
Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy 2
Story: Hayaken
Illustration: Hika Akita
SOL PRESS


CHARACTER
HOMURA YAMAMURA
CLASS WIZARD
LEVEL 191
GUILD GRAND MUSEUM
"Hah! Your brain's so battered from fighting that you can't even see properly! How pathetic!"
"Huh?! No, I just naturally tune out collection fetishists like you!"
CHARACTER
YUKINO YAMAMURA
CLASS MAGIC KNIGHT
LEVEL 199
GUILD MYSTIC ARTS


AS SOON AS THEY SAW HER, THE MEN IN THE AUDIENCE WENT NUTS OVER AKABANE. SHE WAS A SWORD DANCER JUST LIKE AKIRA, AND SHE WAS JUST AS HOT. I COULDN'T IMAGINE A SCENARIO IN WHICH SHE *WOULDN'T* BECOME A GAMING CELEBRITY. IT WAS JUST THE LAW OF THE LAND.
THIS IS TOTALLY HER TURF... I GUESS THIS WILL BE MORE OF AN "AWAY" GAME FOR ME, HUH?
NOZOMI AKABANE
CLASS SWORD DANCER
LEVEL 34
GUILD TRUE FORM


"G-Get ready! I'm gonna give you the beating of a lifetime!"



ORIGINAL STORY: **Hayaken** | ILLUSTRATION: **Hika Akita**

SOL PRESS

TRANSLATION:
Benjamin Daughety

EDITING:
teiko

TYPESETTING:
Brandon Imber

PROOFREADING:
Dizzy Valiel
Victoria Vetter

MEDIA PRODUCTION:
Marie "Kid" H.
Avelina Kyriacou

PRODUCTION MGR:
Matthew Carolan

PUBLISHING MGR:
Adam Haffen

CEO:
Michael Valdez

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Redefining the META at VRMMO Academy

VOL. 2

Original Story by Hayaken
Illustrations by Hika Akita

Chapter 1: It’s a Small World for Us Gamers “All right! Got it! We crushed this one, bro!”

The macho beastman on my screen struck a celebratory pose. With his appearance and brash manner of speaking, you’d never guess he was actually a she.

I’m not dense, I swear! It was pretty much an act of God! I thought to myself, looking at the macho-beast Akira on-screen.

“Nice job, Akira!”

After Unlimited World’s cutoff time, we decided to mess around in Eternal Fantasy. Lately, we’d been having so much fun with UW that we hadn’t even bothered playing EF. Today, however, there happened to be a limited-time event in EF, so it was the perfect time to hang out. The event was pretty ridiculous, requiring players to collect seven balls scattered all across the world in order to have their wishes granted.

Akira had just finished off a giant fish monster that swallowed one of the balls. The ball popped out of the monster’s corpse, bringing us to Akira’s aforementioned pose.

“Woo! Let’s get to the next one, Ren!”

“All right. The next one is...” Before I could finish, another player appeared on the beach.

Nope, not happening. That ball is ours, buddy.

Or so I’d normally say, except this player happened to be an acquaintance of ours. Her name was Snow, fitting of her icy-blue hair.

“Ooh, hey! It’s Ren and Akira! I haven’t seen you guys in a while!” This message popped up in my chat log, accompanied by Snow waving her hand excitedly.

“Whoa! Hi, Snow!”

“Heya, Snow! How have you been?”

Akira and I waved back.

“Peachy! Just kinda bored, you know? Without you two around, I don’t have any worthy opponents.”

Despite her cute appearance, Snow was actually a PvP addict; she loved beating up other players at every opportunity. In fact, she was famous in the PvP community. EF includes team battles, so we often used to team up with Snow and fight other players together. She was incredibly skilled, so these were great opportunities for me to try out new tricks. If a trick worked on Snow, then it’d probably work on just about anyone.

“Aw, sorry. We’ve been really busy.”

“You two-timing me with another game or something?”

“Well, something like that,” Akira said.

“Huh. Is the PvP fun? Do you think I’d like it?”

“It is, but the game isn’t released to the public yet. It’s called Unlimited World.”

Snow’s avatar stepped back with a little gasp. “No way! Did you two get into Yosei Academy?!”

It was my turn to be surprised. “What?! How do you know about it?!”

“Umm, I’m a student there!”

“Whoa!”

“Seriously?!” Akira and I were shocked. To be fair, though, Yosei Academy was pretty much paradise for gaming addicts like us. It was only natural some of our friends would be there too. I mean, even Yano was an EF player.

The gaming world sure is small, huh? Still, I’m surprised someone so close to us turned out to be another Yosei student.

“Are you two first-years? I’m Yukino Yamamura, a third-year student! Come find me in class 3-C.” Well, that would explain her character’s name—“yuki” translates to “snow,” after all.

She’s really a girl, huh? Yet another surprise. I’ve always figured she was a

dude.

"I'm Ren Takashiro, class 1-E!"

"Class 1-E here too! I'm Akira Aoyagi."

"What?! Akira, you're a girl?! I had no idea!"

So, she had Yukino fooled too. Maybe I'm not so dense after all!

"Heh. Ren had the same reaction."

"Oh, so I'm not the only dummy here! What a relief."

Hah! We really are on the same wavelength.

"Why don't we get together in UW, then? Ooh, are you two in a guild yet? If not, I could invite you to mine!"

"Actually, we made our own."

"Aw, well, that makes sense. You pooled your Merit Points, right? It must be really nice to build up your own guild from scratch."

"We didn't have any MEP, actually. We used a Guild Establishment Permit."

"Whoa! It's not every day you see a newbie with one of those. Did a high-level friend trade it to you?"

"Nope. Four of us partied up at level thirty and got it ourselves."

"Wait, what?! How did you manage that?!"

"Well, y'see..." I told her all about how we got the permit.

"Whew! Y'know, I heard a symbologist took the competitive mission's MVP spot this year. But who would've thought it'd be Ren himself?! It totally makes sense, though. That's just how the Emperor of the Underpowered rolls, right?! We should totally duel in UW! You in?!"

"Hahaha, sure. If you're gentle."

"No can do, sorry. If I try to be gentle with you, you'll knock me out of the park."

"Gosh, I'd love to see you two battle!" Akira wiggled around excitedly.

“Geez, Akira. Now that I know you’re a girl, your big, furry avatar gives me the creeps.” Akira was, after all, a frighteningly burly beastman; it was like interacting with one of those powerful anime guys who’re super in touch with their feminine sides.

“It’s kinda weird, right?”

“What?! Not you too, Ren! Fine. I’m just gonna act like a real rough guy’s guy, then! That work for you, *bros*?”

The Ren and Snow avatars nodded in unison.

“Anyway, guys, let’s get back to the event!” I said.

With Snow in tow, we decided to resume searching for balls. Before long, we were ready to call it a night, but not before promising to meet up in UW the next day.

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“Three... Two... One... Go!”

After the countdown, four hands each slammed a sheet of paper onto the wooden table I had crafted. Why, you ask? Well, after school, Akira, Yano, Maeda, and I had gone to our guild house and gathered in the second-floor living area. We then began a competition to decide our guild emblem, which would be displayed on our status screens. Now that everyone had put forth their entries, it was time to pick the winning design. We examined everyone’s drawings one by one.

“Ren drew... a light bulb?” said Akira, tilting her head.

“Why a light bulb?” asked Yano.

“You need a spark of inspiration before you can redefine the meta! It’s an idea given form!”

And I’m a crappy artist, so this was the best thing I could draw!

By the way, we decided on “Hell’s Crafters” for our guild name. I think I would’ve liked the “Redefinition Brigade” or the “Underpowered Empire” more, but when I proposed those names, the girls all said they were too boring. So, taking into account how hell-bent I was on redefining metas as well as my

penchant for crafting, I came up with this one.

I think it's a pretty decent name, if I do say so myself.

"Hmm. I'm not sure anyone will really get it if it's just a light bulb."

"Eh, you have a point. I'm not that great at art anyway. What did you draw, Akira?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Take a look at this! It's a buff demon!" Her drawing depicted a dude with horns striking a pose and flexing.

Wow... Akira really likes her beefcakes.

The art itself was nice, but I couldn't imagine a less appropriate guild symbol. Meta-redefinition required wit and experimentation, but this one made it seem as though we'd bust through our struggles with brute force, like brainless meatheads.

"It's, uh... kinda gross."

"Aww, I thought it was cool. What about yours, Kotomi?"

"Huh? Oh, um... you don't have to look at mine."

"Let's take a look."

Uhh... Welp, I can see why she didn't want to show it.

Maeda had drawn... *something*. Whatever it was, it was pretty darn strange. It was also tiny, as if she wasn't very confident in it. People who can't draw well typically make very tiny drawings so their art doesn't stand out.

It's got a weirdly powerful aura. I'd better not get too close.

"Wooow, Kotomi," Yano said. "It's very... unique?"

"Wh-Why do you even want to look at it?!" Maeda cried, her face flushed. "Let's move on to Yuuna's already!"

"'Kay, here goes nothin'. I tried to make her look kinda sly and crafty. Whaddya think?"

"Ooh, nice!"

"Wow! It's really, really good!"

It was a cutesy drawing of a demon sticking her tongue out and grinning as if she were happily outfoxing her enemy. Her expression was charming, but it was also just annoying enough to get on our victims' nerves.

Yano really is a good artist, huh?

"Sick! I say we go with Yano's!" I said.

"I agree," added Maeda.

"It's a shame my macho demon didn't win, but I have no objections!"

"Oh? Hey, I won! Awesome!" Yano beamed.

"I didn't know you were such a good artist, Yano."

"Come to think of it, Yuuna, didn't you win an art competition in middle school?"

"Aw, I just doodled that thing in class. My teacher liked it so much that she entered it into the comp for me."

"That's so cool! Did you take lessons or something?"

"Nope. My family doesn't have that kind of money. I just drew whatever, really. Honestly, it's kinda embarrassing to get all this praise at once."

She doesn't seem to realize it, but she's a natural-born genius. People can have all sorts of hidden talents, huh?

As a matter of fact, the table we were gathered at had been decorated by Yano. At first, it was just a plain old wooden table. After I made it, she said it was *too* plain and took it upon herself to paint it with a flower pattern. She wanted to decorate the rest of the guild house, too.

Luckily, plenty of shops sold art supplies, and I could craft them as well. I couldn't help but marvel at the incredible craftsmanship available in this game.

We had all gone shopping at the guild market for a while, and our purchases combined with my crafts had resulted in some pretty basic furniture for our house. Unfortunately, we couldn't afford to buy or create any of the expensive stuff, so our setup was basic in every sense of the word... But Yano's painting skills could potentially bring it all to life.



People will often pay good money for quality, so I'm excited to see just how much we can milk this.

"All right. I'll take this over to the GAO," I said, standing up.

The Guild Administration Office is where all the guild-related procedures are handled. It's located in the guild shop market, and the woman who helps us out is named Reimi.

Well, this is just one of my responsibilities as guild master, I guess.

"All right. Thanks, Takashiro!" Yano handed over her emblem sketch.

"Good luck," added Maeda.

"I'll take the guild shop application, too."

The first floor of any guild house can be converted into a shop-slash-atelier. Ever since we'd shelled out for the basic atelier set, we'd been penniless. As it turns out, it's not exactly sustainable to sell off half of your materials and use the other half for furniture. A shop, on the other hand, would help us prosper with a steady, secure stream of income!

As a symbologist, my MP—that is, my *money power*—was a precious resource. I needed to keep up my weapon-wasting attacks, after all. My strength in battle was directly dependent upon my economic strength. I couldn't be a miser, but I couldn't be a pauper, either.

"Money management is just another part of the battle, y'know?" I mused aloud. "But wow, it'll be a long walk there and back."

"Why don't I go with you, Ren?"

"You wanna come, Akira? Does that mean you're gonna help me experiment afterward?"

"Huh? Experiment? Uhh... Do you mean letting the same enemy hit me over and over again for days on end?"

"It'll be fiiine! We'll just do a quick confirmation run today."

"Erm, I can't remember a single time when 'quick' actually meant 'quick' coming from you." Akira eyed me doubtfully.

“Aw, c’mon! Are these the eyes of a liar?”

“Hmm? Your eyes are all sparkly right now. It’s like they’re telling me you’re gonna take up all my free time even if you don’t mean to.”

“Haha, very funny! Let’s just get going, ol’ buddy ol’ pal.”

“Fine, fine. I’m coming!”

“Good luck!” Yano said. “I’ll just be here drawing.”

“I-I’ll do my best to help you, Yuuna,” piped Maeda.

“Ooh! All right, Kotomi, let’s do something about that art problem of yours. I’ll teach you everything I know!”

“If you want to fix this problem, your teaching methods will practically have to be Spartan,” Maeda replied bitterly.

“Ahaha, hey now, there’s no need to go that far.”

“Well, I would love to learn the basics.”

“Nice! Let’s get to it!”

“We’re off, then!” I shouted, waving at the two of them. “Hey, Draco, wanna go for a walk?”

“Chirp chirp chirp!” At my call, Draco flew down from a hammock in a corner of the room. He landed straight onto the top of my head, clearly ready to go.

With that, Akira, Draco, and I left the guild house.

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After we finished up the guild paperwork, Akira and I headed to a forest in the continent of Mishr to begin our experimentation.

“Reeen! Do you want me to just stand here? No attacking or anything?”

“Yeah, perfect, perfect! Just like that, please!” I waved to her from afar.

While Akira was engaged with her enemy, she stood there guarding without fighting back. Her foe was a level 31 monster, the Bandit Wolf. It was the perfect level for our purposes.

Thanks to Akira’s talent loadout, her AP (Arts Points) naturally replenished

over time. She could then use the free AP to dance and heal herself. As a result, she could take a beating from this monster all day without dying, making her my ideal partner for these sorts of trials.

