.

“So? A hundred and...?”

“Uhh... 166 total.”

“All right! That puts us right where we need to be.”

“Are we going to be using our MEP for this, Takashiro?”

“Yeah. We’ll need to buy an item called Wing of Rebirth, and a talent called AP Limit Break.”

The item costed 800 MEP, while the talent costed 450. Fortunately, MEP could be traded between players freely. Players would often sell just one point at a time. If we could pool our MEP together, this might work out!

“I’m guessing AP Limit Break is for me, then?”

“Yeah. It multiplies the AP cap by 1.5, making your maximum AP 450.”

“And you want me to cast Sword Samba twice.” She knew just what I was thinking.

“Exactly.”

“Wing of Rebirth is a class change item, isn’t it?”

“Right. It lets you change classes with your EXP intact. Now isn’t the best time for us to level down, so this is the only way to change classes at the moment.”

Changing classes is actually a bit of a hassle in this game. The action itself is simple; all you have to do is complete a quick quest. But it forces you to restart at level 1. Even if you go back to your old class, you’ll start at level 1 again.

In essence, a class change is equal to a clean EXP reset. Starting back at level 1 means a major loss of time, so only the bravest of people do it this way. But at the cost of 800 MEP, the Wing of Rebirth allows players to change classes without the EXP penalty. It’s an incredible item, to be sure. But it’s just so expensive. If you averaged 80 on every subject, that would be two whole tests.

“Who are we planning to class change?”

“I was hoping to have Yano change to sky pirate.”

That was my second choice for Akira. But yes, it is one of the Bummers. It’s a thief-type class, similar to rogue. But instead of specializing in DEX and AGI like rogues, sky pirates are bulkier, specializing in STR and VIT. They use guns and crossbows to deal damage.

Sky pirates see the world from their airships, so they prefer to fight with more technologically advanced weapons, but the power behind guns and crossbows doesn’t rely on STR. Some might consider it an advantage, but this fact doesn’t really mesh well with the game’s equipment system... Not to mention, guns and crossbows consume ammunition, so their high long-term cost compared to rogues is another major bottleneck for them.

They *can* steal items from enemies just like rogues can, so hey, that’s nice. But generally, most people would prefer to just use a rogue for that. Furthermore, rogues have access to Scapegoat to keep up aggro maintenance, whereas sky pirates do not.

To be fair, there are a lot of classes in the game, so it’s only natural that some of them would get a bum rap. That’s just how it works. You can’t have winners without an equal amount of losers. Despite sky pirate being a Bummer, though, it has great synergy with my symbologist.

“Me? But don’t we need a tank? Even if that tank can’t keep aggro.”

“No, you’ll still be a tank. I just don’t think any class *but* sky pirate could out-aggro me.”

Generally, people go for one of three tank roles: paladin, armor knight, or martial artist. Paladin excels in its role via access to recovery magic. Armor knight has the most pure bulk and an area-of-effect taunt, making it ideal for larger-scale battles. And martial artist has a ton of HP and can dodge and counter like no one else.

Each of these classes had simple, stand-out traits, but I doubt any of them could out-aggro the drama firehose that is my Dead End. The gist of my reasoning is that I have poor synergy with classic tanks. The only way forward is to change up our party composition.

“Ren, how will sky pirate help our aggro issue?”

“Sky pirate has a skill called Guilty Steal.”

“What does it do?” This skill was so obscure that even Yano was left puzzled. I guess the common player wouldn’t know about a weak class’s unique skill.

“It steals aggro from allies.” As a lover of underpowered classes, though, I’ve memorized all of the pertinent information about the Bummers.

“Ooh...”

“I completely forgot that skill existed.”

“Let’s see here... ‘Guilty Steal. Cooldown: three minutes. Steals target ally’s aggro and adds it to player’s own. Be sure not to use it on your tank! The intended use is to save a healer who has pulled aggro. In a party, it’s common knowledge that one should never pull aggro from the tank. Therefore, as a highly situational skill, it earns a D rank,’“ Akira read aloud from the textbook.

Well, that pretty much outlined the basics. Compared to the rogue, who can increase the tank’s aggro with Scapegoat, the sky pirate just has Guilty Steal. That’s yet another reason it can’t compare to rogue.

Not only does Scapegoat help the tank do their job, it also boosts the rogue’s damage. I think Scapegoat is about B rank. It’s better than Guilty Steal, in any case. It’s especially helpful when the party is in danger and they need a moment to recuperate. But that also means that it only really shines *if* the party is in danger, and it requires the player to have enough knowledge and skill to use it at the perfect time.

A truly versatile skill can help in any situation, simple enough for the party to benefit from it at all times. That’s the difference between the A and B rank skills.

“That’s what the guidebook thinks. But for us, that skill is S rank, because it *will* pull the boss off of me. Yano, you started with Master’s Scroll (Shield), right? So you should be about as bulky as a paladin either way.”

The main issue with our first attempt was that I pulled aggro and died too early. If she’d had aggro instead, Yano would have been more than able to hold

out, and it would have allowed me to get more ultimates off as well.

With sky pirate's Guilty Steal, we should be able to force the battle to go the way we need.

"I'll open with Dead End. Then, Yano uses Guilty Steal so the boss targets her. Akira activates Sword Samba on Yano, and I use a Remedy of Murgleis so I can ultimate again. Yano uses Guilty Steal again, and I use another Remedy of Murgleis for another ultimate. At this point, Yano will have two Dead Ends worth of aggro, so the boss shouldn't target me for the rest of the battle. Akira activates Sword Samba on me and I use my fourth Dead End. Bam, we win! That's the plan. Compared to last time, I should be safe to activate all four Dead Ends."

"Hmm. Hearing it all at once makes it pretty hard to wrap my head around..." Yano looked concerned.

"I think we can do it!"

"Good! I like it!"

"How about you two?!"

"I got it. Yuuna just has to use her skill as soon as you Dead End. Once she does that twice, she just has to survive."

"The only problems are that we'll use up all of everyone's MEP, and Yano will be stuck as a sky pirate. It'll be tedious for her to go back to being a paladin. So, the ultimate question: taking all those issues into account, are we still in favor? I say I'm in."

"I'm cool with it too!" Akira nodded to me.

But the ones with the most to lose from this were Maeda and Yano. Maeda would lose all of her whopping 480 MEP. Meanwhile, Yano would be forced to change classes. It would be a shame for her to lose a class she liked.

"I don't mind. If it keeps the class's effort from going to waste, I'm ready to do anything."

"Mmm. Well, *I* don't mind as long as I can help Kotomi."

"Thank you, Yuuna."

“Aww, don’t worry about it.”

Unsurprisingly, Maeda was as serious and responsible as ever. And it would have been rude to actually say it to her, but Yano was really kind despite her gaudy looks. She was very open-minded.

“Sounds like we’re all in favor. Let’s get to work immediately! We gotta get to the boss before the other classes do!”

Fortunately, the MEP-trading counter was within the school, so we hurried over there right away.

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The next morning, during homeroom— “Another good morning to you, gamers!”

Ms. Nakada entered the classroom with her usual energy, but the rest of the class was hardly as excited. The shock caused by the legendary debilitate bomb still lingered.

“All right, everyone, I’ve got news for you. Yesterday, the winner of the competitive event was decided!”

As she looked around the classroom, our eyes met. She smiled mischievously, as if she was a rascally little child playing a prank.

“Class E won! That’s us! Good job, everyone!”

“Whaaaaaaaat?!”

The entire class was shocked.

“But we’re all debilitated, right?!”

“What happened?!”

“Maybe there was some kind of mistake?”

“You’d think so, right? But actually, Takashiro, Maeda, Yano, and Aoyagi successfully took down the tenth floor boss together!”

She wasn’t kidding—once we’d remade our preparations and challenged the boss again, all of the pieces fell into place and we defeated it. The order of events I explained to the party worked exactly as I imagined! It was almost

disappointing how easily I could chain four Dead Ends together. Just like four back-to-back home runs, it spelled death for the enemy.

So it's true what they say; he who is well prepared has half won the battle. Planning and preparation are key.

"Really?!"

"Frickin' rad!"

"Listen up, kids! No matter how many people were present in the battle, this is the whole class's victory! That means everyone gets the reward. Check your talent screens!"

"Oho. There's a new talent called Joint Magic in my talent list."

As I recalled, Joint Magic allows a number of allies who equip it to combine their spells into one attack. It's kind of like a magical version of Skill Chain, in that it lets you create ultimates.

"Those with physical classes get Skill Chain, while those with magic classes get Joint Magic. If you don't see it in your talent list, let me know!"

Combining spells, huh? That had a pretty dramatic ring to it. I'd have to get a feel for just how good it was some time.

"Thank you so much, Maeda!"

"We gave up, but you stayed in the ring all this time!"

"That's our leader for you!"

The class unanimously thanked her.

"You all should thank Takashiro, not me. He's the one who planned the whole thing." Even as she deflected praise, Maeda was smiling. Good. Hopefully I've repaid her in full for looking out for me.

"This next reward is only for the four who defeated the boss—until the next competitive event, they'll have a victory flag next to their character icons!" *Ooh, it's true!* I suddenly noticed the flag in Akira's status screen. "With the victory flag, you'll get discounts at shops, MEP exchange rates become cheaper, airships and dragon mounts are free, drop rates increase, and a whole bunch of

other little bonuses are applied too!”

Huh, neat. But I was all out of MEP, anyway. Sadness. The higher drop rates would sure be nice, though. I always needed more materials for Caneswords, after all. I figured that would make preparation a bit less strenuous.

“Now, it’s time to announce this event’s MVP. Takashiro, come up to the front! Give him a round of applause, everyone!”

I didn’t know there was an MVP assignment, and I sure didn’t expect it would be me!

Clap, clap, clap, clap. In the midst of everyone’s applause, it was a tiny bit embarrassing to step up to the teacher’s platform. When I made it up there, Ms. Nakada whispered to me.

“You saved my butt there, kiddo. If someone else had won, this class could’ve been crushed beyond repair. Especially if the winner was a cheater like that.”

“Any idea who was responsible?”

“No clue yet. But if I had to say, it’s almost like *nobody* did it. We looked through the server logs, and we only saw the message about it detonating. The cause is completely unknown! But it’s still under investigation as a possible bug.”

“Oh, huh.” So we’d never know who threw the debilitation bomb, then? Not that it mattered, since we had won anyway. She was right, though; a loss like that would’ve had lasting effects on the class’s morale.

“Okay! Now for the MVP reward!” Ms. Nakada clapped her hands together once. At the same time, a tiny animal appeared to be floating in midair.

Chirp, chirp! It made cute little noises. The animal was a baby dragon, about the size of a puppy. It was so cute that it looked like a toy mascot. The dragon’s tiny wings flip-flapped, carrying its little body up and over my head.

“This pet dragon is for your use only. It’s just a baby now, but he’ll grow over time. When he grows up, he can help you in battle, so you’d better help him get big and strong! You can even feed him treats.”

“Chirp chirp!” It landed excitedly on my shoulder.

It’s so cute... This is amazing! I’ve always loved pet-raising mechanics!

Since it could help in battle right away, there was an inherent reward in raising it well.

“Feel free to name it as you please. The pet will also change in appearance based on how you take care of it.”

“Okay! Thank you.” I could only wonder what the best way to raise it would be.

“All right, everyone. That concludes today’s homeroom. Have fun in class today!” Ms. Nakada left the classroom.

As I returned to my seat, Akira stared at my little dragon in wonder. “It’s *so* adorable! What’re you gonna name it, Ren?”

“Hmm? Oh, right. I got it as a gift, so it’s technically foreign to me. Since it can help me in battle later on, it’s like a pinch hitter, yeah? So how about—”

“I know what you’re thinking. Don’t you dare name this little dragon after some foreign baseball player.” She saw right through me!

“What *else* would I do?”

“You seriously were going to do that?”

“Do you have any better ideas?”

“Ooh, you want my input? Let’s see, then. We want it to get big and strong, so you can’t go wrong with a strong-sounding name. Something like Halk, Throar, or Wolfyreen!”

“That’s not much better than my naming scheme.” Said the girl who, in every normal online game she played, would always play as bulky beastmen. Maybe it was my fault for expecting any better.

“That won’t work. A cute little baby like this needs to have a cute name.”

“Hey there, Maeda.”

“Takashiro, would you mind if I gave it a little hug?”

“Nah, go right ahead.”

“Thank you! Come here, cutie.” The baby dragon eagerly responded to her beckoning. She drew him into a hug when he approached.

“Chirp chirp chirp!” It certainly sounds happy. You must be a guy, you little playboy. But even happier was the girl hugging him.

“Wowwww, he’s so cute! Good, good boy. I so, so, *so* wish I could’ve gotten you...” Her eyes betrayed her true feelings of envy. I had her pegged as more of the cool and collected type, but I guess she had a soft spot for cute things. I wasn’t sure whether it was real excitement or if she was throwing me some not-too-subtle hints.

“I-I’m guessing you like animals?”

“That is correct. I’ve never been allowed to have pets, but I’ve always wanted one.”

“If you want him that bad, I could ask Ms. Nakada to give him to you instead. You certainly seem like you’d love him the most.”

“That won’t do. I agree that you deserve the title of MVP the most, so this little baby should be yours. I just happened to fall in love at first sight... I wonder if there are other ways to get pets?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. They’re not even in the MEP exchange list.”

“There’s nothing in the guidebook, either. Pets must be super rare.” Akira flipped through the guidebook, searching for an explanation.

“I should’ve asked Ms. Nakada about it.”

“Oh, yeah! We should ask her later.”

“Maybe it’s a quest reward, or loot from some monster. If we can figure out how to farm one, I’ll gladly help.”

“Thank you! I’ll take you up on that offer. With your help, I’m sure we can do anything.” Maeda really did seem to soften up when it came to pets. Her expression of pure joy was actually kind of cute.



“While we’re at it, Maeda, what do you think would be a good name for him?”

“Hmmm... how about Chamomile or Oolong? Or even Bergamot. I think those are cute names.”

“Ooh, sounds fancy.” But also kinda weak. I couldn’t bear the thought of calling my big, strong dragon Bergamot later on down the road.

“Boop, boop.”

“Chirp!”

Yano came over and started poking his snout as he lay in Maeda’s arms.

“All right. Yano, do you have any good ideas for a name?”

“Hmm. He is a dragon, so... how about Draco? That fits pretty well, yeah?”

“It sure didn’t take you long to arrive at that name, Yuuna...”

“Good enough, I say. Plus, there’ll be no mistaking him for anything but a dragon.”

“Ooh. Draco suits him pretty well! It’s simple, but you know what they say: keep it simple, stupid.”

“Woo! He picked mine!”

“All right! From now on, your name is Draco, little buddy. Nice to meet you.”

“Chirp!” He almost seemed to nod at me. Maybe he actually liked the name.

I’m gonna make you the strongest dragon in the world, Draco!

CHAPTER 7: LET'S FORM A GUILD!

I lay lazily on the carpeted picnic mat, listening to Akira's cheerful humming. Draco lay beside me, curled up to sleep.

Warm sunlight filtered through the leaves of the tall trees above, beckoning me to sleep as well. It was like we were really basking in the sunlight. This game was always so lifelike despite its fantasy setting.

We were in the Spirit Forest, next to a small fountain. The guidebook listed places with the best views, so we decided to check them all out, eventually ending up here. It was so pretty and calm...

When the competitive event ended, we were given more places to visit via airship. Naturally, sightseeing maniac Akira was desperate to check out everything. Of course, I tagged along with her.

In a rare display of hospitality, Akira offered to make tea and candy for the occasion. I was glad to wait patiently.

Tea and candy were part of the cooking set of crafting skills. All this time, however, Akira claimed that she never cared about crafting. Maybe she was starting to get into it because she could actually taste it in-game? That was what it seems like, anyway. I imagined she was salivating over all the possible things to eat. I hadn't tried in-game cooking either, so this would be my first time.

"Just a little longer, Ren. I'm almost done, I swear!" Akira looked back at me as she stood before the cooking set, which served as... crafting tools, I guess?

"Gotcha. Trust me, I'm in no hurry."

I watched Akira from behind, lying on my side. As she squatted down to check the temperature of the frying pan, I caught little glimpses of that wondrous gap of bare thigh that some referred to as "absolute territory." In her sword dancer gear and apron, I was soooo close to getting an eyeful of leg.

Whew, what a view.

I'm sure I don't have to explain why guys love sword dancer gear so much, but

I doubt *anyone* would want to actually walk around that exposed normally. Knowing you're in a game makes it a lot less weird—after all, you're pretty much half-fictional. Plus, fantasy clothes are exotic and unique, so there's a certain allure both to wearing and seeing them.

"It's so quiet and peaceful here." There was nobody here when we arrived, so we were free to sit around wherever we wanted.

"Yeah. It's a nice change of pace after having to deal with so many people."

A week had passed since the competitive event and I had been constantly hounded by guilds scouting for new members. With the end of the event, the first-year students had finally been given the option to join guilds.

Guilds are sort of like clubs in this school. Real clubs are probably largely the same, but guilds are always looking for promising fresh blood. Perhaps I'm being a little egotistical when I say this, but I imagine I looked promising, considering I have the "class mission victor" icon, the MVP icon, *and* a pet dragon. I was a newbie with a future—a golden rookie. I bet a few baseball teams would have fought over me in a draft. At any rate, plenty of upperclassmen hell-bent on recruiting new members had been buzzing all around me.

"It's been like that constantly. Scouts are after me at every turn too. But since you have Draco, you'd be more helpful anyway."



“It’s nice to have some attention on me, though, especially when they see my class and lose their minds. They’re all like, ‘uh, is this the right guy?’“

“You are the king of the Bummers, after all.”

“It’s a pretty sweet feeling. But I might be tempted to join a guild that’s only open to Bummers...”

“I wonder if any like that exist.”

The whole point of this sightseeing trip was to get away from all the guild ruckus. Even I could do with a little bit of downtime every now and then.

“Okay! All done.”

What a shame; my peeping fun was about to come to an end. Akira brought over a tray with plates and teacups on it.

“Sorry for the wait! Go on and eat your fill.”

Pancakes were piled on my plate, with cream and chopped fruit on top.

“Ooh, nice! This looks great!”

“The recipe was called fruit pancakes. My cooking skill is still low, so this is the best I could make.”

“This is more than good enough. Let’s have a taste!”

“Woo!”

Chomp.

“Ooh! Wow! This is crazy! I can really taste it!”

“It even has the consistency of a real pancake! Amazing!”

As we nibbled our food and sipped our tea, it disappeared without actually filling our stomachs. It didn’t even make you fatter in-game, so you were free to enjoy it to your heart’s content.

“Oh, I see. When you drink it, it just kinda goes away.”

“Until that point, it seems completely real!”

“Yep. VRMMO technology really is advanced.”

Me and Akira were full of reverence for the devs. This went above and beyond any normal online game.

“Even the cooking process was super lifelike. It’s like playing house, but hyper-realistic! I almost feel like my real-life cooking skill has increased.”

“The devs seem oddly passionate about the smallest details.”

“I love realistic elements in games. Especially since my parents don’t let me cook much in real life.”

Really? I could only wonder why that was the case. When it came to my family, my mother would be overjoyed if I decided to cook for them. Maybe Akira was really bad at it?

“Why don’t your parents let you cook?” When I asked her that, Akira blinked in astonishment, as if I had said something bizarre.

“Oh, you actually care about my life? I’m kinda surprised; I thought you didn’t.”

“Huh? Of course I do.”

“Well, you only ever talk about games, y’know? It’s all about redefining metas, testing things out, self-restricted playthroughs and such. Not that you’re boring or anything.”

“Sorry. I just didn’t want to pry into your private life.”

“I already revealed my big ‘actually a girl’ secret to you of my own volition, so it’s not like I have anything bigger to hide. You don’t have to skimp on the questions, y’know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But I’m picky about who I tell secrets to; you’re just special.” *Aww. She’s cute when she looks all bashful like that.*

“So, you wanted to know why my parents don’t let me cook?”

“Yeah.”

“How about I ask you my own question first: What do you think?”

“Because you’re a crappy cook!”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong! The correct answer is that they don’t want me to take the chef’s job.”

“Wait, what?! You have a private chef?!”

“Yep. Three of them, actually.”

“Wow... So you were a blue-blood all this time.” I had a feeling before, and this only confirmed my suspicions. Come to think of it, I feel like I’d wronged this noblewoman in one or two ways. Maybe I *shouldn’t* have been staring at her absolute territory?

“I guess a normal person would think so. But actually, I’m apparently related to someone from the peerage long ago.” Akira didn’t look too happy as she said that.

“The peerage? Uhh...”

“The nobility of the Meiji period.”

“Huh...”

“My dad and my older brother both work in upper management, and my granddad is a member of the National Diet.”

“Wow, seriously?! It’s like you really are a blue-blood.”

“They want to make me into some sort of sheltered girl, I swear. They’re so overprotective that I can’t even go out when I want to! My life is so rigid and boring.” Surely they just wanted to keep their daughter safe, right? The common man didn’t understand the life she lived. “But in video games, I can go anywhere I want, adventuring as I please. That’s why I love gaming so much. Even better now that this VRMMO feels so real.”

“Is that why you’re such a lover of sights?” *The truth has been unveiled.*

“Yeah! It’s been even more fun with you, Ren. I went to a snobby rich-kid school too, so everyone was sweet and honest. But following orders and being a good girl all day is boring. There’s just nothing interesting going on, y’know?”

“Sounds like a comfy lifestyle.”

“Yeah, kinda. But you’re different, y’know? You’re the kind of guy who’d do

something unexpected, like willingly jump on land mines or redefine things from the ground-up. I never know what you're going to do next, so every day is new and exciting. It's really fun being your friend."

Was that really how she felt? There were a lot of things you could never know about even your best friends without having a face-to-face conversation. Not that we were *literally* face-to-face, but still.

"I never really gave it much thought; I just like to do whatever's fun, and you're fun to hang out with. Sorry for being kinda thoughtless."

"Aww, c'mon. I know you're just a dumb gamer at heart. You're the kinda of guy who gets tunnel vision when he focuses on something."

"Haha, you're probably right." That was because my parents had always told me to find and go after the things I liked.

"But you actually know a ton about video games, so maybe you're more like a smart dumb gamer."

"This sounds like a pretty backhanded compliment..."

"It's like, 60% compliment. Don't worry."

"Wow, a whole 60%."

"Heheh. Now that I've talked to you about it, I feel so much better!" Akira stretched in her seated position.

The sunlight filtering through the trees was pleasantly warm. I let out a yawn. *Man, I'm sleepy.*

"You tired, Ren? There's nobody around and we're not in a hurry to do anything, so why not take a nap?"

"Ooh, that sounds nice." Not that there was anything wrong with sleeping in-game, apart from the forced logout at 10 PM.

We lay on the picnic mat and entered nap mode. *It's nice to be lazy once in a while.*

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"Sorry. I hate to turn you down like this, but I'm not really interested.

Goodbye.”

I lowered my head toward my upperclassman and continued toward my destination.

Wow. How many times have I had to do this today?

“Chirp?” Draco peered down at me from his perch atop my head.

“No worries, buddy. Akira’s waiting for me, so I gotta hurry.”

My destination was the crafting room within the school. Of course, basic crafting can be performed anywhere in the game. But in the crafting room, the NPCs sitting around could boost your success rate and give you hints on recipes.

“You’re late, Ren.” Akira seemed long bored of waiting for me.

“Sorry, my bad. People keep bugging me to join guilds. Did you bring the mats?”

“Yep! Here you go!”

She handed over two Mythrite and a Steel Ingot, both of which were important materials for us. With enough of those, I could begin the ritual to upgrade my Canesword, but our order of business today was powering up Skyfall.

My crafting skill was probably just high enough, but with the support of the NPCs in this room, we could preserve one of our materials if I failed. That would allow me to attempt the upgrade without losing the weapon. It wouldn’t be a big deal if we lost the Mythrite or Steel Ingot.

I immediately spoke to the female NPC, requesting her aid with my crafting.

“Okay, here goes.” I took Skyfall from Akira.

“Thanks for your help, ma’am.” Akira sat cross-legged and watched me, as Draco sat on her head.

Let the crafting begin. I started making the required motions to forge Skyfall. There were points at which I thought I might fail, but I ended up succeeding.

As for the results, here was how the weapon started off: Skyfall (O)

Type: One-Hand Sword Level: 10

Might: 20

AP gain: 12

Poise: 44

Guardbreak: 51

Effect: Creates shockwaves with each attack when user's HP is at 100%.

And here was how it looked after the upgrade: Skyfall +1 (O) Type: One-Hand Sword Level: 25

Might: 39

AP gain: 14

Poise: 56

Guard Break: 64

Effect: Creates shockwaves with each attack when user's HP is above 85%.

"Woo! Success!"

"Yay! Nice job, Ren!"

"Chirp chirp!" Even Draco was clapping his tiny little hands, clearly happy for us.

"It doesn't look any different, but it's stronger, and the shockwave requirement is more lenient."

"Yeah, this seems way more convenient. I wonder if the HP requirement gets more loose with each forge."

"That seems likely. I can tell why this item is super-rare."

"I hope you'll forge it again for me later."

"Of course, I'd be glad to. But good job finding the recipe, Akira. It's not in the guidebook, and the NPCs here don't seem to know much about it either."

The guidebook was far from perfect, and the NPCs would only teach you the most basic of recipes. Not everyone out there could know how to power up a weapon as rare as Skyfall.

“I learned about it from an information broker in the guild market. Shame I had to spend a pretty penny for it, though.”

The floating city Telluna—the main hub for us players—has more facilities than just the school. The guild market is one of them. The proper name for the market, as given by the devs, is the Guildhouse Town Along Shiwen Avenue. The region was full of tightly-packed buildings that had been remodeled by guilds to serve as bases. Thus, players called it the guild market.

Guilds interested in merchantry often reside in the Guildhouse Town Along Shiwen Avenue. Guilds that prioritize other ventures, such as expeditions and battling, usually set up elsewhere.

Guildhouses are to club rooms as guilds are to clubs, essentially.

“Maeda told me that the UW Guidebook was actually written and sold by information brokers. We visited the guild market yesterday, and while we were at it, we picked up the materials.”

“Good stuff. I haven’t visited the guild market yet, myself.” I had things to do yesterday, so I had logged out after classes ended.

“How about we take a trip there next time you need info?”

“Info... hmm. How about info on getting rid of guild scouts? I haven’t been able to focus on the game for so long!”

“I think the easiest way to do that is to just join a guild.” The one who butted in on our conversation was Maeda. She would always come over just so she could stare at Draco.

“Heya, Maeda.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear. I brought a few little treats for you, Draco. Want some?” Maeda showed off a veritable warehouse of foods to him; nuts, fruits, herbs, fish, and more. The sheer amount of food revealed just how excited she was to feed him.

“Haha... that’s more than a few.”

“Apparently these little babies have differing tastes depending on their personality. I had no idea what he might like to eat.”

“Maeda here asked the information broker how to care for pet dragons.”

“Oh, really? Thank you so much. Did you figure out how to get one of your own too?”

“Yes. Essentially, they’re very rare pets, given only to MVPs of large-scale events like the competitive quests. The rewards seem to be the same each year, and the next event will have a different reward, so I won’t get another chance at him until we’re in our second year.”

“Huh. That’s a shame.”

“It really is. But apparently, there is one more method.”

“Oho?”

“When you found a guild, you get a guildhouse to match. But if you can increase the reputation of your guild enough, you’ll be able to claim a nearby floating island as your guild’s territory.”

Is that how it worked? I wouldn’t mind having my own floating island.

“Occasionally, various items will wash up on the ‘shore,’ if you will, of the floating island. A pet dragon’s egg is one of those possible items.”

Akira spoke after Maeda. “So, Ren. If we have to join a guild either way, why don’t we make our own guild and try to make it big? It sounds like a good idea to me. Maeda is game too.”

“If we make our own guild, scouts from guilds we don’t care about should leave us alone, thanks to the guild affiliation icon.”

“Hey, you’re right. Maybe they really would stop bothering us.”

“That being said, the next big event is a guild war.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yes. I learned this yesterday, myself. If you don’t join a guild, you can’t participate; but if you join an established guild, the upperclassmen might boss you around.”

“That’s another way guilds are similar to clubs, huh? It’s like the pecking order of a sports club.”

“Just like that! So it follows that if we form our own guild, we can do whatever we want! Then, suddenly, an out-of-nowhere, no-name guild of first-years takes the spotlight! Sounds cool, doesn’t it?”

“That *does* sound pretty cool...”

And then, the symbologist is suddenly recognized as a high-tier class, and new symbologists flood the streets. Good, good. Absolutely epic. I could envision a bright future ahead of me.

“Right? I know how much you love being the underdog,” Akira whispered into my ear.

“Ooh, you know just what I wanna hear! That’s one of my top-three favorite phrases!” The other two would be *awakened potential* and *meta-redefinition.*

“Soooo, you wanna spread the word of us underdogs?”

“I do! So badly!”

“Then how about we make a guild together?”

“Yes! Yes, please!”

“Okay, maybe I’ll let you join.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

“You’re playing him like a fiddle...” Maeda expressed her thoughts about our exchange.

“Yep! We’ve been friends for so long that I know one or two ways to take him for a ride.” Akira grinned mischievously. Meanwhile, I knew when Akira was playing me. We were both in on it, so it wasn’t weird or anything.

Thus, our next goal was decided: forming our own guild!

“Guilds need a minimum of four people, right? How about Yano joins us?”

“Of course. Yuuna is more than willing to join us.”

“Good, good. This marks the unexpected birth of a Bummers-only guild, one that cherishes weak classes! I can’t help but be drawn in by the excitement of Bummers killing the giant guilds! This is the best thing that could’ve happened!”

“Uh, not quite. I think you and Maeda are the only ones who care about weak classes. Yuuna picked paladin, after all... and she’s been really bummed out about her uselessness in level-grinding parties.”

Fair enough. In a normal party, sky pirates are hardly worthwhile tanks. The three-minute cooldown on Guilty Steal is a bit harsh, considering level-grinding parties are all about doing battle after battle in quick succession. Tanks need to be able to keep up with aggro in each new battle, and a skill that takes three minutes to recast just doesn’t fit the bill.