Even if I were to try to experiment on my own, my real damage came from my ultimate move and my arts. Not only would it be a waste of money to break my own weapon every time, but if I used my 1-HP drama cannon, this simple errand would turn into a very cumbersome task. I would lose money *and* EXP when I inevitably died.

Honestly, I really needed to get some useful talents so I could grind on regular mobs. However, my next Merit Point purchase had already been planned out, so acquiring talents would have to take a back seat for a while.

Man, I can't wait for the next test! I want my MEP, and I want it now!

I had never been so excited for a test before; my own enthusiasm surprised me.

"So, what now?"

"Take a look at this! It's time to try out our new weapon, baby!" I pulled out a long, thin, cylindrical item and proudly held it up in the air.

"What is it? It looks like a flute."

"Nope, it's a Blowgun! The long-awaited second hidden weapon is finally within my grasp!"

Blowgun (OEX) Type: Hidden Weapon Level: 25

Might: 5

AP gain: 10

Effect: Only usable when the talent Knifer is equipped. Allows the user to perform the art Shadow Dart.

Due to the OEX distinction, hidden weapons can't be traded to others; a player can also only hold one of each OEX item. Therefore, the only way to get something like this is through crafting.Thanks to the passive boosts from the atelier in our guild house, I was finally able to unlock this little treasure.

My inner craftsman always demanded I craft something the moment I unlocked it; at the same time, my addiction to experimentation always demanded I experiment with something the moment I crafted it!

Now I'm on fire! Let's get started!

"Ooh! Is it good?"

"I have no idea! This is my first time using it. Here goes nothin'!"

"Okay!"

I pointed the tip of the Blowgun at the Bandit Wolf and blew as hard as I could. A tiny steel dart whistled through the air... then fell to the ground in a pathetic arc.

"Uhh..."

"It didn't make it. Maybe it's not supposed to be used at such a long range?"

"Maybe. I'll try getting closer."

"You lose darts even if they don't hit the target, huh?"

She was completely right; the fallen dart began to disappear. I would've preferred to pick it up instead of letting it go to waste; "once and done" is a tough rule for people with empty pockets.

We're really hurting for money, too... Ah, well. This time, I'll try shooting from 15 to 20 feet away.

"Here comes another!"

I sent a second dart bursting out of the Blowgun.

Ren attacked!

But the Bandit Wolf evaded!

The log displayed my failure.

So, you think you can evade my attacks, huh?!

I fired off ten more darts, but nearly all of them missed. The eleventh one successfully hit him, but the damage was pathetic.

"Looks like a dud to me," Akira muttered.

“Seems like it.”

“Hit rate depends on your DEX, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

The success of a physical attack is calculated based on the attacker’s dexterity and the defender’s agility. Even compared to the Bandit Wolf—an enemy with a similar level to mine—my DEX was just way too low. It wasn’t really surprising, though. Symbologists have the worst base DEX out of all classes, and I hadn’t put any points into it at all. For a VIT tank like myself, hitting an enemy with a shot from a Blowgun was just too much.

That means we’ve ruled out regular use of the Blowgun. I figured this might happen, but you can never be too sure.

“All right. Let’s try it with an art, then.”

“Okie doke.”

Just like the Canesword’s Quickdraw, the Blowgun has its own skill: Shadow Dart.

Shadow Dart (AP: 0) Hidden Weapon Art <Effect> Fires a single dart from the enemy’s blind spot. Hits once. Usable only once per battle. Extra effect rate and potency increase as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

Looks like this one gets stronger as you lose HP, too.

Instead of boosting damage, however, HP loss makes its secondary effect more useful. It also can’t be evaded, so it looks like this is my only option when it comes to using the Blowgun.

“Right now, I have... normal darts, poison darts, and sleep darts.”

“Maybe if you use Shadow Dart at low health, the DoT from poison or the sleep duration will increase?”

“Probably. Let’s see just how much it can do.”

This time, I would try using Shadow Dart. For the sake of comparison, I started off with a poison dart at full HP.

“Here we go!”

Ren activated Shadow Dart!

25 damage dealt to the Bandit Wolf!

The Bandit Wolf is now poisoned.

Ooh, it worked.

The wolf hadn’t seen the dart—and neither had I.

So that’s how Shadow Dart works. You can’t avoid what you can’t see.

I watched the wolf for a while. Every two or three seconds, it took five more damage. It didn’t appear on the log, but I could see how much he was taking from the white numbers popping up above his head.

The Bandit Wolf has recovered from poison.

Wow, already? It barely lasted 30 seconds.

“So it does five damage every three seconds for a total of thirty seconds, huh?”

“Looks like it. But without more data, we can’t be too sure.”

“Yep, there it is. Your lust for endless testing is showing.”

“Well, I *would* like to move to the next variable. Don’t worry, we’ll just do this one twenty times.”

“Wouldn’t two or three times be good enough?”

“Come on, Akira. We may as well take advantage of this opportunity, riiight?”

“Ugh... How can you be so excited about this? Okay, I’ll go ahead and finish this one off.”

Hidden weapon skills are only usable once per battle, so I wouldn’t be able to attack again until this guy died.

“Go ahead, please.”

“All right, time to blow off some steam! Have a taste of my ultimate move!”

Akira unleashed an upward slash on the poor dog. The slash was accompanied by a crescent moon effect as the enemy was launched into the air. Akira used the momentum to leap up high.

“Aerial Crescent!”

The following strike was a downward slash, accompanied by another crescent moon effect. As she slammed the Bandit Wolf against the ground, it roared in pain and disappeared. Akira dropped to the ground with a somersault, ending her dance with a flourish.

Akira’s Aerial Crescent is a combination of Hawk Strike and Crescent Slash. She launches her enemy into the air, then jumps up and strikes it down. Not only is it powerful, but it’s also very stylish with its acrobatics and visual effects. Additionally, because of the leap, her midair attack most likely won’t be interrupted by other enemies.

“Aww yeah! I love this attack. It’s so refreshing!” Akira was clearly satisfied.

Yeah, I could see that skill being popular. But like, who cares about that? What really matters is... I got one heck of a view! Short skirt plus high jump equals a real heavenly sight!

Without verbalizing my excitement, I continued the experiment. Maybe I’d fill her in on it once we were all done.

Man, even a simple test can turn into top-tier entertainment!

After a few repetitions, we noticed that the poison sometimes only lasted ten seconds. Other times, the poison didn’t take effect at all; it appeared to have about a 50% chance of working. It appeared that the maximum effect was five damage every three seconds over a total of 30 seconds. Considering it wasn’t even guaranteed damage, this seemed kinda lame.

We repeated the tests with the sleep dart, and the maximum duration was 30 seconds of sleep. Once again, though, this wasn’t guaranteed.

“Well, my Canesword was weak at full HP, too.”

“Wanna try it with less, then?”

“Yeah. Let’s do it!”

“Okay! Aerial Crescent!”

Looks like Akira’s having fun using her ultimate. Even more fun for me since I’m watching from below. Ahh, I am truly blessed!

“All right. Time to lower my HP.”

I cast Enervating Circle at max range, emptying my MP bar. Then I activated Turnover, reducing my HP to 1. This would put Shadow Dart at its maximum potential.

Annnd... fire!

Ren activated Shadow Dart!

25 damage dealt to the Bandit Wolf!

The Bandit Wolf is now poisoned.

So far, so good.

“Ooh, the DoT is higher this time!”

Wow, now it’s dealing 50 damage every three seconds! That’s an improvement.

I was hoping to see how long the effect would last, but the poison damage actually killed the Bandit Wolf before 30 seconds went by.

We repeated the process twenty times, killing the target every single time.

“Looks like bringing down your HP was the key, huh?”

“Yeah! This could be really useful!”

For someone with very few attack options like myself, this was a great addition to my repertoire, but the once-per-battle limitation on hidden weapon arts was still an issue. If I were to use Shadow Dart during combat, I wouldn’t be able to use Quickdraw in the same battle.

It sure would be nice if each individual art could be used once per battle. Obviously things would never be that easy, though.

If I wanted to use both skills, I would need to forge the weapon for the second

skill after I use the first one. For example, I could put an enemy to sleep and then finish him off with Dead End—in order to do that, I would have to use Shadow Dart, forge a Canesword, and then activate Dead End. If the Blowgun and the Canesword were both in my inventory when I used Shadow Dart, I wouldn't be able to use Dead End for the rest of the battle.

Anyway, let's try Shadow Dart with low HP and the sleep dart this time!

"Huh. Looks like this one increases the sleep duration to three minutes. Oh, please kill him, if you don't mind."

"Aerial Crescent!"

Man, I could watch her do this forever.

While I enjoyed the show, I opened Dead End's menu from the Skill Chain list. Right now, Dead End was the active ultimate, combining Turnover, Final Strike, and Quickdraw. The one and only drama cannon was our key to unleashing ridiculous damage, but I decided to alter the combination a little bit. I tweaked the combo to Turnover, Final Strike, and Shadow Dart.

Combination complete! The resulting ultimate move is... Soul Spear. Ooh, nice.

"All right, lastly, I'll activate the fully chained ultimate."

"Okay! I'll pull the next one."

Akira smacked a newly spawned Bandit Wolf with a shockwave from Skyfall, wounding it. Baited by her attack, the wolf ran toward her. Skyfall really was a convenient weapon.

Time for my ultimate! We can't test this one too many times, since the whole weapon-breaking thing is bad for my wallet. I have to make this one count!

"Ready when you are, Ren!"

"Okay! Here comes my new ultimate: Soul Spear!"

Psheeeew!

Instead of a simple dart, a purple ray of light shot out from the tip of the Blowgun.

Oooooh! This one's really cool!

The ray of light moved at incredible speed, zigzagging through the air until it pierced through the Bandit Wolf and dissipated.

Ren activated Soul Spear!

251 damage dealt to the Bandit Wolf!

The Bandit Wolf is now poisoned.

That's nowhere near as much damage as Dead End... But now the poison deals 80 damage with each tick!

It was far too much for the poor wolf, which keeled over soon after. Due to the effect of Final Strike, the Blowgun in my hand disappeared.

Now I'm one step closer to bankruptcy...

"Oooh! That was really flashy! It was pretty, too!" Akira cried, her eyes aglitter.

"Did you see the way it twisted and turned through the air?!"

With that speed and those complex movements, I guess it's like a guided missile? Or maybe it's more of a homing laser. Either way, I should think of it as a surefire way to poison the enemy or put it to sleep. Oh! If it works like that, then maybe it has surprising synergy with Dead End? The biggest problem with Dead End is actually getting the chance to use it, after all.

Hmm... I've gotta see more of Soul Spear's homing effect! But to do that, I'll need an enemy that'll actually run from it! Generic mobs are out of the question, then.

"Akira, let's go to the Arena!"

The Arena is a facility in some cities where players can rent out a space for PvP battles, training, or fighting specific monsters. You don't get EXP, but it's useful if you want to, say, study a specific type of monster.

The Arena is also great for players who like fighting. We'd been there before for some casual PvP battles. Arena battles aren't recorded in your wins-and-losses record, so it's a nice place to kick back and have fun. Think of it like

practice mode in a fighting game.

“Yeah, sure. What are we gonna do there?”

“I want to know just how far Soul Spear will chase a target. I’ll shoot you with it, and then you just have to run as fast as you can.”

“I see. Okay, I’m game!”

“Oh, one more thing.”

“Hm?”

“When you use Aerial Crescent, I can see your underwear. Be careful with that.”

“Wha—?! Th-Then why didn’t you say anything?! You weirdo! I don’t want you getting an eyeful and then telling me about it later!” Akira’s face was beet-red.

“Ah, well, y’know... I just kinda forgot.”

“Liar! A bad liar, too! Ugh!”

Thus, we changed locations to continue our trials.

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Once we arrived at the Arena, we went back to testing Soul Spear. While we were experimenting outdoors, Draco had slept under a tree—but now he was flying high inside the Arena, happily chirping away.

We were in an instanced room, so there was nobody else around. This let us stand pretty far away from each other, maybe a hundred feet or so. A normal shot or Shadow Dart from the Blowgun could hardly travel 25 feet, but I figured Soul Spear—which was more of a laser than a dart—could hit its target from this distance.

“All right, here comes! Run as fast as you can!”

“Okay! I’m ready!” Akira grinned and waved.

Here we go...

“Ultimate move: Soul Spear!”

Psheeeew!

The moment I blew into the Blowgun, a purple light flew out from the tip.

Man, this is still so cool.

It seemed as though the ray would easily travel a hundred feet.

Akira started to run away from me at an angle, putting as much distance between herself and the Blowgun as possible. The spear of light traced a complex pattern as it approached her.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! It’s coming at me really fast!”

Even though she was running at top speed, the laser was rapidly gaining on her; it would hit her any second now.

Looking good so far!

As the laser closed in, however, Akira changed tactics.

“Hawk Strike!”

This art sends the user leaping into the air while she slashes with her weapon. Akira used Hawk Strike to jump over the approaching laser, successfully dodging it. As you might expect, these sorts of arts are often used for last-minute evasions.

“Ooh! Nice!”

“You won’t hit me that easily!”

She always had quick reflexes, making her great at action games. That was just another reason she made such a perfect experimentation partner.

I’m so grateful for you, Akira.

But it didn’t take long for the laser to curve back around and zoom at her once more.

“Huh...? Aaah!”

This time, Akira started running straight toward me. She swung Skyfall behind her, releasing the weapon’s shockwaves. When the laser reached the shockwaves, it bolted around them, avoiding them completely.

Ooh! So it avoids obstacles, too? Very cool.

The laser began to lag behind a bit because it had diverted so far from its linear path. Akira used that opportunity to dash fiercely toward me.

Hey! She's trying to bring it to me!

As soon as I realized her intentions, I started to move away.

"Waaait! You're getting in on this, too!" She sounded like she was enjoying herself.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that someone with her speedy reaction time would try to lead the laser to me. Normally, I could probably just Quickdraw the enemy with my Canesword as they approached... but I already had a Canesword in my inventory, so now that I'd used Soul Spear, the Canesword couldn't be used for any hidden weapon arts.