Paladins and armor knights have thirty-second cooldowns on their taunts, so they’re ready and able to keep up with successive battles. I had molded her into the perfect tank, but *only* for boss battles. She was ready to Guilty Steal allies who had too much damage output, using the sword dancer’s Sword Samba to its fullest effect. Her tanking style was perfectly specialized to work as a trio of sky pirate, sword dancer, and drama cannon, but that methodology failed in the average level-grinding party.

“Ah well.”

“Ouch, dismissive much?”

“Now, we just need a guild establishment permit. But how are we going to get one? We’re all out of MEP.” The guild establishment permit was in the MEP exchange list for a whopping 2,500 MEP.

“Right. Waiting for the next test would take too long, so I say we search for other ways of getting a permit. How about we head to the guild market to see the information brokers again?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

On that note, we departed for the guild market.

On our way there, we met up with Yano, who had just finished grinding levels for the day. Indeed, she was completely on board with the idea of making our own guild.

“If we get a guild house, that means we each get our own room, right?!”

“From the looks of it, guild houses are really big. I’m sure there’s enough

space for that," I said, gazing at the guild market.

The smallest guild houses seemed to be a whole three floors. The first floor of each seemed to be used as a sales floor. Even if the first floor was reserved, though, the other two floors should've had space for four rooms.

"I have four siblings at home, so I've never had my own room. Even if it's in a game, I want one so bad! We gotta get a permit!" Yano was getting really fired up.

"Sharing a room with a sibling sounds like fun. I'm an only child, so I've never got to experience that."

"It's not fun at *all*; you'd probably be so over it in seconds. Everyone needs privacy. It's kinda like one of those foundational rights."

"I think you mean *fundamental* rights, Yuuna."

"Did I say it wrong? Meh, doesn't matter; you got what I meant."

Yano was as laid back as ever, but a bit of a sore loser. But I guess if you wrote that on a test, you'd get the question wrong. She *did* get 166 on her five subjects. Not that I was in any place to point and laugh at people's grades...

"Yuuna, we'll need a lot more MEP if we want to grow larger as a guild. I'm willing to help you study for the next test, but you need to put in the effort."

"Laaaame."

"Remember, your grades affect the game! Buckle down and study hard." Maeda was obviously passionate about getting her own island.

"Ren, you need to study your English and Japanese too. Didn't you only get 20 points on the English portion?"

"Yeeeeah, yeah. I'm just not interested in it at all."

When would I ever use it in real life? I don't even care about traveling. Getting good grades on tests wouldn't mean I could speak the language well enough anyway. In other words, the subject was useless to me. I'd rather just abandon pursuits that I didn't care about... *Is it so wrong to live off of Japanese only? Who cares about globalization?*

“Hahahaha! I beat you at English! What a dufus!” Seeing her point and laugh at me, I got a little flustered. *Grr. If I were more serious about it, I’d beat her easily.*

“But you got a total of 241, right? What were your other scores?” Maeda asked.

“I got a 100 in math, 63 in science, 31 in social studies, and 27 in Japanese.”

“A perfect math score! That was the hardest one, though.”

“I’m just good at math. It has solid logic and rules behind it.” Studying something based on logic is fun when you get the hang of it. But subjects rooted in rote memorization were always my weakest, even though I was ready and willing to rote-memorize everything about a game.

“A mathematician, huh? I do get that vibe from you.”

“Hmm? Really?”

“Like your way of thinking and your tactics. It might not be the tried and true way to play the game, but your logic always holds up. Ultimately your results show that you’re right in the end. It’s amazing.”

Well, I guess there is no template for success as a Bummer. That’s precisely why it’s so fun to trial-and-error my way to victory.

“But this time, we just happened to have the right ingredients for success. We got lucky.”

“Either way, you were the one who brought those ingredients together. Finding new and original ways of doing things is really important, even outside of video games.”

“Boy, Kotomi, you sure do have a lot of nice things to say about him. Is somebody in loooove?”

“N-No, I’m not! I was simply expressing my respect!”

“Don’t worry. I get it. Such a time comes in every girl’s life, Kotomi.”

“Stop it! I said I’m not in love!”

“Aww, Kotomi’s mad at me! I knew I was right! Eek!” Maeda began to chase

Yano around. They sure seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“Yuuna really does like to change the subject to love. Isn’t that a bit of a pain?” Akira’s smile seemed forced in a rather awkward way.

“Y-Yeah, I guess so.”

We walked onward, eventually reaching the information broker.

“Oh! That’s our stop, Ren. We made it!”

It was a fairly dilapidated guild house on the outskirts of the guild market. On the first-floor entrance, a sign displayed the words “Bigsmax Info Brokers.”

“Hello?”

“Hey there. Welcome!” The employee’s face looked familiar...

“Kataoka? What are you doing here?”

It was the rogue from class B, Kataoka. The guy who loved Hime-chans.

“I’m the shopkeeper, duh. Since I’m a newbie in this guild, they’re giving me the crap jobs.”

“Huh. Is this the guild that made the UW Guidebook?”

“Yeah! It’s called Fountain of Wisdom.”

“You weren’t the shopkeeper yesterday, were you?”

“Hey there, Aoyagi. We have shifts here.”

“Is Fountain of Wisdom that great a guild?”

They did seem to have a lot of influence; everyone relied on the information they put in the guidebook. I was intent on making good and sure that next year’s guidebook recognized symbologist as a home-run champ.

“Well, the guild collects heaps and heaps of data, so I figured I could learn a lot more about the game if I joined them.”

“That does sound reasonable.”

“If I do that, I’ll have more knowledge available to share with my Hime-chan.”

“Grinding those follower levels, huh?”

“You bet. Stumbling through the game with your Hime-chan can only lead to failure. A real follower has to know everything, but pretend not to, exerting all of his energy for the sake of pleasing his Hime-chan. Feel me? You feel me, yeah?”

“I don’t feel you. But if you’re having fun, I’m not gonna stop you.” *Everyone has their own playstyle, so we should all learn to accept diversity.*

“Hime-chan? Follower?” Maeda, lacking experience in online games, was visibly puzzled.

“So basically, Kotomi...” Yano gave her a brief rundown.

“Mmm... That sounds rather odd.” With an air of purity, she abandoned the idea outright.

Whether Kataoka couldn’t hear her or otherwise chose to ignore her remark, I couldn’t say, but he interrupted their conversation all the same.

“So, you all want some information?”

“Yeah. We’re looking to form a new guild, so we want a guild establishment permit. Do you know any ways of obtaining one without spending MEP?”

“I see, I see. Let me just search guild permit requirements...”

Kataoka began operating a terminal on the shop counter. It looked vaguely like an antique notebook computer, almost resembling a typewriter and a desktop mirror slapped together.

“Can that thing even process data?” Akira leaned over the desk, deeply interested.

“You bet it can. They call it the Dealer’s Desk, and it’s like an in-game computer. It can even make and run apps too. Fountain of Wisdom made a full-on information database, and it uses that to sell information and publish guidebooks.”

“Wow... They’ve really made information into a sellable asset.”

For games open to the public at large, there are often strategy guides and walkthrough websites. But UW, open only to students of this school, didn’t have any of that. Leaking hints on the Internet is against school regulations;

anyone who got caught doing so would receive a suspension. That's what led to the birth of information brokers like this guild. Or perhaps the school administration had made that regulation specifically to allow these guilds to flourish?

How I wished I had one of those computers. It would definitely come in handy, being able to make databases myself. As the son of a game designer, I picked up a bit of programming for fun. I'd love to be able to calculate my ultimate ability damage for each stat and equipment change.

"I want one of these. I bet it could help me figure out the damage formula..."

"Uh oh. I don't like the sound of that."

"Hmm? Why not?"

"Don't act like you forgot! When we played EF, you were all, 'let's calculate the damage formula!' And then you made me hit the same enemy over and over for a week!"

"I sure did. And thanks to you, we beat the Dark Lord solo challenge with the fastest time, using the weakest class of all, Hammerer. But I think someone beat our record later..."

"Ooh! I saw that video on a gaming website!"

A member of my fanclub was present?! But Yano *did* say she knew about me in other games, so I suppose it wasn't much of a surprise.

"Do you have any idea how much you made me toil for that little video?"

"Now now, let's not dwell on history. After all, being imprisoned by your own past won't make your future any better."

"Easy for you to say when you're not the victim!"

"How dare you, Takashiro?! A follower exists to *serve* his Hime-chan, not to make her do all the work!" *Didn't I tell you not to wrap me up in your weirdness?!*

"What?! You're a follower too, Takashiro?! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to call you weird!" *Noooo! You're earnest to a fault, Maeda!*

“No, you’ve got it all wrong! Kataoka just thinks I’m a weirdo like him!”

“Is... that so?”

“Anyway, getting back on track, I’d like to know about that guild permit, please!”

“R-Right, right. But first off, I’ll need to charge you the fee. That’ll be 3,000 Mira, please.”

“Mm-kay.” As the leader of this little band, I paid the fee.

“As for alternative methods of getting a permit... Oh! First off, our guild’s shop has one in stock.”

“Oho! How much is it?”

“5,000,000 Mira.”

“WHAT?!”

We all cried out in unison.

“C’mon, the thing costs 2,500 MEP. How much money did you expect it to be?”

“Mm... Any other ways?”

“It’s a confirmed treasure chest drop in a few dungeons, but they’re all really high-level.” Kataoka went on to list the names of those dungeons. “There’s the Airship Graveyard, Crystal Forest, Almishr’s Burial Ground... stuff in that range. Both the Airship Graveyard and Crystal Forest have some pretty tough entry conditions. On top of that, the monster levels in both places are over 100.”

“Then Almishr’s Burial Ground is the only option.”

“I’d say so. You’ll have to take an airship over to the continent Mishr. We actually have the key you’ll need to get to the treasure too. I’m not gonna sugarcoat it, though—it’s gonna take a lot of work.”

“Hmm. How much for the key?”

“For the Ancient Imperial Key, 100,000 Mira.” *That’s still really expensive. But judging from the name, it probably should be.*

“I have about 50,000 on hand. What about you girls?”

“Why don’t we split it 25,000 each? I have 50,000 as well, so it’ll hurt my wallet a little, but...”

“Sure, sounds good to me.”

“I’m cool with it! All I want is to have my own room! See, money *does* solve all problems.”

“Whoa, hold up a sec! Almishr’s Burial Ground has enemies level 80 and above. You guys sure about this?” Kataoka warned us. I crossed my arms and thought for a moment.

“Hmmm... So after our four-man restriction, now we have a level restriction. Fine with me.”

“Ren, I don’t think that’s really a necessary condition...” Akira shot me down.

“Restricted play doesn’t have to be necessary! I do it because I *want* to! It’s my hobby!”

“Wow... Your eyes are on fire again! Ren’s got a fever, and the only prescription is more levels!”

“Pfft. So, as long as we hold onto the key, we can use it any time we want, right?” Yano asked Kataoka.

“Seems like it.”

“Then there’s no reason not to buy it now, yeah?”

“Right. If you screw up, you can just grind out some levels and charge in again. Heck, there’s nothing wrong with just going to scope it out, if you want.”

“Okay! We’ll buy the key. Let’s go to the Burial Ground!”

“All right! Thank you, valued customer!”

Thus, our next destination was set: we were off to find a guild permit at the Burial Ground!

CHAPTER 8: ALMISHR'S BURIAL GROUND WE IMMEDIATELY EMBARKED FOR THE CONTINENT OF MISHR AND MADE OUR WAY TO ALMISHR'S BURIAL GROUND. WHEN THE COMPETITIVE EVENT ENDED, WE WERE GIVEN MORE OPTIONS FOR AIRSHIP ROUTES TO TAKE. THE MISHR ROUTE WAS ONE OF THOSE.

The location itself was a hilly viridian area with several open entrances to the burial ground. There were monsters above ground as well, but they were passive monsters, not attacking unless provoked. Furthermore, they were all in the level 10 range, so they posed no threat either way.

"All right! How about we just pick an entrance at random?"

We formed up and entered the tomb. Our party: level 25 symbologist, level 25 sword dancer, level 27 scholar, level 30 sky pirate.

The first entrance had no special signage or markings to speak of; it was just a featureless, cavern-like hole that led to the ruins. The inside was deep darkness, but the walls of the tomb had some strange engravings—magic runes, or perhaps ancient inscriptions? They radiated bright light, allowing us to navigate the interior without issue.

"Oooh, it's like an ancient civilization." Akira's first rule of MMOs was to take screenshots every time she went to a new place, and this time was certainly no different.

"Enemy ahead!"

We discovered a monster in the middle of our sole path. It seemed to be some sort of doll-type enemy, puppeteered by magic. It held a two-handed staff with a deadly looking iron ball attached to the end.

Keeper's Doll: Level 28

Maybe it was some sort of tomb guardian?

"Guess we ought to kill it, huh?" Everyone nodded to Akira's suggestion.

On our signal, she began unleashing Skyfall shockwaves at the edge of the enemy's aggro range.

"Take that!"

The shockwaves were a direct hit, causing the enemy to panic and run toward her. But the shockwave assault was bringing its HP down fast, in addition to the shots fired from Yano's rifle of old European aesthetic. Meanwhile, Maeda unleashed Fireball spells. All of these attacks landed at once, taking down the foe before it could even fight back.

"Cool. Looks like we'll be able to progress smoothly," Akira said, continuing the investigation at the vanguard of our party.

There were heaps of enemies along the way, but none posed much of a threat against the girls' combined ranged attacks.

Mm... That doesn't leave much for me to do.

Not much point in throwing out an ultimate for the heck of it. There wasn't much I could do about it, but it really felt like I was just standing around and watching. Maybe I should have picked up a talent that would come in handy for times like this. After all, I could just unequip it when I didn't need it. The freedom allowed by the talent system was definitely one of this game's best features.

"Man, it sucks to use consumable-based weapons on everyday mobs." Yano groaned.

"All of sky pirate's weapons *are* long-ranged, after all."

"Yeah, Kotomi. Every time I shoot something, that's money out of my wallet."

“If only you had a close-range weapon talent,” Akira said.

“But I’m all out of MEP. Oh well, no point crying over spilt milk.”

“Even if you hadn’t spent your MEP, you can’t get Master’s Scroll talents with just 100 or so points. Remember to study hard!”

“Ugh... Kinda lame for a game to demand that you study. Dumb people like me already suffer enough in real life, y’know? This school should throw us a bone.”

“You think so? Honestly, I’m not normally interested in pointless studying, so I’m glad the game is here to motivate me.” *I’m definitely learning more than I used to when it comes to classes I couldn’t care less about.*

“As it turns out, most people see better results when they enroll at this school.”

“Right. If the school wasn’t known for that, I never would have been able to enroll.”

“Me too.”

“That’s not the case for me. My parents just told me to do what I want.”

“Same here! They just wanted me to be in school, so I chose this one for fun.”

“I’m envious of your freedom.” Maeda replied with a sigh.

“Your parents do seem strict, Kotomi. How’d you convince them to let you enroll in a school that’s half-game?” Despite the school’s reputation for academic results, Yano was right; to a lot of people, it seemed like it was all play.

“We did argue about it a little, but... I think they got tired of being so rigid. Eventually, they said that if I really was interested in it, they’d think about it. But they also said that if my grades fall, they’ll pull me right out of school.”

“That sounds a little controlling. But I guess it’s not our place to say that, as the ones being taken care of.” *My parents would probably never say something like that. I should thank them some time.*

“I think I’m safe, Ren. I’m focusing on class more than ever, so I’m sure my

grades won't drop. This school is just so fun." Maeda smiled, full of confidence.

We continued our investigation, eventually stumbling upon a treasure chest.

"Ooh! Treasure, treasure!" Maeda jumped for the chest as fast as she could.

"Make sure you check for traps, Yuuna!"

"Got it!"

By default, both rogues and sky pirates can unlock chests. They can also find and disarm any traps. If other classes want to unlock chests, they have to unlock the talent for it first. None of us had access to that talent yet, so it was nice to have a sky pirate with us.

"Yep, there's a trap here. It's one of those, uh... academic ones?"

"A quiz, then?"

Academic traps essentially quizzed your knowledge. I'd never seen one, but they were mentioned in the guidebook. There was no way to disarm them; if you didn't pass the quiz, the contents of the chest would disappear. It was no surprise that a school would use a trap like that.

"We were born for this. Let's do it, Aoyagi!"

"Yeah! I'm ready."

It sure was heartening to have the 90%-average duo with us. Once again, there wasn't much for me to do.

"Okay, I'm opening it. The rest is up to you, Kotomi and Akki!" Yano opened the chest.

Fanfare and an announcement played from within.

"It's time for a pop quiz! Answer three out of five questions correctly to get the treasure! Score more than three correctly to increase its rarity! Now, your first question—"

I'll spare you the details and cut to the chase: their combined knowledge resulted in a 100%. I gotta to admit, they're amazing.

"Chirp! Chirp chirp!" Draco woke from his slumber in the hood of my robe and offered his applause.

Up to this point, all he did was eat when he wanted and sleep when he wanted. He wasn't ready to help in battle, but I let it slide because he was so darn cute. For now, all I could do was make sure he was growing well.

As for the contents of the chest— "Woohoo! Perfect score! What's inside?!"

"Hmmm... Oh? 'Special Crafting Guide: Bayonet.' Maybe Yuuna could use this?" Akira answered after opening the chest.

"Huh? Kotomi, what's a bayonet?"

"It's a blade you can attach to the end of a gun. With it, you can essentially use it as a lance."

"Wow! Then I could fight close-range?"

"I'd assume so. But wow, I didn't even know this game had bayonets."

"I've never even heard of any bayonet arts."

"All should be made clear once we craft it. Who's going to do the deed? If you want, I can take it and try it out right now."

"Right. I haven't raised my crafting level, so it's best if you do it."

"Same. I don't really care about crafting, so you go ahead, Ren."

"Neither have I. Go on, make it for me!"

"All right. Here I go, then."

I took the Crafting Guide and attempted to use it. A message appeared in the Log: "Learned Special Crafting: Bayonet." I guess items like this were necessary to learn specialized crafting.

I opened the crafting menu to take a look at my recipes. Several bayonet entries had been added. At my current level, the best one available was the Iron Bayonet. It needed... three iron ingots. I had more than enough.

"Let's see here..."

I began crafting. With my Efficiency talent, it was done in a flash. A bayonet made of iron appeared in my hand.

"There we go, success. Next, let's combine this and the gun, I guess. Mind if I

borrow your gun, Yano?”

“Sure.” She handed over a Musket. It was fitting equipment for her level.

“I’ll just take this and the bayonet—” Crafting started. *Now we’re cooking!* If I’d had the wrong recipe, it would have thrown an error first. But my hypothesis was correct and once again, I finished crafting immediately.

The Musket was changed to a Musket Gunblade! As for its appearance, the bottom of the barrel was fitted with what was essentially a knife. *Yep, that’s a bayonet in a nutshell.*

“And we’re done!”

“Oooh! I can definitely fight close-range with this! Nice! Thanks, Ren.” Seeing such a flamboyant character rub a gun against her cheek so affectionately was a strange sight, indeed. *But hey, if she’s happy, then I’m happy.* “All right, let’s go try it out right now! Go, go!”

We continued searching, defeating enemies along the way. As Yano tested out her new weapon, we learned a few things.

First, the bayonet attacked with a thrusting motion. Naturally, it had a bit less firepower than the gun’s shots. The thrust itself was somewhat dependent on the type and shape of the gun, as well. One might’ve thought that a small gun’s bayonet would be useless, but... it was actually fairly capable. However, there didn’t seem to be any bayonet-specific arts, so in the end, she could still only use gun arts.

Essentially, bayonets are just a stopgap measure to make up for the gun’s poor short-range capability. But shooting an enemy right after stabbing them is cool, so I thought it was pretty sick overall. Against enemies that don’t pose much danger, the bayonet gives the user an opportunity to save bullets. It could be considered an economically efficient weapon. For the sky pirate, king of bleeding money, it’s vital to find ways to win battles with a minimum of ammo.



Our search continued in that fashion, but then we encountered a problem.

“Huh? Hey, Ren. This is just a dead end, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I didn’t see any keyholes, either. Is this a bust, then?”

“I don’t really mind either way, since I got to upgrade my weapon.”

“At the very least, this wasn’t a waste of time.”

Akira and I had leveled up, as well. I was 26, Akira 26, Maeda 27, Yano 30.

“How about we leave and try a different entrance?”

No objections, so we left the cave.

We entered another cave and tried again... but this one didn’t even have a treasure chest like the last one. We repeated this two, three more times, until morale began to run low.

“Aww. Another bust?”

“I’m beat, and this is boring me to sleep. I think I’m done.”

Offline, it was almost 7 PM. We were all starting to get hungry. Needless to say, in-game food couldn’t fill an empty stomach.

“How about we take a little break and meet up after?”

“Mm... I guess, but—” I suddenly noticed something.

We were just exiting another dead-end bust. In the middle of this hilly country, you could survey a wide area of land. Far away, at the top of a different peak, I spotted another group entering a cave. About ten people, maybe? Two parties worth, give or take.

“Oh, there are entrances over there too. I see a bunch of people.”

“Wow, yeah. Maybe that one’s connected to the treasure?”

“Maybe! Hey, let’s go.”

“If this one’s a bust, we’d better get our break!”

With that, we moved to where the other group was. The entrance was empty; they were probably already well inside. We followed behind.

“This one seems a little different from the others.”

“Yeah. It’s kinda scary...” Akira continued to snap screenshots, regardless.

This one seemed much more decayed than the others, and quite a bit darker to boot. It was like a plaza, but even with the destruction around us, it seemed as though danger could befall us at any moment. Occasionally, pale silhouettes would appear and fade instantly. Some sort of apparition visual effect, perhaps? In the walls, mummy-like bodies were laid to rest, giving off an even more eerie vibe.

“If you think about it, a burial ground is basically a grave. I don’t like haunted houses...” I didn’t expect it, but Yano seemed the most spooked among us.

“D-Don’t worry. It’s just a game...” Maeda seemed to be getting cold feet too.

Even if you’re complete aware it’s just a game, the sense of presence in VR makes it feel like you’re actually there. This was essentially a super-realistic haunted house for us.

I almost enjoyed seeing everyone so scared; this really was a group of girly girls. Myself, meanwhile, well, I was a horror veteran. In fact, I got the urge to prank them while the pranking was good.

And so—

“Aaaaaaaah!” One yell was all it took for the desired effect.

“Eeeeeeep!”

They all clung to me in terror. As a healthy human man, I couldn’t help but relish the moment. But amidst that commotion, we all toppled over.

“Whoa?!”

The floor below us had opened up. A trapdoor?! We all fell straight down.

After a rather long descent, I felt a sudden impact. Oof... It was a good thing this pain was only in-game.

“Ugh... Oww. Ren, don’t scare us like that!”

“Your yell combined with that fall about gave me a heart attack. That was in poor taste, Takashiro.”

“Ouch... Sorry! I just kinda felt like... Wuh?!”

Whoa! I’m seeing something I should totally not be seeing!

After my face’s close encounter with the underground floor, I looked upward... and from this low angle, I could see Akira’s rear pressed against the floor, along with the interior of Maeda’s skirt...

“Takashiro? Peeping under Kotomi and Akki’s skirts, were you?” Yano smirked and ratted me out. *Gee, thanks a lot!*

“Ren! Don’t be such a perv in public, please!” Akira puffed her cheeks in anger — “N-No, I swear, I wasn’t...”

Maeda seemed flustered. “A-A friend of mine said... that since I’m so reserved, I should be more liberal with my choice of underwear, so...”

So like, Akira’s undies were all pink, matching her in-game hair. That’s cute, and it totally fits her style. Maeda’s, meanwhile, were like, all black. Super sexy, y’know? It was kind of a surprise, knowing her personality and demure manner.

“S-So it’s not like... I’m wearing this for fun, or...”

“I get that, I was just... kinda surprised.”

“R-Really?”

“Ohh? Is Kotomi wearing somethin’ steamy? C’mon, gimme a peek.” In came Yano, right on cue.

“N-No! Why would you even...?”

“Ooh. I wanna see too. I need to know for future reference.”

“Sweet! Okay then, Akki, hold her down.”

“On it!”

“Wha?! No, stop!”

“C-Come on, you two. Maeda’s obviously not into this. Cut it out.”

“Whaaaa? Says the one who was perving out in the first place. Don’t act all innocent now.”

“Yeah, exactly! This is all your fault, so you’d better give us a hand!”

“I can’t and I won’t! My bad. I’m sorry. Anyway, we need to find a way back up there.” Thus, I apologized to everyone before they took things one too many steps too far.

From there, we scoped out the floor we were dropped on.

“Hmm? There’s a weirdly conspicuous door over here.”

A colossal door, covered in complex symbols, stood before us.

“Ren, I see a hole that’s just begging to be filled here.”

“Maybe the key will work?”

“Ooh, give it a shot!”

I took out the Ancient Imperial Key. It certainly did look similar to the hole before us. I inserted the key into the cavity in the door. Ooh, perfect.

“It fits!”

The key began to glow, eventually enveloping the entire door in light. We heard a deep noise as the door slowly opened.

“We must be on the right track! Nice job, Takashiro!”

“You were calling me a pervert just a bit ago...” *Ah well, what can ya do.*

We cheerfully stepped through the door, but then... we were greeted with an entirely new kind of horror.

“Ugh... urgh...”

“We’re screwed...”

“Were we too low level?”

Corpses littered the area. It was probably the group we saw before. All of them were reduced to 0 HP; a complete and utter wipe.

A look at the status screen revealed that they were second-years. Among the ten of them, the average level was 60. Was this place really dangerous enough to annihilate such a large and powerful group? I could only suppose that the path ahead contained those high-level enemies Takaoka mentioned.

“H-Hey, guys. You wouldn’t happen to be able to rez us, huh?” The fallen

leader, a paladin, asked.

“Oh, sorry. None of us know any.”

Sword dancers have no resurrection dances, and scholar can learn healing magic, but not rez spells. Being just out of reach of a major itch was what the Bummers were all about. Only paladins, clerics, and minstrels can rez allies. Honestly, it kinda peeved me off that minstrels could do that. Minstrels and symbologists cover the same supportive role, but minstrels are far more versatile.

“Okay, thanks anyway. We’ll just respawn, then. You kids better be careful up ahead.” The party of upperclassmen crumbled to dust, leaving only us in the room.

“Now what? The path ahead looks really tough.” I asked their opinions, but of course, I wasn’t ready to turn back. With my undodgeable, defense-ignoring firebomb of an ultimate, I was the ideal candidate for the job of killing high-level enemies. *It’s time for the drama cannon to make some real drama!*

If nobody else wanted to go, I was willing to go it alone, even.

“You’re not gonna leave, huh, Ren?”

“Aha, you know me well.”

“I’ll go with you. We’ll never know unless we try, after all.”

“Right. With Dead End on our side, I’m sure we have a chance of defeating even some of the strongest enemies.”

“You haven’t had a chance to do anything since we got here, so I’m definitely not leaving until you do. We’re puttin’ you to work, buddy.”

Everyone understood my style, so they faced forward with optimism. We were all thinking the same thing: *Maybe this will actually work out.*

“Let’s get to it, then.”

We made our way deeper into the tomb. Within a small room, a single monster lay in wait. I looked at its status from outside aggro range.

Deadly General: Level 81

An undead monster, he was a skeleton clad in full plate armor and wielded a two-handed axe. He was large and imposing, with a level almost three times mine. But putting aside his attack and defense stats, he probably didn't have as much HP as Shadow Dragon Diablo. That was a final boss; this was just a regular monster. He didn't even have the rare monster icon.

"My AP is full. Are we going with the usual strategy?" Akira readied Skyfall.

"Yup. Chip away at him with the shockwaves, and I'll use my ultimate when he approaches."

In preparation, I deliberately cast Enfeebling Circle in the wrong direction, bringing my MP to 0. "Best to avoid taking aggro for now."

Yano put her gun on her back, readying her shield instead.

"I'll Sword Samba so you can attack twice, right?"

"Right. I'm counting on you, Akira."

"And I'll heal you along with Yuuna, then."

"If you get the chance, could you try healing the enemy? Since he's undead, it should actually do damage. I'm curious how potent it is."

If Maeda used regular offensive magic, it probably wouldn't deal much damage. Since the level difference here was so dramatic, regular damage would be heavily reduced. But using healing magic to damage undead enemies was pretty much common sense. In many games, they were extremely weak to it. Following that logic, even in the face of that level difference, maybe she could still do meaningful damage. Only one way to find out.

"Okay. I'll give it a try, then."

"Here we go. Everyone ready?"

"Let's go!"

On our mark, Akira began unleashing shockwaves from Skyfall. They hit the Deadly General, dealing only 12 damage each. With such a huge level difference, of course she wouldn't do much damage.

The general began his ferocious charge toward Akira, but I stood between

them, and Maeda began casting a healing spell.

All right, let's see if we can do this in one try!

"Hello, and good-*die*!"

"Wow! Which one of you is the bad guy, again?!"

Ignoring Yano's heckling, I prepared to use my ultimate. Just before I did, Maeda's recovery magic tore into the general, unleashing damage unaffected by the level difference.

Kotomi cast Exheal. 253 damage dealt to Deadly General!

Then, I fired off my ultimate!

Ren activated Dead End. 2,401 damage dealt to Deadly General!

As the message appeared in the backlog, the Deadly General's HP bar flashed to empty. His HP depleted, he groaned thunderously before falling to the ground and fading away. Woohoo! We killed him before he could get a single hit in. It was like pitching a perfect game in baseball.

"Chirp chirp chirp!" Draco expressed his excitement too.

That went a lot more smoothly than I had expected. Maybe we really could make it through. Or so I thought— *Groooooooooan*...

Like the previous floor, this area also had mummies buried in the walls. Suddenly, they all started moving at once!

"Ah?!"

"Eeeeeeek!"

"Chirp chirp chirp chirp?!"

We'd figured they were just scenery, so this came as an awful surprise. It was like when people grabbed you through the walls in a haunted house. The girls screamed in terror, and even Draco began to panic.

Crimson Mummy Army: Level 78

The mummies were all covered in blood-soaked red bandages, their faces frenzied and terrifying. They began to charge at me simultaneously. *Is this how*

idols feel when they're surrounded by fans?

Akira and co. were paralyzed with fear. If these things, nearly three times my level, managed to trap me with a mere 1 HP— "Hoo boy."