In a real fight, I should open up with Soul Spear and craft a Canesword immediately after. Yep, I'll keep that in mind.

While I was thinking, Akira was gaining on me.

I was running as fast as I could, but there was a hefty AGI difference between us, so she was obviously much faster.

She's gonna catch me at this rate! All right, I'll just have to slow her down!

I stopped running just long enough to cast Enervating Circle. Using about 80% of my MP, I cast it around Akira.

Enervating Circle slows enemies down and lowers their AGI, so this would allow the laser to catch up with her!

Akira tried to run out of the circle, but she was too slow, and the laser was hot on her heels. The distance between them closed as the laser approached the edge of the circle. Then it... curved and changed direction again!

Huh? Why?! The circle isn't even an obstacle!

After that, the laser just flew in circles around my spell without even attempting to get to Akira.

Is it really treating the Enervating Circle as an obstacle? I wonder if it's tracing

circles because it's trying to avoid my spell. Looks like it won't hit her until she leaves the circle, then.

"Here I come!"

While I was staring at the laser, Akira took the opportunity to move. From inside the circle, she once again activated Hawk Strike and flew into the air, then landed square in front of me.

That was fast!

She wasted no time in clinging onto me.

"Gah! Let me go!"

"Hehehe! How lucky are you to get a hug from such a cutie?"

Well, yes, your body is nice and soft and... Oh no!

Pew!

The laser struck both of us at the same time. I quickly succumbed to intense drowsiness and lost consciousness. It was a sleep dart, after all.

A short while later, I opened my eyes.

"Mngh?!"

This might be obvious considering our positions when the laser hit us, but I awoke cradled in Akira's arms. The sensation of her skin pressed against mine was amazingly realistic—much more than you might expect from a video game.

Man, they added some real pointless features. But wow, her face is right in front of me... I never realized how beautiful she is.

I glanced downward and was treated to an eyeful of her impressive cleavage, thanks to the sword dancer's incredibly revealing gear.

Oh, yowza. Now THIS is a view!

I decided to appreciate her lovely form until she woke up.



A little while later...

“Hey, Ren? How long are you gonna stare at me?”

“Whoa! Uh, you were awake?!”

“I just woke up. It didn’t bug me too much at first, but I seriously can’t take this anymore.”

“Sorry, sorry, my bad! Hahaha!”

“Geez...”

We pulled away from each other and stood up.

“Chirp chirp!”

Draco descended from above and landed on my head.

“Ooh, I see another line’s showing up on his tail.”

“Huh. Maybe he’s almost ready to learn his next skill?”

After our search of Almishr’s Burial Ground, we learned that a pet dragon’s growth can be monitored by the amount of lines on the underside of its tail. Pets grow through regular feeding and experiencing things with their master.

“You’d better learn something useful, buddy!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“So, what’s next? Do we have more tests to do?”

“No, I think we have enough data by now. I’m getting really low on money and mats, so I’d rather not use my ultimate anymore.”

Still, I’d love to do more when my wallet’s a bit fatter. We really need a proper source of income soon... I’d better make our guild shop popular so we can reap those profits.

“Guess we’re done for today, then. Now it’s my turn! Let’s go somewhere pretty!”

Time to humor the sightseeing maniac. Well, that’s fine. Relationships are give and take, after all.

After taking a nice stroll together, we returned to our guild house.

“Hey, you two!” said Yano with a wave. “You have a visitor!”

“Huh? Really?” I had no idea who it could be.

“Who is it?” Akira asked, cocking her head.

Standing in our second-floor living space was an unfamiliar girl. She was pretty and had a fierce, dignified aura around her. Her hair, blue as the sea, was tied up in a ponytail. The light-blue name indicated that she was a real player.

Yukino Yamamura (3-C)

Level 199 Magic Knight

Guild: Mystic Arts (Guild Master)

Whoa, we know her! This is our first time seeing her face, though. Dang, she’s level 199, too! Meanwhile, I’m still only level 30! Plus, she’s the master of some guild...

“Oh, Yukino, it’s you! Good to see ya!”

“Yay! Nice to meet you! Did you come here just to hang out?”

“Hi, Ren! Hi Akira!” she said with a smirk. “I know we haven’t met in this game yet, but I wanted to come and bring you your invites.”

“Invites? To what?”

“You said we could duel, remember? Well, we’re hosting a tournament tomorrow, so I brought you your invitations!”

Chapter 2: To the Arena!

In UW's lore, we're students in a magical school on the floating island of Telluna. This school is called the Legrand Academy of Magic. Legrand prides itself as the greatest educational institution in all of UW. One privilege of being a student there is financial assistance from the Telluna Royal Family for extracurricular activities. This comes in the form of the guild system, in which each guild receives a certain amount of supplies.

The most distinguished guilds are given property rights to one of the man-made floating islands in the Lagoon, a region that surrounds Telluna. Guilds are free to use their island in the Lagoon however they like.

Before our eyes was the embodiment of that ideal: an island shaped entirely by the guild's desires.

"Ooh! There it is!"

A massive drawbridge extended outward from Telluna, connecting it to a floating island. On this island stood a colossal stone dome, which was currently surrounded by great big balloons as though it were the site of some kind of festival. NPCs and players alike crossed the pier, heading to the dome to watch the upcoming event.

"So? Awesome, right? That's my guild's very own Arena!" Yukino puffed out her chest with pride.

Indeed, this impressive Arena had been created by Mystic Arts for their island in the Lagoon. Since Yukino was the guild master, she could be considered the owner of the Arena. Yukino and the rest of Mystic Arts were a group of PvP lovers, so this was the natural outcome of them putting their heads together.

Man, PvP freaks are scary.

If you couldn't already tell from the gargantuan Arena, I should mention that Mystic Arts was one of the most influential guilds out there. They often planned PvP events and profited from the entrance fees and winning bets. One of these events was taking place today, and Akira and I had been brought in as fighters.

I doubted we could win against Yukino, who was almost level 200, but today's matches were mostly geared toward freshmen, with a level 30 limitation. Like previous years' events, the MVP of the most recent competitive class mission was guaranteed entry.

Despite the level limitation, upperclassmen could still participate, though they would be level synced; in other words, their levels would automatically be reduced. Yukino was going to join in, of course, so she could duel us.

Upperclassmen are sure to have better items and talents than we do, so I'd better watch out. But if they want a fight, I'm obligated to bring my A-game! I'm gonna mow down all my opponents and show the world the power of my drama cannon! This will awaken my true powers of meta-redefinition! I'll stand on the shoulders of giants... and drop them in one hit!

I'm gonna shine the spotlight on the symbologist, the king of the Bummers!

"Wow! There are so many people here. The thought of fighting in front of such a big crowd makes me nervous."

"I don't think you have to worry, Akira. Considering how much skin you show, they'll love you no matter what."

"Ugh... I guess. It's embarrassing that I have to go out there like this, but I sure do enjoy PvP."

"It's a-okay, girl!" Yukino piped. "You're so cute that anything would look good on you. I never imagined you'd look like *this*, considering your avatar in EF! Right, Ren?"

"Yeah. When I found out she wasn't a guy, I almost had a heart attack."

"Hahaha! Totally. I'm glad we can all play here together, though. If we get matched up against each other, I'm not gonna hold back!"

Today's event was a tournament, so it wasn't guaranteed that we'd fight each other. But if I could make it to the finals, I'd surely end up pitted against her at some point. The matchups hadn't yet been decided; apparently, they would be chosen by lottery.

"I'll fight with all I've got, too!"

“Heheh, don’t you look excited? Your eyes are on fire, Ren.”

“That’s because this is my big chance to show off! Also, I heard there are prizes involved!”

If all goes well, I might be able to escape poverty!

“Chirp! Chirp chirp!”

“Draco’s getting pumped, too! All right, boy. If we win, I’ll treat you to something delicious!”

“Is Draco your dragon’s name? Baby pets are sooo cute!”

“Why don’t you have one, Yukino?” Akira asked.

“Well, a lot of duel rulesets don’t allow pets. If I can’t use it in PvP, I don’t want it.”

“Yup, that’s a bona fide PvP main for you.”

“You’re one to talk, Mr. ‘I’m Allergic to Good Classes.’ If you gave up on your weird obsession and focused on PvP like me, I bet you’d surpass me in no time.”

“But that’s just not my style, y’know? It wouldn’t be fun that way.”

“Heh. Welp, you do you. You wouldn’t be as much fun if you weren’t weird anyway. I’m excited to see what kind of crazy stuff you can pull off as a symbologist.”

We continued our chat as we approached the entrance of the dome. Lines upon lines of people were waiting to buy tickets, but Yukino pulled us aside, bypassing the line entirely.

“We’re taking the contestants’ entrance. Let’s get to the waiting room.”

People who looked to be members of Mystic Arts were standing guard; upon seeing Yukino, they saluted.

So that’s the kinda respect a real guild master gets... So cool!

“Did you form Mystic Arts, Yukino?”

“Nah. Both the guild and the Arena were here before I joined. They had a tournament to decide the new guild master, and I won, so I inherited it all.

Honestly, it's not really my thing."

You can say that again.

In past games, Yukino never tried to be a leader; she was more of a stoic loner type who loved taking on challenges all by herself.

"On the bright side, though, we all share a common interest. So it's not too bad."

We followed Yukino down an underground path until she stopped in front of a door.

"This is it."

We opened the door and stepped inside... and I immediately saw a familiar face.

"Huh? Kataoka, is that you?"

"Hey, Takashiro! Did you enter the tourney too?"

Shinichi Kataoka (1-B) Level 31 Rogue Guild: Fountain of Knowledge This was the guy who liked Hime-chans. He even joined a guild of information brokers so he could learn more and impress his mistress. Overall, Kataoka was focused, in a way. Not that I agreed with it. At his side was...

Nozomi Akabane (1-B) Level 34 Sword Dancer Guild: True Form That's his Hime-chan. Looks like they joined this thing together. Doesn't this girl know Akira or something...?

"Blegh!" Akira's face scrunched up.

Oh, right! Akira and Akabane know each other in real life. Not that I know what their relationship is.

There was a bitter atmosphere between them as they glared at each other.

"My, if it isn't Akira. How rude of you to greet an acquaintance with such a harsh expression."

"Sorry. This is actually how I look when I'm happy to see someone. It's *so* nice to see you!"

"Liar! Your disgust is all too obvious! As a daughter of the Aoyagi family, I

thought you would have more self-awareness than that. Your family must be terribly worried about your future."

Akira turned up her nose, ignoring the insults Akabane threw her way.

Wow, they hate each other. I've never seen Akira that peeved. Normally, she's all smiles. As I recall, her family is descended from old nobility. Her grandfather is a member of the National Diet, and her dad is in upper management. Her family even has its own chef! What a blue-blood. I always figured celebrities had a lot of drama going on.

"You're not surprised to see me here, are you?" Akira muttered.

"I already knew you were enrolled in this school."

"You knew? Then why didn't you come find me and insul—I mean, talk to me?"

"Knowing when to be the first to greet an acquaintance is an important part of etiquette. Naturally, an Akabane can't be the first to yield, so I was waiting for you."

"Oh. Well, I am *so* very sorry."

Kataoka poked my shoulder.

"What?"

"Hey, do Aoyagi and Lady Nozomi know each other?"

"I guess. I don't know much about it, honestly."

"Huh. Doesn't seem like they're on good terms."

"Right? Why don't you go break them up?"

"What?! Why me?!"

"Kataoka! You are not to make friends without my permission!"

"Yes, Milady! Anyway, Takashiro, you'd better back off! This is a prime opportunity for me to kick your butt!"

"Haha..."

He's a follower from start to finish. Nothing will stop him.

“Nice try. Ren beat Kataoka in a duel once before, and he’ll do it again.”

“What?! Kataoka, you pathetic insect!”

“Heh. Looks like *I’ve* got the better follower, huh?” Akira couldn’t stop herself from gloating.

“Whoa, I never agreed to be your follower!”

“Oh, come on! I spent all day yesterday helping with your experiments!”

“Dammit, Takashiro! Didn’t I tell you that a follower can’t make his Hime-chan do all the work?!”

“You only make things worse every time you open your mouth!”

Sick of watching us bicker, Yukino stepped into the fray. “Cut it out, guys. I don’t know what your beef is, but if you wanna be nasty to each other, do it in the ring. At least then we can declare a winner.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We moved to the back of the waiting room. Yukino told us to wait there and left, so I decided to talk with Akira.

“Akira, how do you know Akabane?”

“Her family descends from old nobility, too. We live near each other, so we’re kinda like rivals. Y’know how my granddad is in the Diet? Well, he won the seat that her own grandfather was aiming for.”

“Huh. When you put it like that, you’re sort of like business rivals.”

“Yeah. She’s always treated me this way. I get really tired of arguing with her... It’s literally been happening since kindergarten. Now I’m stuck with her here, too.”

“But that means she likes video games too, right? You can’t be that different at heart.”

“Really? I don’t think so.”

“You even picked the same class.”

“I don’t know about her, but I only picked this because you made me!”

At that moment, Yukino returned to the waiting room with another guild member in tow, carrying a lottery box and tournament bracket.

Oh, is it time to decide on the matchups, then?

“Hello, everyone! Thanks for coming. I’m Yukino Yamamura, guild master of Mystic Arts, the sponsor of today’s tournament, the Spring Newbie Spotlight. We will now begin drawing lots to determine the tournament brackets. But first, the rules of the tourney.

“First, there is a level cap of 30. That means you can only use equipment that’s level 30 and below, so make sure you’ve geared up accordingly. Second, pet dragons may not participate in the battles.”

Shame, but I get it. He’d be too useful if he joined in.

When he heard that last part, Draco chirped in dismay.

“Lastly, for anyone curious about the reward, *this* is what we’ve chosen as the first-place prize.” Yukino held up what appeared to be a decorative paintbrush. “This is Libra’s Brush, a new item introduced this spring. The school gave it to us for this event.”