Well, I'd freaking die, of course. I was at *one hitpoint.*

With only my bare-handed guard between me and death, their guardbreak would kill me immediately. Thus, I resigned myself to the same fate as the upperclassmen who came before me.

After they finished me off, the mummy army turned to the girls and attacked them as well. Yep, we were toast. I felt like that was a recurring theme lately. But let's not forget that this dungeon *did* obliterate a group of ten second-years.

This is a tricky situation. I'll have to think up a breakthrough solution for this. Heheheh, that's just the reality of things when you face a level restriction! Now I'm really getting psyched!

Chapter 9: Devising a New Strategy

One day had passed since our treasure-hunt-picnic-turned-massacre. I logged back into UW first thing in the morning, before class started. There was just something on my mind...

The night before, I had logged out immediately after we died and disbanded the party. Thoughts of strategy filled my head as I ate dinner, bathed, and got ready for bed. Something that I wanted to test came to mind, so I set an alarm for early morning.

Keep in mind that after 10 PM, logins are disabled until 6 AM. The rule might as well have been made to specifically hurt me, since I'm the kind of guy who wants to test things out as soon as I think of them. But it is healthy to get up early in the morning, right? So maybe it was for the best. If I were free to test stuff whenever I wanted, I'm sure I'd have stayed up all night and missed out on sleep, fell asleep in class the next day, and then ultimately my test scores would suffer, resulting in less MEP and a bad time all around. Yup, I can totally picture that very situation. If the devs wanted to try to prevent that, I could deal.

Anyway, I walked to the warp room and traveled to an area near Almishr's Burial Ground. Then, I entered the cave that ended yesterday's search, finding a very familiar face within.

"Huh! Morning, Maeda."

"Oh, Takashiro? Good morning to you too."

"What brings you here this early?"

"Our original reason for coming here was because of what I said, right? I felt bad for making you all work so hard for me, so I came to search for information that could help in the expedition."

"Hmm... But then, I'm the one who wanted the level restriction, so it's *actually* more my fault."

"I suppose you have a point..." So she said, but her frown didn't ease up. I wasn't sure if she was earnest to a fault or just honorable, but either way, she

was really a nice person.

Still, she was worrying about it too much. *What's a little massacre or two between friends? It's all a game, so it's just part of the fun.*

"Um..." I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what, exactly.

"Yes? What's the matter?"

"Oh, just, uh... hmm. Hey, I think I'm just gonna go die real quick. Do you wanna join me?"

"What?!"

"Then we'll have no hard feelings."

"Uh—well, I don't especially *mind*, I suppose. But did you come here just to die on purpose?"

"That'll be the end result, but the main idea is to check out some stuff."

"Hmm... All right, then. Let's go."

With that, we partied up and fell into the pitfall from before.

I put the key into the hole once more. "I think it's pretty neat that death can be taken so lightly in games."

"Lightly...?"

"It's not like you're *really* dying; you just lose a bit of EXP. Failures like this in real life aren't resolved that simply. I died yesterday, but it was a heck of a lot of fun. It was *because* I didn't expect it that I enjoyed it. So much so, in fact, that I came here to die again."

"Is dying your hobby, or something?"

"Not exactly. But if I have to die, I can still have fun every time. I expect to learn what I came for, so I'm excited to die. Uh, I'm not really sure what I'm getting at here, but... I'm having fun gaming with you, Maeda, so let's not take it too seriously."

"...Thank you. Maybe I do take things too seriously sometimes. I'm just rather afraid of failure."

“Then I say the solution is to fail as much as you can in UW, so you can get used to it. Even if *you* don’t fail, you’re sure to be surrounded by failures with me and Akira around.”

“Haha! Trouble does seem to always be two steps behind you two, but I really have been enjoying things.”

“See, you’re already getting used to failure!”

We continued through the door and stood roughly where the upperclassmen died the day before. There were mummies in the walls here as well.

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, these are the guys that attacked us yesterday, yeah?” I started whacking the wall of mummies, but they didn’t react. Their names and status windows weren’t visible, either. They were essentially just part of the scenery.

“Yes, I believe they were called Crimson Mummies.”

“Right. As they are now, they’re harmless; however, something caused them to react and charge us.”

“It all happened so fast! I was so surprised that I thought I might have a real-life heart attack.”

“Now, the question is what caused them to swarm us? Once we know their wake conditions, we might be able to avoid awakening them. If my idea works out, then they should start moving.”

“And when they do, we die.”

“Yep. Are you sure you don’t want to book it out of here?”

“No, I’m staying with you. Otherwise, we can’t be even.” She really did have a strong sense of honor.

“All right. Here goes nothing.”

Maeda nodded, and I cast a large-range Enfeebling Circle. My MP fell to 0, but the wall mummies didn’t react. Next, I activated Turnover. My HP became 1, while my MP bar filled completely.

Then— Groooooooooan...

The army of Crimson Mummies awakened! Needless to say, they made short work of us. But yes! I was right!

I chose to respawn, and the two of us returned to our set point within the school where you always respawned when you died.

There, we began strategizing.

“Whew... Even if we knew what to expect, they’re still terrifying.”

“We died, as I predicted.”

“What did you learn from it?”

“I’ve figured out what causes them to move: they have health-based aggro.”

Hostile monsters will attack players unprovoked based on their type of aggro. The basic types are as follows: Line-of-sight-based aggro is the simplest; when a monster sees you, it attacks. Sound-based aggro triggers when a monster hears footsteps. Finally, health-based aggro; the one currently in question, prompts monsters to attack low-health players. The subjects of our investigation were most likely all hostile monsters with health-based aggro settings. My HP drops to 1 when I use my ultimate, so they reacted to that. In short— “Health-based aggro? Then every time you use Dead End...”

“Yep, it turns into a Crimson Mummy handshake party. And that equals massacre.”

“Then we can’t use Dead End, can we?”

“Right.”

“That means it’s impossible! Dead End is our trump card.”

“Oh, no no no. Now that we know that, we can advance further.” *We’ve confirmed that I absolutely can’t use Dead End in that area. That’s a mandatory condition.*

“Is grinding levels the only way, then?”

“If that were the issue, we might as well just wait for MEP from tests.” Our upperclassmen were massacred at a whopping level 60. At levels 25 to 30, it would take forever and a half for us to get anywhere near that, especially as the

EXP requirement increased with each level.

“Should we give up, then?”

“No, not yet. First, we have to exhaust all possible possibilities.”

“What possibilities are there?”

“You got Draconic magic from Shadow Dragon Diablo, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes. Diabolic Howl?”

It almost slipped my mind, but we looted that magic from him during the final boss battle of the competitive event. As the scholar’s unique magic, the only way to get Draconic magic is as a drop from dragon bosses. It’s not that great when you consider how hard it is to acquire, so people pretty much consider it trash. We were lucky to get the drop in one try. Of course, we gave it to Maeda, since she was the only one who could learn it.

“Yeah, that one. It cuts the target’s HP by half if I recall?” It could very well be the perfect spell for us.

“I believe so. But it only works on enemies at levels lower than the user, I believe? It certainly won’t work on those monsters...”

“Of course not. If it were that easy, everyone would be using scholar.”

“Agreed. It also costs 150 MP.” Maeda’s MP, meanwhile, was 200. Ouch.

With that great of a cost, it was hard to imagine the spell ever being worth it. Combined with the level requirement on its effect, it was hardly useful enough to warrant that cost.

Still, a picture’s worth a thousand words. I was ready to see it for myself.

“Would you mind showing me how it looks when the spell is successful?”

“Sure, I don’t mind at all.”

Thus, we walked back to the warp room and teleported to the first floor of Trinisty Island. During the month when Akira wasn’t here, my good friends, the Island Bunnies, kept me company and helped me test things out. We were off to request their services once more.

After warping, we exited the city and found a few frolicking Island Bunnies.

The game called them bunnies, but they seemed more like kangaroos to me. Their vacant expressions made them seem so innocent... But they weren't *that* cute, so I never felt bad using them for experiments. They were my good buddies, always there when you needed them.

"All right. One Diabolic Howl, if you please."

"All right." Maeda nodded and began to cast the spell.

While she did, her body was surrounded by mana particles that moved along with her. Every magic spell has a cast time; if the player moves during the cast, it's immediately canceled. Thus, you're essentially stuck in place while you cast.

"Diabolic Howl!"

A mass of energy in the shape of a dragon's face materialized as she finished casting. The dragon howled and chomped on the poor Island Bunny. *Ooh, that's a really cool visual effect. Very flashy.*

As a result— Kotomi cast Diabolic Howl!

But Island Bunny resisted the effect!

Oh... It didn't even work on the weakest enemy.

"How utterly useless."

"Well, it only failed once. I'd like to see just how luck-based it is, so would you mind casting it a few more times?"

"Certainly. How many is a few?"

"Hmm. I think a hundred should suffice."

"What?! That many times?!"

"Aw, c'mon. Without a large enough data set, the probability measurement could be skewed by luck. Honestly, a hundred is the absolute minimum that I'd accept."

"I understand your point, I suppose... Did you really do this all the time until Aoyagi joined?"

"Yep! Data gathering is buckets of fun, right?"

“I-I suppose everyone has their own idea of fun.”

“Woo! 99 to go!”

Our hundred-ball batting practice began— —and eventually ended.

“Phew... It’s finally over.”

“Good job. That’s 13 hits out of a hundred.”

That was an abysmal hit rate. If it only costed 5 or 10 MP, I could see it being used as a time-filler, at least. But 150? I couldn’t imagine this seeing any practical use.

“It’s honestly useless, isn’t it?” Maeda asked, performing the recovery pose to regain MP.

The pose is simple; plant your feet, put your hands together, and close your eyes. Then, you’re enveloped in a light-green glow as your HP and MP refill. It can be done both in and out of battle, but the effect is much greater out of battle.

“For now, that’s the only conclusion. But there’s something else I want to try.”

“What else can we possibly do?”

“Let’s see what happens if we use it alongside Joint Magic.” Joint Magic was our reward for winning the competitive mission. The talent allowed us to combine our magic when attacking.

“Joint Magic... I haven’t tried using it yet.”

“Symbologist’s circle magic can’t be resisted. If we combine it with Diabolic Howl, maybe we can increase your success rate?”

“That may be possible. Let’s try it!”

“All right. Here we go.”

I extended my hand toward Maeda. To use Joint Magic, players must join hands and activate Joint Magic as a skill. That’s how the game knows whose magic is to be joined. From there, the next spell each player casts will be combined and unleashed at once.

“Ah... R-Right. We have to hold hands for it.” She seemed hesitant. “J-Just a moment.”

Maeda removed a handkerchief and scrubbed at her hands vigorously. Handkerchiefs were in-game items too.

“We’re in a game. It’s not like your hands are dirty.”

“I-It’s just a personal thing... Here.” She modestly took my hand. Hers was soft and silky-smooth. *I’m still amazed by this level of realism. The technology behind this must be some kind of incredible, mysterious voodoo.*

“Let’s do it!”

“Ready when you are.”

“Joint Magic!”

We activated the skill simultaneously, prompting special visual effects to surround us. From there, we casted our own spells. Of course, Maeda cast Diabolic Howl. As for me, any of my available circles was fine.

For now, I chose Confounding Circle, which lowers enemy MND. MND is related to magic resistance, so maybe it would increase the effect rate somewhat.

“Diabolic Howl!”

“Confounding Circle!”

We finished casting our spells. Now, what would happen next?

After I specified a radius, the magic circle appeared under the island bunny. A debuff icon appeared next to the bunny’s name. Was it just a normal Confounding Circle now?



But then—the color of the magic circle changed to a red tint. Diabolic Howl's dragon head then emerged from the circle. With its trademark howl, the dragon chomped into its prey, reducing its HP by about 70%.

"Oho, it worked!"

"Doesn't that seem like too much damage?"

The Island Bunny hopped toward Maeda for a counterattack, but she smacked it away with her staff. She had been doing that the entire time, but she might as well have been ignoring them. Scholars may have been weak at melee physical attacks, but against the lowest-leveled monsters in the game, even they could win easily.

"We'll keep that in mind for the next test run. Time for round two of a hundred!"

"Again?! B-But... Oh, fine." Maeda nodded with a smile, surprisingly. She was finally getting into it.

Thus began our second hundred-spell cycle.

—And that should do it.

"Niiiice!"

"Yes! The difference is incredible!"

With Joint Magic activated, her hit rate improved remarkably, which is to say she never missed—out of a hundred attempts, we hit a hundred times. We should then have a perfect hit rate against any enemy that didn't outright resist the spell.

On top of that, Diabolic Howl's HP-halving effect was amplified. Instead of 50%, the enemies lost 70%.

"This is a bombshell of a discovery! Draconic magic just needs Joint Magic to flourish."

The UW Guidebook only had the most basic info. It only mentioned that Joint Magic is used to power up a combination of X magic and Y magic. That's why you needed to blaze new trails through experimentation. We did, and we found

an amazing combination.

Symbologist and scholar are actually very synergistic. I was super happy that symbologist's circles have found a new use. After all, I was only using them to drain my MP before.

"How convenient. Do you think this could turn out to be a top-tier combination?"

"I dunno. It might not work on crown-marked enemies. But if it does, scholar and symbologist might just go up a tier or two."

"Are they rated low because they don't come through in the important situations?"

"I'd say so."

Plus, grinding on extra-strong trash mobs was of niche benefit at best. In this game, EXP from monsters is based on the difference between player and monster levels. But there's a cap to that; your EXP gain maxes out when the enemy is ten levels higher than you.

The enemies inside Almishr's Burial Ground are dozens of levels higher than us, so if we tried to grind on them, we would only get a level 40 monster's worth of EXP. It's pointless to anyone but hobbyists like me. If a class's use is only meaningful for hobbyists, then that use won't be considered the class's tier placement.

"Since we're trying to deal with extra-strong mobs, this is good for us. This might be our new hope."

"Good! I agree."

"I think I'd like to try this on stronger enemies. There's more I want to test."

First off, the enemies at Almishr's Burial Ground were undead. We'd need to know if this magic would even work on undead monsters.

The next question from there was where the aggro from Joint Magic spells would actually go.

"Are we going somewhere else?"

“Yeah. Let’s go to the tenth floor and try it on the undead enemies there.”

We used a warp point to go to the tenth floor, where we could fight level 20-ish undead monsters as we pleased.

Scrappy Skeleton: Level 19

That would suffice. We began using Joint Magic immediately. Our magic combined and struck the sword-and-shield-wielding skeleton, bringing down his HP bar fast and hard. Very, very nice.

The enemy then turned toward us and charged. Maeda was ready to face his advance with her magic, but I stopped her.

“Hold it, Maeda. Don’t attack yet. We should let him hit us without trying to defend or evade.”

“Hmm? All right, then.”

The Scrappy Skeleton turned toward Maeda and brought down his sword. It hit, shaving off some of Maeda’s HP. Immediately after, he turned to me and attacked, striking me for a bit of my HP as well. Immediately after, he turned to Maeda. He ran over, attacked her, and hit. Then, he turned to me again—Keeping with the pattern, he bounced between us like a ping-pong ball.

“Fascinating... All right, Maeda. Go ahead and finish him off.”

She nodded deeply and began casting magic. “Exheal!”

The skeleton took the brunt of her recovery magic. His HP fell to 0 as he rattled and fell to pieces.