Hmm?

“What does it do?” someone asked.

“It seems to work a lot like a drawing tablet.”

Ohoho. A tool just for art, huh? It must work a lot like the Dealer’s Desk. Hmm... She didn’t tell us much about it, but it looks like it can draw stuff in a variety of colors, save designs, and copy-paste them.

Ooh! If that’s true, then it would totally help us out! With that item, our guild shop could become a huge hit! Also, since it’s new, it would give us a competitive advantage over our rivals!

“Akira. I really, really want that thing,” I said.

“Huh? Do you wanna draw or something? I could teach you how to draw macho men.”

“No! Money, girl! If we have that, we could get cash rolling in for our guild!

We might even get a stable income!”

That very item could be the savior of our wallets!

“An income for our guild, huh? We did use most of our money on furniture, so it would be nice to get some more. What would you do if we got that thing?”

“We could use it to paint swords, armor, and other stuff to sell. I’ll make the base items, and then Yano can paint the designs. With her artistic talent, I bet we’ll make a killing.”

“Ooh! She does have a knack for it.”

“Yeah. We could turn simple little wooden tables and iron swords into high-quality art. Heck, we could do it to the stuff we already own.”

“I’ve never seen any shops selling items with custom designs. I wonder why?”

“Probably because painting normally takes a lot of time and effort. Doing one stroke at a time takes so long that you probably can’t do anything else. With the cost of labor, that makes for an expensive product.”

“Oh, I get it. With tablet functionalities, we can copy and paste designs we’ve already made, so that cuts down on labor by a lot while increasing our productivity.”

“Yeah! If we could do that, we could turn an easy profit. And did you hear her say it was a new item? With such a low supply, nobody can take hold of the market yet. Let’s capitalize on this opportunity and make explosive profits!”

That’s economics for you! The early bird gets the competitive advantage! Fortunately for us, we already have a designer—Yano. She can probably make plenty of high-quality designs for us. Who wouldn’t do it at this point?!

“That sounds fun! It seems like it’ll work, too.”

“Cool! One of us has to win so we can bring home that paintbrush!”

“Yeah! Let’s do our best!”

With that goal in mind, all that mattered now was our matchups.

“All right, let’s begin the lottery. When your name is called, come up and draw,” Yukino ordered.

Ideally, Akira and I wouldn't face one another until the finals. The tournament bracket they brought out listed thirty-two contestants. It was split with sixteen entrants on each side, narrowing down to a final match between the last two.

Put Akira on the opposite side! The opposite siiide!

Once we had all drawn lots, it was time to begin.

"Okay, here we go!" shouted Yukino. "We'll start at the top-left of the chart and move our way down. When it's your turn, get your butt out to the stadium! Most importantly, make sure you have fun!"

"Woooo!" The crowd went wild as the tournament kicked off.

My match was fifth, so I had some time to kill.

"Nice! We won't meet until the finals!"

"Yeah!"

I was on the left side of the bracket, and Akira was on the right. We'd successfully avoided the need to butt heads before the final match. Yukino and Akabane were on my side, so there was a possibility I'd run into one or both of them. Kataoka was on Akira's side.

Yukino walked over to me with a mischievous grin. "Looks like we'll be meeting in the quarterfinals, Ren. Heheheh, I'm getting pumped up!"

"I probably don't have to worry about you, but make sure you don't lose, all right?"

"I'm not planning to!"

"We'll have to see about that," someone said from behind us.

Hmm?

Homura Yamamura (3-A) Level 191 Wizard Guild: Grand Museum (Guild Master) Yamamura...?

Her features were similar to Yukino's, but her hair was red and styled into pigtails.

"Yukino, is she—"

“Dunno. I don’t see anything there,” she replied shortly.

“Hah! Your brain’s so battered from fighting that you can’t even see properly! How pathetic!” said the red-haired girl.

“Huh?! No, I just naturally tune out collection fetishists like you!”

“You’re staring right at me! I know you can see me!”

Am I watching some sort of weird diss-off?

“Homura and Yukino must be...” Akira chimed in.

“Yes, we’re twins! Not that we want to be anywhere near each other!”

Yep, there it is. They’re a lot alike, apart from their clashing red and blue color schemes.

“Hmph. By the way, I’m the older twin, so I’m naturally superior. Don’t you forget it.”

“By only a few seconds! Don’t act like you’re better than me, moron!”

“Shut up, you hyena! Every time you get a whiff of an item, you just start howling for it!”

“My museum doesn’t have Libra’s Brush yet, so I’ll do anything to get my hands on it. Even if it means forcing myself to take part in a competition full of meatheads!”

“What museum?” When I spoke, Homura’s eyes sparkled with joy.

“My guild is a group of item collectors. Our dream is to collect every item in the game and put them all on display in our museum! If you’re going to play a game, you might as well see all of the items’ graphics up close, right? It really makes you want to collect them all!”

“Huh. That sounds fun.”

“I kinda wanna see it.”

“Ooh! You two get it! You should come by after this is over. It’s right here.” Homura handed us what looked to be a sticker with a map on it.

“Nice. Thanks!”

“Hey! Whose side are you guys on?! She’s a no-good junkie who’d do anything for a rare item!”

“Yukino! How dare you slander me?!”

“All you boring losers do is focus-fire your magic on enemies so you can get your items in complete safety! That’s no fun at all! It’s straight-up disrespectful to a beautifully crafted battle system! Why even play games at that point?!”

“What’s the problem? That’s the easiest way to grind items! You’re just a bunch of lunkheads who waste precious items on any old battle! I bet you’d be just fine with using Megalixirs until you ran out! Everyone knows you’re supposed to keep at least one on you, just in case!”

These two are total opposites when it comes to their ideologies—but at the very least, I know they both love gaming. That’s why they both feel so strongly about this. They might be hurling insults at each other, but they aren’t being genuinely hateful. You know how it goes; you tend to fight the most with the people you’re closest to... and you can’t get much closer than twins.

“Hmph, fine! Ren, you’d better not lose to her. I’m not missing out on an opportunity to battle you!”

“Oh, right. If I win my first match, I’ll be up against you, Homura.”

“Right. Sorry, but I’m going to beat you.”

“Stupid. You think you can beat Ren when you can’t PvP your way out of a paper bag?”

“So you say, but he’s only a level 30 symbologist.! My items and talents are way better.”

“Well, I can’t afford to lose here, so I’m gonna come at you with everything I’ve got.”

“Of course. No hard feelings!”

Now, it’s almost my turn! It’d be a darn shame if I lost in the first round before I even got to Homura. I should take a quick look at my equipment and talent loadouts.

◆◆◆

Let's start by confirming my stats.

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[Character Status]

Class: Symbologist Level: 30

HP: 944/944

MP: 330/330

AP: 0/300

STR: 49

VIT: 171

DEX: 60

AGI: 71

INT: 121

MND: 105

CHR: 82

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: Skill Chain <Effect> User can unleash ultimate moves that combine up to three skills/arts.

LUB: 0

MEP: 0

Money: 130 Mira [Equipment]

Main Weapon: Fanatic's Staff (O) Subweapon: None Ranged Weapon: Blowgun (OEX) Ammunition: Sleep Darts Head: Elder's Circlet Body: Elder's

Robes Arms: Elder's Gloves Legs: Elder's Trousers Feet: Elder's Shoes Acc 1: Equip Ring Acc 2: Parry Ring I was still putting all of my LUB points into VIT, making it ridiculously high. At this point, my VIT rivaled that of most tank classes. Thanks to the HP gain from increased VIT, my HP was exceptionally high for a back-line class. I had two Skill Chain talents equipped in order to use both of my hidden weapon ultimates.

Skill Chain can be placed in multiple talent slots to duplicate the effect, but man, it's tough to spare two whole slots. If I had something better to put there, I definitely would, but my only other available talent was Joint Magic. That didn't help in one-on-one combat, so Skill Chain was the better choice.

My funds were dangerously low, enough only to buy a single can of coffee.

Poverty stinks.

My main weapon for now was the Fanatic's Staff due to its high poise stat. I could switch between that and the Canesword as needed. Naturally, my Blowgun was ready to unleash some sleep darts. I stayed away from poison darts because they could be made useless almost instantly with a single antidote item.

The Elder series of gear was just an appropriate set of equipment for my level. Honestly, it was just a temporary measure; I was resigned to refine it when I could.

Then came my accessories, Equip Ring and Parry Ring.

Equip Ring Type: Accessory Level: 10

Effect: Allows the user to change equipment quickly through verbal commands.

[Same effect as the talent Quick Change]

Quick Change essentially allows you to change gear whenever you want. For example, my loadout above was saved in the first set, Equipment Set A. Set B was as follows: [Equipment Set B]

Main Weapon: Canesword (OEX) Subweapon: None Ranged Weapon: Blowgun (OEX) Ammunition: Sleep Darts Head: Elder's Circlet Body: Elder's

Robes Arms: Elder's Gloves Legs: Elder's Trousers Feet: Elder's Shoes Acc 1: Equip Ring Acc 2: Parry Ring The only difference between the two sets was my main weapon, but the Equip Ring gave me the ability to switch weapons without going through the whole rigmarole of opening my item window and manually moving around my equipment. Normally, if I wanted to switch to the Fanatic's Staff to guard after using Dead End or switch to the Canesword in order to attack, I had to change weapons by hand—which left me too vulnerable for way too long. Now that I didn't have to worry about that, I was in a much better position.

This would also come in handy if I wanted to use offensive magic; I could switch to a set of gear that increased my magic but lowered my defenses. Or, if I had to defend, I could switch to a set that raised my defenses at the expense of offense.

Changing into gear sets optimized for any situation is known as outfitting in this world. Someone who focuses on outfitting wants different sets built specifically around normal attacks, arts, magic, and more, which naturally leads to item hoarding and a cluttered inventory. But hey, it is what it is. We want to feel immersed! We want to focus on the little things! That's what being a gamer is all about! So, if you can change outfits, that's just what you do.

I planned on never taking off my Equip Ring. As for where it came from, the girls happened to find it in a chest while I was running a marathon to escape the enemies at Almishr's Burial Ground. It was a nice added bonus to getting the Guild Establishment Permit. We split the spoils pretty evenly, so I ended up with the Equip Ring.

Now for my other accessory: Parry Ring Type: Accessory Level: 28

Effect: If an enemy attack is successfully guarded, the user is awarded with some AP.

This was at Almishr's Burial Ground, too. It actually belonged to Yano, who let me borrow it for the tournament. Normally, you wouldn't get any AP for guarding an attack and taking zero damage, but with this ring equipped, you'd receive a little boost. With my VIT focus and my high-poise Fanatic's Staff, no-damage guards are common. This ring was pretty much made for me.

[Magic]

Enfeebling Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Devitalizing Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Clumsifying Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Enervating Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Stupefying Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Debrain Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds Repugnant Circle (MP: 5~∞) Cooldown: 0/10 seconds
[Skills]

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

Symbologist only Final Strike Cooldown: 0/300 seconds <Effect> Greatly increases damage of next attack, but breaks weapon afterward.

[Arts]

Charge Spells (AP: 100) Staff Art <Effect> Recovers 20% of max MP

Stinging Shot (AP: 50) Staff Art <Effect> Smacks a faraway enemy by using magic to manipulate one's staff. Hits once.

Windmill (AP: 50) Staff Art <Effect> User swings equipped staff in a wide arc and leaps upward. Hits once.

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

Shadow Dart (AP: 0) Hidden Weapon Art <Effect> Fires a single dart from the enemy's blind spot. Hits once. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Extra effect rate and potency increase as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

The only real changes here were the two new additions to my staff arts: Stinging Shot and Windmill. Stinging Shot's damage is dependent on INT, but its accuracy is dependent on DEX, since it's a physical attack. That means I'll never hit anyone, so it's pretty pointless.

Meanwhile, Windmill's damage is dependent on STR, so it *appears* to be useless at first glance. However, its animation looks very similar to a certain

upward punch from a famous fighting game. Much like the one-handed sword's Hawk Strike, Windmill is very useful for dodging. I wouldn't be able to move as high as Akira when using it, but it's better than nothing. At the very least, I can recognize it as a trade-off between AP and evasion.

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[Ultimates]

Dead End (Usable after a sequence of Turnover -> Final Strike -> Quickdraw) Soul Spear (Usable after a sequence of Turnover -> Final Strike -> Shadow Dart) I have two ultimate moves, so I'd better make sure to use the right one! Annnd I'm all set. All that's left is to make the right moves.

"The fifth match is about to begin! Fighters, take your places in the stadium!" shouted a Mystic Arts staff member, peeking into the waiting room.

It's finally my turn! Time to show everyone the fruits of my meta-redefinition!

"Good luck, Ren!" Akira shouted.

"Thanks! Heheh... Watch this developing player rise up to stardom from the brink of being benched!"

"Haha. You're as confident as always."

Akira watched me from the bottom of the staircase as I climbed up to make my debut.

Chapter 3: The Spring Newbie Spotlight and the Drama Cannon Cheers rained down upon me as I stepped into the circular stadium.

Whoa, this place is packed! Aww man, I'm getting fired up!

"Heeey, Takashiro! You better win!"

"Good luck, Takashiro!"

I looked over to see Yano and Maeda yelling from the VIP seats in the front row. The two of them could watch and learn from the best seats in the house, thanks to Yukino.

"Yeah! I got this!" I waved back at them, a big smile plastered on my face. "Just you wait! I'm gonna win this whole thing and bring back one heck of a prize!"

"Ooh! This guy's just brimming with confidence!"

At that moment, my first opponent appeared before me. His whole body was covered with blue armor, and I could only see his face because of his raised visor. At a glance, he didn't seem to feel one way or another about this. Perhaps a little jittery, if anything.

"I get that you want to look good in front of your girlfriends, but you're gonna seem like a total loser if you fail after all that bragging," he said.