“Hmm... Interesting. I should think about this more in-depth.”

“What about it, exactly?”

“Oh, right. See, it looks like the aggro was split evenly between us.”

“Judging by the monster’s behavior, that seems right.”

Enemy monsters will always try to attack the player with the most aggro. Players lose aggro each time they take damage, thus the skeleton alternated between us. When he hit Maeda, her aggro fell below mine; when he hit me, my aggro fell below hers. The cycle went on and on as his priority shifted each

time. That could only mean that we had started with approximately equal aggro before he attacked us.

Of course, we hadn't generated aggro in any ways other than via Diabolic Howl, so apparently I took half of the aggro because of our combined magic.

But that would mean... There was a slight problem. This wouldn't work; there must've been a missing piece.

In order to confirm one more thing, we descended to the eighth floor. There, we combined our magic versus the crown-marked Iron Gemini. This time, it didn't work, meaning it really didn't work against crown-marked enemies. *Better keep that in mind...*

Then, we heard an unexpected chime. A message was displayed in the Log window: —It's almost time for morning assembly. Students, please return to the school immediately.

"Oh, time for class. Let's go back, I guess."

"Right, let's do so. We can continue after school."

For now, our investigation would have to end. Despite having to cut things short, it was a productive session. Productive enough to make me think we might just stand a chance.

◆◇◆

After classes ended, I decided to return to the guild market. Akira, Maeda, and Yano came along. Draco too, of course, who had been sleeping happily in the hood of my robe throughout our entire morning test runs. He did a lot of sleeping as a growing baby, but right now he was flapping his little wings excitedly nearby.

"So, Ren, what are we looking for?"

"I'm looking for a staff with high poise. Plus a shield, if I can find one. Yano, what shield do you have right now?"

"Oh? Here ya go." Yano opened her item window and showed me.

Dueling Shield Type: Shield Level: 27

Poise: 144

Effects: None A solid shield for her level, but one without any special effects.

"If I can find a shield with higher poise than that, then I'll buy it. Staves are my top priority, though."

"What staff are you using, Takashiro?"

"I'm using this."

Iron Staff Type: Staff Level: 21

Might: 17

AP gain: 10

Poise: 55

Guardbreak: 20

Effects: INT +8, MND +4, Max MP +12

Compared to a shield, its poise was laughable. I would need much more than this. If I couldn't do significantly better, it'd be nearly impossible to make it through Almishr's Burial Ground. Unfortunately, it was the best recipe I could craft. The only way to get a better one was to buy one, and that was what led me to the guild market. Plus, rare drops from monsters often couldn't be crafted.

"Hmm. Not sure if I follow, but whatever floats your boat."

"So all you need is high poise, right?"

"Yeah, so long as the gear isn't too expensive."

"There are so many shops here. Let's run around and have a look!"

We started with a reasonable looking shop.

"Hello and welcome!" A large third-year, probably in judo or some other athletics club, was the shopkeeper. He looked at me with intense curiosity. "Ooh, a first-year with a dragon? You must be this year's first MVP!"

Having Draco with me made me too easy to spot.

“Yes, sir. I guess I am.”

“A symbologist, even. You don’t see that every day. Magic knights, paladins, and wizards are usually the ones to take the spotlight. You’re an interesting fellow.”

Oh boy, here comes the recruitment speech.

But then he subverted my expectations.

“So, are you here for anything specific? Or did you want to look at our inventory list?” Instead, he returned straight to the shop conversation. It took me by surprise, and I could only stare and blink for a moment. “Hmm? What’s up?”

“Oh, uh... People usually invite me to their guilds, because of the dragon and all. I was just surprised that you didn’t.”

“Did you want an invite?”

“No, that’s not quite it.”

“Our guild is only for martial artists who love hand-to-hand combat. Sorry, you’re just not in our target demographic.”

“Oh, I gotcha. I didn’t know there were guilds like yours.”

“Do you make martial artist-only parties too?” Akira asked.

“That we do. It’s tough without a healer, but it’s our hobby, so we find ways around it. It’s all about having fun while you win.”

That sounded like a nice mentality. Everyone should be able to find their own passion and fun. It was a game, after all. And I was playing with my own bizarre style too.

“So, what’ll it be? Would you like to browse our wares?”

“Oh, I’d just like to see your staves and shields, please. Specifically ones with high poise and low enough level requirements for us to use them.”

“Poise, huh? Just a second. We’ve got these two, but they’re both rare drops.”

Fanatic’s Staff (O) Type: Staff Level: 25

Might: 3

AP gain: 7

Poise: 256

Guardbreak: 6

Effects: INT -60, MND -60, Max MP -50

Fanatic's Shield (O) Type: Shield Level: 25

Poise: 320

Effects: INT -60, MND -60, Max MP -50

Oho, bingo! I was hoping for something just like this. They came with a bunch of insane stat penalties, but that hardly mattered to me.

"How much for this?!"

"The shield is 1.5 million Mira."

"That's *really* expensive!" That was way out of my price range! No-go there.

"The staff is ten thousand Mira."

"That's *really* cheap!" Now *that* was my kinda price! I gotta buy it! Buy, buy, buy, buy!

"That is quite a difference in price..." Yano seemed unsatisfied with the price of the shield.

"I'm pretty sure these are the market average prices."

"I guess it does make sense, if you consider the practicality of the two."

"What do you mean?" Maeda asked me.

"Most staff-wielding classes aren't trying to get hit by enemies. They're like mages; if a staff has high guard and reduces your magic stats, doesn't that seem like a ridiculously useless trade-off?"

"Oh... I suppose it does."

"On the other hand, a tank is happy to have as much poise as possible. It kinda sucks to lose MP, but INT and MND are no big deal. The staff is confusing

and niche at best, but the shield is perfect for most tanks, so naturally it would be in high demand."

"Right, so demand has an effect on price. In my offline games, items in the same set are usually the same price. But online games are affected by the market forces of supply and demand... I guess that's obvious, since they're transactions between real people." Maeda nodded, clearly impressed. It was her first online game; this kind of price difference must've been a new concept for her.

"That sounds about right."

But this was just what I needed. This bafflingly useless staff, seen as vendor trash by everyone else, would become my secret weapon.

"I'll take the staff, then!"

"All right! Thank you, sir."

When we left the store, I made a declaration to the party: "We might be able to do this! Let's challenge Almishr's Burial Ground one more time!"

After some preparation, we embarked.

CHAPTER 10: REMATCH AT THE BURIAL GROUND ONCE MORE, WE ARRIVED AT THE DOOR TO THE TOMB.

If we made a single misstep, we'd be done for. Prior to coming here, we had already met to discuss strategy for the basic flow of the battles to come. All that remained was to put it into practice.

In the first room, where we were massacred before, one Deadly General lay in wait as always. If anybody fell below 50% HP, the mummy army in the walls would awaken and kill us all. Thus, the clear condition for survival was to maintain a workable HP level.

"All right, Maeda. Are you ready?"

"Ready!"

Maeda and I unleashed our combined magic from the edge of the Deadly General's aggro range. Naturally, it worked. 70% of his HP was shaved off at once. As a result, of course, he advanced toward us.

"I'll be taking that aggro!" Before the general could reach us, Yano used Guilty Steal on Maeda.

Yano and I then had equal aggro. Yano had already put away her gun and readied her shield; she was in full guard mode.

The enemy's first attack was aimed at her. His charging axe-swing was guarded perfectly by Yano. His guardbreak took effect, but only slightly, dealing only 1% of her health bar in damage. She was far from danger range.

"Whew! I thought I might mess up."

After Yano guarded his attack, he switched targets to me. Because we split aggro, he was bouncing between us, just like when Maeda and I initially investigated.

If I were still using my Iron Staff from before, this would have been big trouble. Iron Staff had low poise, so even if I did try to guard with it, I would take a ton of damage. But with my new weapon, the Fanatic's Staff— I saw through the Deadly General's horizontal slice and guarded against it.

Deadly General attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Oho, *zero* damage! It was all thanks to my VIT specialization and this incredible new staff!

He followed up with a spinning axe-swing, another horizontal slice, and a full-body shove, but even while guarding, I took zero damage from any of it. Since I was on full-on defensive duty, somebody else would have to take on the damage role. But of course, that was all taken care of in our strategy meeting.

"Akira, it's all you!"

"Got it!" Akira jammed Skyfall into the ground and began to dance around it.

As she spun along with the dance's cute choreography, her ample chest bounced with her. That dance really gave her an air of tasteful seductiveness. But if that's how the dance was performed, there was nothing she could do about it. *Ooh, and there's the big pose! So cute.* And then— "Ultimate ability! Saint's Crescent!"

She removed Skyfall from the floor and slashed horizontally with a flash. The arc of her sword-slash manifested as a crescent, hitting the Deadly General. When it did, it unleashed its healing effect. Since the general was undead, he took damage instead.

Akira activated Saint's Crescent.

539 damage dealt to Deadly General!

Saint's Crescent is made by using a talent to chain sword dancer's AoE heal, Healing Dance+, and the one-handed art, Crescent Slash. The result is an AoE heal. The heal from Healing Dance+ is further boosted by the damage of Crescent Slash, while most of the damage is magic as opposed to physical. As a

result, it still hits high-level enemies with the same force as ever. Normal healing dances can only be activated for allies, but Saint's Crescent can hit friend or foe alike. When it hits an undead foe, it becomes a source of damage.

"Aargh! It's still got a sliver of health!"

Even after taking the full force of Akira's ultimate, the Deadly General still stood. It just needed a little more damage! So close.

"Here comes another!" Saint's Crescent costed 180 AP; Akira's max was 450. We waited for her AP to fill to max before the battle, so she was more than ready to let two loose in a row.

"Wait! I'll do it!" Mostly relegated to healing after the start of the battle, Maeda moved in to attack.

Kotomi cast Exheal.

246 damage dealt to Deadly General!

Finally, the Deadly General's HP fell to zero. He let out a groan before dying and fading away.

"Woo! We're really doing this!"

Reworking our tactics from the ground up had paid off. The rewards from the competitive quest were coming in handy too. *You gotta make full use of everything at your disposal!*

"Yaaaay!"

"It all went according to your calculations, Takashiro."

"Aww yeah! New guild, here we come! I can't wait to have my own room!"

"Go underdogs!"

"My own pet dragon! I can't wait!"

"Our own floating island! Beautiful views for days!"

These were the raw, unfiltered voices of our hearts, revealing our deepest desires.

“Now, onward!”

We topped off our HP and MP before resuming deeper into the tomb.

“But y’know, it’s kinda funny watchin’ one guy guarding desperately for his life while the girl behind him dances her butt off like she just doesn’t care. Know what I mean, Kotomi?”

“Oh? I-I suppose?”

“Gaaaah! I-I can’t help it! It’s not like it’s not embarrassing for me...”

“C’mon now, girls. The dance *is* almost too tempting for me too, but since it’s so cute, I definitely can’t say I mind.”

“...Yes, Yuuna, it is rather amusing.”

“Not you too, Maeda! I can’t do anything about the animation they made...”

“We know it’s not your fault, Akki. Whoever designed the sword dancer’s gear and animations is the real creep.”

“I *know*, right?! Every little movement and every microscopic outfit just makes it worse!”

“Doesn’t it kinda feel like you’re being forced to do things that men would want to see you do?”

“This is sounding more and more shady by the minute...”

There’s a reason that sword dancer is the #1 class girls don’t want to play. It’s pretty unfair.

“Look, the class is critical to my strategy. Besides, guys can play it too!”

At length, we discovered another room. It looked like this path was made purely to connect small rooms to other small rooms. This time, there were two Deadly Generals— “Let’s take them on using the same strat.”

Our combined magic and Akira’s ultimate were both AoE. If we could hit both generals, it would work out just fine.

And I was right. We cleared the second small room without having to worry about the mummy army.

We cleared room after room, each of them housing only one or two enemies. Once we got used to the strategy, we were progressing quickly. Thanks to the level difference between our party and the enemies, we were getting tons of EXP.

Our levels had risen to: Me 28, Akira 28, Maeda 29, Yano 31. Good stuff, good stuff. At this rate, we really were going to make it!

“Huh? There’s a staircase.”

When you proceed to the next floor of a dungeon, enemies get stronger. We’d best be on our guard, then.

We descended down to the next floor, immediately finding ourselves faced with another small room with enemies.

Deadly General x3: Level 81

Ancient Doll x2: Level 82

Whoa, there’s five of them. And Ancient Dolls aren’t undead; they’re magic doll types. This would be a challenge; that was the difficulty curve at work.

“Mm... This would be easier if they were all undead.”

“What should we do, Ren? This doesn’t look good.”

“We’ll open up with the usual Joint Magic. And then from there—” I began an impromptu strategy meeting.

“You sure this’ll work? I’m not too confident about fighting five dudes.”

“This does seem rather dangerous.”

“Let’s give it a shot! I’m sure it’ll work out!” Yano and Maeda were uneasy, but Akira was 100% on board.

“There’s nothing to worry about! Let’s go!”

“If you say so, Akki.”

“Let’s give it a try.”

With Akira’s inspiration, we completed our battle plan. First, of course, we hit all five enemies with our Joint Magic. When that worked out, all of them moved

to attack us.

“I gotcha, Kotomi!” Yano used her Guilty Steal, leaving her and me with equal aggro. The same strat as usual.

Normally, this is where Akira would use her ultimate, heal-damaging the undead. Unfortunately, this would have the side-effect of healing the Ancient Dolls, so we decided to go with a different strategy this time.

I readied my staff, and Yano her shield, to withstand the enemy assault.

Maeda cast a spell from the back line: “Vengeful Blast!”

This spell creates a wall that deals fixed counterattack damage in response to all enemy attacks. It targets one ally, so she cast it on me.

Deadly General attacked.

Ren guarded the attack!

10 counterattack damage dealt to Deadly General!

With each guard, I chipped away at the enemy’s health. There were two Deadly Generals and an Ancient Doll on me, making it three versus one. Meanwhile, Yano was guarding against the remaining two.

Ancient Doll attacked.

Yuuna guarded the attack, taking 32 damage.

Yano was taking a bit of guardbreak damage. This reduced her aggro level, making me the next in line for their attacks. All five enemies then stood before me. Far from losing aggro, I was actually generating more thanks to my counterattack damage. With every guard, I was gaining more and more. That’s precisely what I had planned.

I continued to guard against attack after attack after attack, against the generals’ axe swings and shoves; against the dolls’ erratic barbed flail assaults. I could already block the generals’ slow attacks with my eyes closed, and the dolls’ attack animations were the same as lower level dolls. As long as there was no danger of guardbreak, it didn’t matter how low my AGI or how sluggish my

movement; I could guard against anything without breaking a sweat.

Every attack animation comes with a telegraph at the start, so they're easy to predict. I moved away based on the range of each one. The only attacks I had to guard were the ones that would have definitely hit me.

The Deadly General's shove knocked targets back even if they guarded, so that was something I had to be wary of. When possible, I took advantage of it to help dodge the other enemies' attacks.

The optimal tactic changed with each passing moment, but... logically, all I had to do was maintain this pattern. The only problems were the accuracy of my predictions and the speed of my reactions to match them.

Before the battle, I claimed that I could handle five of them at once, so I'd take on the tank role. Maeda and Yano didn't seem to believe me, but it looked like I'd really be able to keep this up.

"That's amazing, Takashiro! You're seriously avoiding every hit!"

"The heck?! Symbologists are supposed to have crappy AGI! How are you not taking any damage from all those enemies?! Are you cheating?"

"This is Ren we're talking about. He's really good at figuring out enemy movements quickly and accurately. It's not about stats; it's pure skill. AGI has nothing to do with it." Akira seemed proud, for some reason.

"So uh, are you all just gonna stand there, or are you gonna attack?!" That was supposed to be the plan! While I was acting as a decoy, they were supposed to focus down the Ancient Dolls.

"Whoops! Totally slipped my mind!"

"Okay! Let's do it!"

Yano unequipped her shield and grabbed her gun, and Akira began slashing away at the dolls with Skyfall. With the vast level difference, their attacks were mostly evaded, but our strategy was essentially "throw enough dirt and some will stick," using brute force to chip away at them.

Yano readied her gun and made use of the AP she collected through guarding. "Ultimate ability! Shadow Blaster!"

This ultimate was chained from sky pirate and hunter's Stealth Shot, along with the gun art, Double Blast. Stealth Shot makes the user transparent, so the shooter doesn't gain aggro. When matched with a double-hit art, it becomes a powerful attack that doesn't put the user in danger. It's very safe damage.

Yano still had a considerable amount of aggro from the Joint Magic earlier, so if she wasn't careful, she might've ended up surpassing my aggro and getting attacked. With her shield still unequipped, she would get wrecked immediately, attracting the mummies as she died. But with her no-aggro attack, she was safe as long as I didn't mess up.

Yano's ultimate was a direct hit, and Akira's chip damage and the continued effect of Stealth Shot helped them clean up the remainder of the dolls' health. Gunshots were unavoidable by nature; they were the most accurate means of attack.

The first Ancient Doll went down, followed by the second. I was still rocking a full HP bar, and the cycle only got easier and easier as enemies fell. Three Deadly Generals remained. The rest would be easy.

"All right, I'm ready! Ultimate ability! Saint's Crescent!"

The three generals fell to the red zone all at once, and Maeda finished them off one at a time with Exheal.

"Woohoooo! We're getting there! We're really doing this!"

"Heck yeah! We won!"

"I thought this would be much harder..."

"Your perfect guards saved the day, Takashiro!"

"Good job, Ren. Those were some god-tier reflexes!"

"Heheh... Aww, it was nothing." I couldn't help but bask in the praise of all these cuties!

"But hey, if you're that agile with symbologist, imagine how much your skill could shine with a high-AGI frontline class like magic knight or martial artist!"

"Dead End does deal formidable damage, but symbologist just can't stand up to enemy fire afterward."

“Maybe so, but I’m just not interested in the strong classes.”

My style was basically to stand in the back and then one-shot kill the enemy when my time came. Frontline fighters and tanks needed to have ways to manage aggro, but I was the opposite. Without a taunt skill of my own to take aggro, my only aggro gain was through my ultimate. My burst damage was all I had. No matter what I did or where I went, I was a drama cannon through and through. This fight was an exception—a plan B.

“Haha... I guess you *are* the Emperor of Underpowered.”

“It feels like such a waste of skill...”

“No matter what anyone says, Ren never lets go of his obsession.”

“Akira, you always get me.”

“I don’t ‘get’ you. I just give up on persuading you because you’re so dumb.”

“What?! That’s news to me!”

“Heehee, you two are such good friends.”

“What Kotomi means to say is, ‘Takashiro, flirt with me, instead! Pretty please?!’“

“I most certainly did *not*! That didn’t even sound like me, Yuuna, you dummy!”

“Oww! You didn’t have to hit me, Kotomi. I thought I was doing you all a favor by providing a rough translation.”

“I don’t want your favors! Come on, let’s go!” Maeda moved to the vanguard of the party and continued onward.

We were able to match our previous successes in battle, but the road ahead was becoming very labyrinthine. Despite our confusion, we had no trouble mowing down foe after foe.

As we continued searching, Maeda entertained herself by feeding Draco, until — “Chirp chirp! Chirp chirp!” He let out a few excited cries, and suddenly his body started glowing!

“Huh?!”

“Ooh! He’s all glowy!”

“Draco, what’s wrong?!”

“D-Did his stomach explode?!”

I checked my Log window.

Draco’s growth level increased!

Please choose a skill for it to learn: Well, hello there! “Oh, sweet! It says he’s grown enough to learn a skill.”

Nice, nice, *nice*! This was the best part of pet-raising mechanics! So what could he learn, then? The list was as follows: 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.

Pickup (Passive) Effect: Occasionally gathers materials when a material-gathering point is nearby. (Tools not necessary) Functions even when master is logged out.

Target Marker (Passive) Effect: Functions as a marker for area-of-effect magic and skills. Only works on master’s magic and skills.

When pet dragon is targeted by magic/skills that can be freely placed, the area-of-effect will move along with the pet dragon.

Looked like all of them were passive support skills. Interesting, interesting. Two of the three looked especially useful to me, but after considering how desirable each of them would be, I arrived at one conclusion. Yup, it could only be that one!

“What can he learn?”

“Look at this message. Regenerator, Pickup, and Target Marker.” I enlarged my Log window to show the rest of the party.

“Which one would you all choose?”

“Regenerator is the best one, yeah? It works on the whole party, and you can never have too many heals.”

“Safety first.” Maeda nodded in agreement to Yano’s choice.

“But I wouldn’t ignore Pickup. With the forced logout window, this lets you get ahead even in the dead hours.” Akira’s choice was understandable, and I could see Pickup’s charm.

“Cool, cool. I’ll choose Target Marker, then.” I tapped Target Marker and confirmed my choice.

“Greeeeat, thanks for asking our opinions!”

“What was the point of asking?”

“Ren, why’d you choose that one?”

“Regenerator has a chance of messing up my 1 HP Dead Ends, so it’d be more of a burden than anything. Pickup is a good choice, but Target Marker is perfect for symbologists. It’s the only answer.”

I had to try it out right then and there. I began casting Devitalizing Circle.

Ooh! With Target Marker equipped, I can even target Draco. I cast the spell, and a circle of light appeared around him.

“Draco, fly around in circles!”

“Chirp!” Draco posed as if bowing in assent before flying around our party. As he moved, my magic circle followed him.

It worked! Now I could move my circles around.

“Symbologists normally can’t move their circles after placing them. This is a major development! Good job, Draco! Good boy!”

“Chirp chirp chirp!” Draco seemed very proud as I praised him. What a cute little guy.

“Huh. So you can move your circles. But what’s so good about that?”

“If we can manage aggro properly, then the enemies aren’t moving, anyway. Why do you need to move the circles?” Yano and Maeda didn’t quite seem to get it just yet.

“It must be for PvP, right? If Draco chases your enemy, you can then use your circles more effectively.”

Aggro doesn't matter in player vs player battles; all someone has to do is look at where the circle is and move away from it. With Draco's ability to move them, my circles would indeed be better in PvP.

"True, but I think it's a good general boost for symbologist. I'll get back to you ladies once I do some testing. For now, let's keep going."

We were in the middle of a "one wrong step and you're done for" expedition. We had to focus on the task at hand.

After a while, we found an incredibly ornate door that shone gold.

"Whoa! This door definitely smells like treasure!"

"It does. But..."

"It almost seems too conspicuous..."

"What do we do now...?"

Gatekeepers lay in wait before the door.

Deadly King: Level 99

Crown Icon (rare monster) This guy looked crazy strong. He was the next level up from the Deadly Generals we fought before. His muscular body, far larger than the generals, was covered with golden armor, adorned with jewels that revealed his high status. Blood-red light emanated from the depths of his eyes, matching the ominous aura exuded by his obsidian two-handed sword. For a skeleton, he had immense presence. Overall, this boss was awe-inspiring.

Two Deadly Generals stood at his side as well. There looked to be seven gatekeepers in total guarding the treasure vault.

"Whoooa. So uh, Takashiro, how're we gonna deal with this?"

"Don't ask me... These guys look way too strong."

"Aren't you here to make up a crazy plan to get us out of this? C'mon, hop to it!" She must have thought I was some sort of miracle worker.

"Why does it have to be me?"

"That's just how much we believe in you, Takashiro. Can't you think of

anything?”

“You’re the strategist, Ren. Be the best Zhuge Liang you can be!”

“I think I’d rather be Liu Bei here. If I left things to my cohorts, I’d be far more likely to live through this.” I tried to jest, but my mind was running a mile a minute.

Well, I couldn’t use Dead End here. We’d come this far into the dungeon, so I didn’t want to risk messing it up and doing it all over again.

Hmm... Or maybe... we didn’t have to defeat them at all. If we could just get inside the treasure room...

I wanted to test something before I showed it off, but maybe this was the time to use it. It may or may not work... but it was all I had!

Okay, let’s do it!

“All right, then. How about we give up on victory?” I presented the idea with a smile.

“Whaaaa?! I don’t wanna go home empty-handed after all this junk!” Yano was obviously disappointed with my idea.

“Oh, no no. We’re not giving up on the treasure.”

“Then what’s the plan, Takashiro?”

“We forget about beating these guys. Someone acts as a decoy for the enemies while everyone else rushes for the treasure. We all know that door just reeks of treasure, right? I can be the decoy.”

“Just you? How are you gonna do it? Is this gonna be some guard chip damage thing again?”

“Nope. I doubt I can guard the king’s attacks without taking damage, so it’s up to Draco. This is that new thing I was talking about before; I’m gonna take it for a test drive here.” I handed the Ancient Imperial Key to Akira.

“I’ll draw them away. Everyone else, you go in and grab the treasure.”

“Are you sure about this? Draco’s just gonna move your circles, right?”

“I’m positive! Even if I screw this up, that’s important data for my testing. No

matter how it goes, I win!”

“That doesn’t *sound* very sure!”

“Heehee. Takashiro always looks so enthusiastic at times like this.”

“He’s a testing fetishist or something. Okay, Ren. Go for it. I’m excited to see what happens.” Yano was being her usual self, but Akira and Maeda were much more receptive.

“Okay... Here goes. When they move away from the door, get in there ASAP.”

Leaving them with those words, I began casting a spell.

“Enervating Circle!”

In case you’ve forgotten, it lowers AGI. I made the circle just large enough to contain every enemy in the army guarding the door.

Casting complete. A circle of light appeared, with Draco at its center.

Akira clapped her hands together when she realized what I wanted. “Oh! Ren, does Enervating Circle make enemies run slower?”

“Bingo!”

“Oh, wow! We’re about to witness another Ren miracle!”

I then called out to my pet. “To me, Draco!”

I cradled him in my arms, and—it was go time! First, I dashed toward the door to the treasure vault. When I came close enough, I entered enemy aggro range. With the Deadly King at the forefront, all seven enemies moved at once.

All right, then. Time to book it! I screeched to a halt, then turned 180 degrees and ran away. The game of tag began. Running past the rest of my party, I began going back the way we came from. Since I had aggro, the boss group ignored my party and continued chasing me.

Afterward, Akira and co. moved for the treasure vault. Good, good. But now that they had chased me so far, the enemies leashed, turning back to return to their resting place. I’d have to run as fast as I could if I didn’t want to let them die before they got the treasure!

With the insane level difference, my foes also moved much faster than

normal. But even with one or two hundred more AGI than me, it didn't mean they were twice as fast. Everyone has a base movement speed which steadily increases with the unit's status bonuses. The difference between classes is a major factor too; for example, four-legged beastman types are the fastest. Skeletons, meanwhile, are slow. At lower levels, they can hardly even stand. But despite all that, this boss group was surprisingly fast, as I've already noted.

At the entrance to the huge room that housed the door to the treasure vault, they had already gotten too close to me for comfort.

"Chirp! Chirp chirp!"

"Don't worry! They won't get me that easily!"

The Deadly King stepped into the Enervating Circle centered on Draco, slowing him down immensely.

Still running, I was able to make some more distance between us. As the circle moved away from him, the king gained speed again. When he got closer to me, he stepped into the circle and slowed down again.

We repeated this process over and over.

"Chichirp?"

"Outside the circle, they're faster than me. But inside, I reign supreme as the king of speed!"

As a result of the circle's debuff, they were slowed down. That's the endgame of the inner-circle reversal you see here. So as long as I kept hold of Draco and kept my circle going, they couldn't catch up with me.

Enervating Circle cuts enemy AGI by 25%, and as Akira said, it decreases their movement speed by 25% as a side effect. If the king was still faster than me inside the circle, I'd strike out. This strategy was an unrehearsed gamble, so I'm glad it ended up working out this well.

"It worked! I can outrun them forever at this rate!" Pulling enemies and outrunning them like this has various names in games; "kiting" and "training" come to mind.

I picked Target Marker for exactly this sort of battle plan. I've found a new

possible role for symbologist: marathon runner!

The fact that circles can't be resisted was a major selling point. As long as you can keep the circle moving, nobody can match your marathoning potential. If there were a way to combine sleep attacks with this strategy, a player could outright bore his enemies to death. This could be a dangerous power, if only I had the means to wield it.

So, my one-minute circle was going to expire soon. I'd best recast it immediately. I stopped moving and rushed to cast a new one, while the boss group slowly approached me inside my current circle.

The casting completed, overwriting the old circle and allowing me to make distance between us again. All right! I even had time to recast! Heheheh, there was no way to stop me from kiting them now! Maybe I could even drag them outside the tomb!

I continued on the path we entered from, recasting as necessary. My MP was getting dangerously low, but I was far from out yet!

"Turnover!"

My HP fell to one digit, filling my MP to max. When I did this, of course—*Groooooooooan*...

Crimson Mummy army: level 78

There it is! Our handshake party begins anew!

But I remained within the center of my Enervating Circle, allowing me to escape long before the mummies could reach me. I ran, ran, and ran some more— There was still a long time before I'd reach the outside. Would I make it?! On a whim, I looked behind me again, and realized that a horrifying scene had developed.

Crimson Mummies are embedded in the walls all throughout the dungeon. As a result of my low-HP mad dash, hundreds of blood-red mummies had gathered! What an insane train of monsters! I'd never even seen a mob like this before!

The Deadly King was so buried by the red mass that I couldn't even see him! A

normal online game would get bogged down immensely with all of these monsters onscreen, but the good ol' VRMMO didn't even miss a beat.

I couldn't help but laugh all the while! "Bahahahaha! What the heck, dude?! This is hilarious!"


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I approached the exit, still cackling uncontrollably.

Take a right there, then two more lefts! I can do it, I can do it, I can do it! I can really do this! This is my victory lap!

Before long, I leapt from the entrance of the dungeon. Wow! The blue sky was a sight for sore eyes!

“Woohooooo! Goooooal! Haaahahah! I win, I win!”

Apparently the undead army couldn’t chase me out any further. They just stopped and stood there, as if there was an invisible wall at the exit. It’s just not their habitat, I guess. In most MMOs, enemies have set habitats that they reside in, and they can’t leave that area. After a while, they’d just go back to where they belonged. That rule seems to apply to UW, as well.

“Great job, Draco! You’re my savior, little buddy!”

“Chirp chirp! Chichichiiirp!”

In my excitement, I pet Draco like he’d never been pet before. He seemed to love it.