Hayato Nomura (2-F) Level 30 (Restricted) Armor Knight Guild: Peacemakers A Peacemaker, huh? I know that guild. They enforce the rules, kinda like a student council. The guild master is probably something like the student council president. Thanks to the level restriction, he's level 30 like me.

"I *do* want to look good, yeah... but not for the girls out there. As a symbologist, I wanna show everyone what the king of the Bummers can really do. This class is like my baby, and you know how it is; a father has to love his child, no matter how weak they are."

"Hey, man, whatever you wanna do in your free time. Sorry to say, but, uh, I

don’t think being a symbologist is gonna work out for you here.”

“Oh, really? Well, we’ll just have to see.”

“Heh. Don’t come crying to me when you embarrass yourself. I’m representing my guild in this fight, so I won’t hold back.”

A loud voice—the announcer’s—interrupted our conversation.

“Our next match is between Nomura from 2-F and Takashiro from 1-E! Nomura is an armor knight, while Takashiro is the only symbologist in the whole tournament. It’s the vice president of the Peacemakers up against the MVP of the first-years’ first competitive mission! Here as our player analyst is our very own Yukino Yamamura! Anything to point out?”

Yukino’s doing commentary too? Come to think of it, that announcer sounds really familiar...

“Yes! Like you said, Ren is the only symbologist competing in today’s event! As a back-line class with low physical capabilities, symbologist isn’t especially suited for PvP. How he works to overcome this weakness will be very important.”

“Wow, how insightful! Seeing as Takashiro is one of my students, I must say I’m very excited to watch him fight!”

No way!

I looked up toward the stands and spotted the two announcers.

There she is—it’s Ms. Nakada! The heck’s going on here?!

“Hey, Ms. Nakada! What are you doing up there?!”

“One of my GM duties is commentating on player events. This one has been a blast!”

Welp, if she’s having fun, more power to her.

As always, she was as giddy as a kid in a candy store.

“Are the contestants ready?” Nomura and I assumed our positions, then nodded in unison. “All right, here we go! Let the duel begin!”

At the same time, the sound of a gong reverberated through the stadium, and

the crowd went wild.

“Hope you’re ready for this!” Nomura lowered his visor, now fully protected by his armor. With a quick wave of his sturdy lance, he activated Challenge. It succeeded, giving me the Provoked affliction.

Challenge is a taunt skill inherent to armor knights. Against monsters, it increases aggro, but when used in PvP, it forces the foe to target you. Healing and buffing skills require you to target the player you want to use them on, so this effectively disables those skills.

Furthermore, a Provoked enemy can’t move away from you, so they can’t escape until it wears off. It’s a very powerful affliction, but it can sometimes be resisted. With a cooldown time of only thirty seconds, Challenge can really mess up your front lines—it’s no surprise that this skill is A-rank. This Challenge seemed to have an even higher range than usual, though; otherwise, it wouldn’t have been able to hit me from so far away. He must have a talent or some kind of equipment that increases its range.

I get it. Now that I’m Provoked, I won’t be able to heal myself or leave his taunt range. He’s essentially forcing me to fight at close range.

Armor knights have the highest durability of all classes, thanks to their class-specific armor trait that cuts physical damage by a whopping 50%. It’s pretty much like they’re always guarding with a shield. The only real threat to armor knights is magic.

Nomura wasted no time in closing the gap between us. He dashed forward in a straight line, focused on bringing down a direct attack. I couldn’t increase the distance between us, so even if I were to cast a magic circle, he would reach me eventually. On top of that, armor knights had ridiculous physical strength, so even if we hit each other at the same time, he would deal much more damage.

He wasn’t going to defend—only attack! That’s the rational strategy against most back-line classes, after all.

Unfortunately for him, headstrong charges like this are perfect for me! If he cuts damage by 50%, then I’ll just have to overkill with an attack that deals damage equal to 200% of his health!

I cast an Enervating Circle with a wide range, erasing my MP bar.

“Skill Set B!”

Thanks to the Equip Ring, my main weapon instantly changed to the Canesword.

“Haaaaah!” Finally, Nomura stepped within range.

All right! Time to chow down!

“Ultimate move! Dead End!”

Smaaaaaaaaash!

The flash of purple light from my sword knocked the fully armored knight off his feet.

“What! Aaargh?!” Nomura flew away like a ping-pong ball, then smashed into the wall and got stuck to it.

Ooh! That’s a neat little bonus!

Ren activated Dead End. Dealt 1,311 damage to Hayato!

Ren has slain Hayato.

Duel complete! Ren is the winner!

Ren’s duel record is 2W / 0L.

The log communicated my victory.

Phew! Look at that 150-yard home run! I always knew my hit distance was something to be proud of! Go on, cut my damage in half! I’ll still one-shot you without breaking a sweat! Man, I’m so proud of myself. He was pretty much the perfect opponent for me. That charge pretty much put things on easy mode. If I were a plumber in this scenario, he would be nothing but a little walking mushroom for me to stomp on.

A short moment of silence followed as the crowd registered what had happened. Then, the Arena was filled with thunderous applause.

I’m just glad I got to show them all my drama cannon right off the bat. Hopefully this piques their interest.

“Takashiro has won the duel! Everyone here is astounded at the sight of a symbologist one-shotting an armor knight—the pinnacle of defense and HP! What are your thoughts on the match, Yukino?”

“It all came down to that ultimate. Even though it’s a shocker to see an armor knight taken down so easily, it makes total sense. There was no way for Nomura to know Ren could unleash so much firepower. With his level brought down to 30, he couldn’t match that blast when it came to offense *or* defense. That ultimate move really came out of left field. With Ren behind the wheel of the symbologist class, it’s clear that it may not be the weak, back-line Bummer everyone thinks it is. I’m glad we got to see a little bit of its potential unleashed here today.”

“Very interesting. Thank you, Yukino! Now, let’s move on to the next match!”

I headed back to the waiting room as they continued their commentary. Akira jogged up to me, grinning from ear to ear.

“You did it, Ren! Good job!”

“Thanks! But that one was pretty easy. You’d better win your first match, too, Akira!”

“Yeah. I’ll do everything I can to win!”

Homura walked by us on her way to her match. When our eyes met, she swallowed hard and forced an awkward smile.

“N-Not bad! You’ll be a worthy opponent for me!”

“Hah! Look at you, acting tough. Ren’s going to one-hit punch you into oblivion!”

“Oh, if it isn’t Yukino. Are you taking a break?”

“Yeah, since my battle is coming up soon. I wish I didn’t have to keep going up there, though. It’s really not my thing.”

“I mean, you are Mystic Arts’ guild master,” Akira said. “Comes with the leadership, I guess.”

“Nah, if that were the guild master’s job, I’d give the title to someone else real quick. Ms. Nakada told me to do it, actually. She was the first master of this

guild, so I can't just say no."

"Really?! Hmm, she did say she graduated from this school..."

"Yeah. I bet she's enjoying being an announcer for her old guild's tournament," I said.

"I do appreciate her helping out, though. So hey, Ren, that was a great match! The crowd was going nuts for you."

"Heck yeah! They must've loved the sweet taste of meta-redefinition!"

"Hahaha. Your style is kind of like, high-risk, high-reward, since you're reducing your HP to up your damage. Your HP bar was only a fraction of an inch long after you let your ultimate loose. If you got so much as poked, you'd have keeled over."

"Well, that's the only way to unlock the symbologist's hidden damage potential."

"You always take things to the extreme, Ren. But I'm gonna find a way around it so I can take you down!"

"I'll hold you to that!"

"Hmm... Ooh, so that's how it is. In that case..." As she listened to our conversation, Homura was deep in thought. "Heheh. Not so fast! You two won't even get the chance to fight against each other because *I'm* gonna defeat you first!"

"How about you shut up and get to your battle? I don't have time to deal with small fry who can't do anything but grind for items."

"Hah! If that's all I can do, then I'll rely on my items. Just you wait!" Homura left us with those words as she made for the stadium.

"Now that she's gone... Ren?"

"Yeah?"

"Being a symbologist might be working for you right now, but things will get harder down the line."

"Why's that?"

“Well, we definitely didn’t overlook experimenting with Knifer on symbologist. We’re a guild full of PvP fanatics, remember? But, um...” Yukino was struggling to convey her thoughts, but I knew what she wanted to say.

“I see. It lost heat, I bet, huh?”

“Right. Between the constant money loss and the forging requirement for hidden weapons, it gets to be too much to handle. The stronger you get, the more you’ll be spending on mats for your weapons. You need to increase your crafting level, too. The hardest parts for us were fundraising and grinding crafting levels.”

“Hmm...”

“As you get to the higher levels, people have more ways to protect themselves. For example, they might have resurrection abilities or skills that guard against OHKOs. In these cases, a once-per-battle attack is at a huge disadvantage. For us, winning just got harder and harder. Your ultimate move may be strong, but the symbologist’s basic attacks are pathetic, so their overall damage output is pretty low. In short, it’s just not a good enough attacker to justify the cost.”

“In other words, it works at lower levels but falls behind at higher levels, and that’s why it’s not popular?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I don’t mean to rain on your parade.”

“Oh, no. Heheh... This is actually great. There must be an even greater awakening beyond this wall, right?! Nice! I’m getting more and more excited!”

I’m gonna rise up and show those quitters who’s boss! I’ll go above and beyond what everyone thinks a symbologist can do... Man, I can hardly contain myself!

“Hahahah. Guess I didn’t have to worry about you, Ren. You’re such a character.” Yukino grinned.

“That’s Ren for you!” Akira piped.

“By the way, Yukino... Are you sure you can only use hidden weapon arts once per battle?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Well, after your weapon is broken with Final Strike, you can actually make another one with Efficiency and—”

“What?! I had no idea. Then... No, wait. Your skills would still be on cooldown, right?”

I patted Akira’s shoulder proudly and slung a thumb in her direction.

“Oh, right, sword dancers! She can really boost your damage, huh? I bet Akira’s the reason you’ve made it this far with symbologist. Yep, you two might just be able to pioneer a new path for that class. I don’t know of anyone else who’s tried it with their sword dancer girlfriend at their side!”

“N-No, no, no! Umm, we’re not dating or anything!” Akira waved her hands around in denial, her face quickly flushing red.

“Oh? My bad. You guys just get along so well, you know? Well, in that case, how ’bout you and I go out sometime, Ren?”

“Huh?!” Akira and I blurted in unison.

Suddenly, I felt a menacing aura radiating from beside me.

“Kidding, kidding! Hahaha! Didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. I just love givin’ you guys a hard time.”

Akira sighed. “Ugh! You really had me going there!”

“Sorry, girl. I guess it was kind of a rude prank. Honestly, I’ve never felt the need for a boyfriend. Gaming is just too much fun!”



That's so like her. She's just a simple, honest gal.

"Hey, all that matters is that you're having fun," I said.

I would know, because I feel the same way! My parents always told me to pursue my interests, so that's what I do.

◆◆◆

Akira, Yukino, Homura, and even Akabane won their first-round matches with ease. Unfortunately, Kataoka lost. Akabane looked at him as though he were walking garbage, but he didn't seem to mind. Heck, he almost looked happy about it.

I'll never get that guy.

Also, Akira was *very* popular with the crowd! She was embarrassed about her appearance, of course, but the male audience members were in heaven.

Since Akabane was also a sword dancer, she was met with the same warm reception. Unlike Akira, however, Akabane seemed used to it; she didn't even bat an eyelash at all the attention. Either way, both of them had a tight grip on the hearts of the audience.

Now that the first round was over, the tournament moved on to the second. It was almost time for my battle with Homura.

"The next battle is about to begin!" said a guild staffer. "Homura Yamamura and Ren Takashiro, report to the ring immediately!"

"Finally! Be there in a jiffy!"

"Good luck, Ren!" Akira cheered.

I was ready and raring to go, but Homura was another story.

"Wait just a second, please! I'm not ready yet! I just need a little more time to prepare!"

"Today's schedule is tight, so sorry, but we can't allow that. If you refuse to come to the ring, you'll be disqualified."

Hmm...

“Ouch! Ow, ow, owww!” I moaned, clutching my gut. “My stomach! Sorry! I’ve gotta run to the bathroom!”

“A-Are you okay?! Try to hurry!”

“Sorry! Be right back!”

The staff member accepted my lame excuse without disqualifying me. I logged out of the game and waited for a few minutes. Akira probably understood what I was doing; before long, a private message from her appeared on my screen.

“It looks like Homura was waiting for some gear to arrive. She’s ready now!”

Back in I go, then.

“Sorry again! I’m okay now!”

“Good. Then get to the ring, both of you!”

As we walked up the stairs toward the stadium, Homura spoke up.

“Thank you for stalling, even though your acting sucked.”

“Huh? Darn, I thought it was really convincing.”

“Haha! You’re not bad for one of Yukino’s friends. But I’m still not gonna go easy on you!”

“I wouldn’t dream of it! Hit me with your best shot!”

I noticed that Homura’s winged robe had gone from black and scarlet to pure white. The new one had a cool, luxurious feel to it.

So that’s what she was waiting on? Must be special equipment for use against me specifically. I wonder what she’s gonna do...

The two of us stepped into the ring.

“Now, on to the next second-round match! It’s the one-hit wonder himself, Ren Takashiro, versus the guild master of Grand Museum, Homura Yamamura! Grand Museum is one of the top ten guilds, and today, the guild master herself has joined the fray! Your thoughts, Yukino?!”

Once again, Ms. Nakada was delivering the play-by-play.

“She must be here for Libra’s Brush. All Grand Museum’s guildies care about is items, you know? But because of their tunnel vision, they lack PvP experience, making them kinda weak. Ren may be a first-year, but his skill is undeniable. Homura doesn’t stand a chance, so she might as well just eat a Dead End and be done with it.”

Homura was clearly offended by this.

“Hey! Either offer some fair commentary or shut your trap! Emphasis on *fair*!”

“I see! Will Yukino’s predictions be prove to be accurate? As for me, I’m rather interested in that robe Homura wore to the match. What could it be?”

“Giving a robe like that to Homura is like casting pearls before swine. That said, it will make things very difficult for Ren. I’m sure everyone here will understand what it does before long.”

“Hmm, all right. Keep your eyes peeled, everyone!”

What does it do? I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

“Okay, fighters, let’s begin!” cried Ms. Nakada.

“Heheh... I do appreciate you giving me some extra time, but in doing so, you sealed your own fate. Now that I have this, I can’t lose! It’s just a shame I had to don such a rare item! There might be a level restriction, but using super-rare items isn’t against the rules!” Homura cackled, clearly pleased with herself.

“Now, Phoenix Cloak!”

Immediately after she uttered this, Homura was enveloped in a pale green light. Over the course of a few seconds, the light gradually faded, leaving a halo icon in Homura’s status display.

“Ooh! This is...!”

The auto-revive icon!

When you die, auto-revive brings you right back to life. It only works once, though. There was a number one to the right of the icon, meaning this skill was level 1. Level 1 revives bring the user back with 30% HP. Normally, when a player is brought back from the dead, they’ll be enfeebled, which greatly reduces their stats... but auto-revives in duel mode don’t enfeeble you. It’s a

special measure taken to ensure that revival isn't too useless in duels.

So this is her countermeasure, huh?

Like Yukino said, I was naturally weak against foes who could revive automatically because they could essentially bypass my first big strike and force me to come up with a second one. After Homura's auto-revival, I'd be in a lot of danger. Not only would I be on the verge of death, but I'd also be stuck waiting for cooldowns while avoiding her attacks. If she could somehow recast her auto-revive skill while I was waiting for my second ultimate, then I would *really* be screwed.

"There's the enchantment! Homura has set up her auto-revive! This is the only way to auto-revive if you're under level 30; even Clerics don't learn auto-revival magic until level 35! It's all thanks to the Phoenix Cloak, an item as rare as the illusory sword, Skyfall! That's Grand Museum for you—they've always got some rare gems to pull out in a pinch!"

Homura smirked. "I had this brought over from the museum, so it took a while. Now that I have it, though, you don't stand a chance! Get ready to eat dirt!"

With her auto-revive status ready, Homura began casting a spell.

"Skill Set C!"

Here's my newest equipment set: Main Weapon: Iron Staff Subweapon: None The Fanatic's Staff may have high poise, but it does have certain drawbacks.

Fanatic's Staff (O) Effects: INT -60, MND -60, MAX MP -50

It's convenient to be able to block any and all physical attacks, but the Fanatic's Staff just isn't made to take magic. Its stats make the user's magic resistance way too low. Plus, poise doesn't do anything to help against magic; for that, you need INT and MND. Performing the actual guard motion will also cut the damage you take somewhat, so I went for the INT-and MND-boosting Iron Staff.

Finally, Homura completed her cast animation.

"Blazing Cowl!"

Her body was enveloped in bright red flames.

That must be an elemental safeguard. A fire type, by the looks of it.

With this sort of magic, the user can absorb elemental attacks—fire, in Homura's case. When someone attacks from point-blank range, the fire surrounding the user will also perform an automatic counterattack.

For example, if I tried to use Dead End, I would kill her in one hit. As soon as she revived, I would take fire damage from the counterattack, and then I'd die.

I'd better not be too brash here. For now, I should just watch and wait. If I don't figure this out, I won't get a chance to attack.

Homura wasted no time in following up with another spell.

"Split Flares!"

She pointed her palm in my direction, shooting out three tiny flaming bullets. They were smaller than Maeda's fireballs, but they came out in quick succession, and the bullets were much faster. This spell seemed more suited to proper battles.

I guarded against all of the bullets. They broke through my guard a bit, but I wasn't too worried about it. I did have some HP potions, although they took some time to use. I could've even dodged the bullets if I'd tried, but I wanted the AP gain from taking damage.

"I'm not done yet!"

She cast Split Flares again, and I guarded just like before. Between rounds, I started casting Stupefying Circle at Homura's feet—this magic circle lowers enemy INT. As long as she stood inside it, her magic would be less dangerous.

"Hmph!"

She abruptly stopped casting so she could run outside of the circle.

Well, that's obvious. If you can run out of it, just run out of it.

After that, she fired off a bunch of Split Flares.

Homura activated Split Flares.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 40 damage.

Homura activated Split Flares.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 41 damage.

Homura activated Split Flares.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 40 damage.

The damage was really starting to pile up, but at this point, Homura's Blazing Cowl had worn off.

About two minutes, huh? I'll remember that.

At that moment, she began casting Blazing Cowl again.

I took the opportunity to chug a potion and recover my lost HP. I didn't have many left, so I was sad to see this one go.

Once Homura had finished casting, she spotted me and decided to do the same with her MP. She clearly had a much faster potion-drinking animation; I figured she had a talent that sped it up.

At this point, we had pretty much restarted the battle. Homura resumed launching Split Flares, but if she *really* wanted to defeat me, she needed to try something different.

This time, I ran to dodge the incoming fire. Not only did the bullets fly in a straight line, but there was also enough distance between us that I had ample time to react. As long as I wasn't standing still, it was pretty easy to avoid them.

Maybe she'll try something else if I keep dodging?

Or so I thought, but she just kept on shooting Split Flares... and missing.

So, uh, she doesn't care, I guess. Is she just trying to buy time? If so, why?

"Split Flares!"

I dodged them and followed up with my own magic.

"Repugnant Circle!"

This one lowers CHR. Honestly, there isn't much point in lowering this stat. Homura seemed to know this as well, as she didn't even bother stepping out of it.

She recognizes that this one's pointless, so she's gonna ignore it. I see, I see.

With that out of the way, I continued thinking.

When I considered Homura's actions, one thought came to mind: Phoenix Cloak's effect probably had a cooldown time. If she were to die before the cooldown ended, she would still resurrect, but she would still have to wait for the cooldown to end before casting it again. Until then, she'd be painfully defenseless.

From Homura's point of view, she would want the auto-revive to be ready at all times. With that in mind, she was acting carefully, probably on guard as a result of seeing my Dead End in the first round. If she changed her pattern anytime soon, that meant she was comfortable enough to charge in—and that was a sign that the cloak had finished its cooldown. I decided to wait for this to happen so I could figure out just how long the cooldown time was. Knowledge is power, as they say.

"All right. Final Strike!"

I activated Final Strike independently rather than as part of my ultimate combo. It would make my next attack stronger at the cost of breaking my weapon. However, there was actually a lot of leeway regarding how long I could wait until my next attack. According to my experiments, that leeway was about thirty minutes.

How did I experiment, you might ask? First, I'd activate Final Strike. Then I would wait X minutes and activate Quickdraw. Each time, I increased X by one, searching for the length of time after which Quickdraw didn't break my weapon. It was pretty simple, really... though I guess that means I broke 30 Caneswords, huh?

As a result, I learned that Final Strike stays active for 30 minutes, while the cooldown is only five minutes. That meant I could perform a two-hit sucker punch by activating Final Strike, waiting five minutes, attacking, and then activating Final Strike for another attack. The first Final Strike activation puts the skill on cooldown, even without attacking. The ability to put off the actual attack is this skill's specialty.

Maybe I should call it Double Strike or something.

If Homura wanted to wait for her cooldowns, then I'd gladly wait with her. For the time being, of course, she continued attacking with her long-range magic. Soon we passed the five-minute mark from the start of the match.

"This is going nowhere! I guess now it's time to turn up the heat!"

Great, she's finally getting serious about this!

"All right, I'm comin' at you for real this time!"

Homura cast her next spell.

"Volcanic Flame!"

I'd never heard of this spell before. It wasn't even in the UW Guidebook. When the spell activated, a huge lion's face made of fire materialized in the air above my head. The lion looked fierce, baring its fangs my way.

"Ooh!"

So cool! It's like Maeda's Diabolic Howl!

"Attaaaaaack!" Homura cried.

The flaming lion rapidly descended. Simply guarding would be too lame, so instead, I decided to figure out how the spell worked. For the sake of learning, I ran diagonally away from Homura.

Can I escape it completely if I just keep running as soon as it's cast? Or is it a guided missile like Soul Spear?

I moved as fast as possible, keeping track of the Volcanic Flame as I went.

The flaming lion fell straight into the ground.

Groooooaaaaar!

With an ear-splitting howl, it exploded. The fiery explosion spread out in a wide range from the epicenter, torching the ground as it went. Naturally, I was within that range. Unable to guard in time, I took the full brunt of the spell.

Homura activated Volcanic Flame.

Dealt 422 damage to Ren!

"Ngh!"

Ouch! It took just about half of my health! I never saw that coming. I'd better guard next time. After such a huge explosion, the aftermath would... Oh, no.

When I realized what could happen next, I quickly put up a basic guard.

Just then, Ms. Nakada cut in for some commentary.

"What a feast for the eyes! Volcanic Flame is a rare magic drop from a limited-time event monster! Homura's gear is just perfect for this fight!"

"A level 30 wouldn't normally be able to obtain magic like this, but fortunately for her, the required level to learn it is 30. This is probably one of the strongest magical abilities you can get up to this level," Yukino said.

"One more time! Volcanic Flame!"

I'm not just gonna stand here and take this!

When I saw that Homura had begun casting, I dashed toward her. Since Volcanic Flame's radius is so large, I could make it hit her, too!

Groooooaaaaar!

Homura activated Volcanic Flame.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 343 damage.

Homura activated Volcanic Flame.

Homura recovered 322 HP!

"What?!"

Aww, man, I completely forgot about Blazing Cowl! Well, I guess it's not that big of a deal.

By this point, I hadn't even given her so much as a scratch. Her battle plan was simple, yet effective. She maintained her auto-revive to avoid any nasty surprises, put up a flame barrier, and used explosive magic. She didn't even have to be careful about her attack placement since it would just heal her.

Normally, I would counter this with a quick one-shot, but she would just revive. While her battle strategy relied a lot on brute force, it was deliciously simple. That simplicity made it more versatile, so it could pretty much be used against any given enemy. Don't know how to handle this foe? Just kill it with

fire! Simple as that.

Very impressive, Homura!

Instead of reading her enemy's movements or changing tactics on the fly, she'd come up with a solid plan that could be plugged into any battle.

My HP was now below 100. I might have been backed into a corner, but I still had some tricks up my sleeve. It was the perfect time to turn the tables. The computer in my brain had calculated the perfect route to victory!



“This next one will be the last!” Homura said, starting to cast Volcanic Flame again.

“Not so fast!”

As soon as I stepped into firing range, I activated Shadow Dart, finally unleashing my saved-up Final Strike.

“Ungh?! Zzz...”

Ren activates Shadow Dart.

Dealt 75 damage to Homura!

Homura has fallen asleep.

It worked!

Once I was sure that she was asleep, I rushed to craft another Blowgun.

“Whoa! Homura has fallen asleep! This is Takashiro’s big chance! Is he going to unleash his ultimate move?!”

Nope. For now, we wait!

If she took even one point of damage, she would wake up from her slumber. At this point, Final Strike had just come off cooldown.

Okay! Time to activate Final Strike again! Just gotta wait five more minutes now... Hurry, hurry, hurry! Come off cooldown before she wakes up!

As if the game had answered my prayers, it did.

“All right!”

I immediately moved to the next stage of plan.

Everything’s in order! Let’s do this!

“Skill Set C!”

My long-range equipment changed to the following:

Ranged Weapon: Blowgun (OEX)

Ammunition: Sleep Darts

Now I’ve just gotta wait for Homura to wake up.

“What’s this? Ren isn’t making a single move. He’s not using this opportunity to attack or heal himself! Is this part of his plan?!”

Sure is, Ms. Nakada!

I lay in wait for a few more moments until finally, a message appeared in my log.

Homura woke up!

“Huh?! Whoa! What’s hap—”

In no time at all, I began casting.

“Repugnant Circle!”

I set the circle to its maximum range, encompassing Homura as well. My MP bar fell straight to zero. The debuff worked—not that it mattered, considering it only lowered CHR. Just like last time, Homura didn’t budge. I hastily moved on to my next action.

“Ultimate move! Soul Spear!”

Psheeeew!

A purple ray of light shot out of my Blowgun.

“Wha—?!” Homura flinched at the sight of the laser zigzagging her way.

But Soul Spear didn’t enter the magic field. Instead, it started tracing a circle around it, just as it had when I used it on Akira. Soul Spear was treating the circle as an obstacle. It honestly seemed like a bug to me, but hey, why not use it to my advantage?

Entranced by Soul Spear’s bizarre movement, Homura could only stare at it as it whizzed around her. To the soccer players out there, she was pretty much just ball watching.

I took this opportunity to craft a Canesword and then dashed straight toward Homura.

“Hmph!”

As soon as she realized what I was doing, she began casting Volcanic Flame. Since I had just used my ultimate move, I was down to 1 HP. If I were to be so

much as licked by Volcanic Flame, I was toast. I'd guarded against every Volcanic Flame so far, unable to escape any of them unscathed. In other words, from Homura's point of view, this one was sure to hit. And that's exactly what I wanted her to think!

The spell finished, and another massive, flaming lion appeared. Just as it began to near the ground...

Now!

"Windmill!"

This was a staff art that sent the user leaping upward while striking with the staff. This upward attack was pretty similar to one beloved move from a famous fighting game.

Groooooaaaaar!

Volcanic Flame's impact caused only the following to pop up in my log window:

Homura activated Volcanic Flame.

Dealt 326 damage to Homura!

My Windmill leap helped me escape the explosion, leaving me unscathed. Every guard so far was meant to draw her attention away from the idea that I could perform this last-minute maneuver. If I had used Windmill even once before, it would have revealed my trick.

"Nnngh! Darn, I forgot about my cowl!"