From the writhing mass of undead emerged one solitary figure from the cave. It was an awe-inspiring skeleton with a body clad in shining armor.

“So the Deadly King is the only one who can leave, huh? That’s a king for you.”

What would I do now? The gang should have had over ten minutes to get the treasure by now.

Then... how about I try for a bonus challenge?

I’d like to see how far my one-shot wonder can take me, for future reference.

“Let’s do this, Draco!”

“Chirp!”

I cast Enfeebling Circle at its maximum radius, reducing my remaining MP to 0. With the head of my Canesword unscrewed, I was ready to unleash my ultimate.

When the Deadly King approached, his eyes glowed even redder than before. He roared and swung his obsidian broadsword— A vertical slash? If so, I should be able to evade it and slide for home base!

Symbologist may have low AGI, but if I could just time this well enough...!

Crash!

That was the sound of his obsidian broadsword piercing the earth. He missed me!

“Here goes! Ultimate ability! Dead End!” As I slid in front of him, I unleashed my ultimate.

Ren activated Dead End.

2,561 damage dealt to Deadly King!

It worked! But... his HP bar hardly budged. I guess it wasn’t surprising for a level 99 monster to have astronomical health.

Not letting my awe get the better of me, I instantly changed weapons to my Fanatic’s Staff. The king was knocked back for a moment by my damage, leaving me just enough time to act.

Deadly King then kicked at me as I still stood before him. I couldn’t dodge that in time. I’d have to guard! And if he broke my guard, I’d die instantly. Talk about a sudden death situation.

Deadly King attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Putting aside the fact that it was just a plain old kick, similar to what his weak attack would be in a fighting game, I really could guard it! But if I can guard that — What if I could stay in a position that forced him to use his weak attack over and over? To provoke him to use his weak attack, I’d to stick to him like glue. That meant directly in front of him is the safest place!

...And so I stuck to him like glue, guarding against each kick as it came. He would sometimes use a spinning sword slash, but it was rare and had a long

wind-up, so I had little trouble avoiding it. But since I would have to jump out of the way each time, that would make me vulnerable. In those cases, I would dodge his sword again and jump back in front of him. The only possible way to do that was to watch out for another vertical slash. Whenever he showed signs of preparing for any other attack, I'd just keep my distance.

Jump in, approach, guard, and dodge. I had found a good routine. At the very least, this would let me bide my time.

Five minutes passed, bringing Final Strike and Turnover off cooldown. Now I could use Dead End again!

I was just in the middle of approaching him and dodging another kick. After that, the king telegraphed his spin slash by turning his body. Now was my chance! I took that opportunity to leap and dash away, making greater distance between us. There, I opened my item box and forged a Canesword as quickly as the game would allow. My new weapon was equipped and ready to go.

The king approached and telegraphed another vertical slash. I couldn't miss this opportunity! Time for my second shot!

Ren activated Dead End.

2,561 damage dealt to Deadly King!

Let's see how far I can take this loop!

Relying on the routine I had formulated on the fly, I repeated my actions over and over and over...

Until—how many times had I even done this?

At this point, Deadly King's HP was down to about half. But I wasn't done yet! I was intent on staying on this train until its last stop!

Or, as it turned out, until its emergency detour.

"Are you okay?!"

Oh, it was one of those second-year upperclassmen.

Shinsuke Miura (2-B) Level 68 Paladin, party leader Huh, my HP was back to

full. He must have healed me.

"Takashiro! We'd like to help you take him down. May we lend a hand?"

A quick glance to the side revealed that all ten of the upperclassmen from before, all in the level 60 range, were present. If I had this many people ready to help me, maybe I really could do it...

I tossed my stubborn pride aside; at this point, I'd gladly accept any help I could get.

"Yes, please!"

"All right, then! Guardian Force!" Miura activated the skill immediately, standing in front of me protectively. He spoke to me as he took the Deadly King's assault. "Did you drag him out here and deal this much damage all by yourself?!"

"Yes, sir! But I did get some help from this little guy." I looked over at Draco.

"That's amazing, especially for your level! You're a machine! I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it myself!"

The other upperclassmen stood in their respective battle positions and joined the fight.

Now, what should I do in the midst of all this? I'm probably far, far ahead in aggro, so holding back and focusing on dodging attacks was probably my best bet.

But while I considered my next actions— "HEH HEH HEH... YOU ARE FORMIDABLE, INDEED." The Deadly King spoke! Were all high-level enemies like this?! He was just a pile of bones when all was said and done, but he almost looked like he was grinning. "I MUST COMMEND YOUR CONSIDERABLE STRENGTH—WITH MY ULTIMATE ATTACK!"

The Deadly King raised his broadsword in the air before plunging it down into the earth. "GAZE UPON ME AND DESPAIR! CRIMSON CALAMITY!"

Holy crap!

As he activated his ultimate, flames erupted from the earth where his broadsword stood. The fire shot out in random directions, engulfing us all.

Before I realized it, my vision was filled with nothing but red flames. Against such a long-range, high-speed instakill, the upperclassmen and I had no counter.

A cacophony of screams swelled around me.

And then—only the Deadly King remained standing.

Wow, we all died at once...

Did he go into an enrage mode when he lost a certain amount of HP? I'd have to think of a way to deal with that if I ever wanted to beat him.

The Deadly King is one heck of an adversary! Level 99 rare monsters were no joke, it turned out..

"HEH HEH HEH... COME FACE ME AGAIN, BRAVE WARRIORS." With a smug look, he left those parting words and majestically returned to the tomb. He was way too cool for a skeleton...

Sucks for you, though! My girls just ransacked your treasure vault, buddy! I wish I could see the shock on your boney face when you get home!

But that king did seem like kind of a battle junkie. Maybe he was just using the treasure as bait because he wanted to keep fighting people? Either way, that was fun!

I'm gonna take you down someday, Deadly King!

"Hahaha... It's a bit embarrassing for all ten of us to die right after we came to help you." Miura spoke apologetically, despite his avatar being stuck inspecting the ground like mine.

"Oh, no, thank you for coming. Sorry to get you killed too."

"No need to apologize. Killing the Deadly King was our goal, so seeing him outside the dungeon was an amazing opportunity."

"Huh. Does he drop good loot?"

"Yeah, his weapon and armor are decent. But you saw his ultimate, didn't you? He drops the Crimson Calamity book when he dies. It's really strong, and the cool part is that any weapon can use it."

“Whoa! That’s really cool!” I hoped I could take him down one day, just for that!

“All right, let’s go back. We should do this again, if we happen to meet up.”

“Sounds good. Right, it’s time to go—” I’d have to respawn. I could only wonder if the girls got that Guild Establishment Permit.

Only one way to find out. Back to the home point!

Epilogue

The next day— “Oof... I overslept a bit.”

I logged into UW after 7 AM. They told me we’d be able to prep our guild house first thing in the morning. The plan was to log in at 6 AM, but I’d overslept by an hour.

While I was busy pulling the boss, the girls found a Guild Establishment Permit. We immediately started the proceedings for establishing a guild. After that, we were told that it would take until the next day, so there I was, fashionably late.

“Chirp chirp!” When I logged in, Draco clung to me. That’s so cute. Maybe it was something of a “good morning“ message.

Yesterday, I had logged out in front of the school’s warp room. Holding Draco, I walked into the room. From there, I noticed a new destination in my warp list: the guild house. I tapped it right away.

The world before me warped and swirled, before finally returning to normal— with different scenery. I was inside of a fantasy-style wooden home. It was pretty bland, with no furniture or decor to speak of. At the peak of the staircase, I saw doors to several rooms.

“Well, we were only promised the house itself. It would be silly to expect it to come furnished.”

In UW, furniture can be crafted like anything else; it was almost as if the game was telling the player to feng shui to their heart’s content.

But either way, nice! Our own home! This was the fruit of all our hard labor!

“Draco, this is our new home! I’ll make a nice perch for you to relax on.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“How about we look around the second floor?” As I moved toward the staircase— “Oh! Good morning, Ren.” Akira was at the top. I looked up to greet her— “Hey there, Akir... ah?!”

I couldn't help but gasp. Sword dancer's skirts are so short, and with the viewing angle from the bottom of the staircase—it was beyond my control, but I caught an eyeful. Perhaps this was the real treasure all along.

Akira recoiled back a step, as if she knew exactly what I was reacting to. "J-Just come upstairs, already!"

"Yes'm."

When I reached the top of the staircase, Akira was already back in her schoolgirl outfit.

"It was my fault, so I'm not mad at you *this* time."

"Oh, uh, thanks. But why were you in your sword dancer gear?"

"With everything that went on yesterday, I just forgot to change out of it."

"Uh huh..." I couldn't blame her; I woke up early because I was so excited. Everyone was.

"It's not much yet, but we can customize it however we want. I can't wait to fill this place up!" Akira smiled, already forgetting her embarrassment from before.

"Yeah, this boring emptiness is more like an open field of possibilities! Where do we even begin decorating?"

Other MMOs have mechanics like this, but being able to see and feel the home makes it all the more exciting. I bet my dad would understand the joy of getting my dream home, even if it's in a video game!

"Hahaha. What do you want to do with it, Ren?"

"I'm dying to craft, so I think I want to start with a workshop. Then, we could build a shop to sell the things I make, and a storeroom to keep our wares and crafting materials!"

"When Kotomi gets back, we can have a meeting to discuss our next actions!"

"Oh, has everyone already seen it? Guess I'm the last."

"Yep. They're looking around outside right now. Oh, hey, Ren. How about we take a screenshot together to commemorate the occasion?" Akira pulled out

her camera.

“Sure. I wish we had a selfie stick or something for this.”

All we can do was use our hands to hold out the camera, like some kind of uncultured barbarians. But when we did, Draco reached his little hands for the device.

“Chirp! Chichichirp!” He pointed at himself, nodding furiously.

“Oh? Are you gonna take the picture for us, Draco?”

“Chichirp!” Nod, nod. Wow, he could really do that? This pet dragon was seriously multifunctional! It’s all thanks to you that we got this guild house, buddy. You’re one heck of a pet.

Thus, Draco snapped pictures of us.

“Hey, Ren. You know how I kinda coerced you into applying to this school? Do you think it was a good decision?”

“Absolutely! It’s been endless fun, and I’m sure there’s more to come.”

“Yeah, for sure! We’ll have tons more fun together.”

Akira’s smile was too cute for me to handle. I remembered the burly beastman she used to play. The person behind the avatar was really like this all along... It’s almost ridiculous. But if I were pressed, I couldn’t say I disliked this development. No complaints here.

“I can’t wait.”

“Woo!”

We shook hands. Her hand was impressively soft.

From here on out, we were all going to customize our guild house. Then, we were going to grow the guild and work toward our future floating island.

While I worked on my one-shot wonder drama cannon abilities, I also wanted to look into symbologist’s potential as a marathon runner. I couldn’t neglect Draco, either—I wasn’t about to forget being an underdog force to be reckoned with in the guild event! There was just so much to do in this game. I wasn’t sure how far I’d be able to get before finishing my third year, but I fully intended to

have as much fun as I could all along the way!

Maeda and Yano returned from their stroll just in time.

“Oh, Takashiro’s finally here! Heya.”

“Good morning, Takashiro.”

“Same to both of you.”

“Welcome home, Kotomi and Yuuna!”

“We didn’t interrupt anything, did we? We can go get lost if you two wanna continue your flirt fest.”

“Jeez, would you please cut that out?!” Akira’s face turned a little red.

“You’re always saying stuff like that, Yano.”

“If I wasn’t, would I be into this kind of fashion?”

“I’m not sure if I see the connection.”

“They are too connected! I wouldn’t be into fashion, relationships, and video games if I wasn’t a complete bonehead.”

“I disagree. MMOs are all about thinking about the math behind what’s happening in front of you, trying to find meaning in every single stat point, and dragging results out of your own theories. MMOs aren’t something you enjoy mindlessly; they make you think, and that’s why they’re fun.”

“Whoa, I think your idea of fun is just a *little* different from mine.”

“Only Ren could go on and on about something like that.”

Suddenly, someone downstairs asked if she could come in. Hmm, who could it be?

We went down and opened the door to see that our visitor was a female NPC. She was a lean, tall, model-like girl.

“Good morning. My name is Reimi, and I’m from the Guild Administration Office. I was hoping to take a moment of your time to talk about the final procedures and the various functions of your new guild.” Ooh, tutorial time, then. We nodded and invited Reimi into our guild house. “My apologies if this

seems abrupt, but have you chosen a guild master yet? If not, you have up to two days—”

“No, we’ve decided.”

All three of the girls spoke up at once, pointing at me.

“Huh?! Me?! Why not Maeda? She’s the class rep!”

“I’m content with representing the class alone. Why don’t you represent the guild?”

“We believe in you, Guild Master Ren!”

“I am *totally* not in. You do it, Takashiro.”

“...All right.” Ah, why the heck not? I raised my hand and said, “I’ll be the guild master, then.”

Now, what kind of guild will we be?



AFTERWORD

First off, I'd like to thank everyone who bought this novel. This is my eighth book in total, but I'm doing something a little different this time: I'm publishing it on Shousetsuka ni Narou. Thank you for this opportunity!

The concept behind this story was essentially "boy, I wish I could've gone to a school like this." If full-dive gaming technology ever came out, this is what I think it would be like.

But I'm sure developing this and making it into a game for end users would have such a high unit cost that it wouldn't possibly be profitable. So instead, companies would collaborate in some way to make a premium product, striving for maximum market penetration. One solution to this problem would naturally be using cyberspace as an educational medium, don't you think?

In a lot of light novels, schools have some crazy conspiracy going on behind the scenes, or people are oppressed in some way. So I figured, why not just have a school that's genuinely fun to be a part of?

This is a bit of an experimental project of mine. What you see here is the result of that experimentation:

- A first-person work. Until now, all of my works have been third-person, so this is new territory.
- A work about video games. I've never written any like this, but I'm actually an online gaming junkie, so I hope it worked out!
- A pure, fun story. Instead of emphasizing plot structure and such, I emphasized *fun* above all else.

The latter of which was easier said than done; the author really has to consider how he's been trained to think. But thanks to that effort, I think I've mastered a new kind of pitch. In the end, mastering different pitches helps prolong an athlete's useful life.

Whether I keep writing this or not depends on sales. But whether or not it sells, I'm glad I tried this out. I plan to continue working with Shousetsuka ni

Narou, so I hope you'll all give my works a look when you get a chance. Maybe I should write a story about robots...

Finally, to my lead editor, N; my lead artist, Hika Akita; and everyone else involved in this, I thank you for your tireless efforts from the bottom of my heart. Everything came out so well, like the illustration of Akira on the cover page. When I first saw it, I just wanted to bow down to you and thank you endlessly. I want to see more illustrations like these. I hope everyone buys this novel so we can work on the next one together!

Now, I think it's about time I said goodbye. Thanks again!



ORIGINAL STORY: **Hayaken** | ILLUSTRATION: **Hika Akita**

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REDEFINING THE META AT VRMMO ACADEMY VOLUME 1
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English language rights arranged through HOBBY JAPAN.

English translation ©2019 Sol Press, LLC.

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Sol Press, LLC.
P.O. Box 6593
Fullerton CA, 92834
www.solpress.co

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First Printing, April 2019
ISBNs: 978-1-948838-16-0 (paperback)
978-1-948838-15-3 (ebook)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1