Homura's Blazing Cowl had just expired, and it was for this very reason I had waited patiently while she slept. I launched my assault the moment she woke up so that she wouldn't have time to erect the barrier again. Volcanic Flame then hit her alone, dealing damage instead of healing her.

"Grrr! I've gotta heal!"

She tried to use a potion, but before she could, I had already landed next to her, Canesword in hand.

"Take thiiiis!"

While still barely alive at 1 HP, I unleashed my hidden weapon art, Quickdraw. A silver flash seized Homura.

“Eeeeek?!”

Ren activated Quickdraw.

Dealt 452 damage to Homura!

She eventually hit the ground after being blown away by the attack. Thanks to Quickdraw, her HP fell to 0, but she still had the auto-revive. A soft, pale light enveloped her body, bringing her slowly back to life. Level 1 auto-revival only recovers 30% of the target’s max HP.

“Not bad!”

After standing back up, Homura immediately attempted to reapply the auto-revive. Since she’d been blown away by the Quickdraw, Homura was now standing far away from me. She was free to enter auto-revive mode again.

But wait... notice anything strange about where she was standing? Perhaps the plain ground, devoid of any patterns of magical light?! That’s right: Homura had flown so far away that she was now outside of my Repugnant Circle.

Psheeeew!

In a split second, a purple laser pierced right through her. My Soul Spear was too shy to take the stage before, but now it was finally putting in work!

“What the...?! How?!”

Ren activated Soul Spear.

Dealt 251 damage to Homura!

Ren has defeated Homura.

Duel complete! Ren is the winner!

Ren’s duel record is 3W / 0L.

“Woooooo!”

The crowd exploded with cheers.

“And it’s oveeeeer! Takashiro is the winner!” Ms. Nakada’s announcement

reverberated throughout the arena.

“Aww yeah! I won!”

That was close! I was so on edge, but that made it even more exciting!

The only way to keep Homura from reapplying her auto-revive was to attack twice in quick succession during a very small window of time. I used Soul Spear’s strange circle-avoiding quirk to my advantage, delaying it until after I had already attacked once. Thanks to the auto-revive’s low recovery percentage, I figured Soul Spear was more than enough to finish her off. With Soul Spear handling the cleanup, I just had to use Quickdraw for the initiating blow. Even a Quickdraw at 1 HP wasn’t enough to one-shot her, though, so I relied on the power of her very own Volcanic Flame.

Anyway, my beautiful thinking machine had come up with this perfect sequence. And I have to say, it went off without a hitch!

“Wow! What an incredible turn of events! What are your thoughts, Yukino?”

“Incredible is the perfect word to describe it. In no time at all, Ren carefully calculated that entire chain of events. He’s capable of balancing quick thinking and accuracy, along with bold execution... Ren’s got a natural gift for PvP. He’s certainly worthy enough to face me. I look forward to our match.” Despite her cool analysis, Yukino looked really excited.

My next battle was shaping up to be even more fun and challenging than the last.

I’ll probably be fighting Yukino next... All right, I’m gonna give it everything I’ve got!

Chapter 4: The Two-Million Mila “V”

“Congrats, Ren! That last combo was crazy!”

Upon my return to the waiting room, Akira trotted right up to me.

“Heheheh. You saw it, huh? It was pretty great, if I do say so myself!”

“Yeah, totally! It was awesome! Setting up Soul Spear, making her blow herself up, using Quickdraw to take her first life, and then Soul Spear coming in for the final kill! Two whole kills before she could even reactivate her auto-revive!”

That’s my best friend for you; she always understood my strategy.

“You were so quick to concoct a plan, even while you were constantly moving! Seeing her fall for Soul Spear was totally amazing! I bet she never expected your power level could get that high!” Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, bouncing all over the place.

Looks like she enjoyed the fight.

Akira’s happiness infected me, making me even happier.

“Hahaha! You mean that whole ‘It’s over nine thousaaand!’ thing?”

It’s a little weird to see such a cute girl referencing an anime about beefy glowing warriors, but I might as well play along.

“Yeah! Homura is definitely Yegeta in that scene.”

“But hey, this is all thanks to our experiments. If I hadn’t known Soul Spear avoids magic circles, I never would’ve been able to come up with that. Thank you for helping me, Akira.”

“No problem!”

We high-fived each other as Homura approached us.

“Could I have a moment, Takashiro?”

“Oh, hey, Homura. That was a good fight!”

“Yeah. You’re... really strong. Even Yukino knows it.”

“Heh. Thanks.”

“It sucks, but I have to admit defeat. On that note, I have a request.”

“Uh-huh. What is it?”

“You’ll probably be up against Yukino next, right?”

“Probably.”

Yukino’s in the middle of her battle, but she’ll most likely win anyway. I have a feeling I’ll be fighting the final boss of this tournament early.

“Please, you have to defeat her! If she wins against you even though I lost, she’ll *never* shut up about it! But if we both lose to you, then it’s like a draw!”

“Hahaha! I’m not here to lose, so I’ll do my best. No guarantees, though.”

I’ll be up against Yukino, after all. I’d be lying if I said I was totally confident.

“I’m serious! If you lose, I’m really in for it! This is important for my mental health, so I’m gonna help you out!”

“Hmm? How’s that?”

“With this. Use it in your duel and make sure you win!” Homura said, handing me an item.

Peregrine Stone Type: Treasure Description: Crafting material. When combined with a weapon, this magical stone gives the user the ability to perform lightning-fast strikes. It is an extremely rare material that is scarcely produced.

“Oooh!”

“Huh?! Wow!” Akira and I were both shocked.

Peregrine Stones are super expensive. Whenever we saw them in the Guild Market, they were on sale for no less than two million Mila. As the description implies, when you combine it with a weapon, that weapon can be used to attack twice in a row. One attack motion gives you two hits. It’s a necessary ingredient for peregrine weapons, which everyone is dying to get. Rare items like this only show up in shops once in a while, so when they do, they’re insanely expensive.

And she's just gonna give me one?!

"Hold up a second! I can't accept something this valuable!"

"You don't have to be so modest. Take it and knock her out of the tournament!"

"But... if I use this, it's going straight into a Canesword. It'll be broken by the end of the battle."

"I know. As long as you win, I don't care. Go on. It's yours."

"Man, this really feels like a waste."

I'll be spending two million Mila in one strike. That's way too much! I only have 130 Mila! I could flip this for two million! Or I can use it to buff Akira's Skyfall! That's a much better long-term boost!

"Oh, and if you sell it or use it on something else, I'll be really mad. This is for Yukino-killing only! In fact, just put it in your weapon right now so you can't take it out later. I'll watch."

"Nnngh..."

"It's okay! I *am* the master of an item-lovers' guild, after all. At my rank, this thing isn't that big of a deal. Your victory is much more valuable to me."

A Canesword with a Peregrine Stone, huh? That Dead End would be something else. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to see my precious drama cannon fire off with two million Mila of cold, hard cash behind it.

"What do you think, Akira?"

"Oh, me? I honestly just wanna see how it looks."

Right. That's true, too. Hmm. Hmmmm. Hmmmmm...!

"Okay. I'll do it! Thank you so much!"

My curiosity is bubbling over! I've just gotta see what happens! Heheheh. Man, I'm so hype, my hands are shaking!

"Good! Try crafting with it, then."

"Got it!"

I whipped out my Simple Forge toolset and combined an iron sword with the Peregrine Stone. The required crafting level wasn't very high, so the attempt went smoothly. Now I had an iron sword with the two-strike effect added to it. Its name had changed to Peregrine Iron Sword, and its description included the whole "attacking twice" bit.

"Cool. I'd rather complete the actual Canesword during the battle, though."

"Sure, I don't mind. Just make sure you use it."

"Okay."

Let's see how it'll look when it becomes a Canesword.

In the crafting menu, I selected the Peregrine Iron Sword and an iron staff. The expected crafting result was a Canesword, but the hidden weapon art it came with was different.

"Ohoho!"

"Oooh!" Akira was equally captivated.

Normally, Caneswords come with Quickdraw. However...

Swallow's Blade (AP: 0) Hidden Weapon Art <Effect> Lightning-fast strike that takes the foe by surprise, followed by another high-speed attack. Hits twice. Only usable once per battle. Grows stronger as HP decreases. Ignores defense. Cannot be evaded.

Swallow's Blade! Wow, that sounds pretty cool. Kinda weird how a peregrine falcon motif turns into a swallow motif, but if that's the naming convention, then I can't complain. Conventions rule game systems, after all. It's like how umpires have to follow strict rules in baseball.

"Nice! It has kind of an edgy feel to it."

"Right?! I wonder what it'll be like to use it."

"So, Ren, what happens when you insert this bad boy into an ultimate combo?"

"Let's take a look."

Arts and skills that have been displayed on-screen once can be chosen as

candidates for Skill Chain ultimates, even if you haven't actually used them. I set Turnover, Final Strike, and Swallow's Blade as the components for my new ultimate.

The result: Dead End V (Usable after a sequence of Turnover -> Final Strike -> Swallow's Blade) Oooohohoho! Here it is! The "V" is clearly short for "very expensive"! With this, I can fire off some two-million Mila fireworks! Man, I'm getting really pumped for my next match!

◆◆◆

Soon enough, the second-round matches concluded. Obviously, Yukino won hers. I'd be up against her next.

Akira made it through her match with flying colors—not that I ever doubted my best friend's abilities. Skyfall's shockwaves, the automatic AP recharge from Breath of Ares, the max AP increase from AP Limit Break, and the incredible damage output from Skill Chain's ultimates all made for a great combo.

Akira kept her opponent at a distance using Skyfall's shockwaves while accumulating AP thanks to Breath of Ares. Whenever her opponent dodged the shockwaves and got close to her, she would use her built-up AP to use her ultimate move as a counterattack, which suited her style perfectly. Skyfall's pickoffs and her automatic AP recovery were just too synergistic; while the enemy had their hands full with the shockwaves, she was accumulating AP to deal the finishing blow. Even if she got hurt, she could just heal herself with a dance. Sword dancer was yet another potent piece of the meta-redefinition puzzle.

Incidentally, it seemed like Aerial Crescent was just dead weight today. When I asked Akira why she wouldn't use it, she just glared at me and said "I can't use that *here*!"

Well, all that really matters is that she's winning. I hope I can fight her in the finals.

Then there's Akabane, Akira's real-life acquaintance. She won her fight, too. Whoever wins between Yukino and myself will likely end up pitted against her.

Yukino and I walked up the stairs toward the stadium together. Our duel was

about to begin.

“It’s our time to shine, Ren! Let’s make this duel a sight to behold!”

“Absolutely!”

We grinned and bumped fists.

“Heheh. I really do love this game. Whenever you whack or slice through somebody, you can really feel it. It’s a lot more stimulating than PvP in other games, y’know?”

“Whoa there! That sounds ominous... Almost like you’re gonna kill me during our match.”

“Hmm? Oops, sorry. I got a little too excited.”

Uh, is she okay? I’m a little worried about her.

“Anyway, come at me with all you’ve got! I don’t want you to hold back in the slightest.”

“Of course! I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I’m ready to launch my cash cannon her way, with or without her invitation! Who wouldn’t, given the chance?! Not me, that’s for sure. Plus, we really need Libra’s Brush. I’ll do whatever it takes to get it, even if I have to throw mercy to the wayside! I’d become the devil himself to achieve my goals!

As we stepped onto the stadium grounds, we were welcomed by the cheers of the crowd.

“All right! In this match, our rising-star symbologist, Ren Takashiro, will test his mettle against the sponsor of this event, the guild master of Mystic Arts, Yukino Yamamura! This may be the most hair-raising match of the entire tournament! As our interim player analyst, we have Akira Aoyagi! What are your thoughts, Akira?”

Oh, right, Akira was taken to the hosts’ booth earlier, wasn’t she?

“Uhh... Well, let’s see. Both of them are highly skilled players, so I think we can expect a pretty intense fight. I’m excited to see how it goes.”

“I see! Who do you expect to win?”

“I don’t know, but I’m hoping they both give it a hundred and ten percent.”

“Aww, c’mon! You gave an unbiased answer, but you’re totally rooting for Takashiro, aren’t you?!”

“Huh?!”

“You two have gotten along so well since you enrolled in our school. All the students say you must be dating. Don’t you wanna root for your boyfriend?!”

Ms. Nakada’s teasing caused some of the audience members to spit hateful comments my way.

“What?! I thought I’d finally found a cute sword dancer to worship!”

“No way, bro! Akira is ours!”

“Die, normie, die!”

“Go explode somewhere, normie!”

Ouch. I think the crowd wants me dead! Akira and Akabane are already about as popular as idols here.

“Um, wait, no, that’s not it!” Akira tried to deny it, but I had already earned the crowd’s wrath.

One man stood up from his seat in the stands.

“All of you, quit it! Their relationship isn’t what you think! They’re not dating... It’s much more pure than that, you feel me?! Ms. Aoyagi is Takashiro’s Hime-chan! He’s just doing his best as her follower, and I’m not gonna stand for any losers trying to make fun of him for it!”

I think I know who that came from... Yep, there’s Kataoka. Guess he came to watch, too. I think he’s trying to defend me, but man, I really don’t get that guy.

“Oh, really? If he’s just her follower, then that’s fine.”

“Okay, I get it.”

“I’ll allow it!”

“An ally?! Good luck, bro!”

Why the heck did that work so well?! Why does the crowd think having Hime-

chans is normal?! It's not normal, right?! At the very least, I don't feel their bloodlust anymore. Thanks, I suppose.

Yukino chuckled. "Hahaha. I feel sorry for you, Ren."

"Good grief."

"Anyway, how about we get this show on the road?"

"Sure!"

Yukino and I took our positions, putting some distance between us.

So, Yukino is a magic knight, the best offensive class in the game. Magic knights can equip shortswords, one-handed swords, one-handed axes, things like that. If the weapon can be held in one hand, they can probably equip it.

With regards to their stats, magic knights have above-average STR and very high DEX and AGI, so they make quick, powerful attacks. Their INT also isn't too shabby, which helps them handle their magic. In short, they're pretty much magic swordsmen with a focus on speed. Everyone loves magic swordsmen, in my experience. But that's not enough to make them the most popular offensive class in the game; there's one more thing.

"Let's do this, Ren!"

Yukino was holding two one-handed axes. That's right—*one in each hand.* The magic knight's most important ability is dual-wielding... and you know everyone loves dual-wielding. Dual-wielding is powerful in every game that allows it. If it turned out to be weak in some game, players would almost certainly complain. It would be no exaggeration to say that dual-wielding has an international reputation for being really freakin' awesome. People especially love it when dual-wielding is overpowered. It's just too cool not to love. But from my perspective, dual-wielding is just an obstacle standing between me and the top, no matter what game I play!

This is inexcusable! Darn you, dual-wielding, for getting in my way once again! I won't let you get away with this!

"Okay! As the Emperor of the Underpowered, I can't bear to lose to dual-wielding!" I was ready for battle, Fanatic's Staff in hand.

Magic knights come with dual-wielding at level 1. Between the faster attack animations and performing twice the attacks, it leads to incredibly fast AP gain and high arts turnover. The attack animations are also a little harder to predict than single-wielding animations, making it useful for PvP as well, since you can pick and choose when you want to strike with your left or right hand. With so many different weapon options to choose from, the range of potential attack animations increases exponentially.



Other classes can learn dual-wielding as well, but only magic knights have it from the start. Plus, magic knights have the most weapon options. They also have sword magic to further bolster their skillset. Think of it as a set of arts that trade AP for various effects, almost like the sword dancer's dances. This also allows them to enchant their weapons with magic, boosting their damage output to the point that it surpasses that of all the other offensive classes.

Among their magical abilities is a support skill called Shadow Slave that simply sends the magic knight's potential through the roof. Shadow Slave creates clones that have a 100% evasion rate against all normal attacks. Because it's an AP-based skill with a short cooldown, magic knights can keep the clones active for as long as they can maintain their AP. Since dual-wielding is so useful for keeping up AP, it's not all that hard to sustain the clones indefinitely. Even if they accidentally pulled aggro in battle, the clones would just take the brunt of the attacks, giving the tank a chance to regain control of the fight.

Magic knights excel in both attack power and durability; a party might not even need a regular tank if they've got one on the front lines. Just being able to maintain Shadow Slave while slapping the enemy with two weapons is a ridiculously powerful combination. Even if the knight takes aggro, they don't have to worry about it, thanks to the clones. In fact, they don't even have to guard. Since they can focus on pure damage output, they have yet another leg up on the competition.

Shadow Slave should probably be nerfed... It's all because of this one skill. This simple tactic can promote pretty brain-dead play, but it rewards adept players like Yukino with a myriad of attack animations. Newbies also love the magic knight for its low skill floor.

Yukino doesn't quite obsess over the Bummers like I do. A skilled racer would naturally pick the best car for the job, right?

As for weaknesses, magic knights have low VIT and HP. If their clones take a hit from an AoE attack, they'll immediately disappear. Magic knights will often die from powerful enemy arts after accidentally taking aggro and losing their clones to a random AoE. Unlike most tanks, they're not good at taking hits. That being said, these weaknesses aren't enough to push the magic knight out of the

number-one spot.

“Looks like both our fighters are ready! Let’s begin!”

Along with Ms. Nakada’s voice, the sound of a gong reverberated throughout the Arena, and the crowd cheered with all its might.

“Here I come, Ren!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Of course, I came with a plan in mind: the early bird gets the worm!

If I let her build up enough AP, she’s sure to use Shadow Slave. That means my best odds are at the start of the match, when she doesn’t have any AP. I have to act now and take her down in one strike!

I planned to use a sleep-dart-infused Soul Spear followed by Swallow’s Blade. Using Quickdraw after Soul Spear wouldn’t be enough to finish her off, but Swallow’s Blade would probably do the trick.

I’m itching to set off my two million Mila fireworks with a Dead End V right off the bat, but it’s best if I open with Soul Spear to tie her down. I’ll go for the easier win, thanks!

“Ultimate move!” I cried.

But before I could activate it, Yukino used an item.

“Hup!”

She’d used a Toxin on herself, which poisons the user. Poisoned players lose HP every few seconds.

“Argh! Why, you little...!”

Crap! Now I can’t use Soul Spear!

The sleep affliction is removed if the affected player loses even 1 HP, so poisoned players will be woken up in seconds. Yukino was taking advantage of that fact to neuter my strategy of putting foes to sleep before unleashing my Dead End.

“I’m not just gonna lie there and take a nap while you beat me up! Face me head-on like a man!”

Grinning with determination, Yukino charged straight at me. Her body leaned forward to balance the weight of her axes. While her avatar was a lithe young girl with a cutesy blue ponytail, the way she ran while brandishing those weapons made her look dashing.

“Haaah!”

She raised her right axe in the air and swung it down hard.

Gotta guard now!

Yukino attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Good job, Fanatic’s Staff! Work that crazy poise!

When an attack is fully guarded, the attacker doesn’t gain any AP. I normally wouldn’t gain any either, but thanks to my Parry Ring, I had built up a tiny bit of AP. I swung my staff to the right in order to guard her left-handed attack, gaining a little bit more.

However...

“Ngh!”

I can’t keep this up!

Because of the dual-wielding, her attack rate was becoming too difficult to handle. I also had to determine whether each attack would come from the left or the right, making it harder to read her and guard accordingly. To compare it to a fighting game, even when your opponent uses a light attack, you don’t know if they’ll follow up with another light attack or a heavy attack. You also don’t know if they’ll aim up or down with it.

In this case, it was a choice between left and right. But if I picked the wrong one and tried to guard against it, she’d hit me.

Right! Left! Right! Right! Left! Left!

Her attacks were fast and merciless, forcing me to concentrate entirely on guarding. By watching her footwork, I could get an idea of which side would come next.

Trust me, I'm not just staring at her thighs for the fun of it!

"Not bad! You've got great reaction time, Ren!"

"You haven't seen anything yet!"

At this point, I haven't taken any hits. Yukino should still be at 0 AP, so all I have to do is keep this up until I find an opening!

"Then how about some of this?!"

Particles of mana enveloped her body, causing her to glow.

She's casting a spell?

Even then, Yukino continued her flurry of axe strikes.

Oh! This must be Mobile Magic!

Mobile Magic allows the user to cast magic without interrupting her movement. In the MEP shop, it's one of the most expensive talents.

I shoulda known she'd have high-level talents like this!

"Blizzard Edge!"

Once she finished casting the spell, both of her axes shone with a bright blue light. This magic enchanted her weapons with ice, giving them the power to do magic damage with her regular swings. A normal physical guard wouldn't be enough to protect me from this.

Naturally, Yukino wasn't done yet.

"Shadow Slave!"

"Huh?!"

She's making clones already?!

Yukino's body warped and split into two other Yukinos, making three altogether. Now she could evade two of my attacks unconditionally. The clones will only evade single-target attacks; with AoE magic, I could dispel all of them at once and damage her as well.

Problem is, I don't have any AoE attacks!

An art that hits multiple times would dispel that many clones; for example, a

one-two punch would break through two of them. But even if I did that, she could just summon two more clones as long as she had the AP to keep doing so. Now that I'd let her use it once, this was going to be a real pain to deal with. The clones would, of course, evade both Quickdraw and Dead End. I needed to get rid of the clones and then pummel her, but my normal attacks wouldn't work here since the clones would just evade them.

I had heard that ranged attacks were guaranteed to kill the clones, but my only ranged attack was Shadow Dart—which already couldn't be evaded. Besides, as a hidden weapon skill, Shadow Dart couldn't be used willy-nilly just to remove clones.

This would be a lot easier if I could equip a talent that'd let me use AoE magic, but alas. Come to think of it, she shouldn't have gained any AP from attacking me anyway. That must mean she has Breath of Ares, just like Akira! Grrr!

"Let's see if you can block this!"

Her attack animations didn't change, but now Yukino's attacks were enchanted, making them extra powerful.

Yukino attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 25 damage!

Yukino attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 27 damage!

Yukino attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 28 damage!

Yukino attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 22 damage!

The damage was piling up in no time.

This is bad!

I quickly blocked a vertical slash, when suddenly, Yukino came in hot with a low kick.

Yukino attacked.

Dealt 65 damage to Ren!

“Gah! What the...?!”

She kicked me?!

I was so focused on defending myself against her axes that I hadn’t even had time to react.

Does she have a Master’s Scroll (Martial Arts)?!

I hadn’t expected her to combine *that* with dual-wielding, of all things. It made her attack patterns all the more difficult to predict.

Then those crazy axe attacks she did were just a warm-up?!

“Heheh! If I waste time like Homura did, I know you’ll come up with some crazy scheme! I’m gonna take you down while I still can!”

“Ngh!”

I need to put some distance between us!

“Windmill!”

My AP dropped a bit as I activated the art. I jumped high into the air with my staff, sailing over Yukino and landing behind her. I’d hoped to squeeze in a little damage, but of course, she’d dodged it. In the end, Windmill was only useful as a repositioning skill. As soon as I landed, I ran away to try to put some distance between us.

“I’m not letting you get away! Boomerang Axe!”

Yukino clearly wasn’t having any of that. She chucked both of her axes in my direction.

One-handed axe arts have very low AP consumption, using only about ten or so in most cases. Therefore, she didn’t have to deliberate on using a ranged attack. One-handed axes have a surprisingly long reach; it’s one of their defining features. The two Boomerang Axes dogged me ferociously.

“Argh!”

I attempted to guard, but thanks to the ice enchantment, I still took damage.

Man! Whether it's short range or long range, Yukino doesn't hold back! She's super strong!

While I was guarding and taking damage from her Boomerang Axes, Yukino herself was still in hot pursuit.

"Thunderbolt!"

This martial artist art sends the user into a high jump, after which they dive downward to gain momentum and perform a fierce dropkick. It's like the one-handed weapon's Hawk Strike.

She was heading toward me like a speeding bullet, leaving me no room to dodge. I guarded once more. The dropkick wouldn't be enhanced by her sword magic, but arts come with higher guard break than regular attacks. Even with the Fanatic's Staff equipped, I took a small chunk of damage. Worse yet, she had closed the distance between us in seconds, even though it had taken me so much effort to get away from her.

What a beast! I wouldn't have expected any less from her!

I hadn't even had the chance to craft my Canesword yet, since the first part of the Soul Spear -> Swallow's Blade combo wasn't complete yet.

How can I bounce back from this?!

My train of thought was derailed the moment I saw Yukino's body glow with mana particles again.

Mobile Magic again! She still has another attack coming!

"Frozen Bullet!"

Nonstop icy projectiles flew in my direction. Thankfully, since I'd seen it coming, I was just able to jump out of the way using Windmill before they could reach me. I then launched another art in Yukino's direction while I was still midair.

"Stinging Shot!"

This art manipulates the staff using magic to hit a distant foe. It can be used both in midair and on the ground. However, its damage is based on INT, and its accuracy is based on DEX. It wasn't going to hit her, but this particular skill has a

bit of recoil when the staff is launched away. If you use it in midair, it pushes you backward.

Yes, I did just use two arts in a row to run away. Got a problem with it?! It was a last resort, okay?!

Just as planned, Windmill and Stinging Shot let me get away from her in a jiffy. But there was a second, unexpected result: Ren activated Stinging Shot.

A Yukino Clone faded.

Hmm?! It hit?! Wow, must be my lucky day! Oh, wait, wait. That's it! Stinging Shot is treated as a long-range attack! Long-ranged arts really do knock out a clone!

"Run all you want, Ren! You're just prolonging the inevitable!"

Yukino wasted no time in running after me. She had one more clone left. If I took down the other one, she could easily summon two more. I also didn't have enough AP to activate Stinging Shot again.

That means there's only one thing I can do!

I shot a Shadow Dart at Yukino as she approached.

Ren activated Shadow Dart.

A Yukino Clone faded.

Booyah! There we go!

"Hmph! Shadow Slave!"

She paused to summon two more clones.

Hah! That's just the opening I was waiting for!

I opened up my inventory and crafted a Canesword using the Peregrine Iron Sword and an iron staff. I'd used up my Shadow Dart for the sole purpose of buying this moment.

The Blowgun won't be useful for the rest of the battle, but now I've got my legendary money cannon! The time has come! This is my one shot at victory! I'm gonna do it! Farewell, two million Mila!

Steeling my resolve, I cast a Stupefying Circle at its maximum radius around me, depleting my MP. Her magic hurt like heck, so I'd picked this one to reduce her INT.

"I've got you now!"

I continued to survive her onslaught by guarding, building up AP all the while. I needed more AP so I could use Stinging Shot to get rid of her new clones. After parrying so many attacks, my HP bar was in the red, but I finally had enough AP!

Watch in terror! Behold the greatest waste of money this world has ever seen!

"Stinging Shot!"

Ren activated Stinging Shot.

A Yukino Clone faded.

Just one more!

Yukino kept swinging, not caring about her lost defender.

This is it! Time for my attack!

"Skill Set B!"

With this command, I switched to my Canesword.

"Ultimate move!"

Yukino knew all about Dead End, so she didn't bother to guard against it or try to avoid it, since her clone would just block it for her. And with my HP down to 1 as a result, she just needed to hit me one more time. From her point of view, she should ignore it and keep attacking!

"Dead End!"

Smaaaaaaash!

A purple flash of light moved toward Yukino, but destroyed her remaining clone instead. Immediately, I took a step forward and traced a V with the blade of the Canesword!

That's what makes it...

"Huh?!"

“V tiiiiime!”

SMAAAAAAASH!

The first attack had been a ruse so the second would catch her off-guard.

She’s not expecting this one! It’ll totally work!

Yukino was blown back by the second attack, but she was still standing afterward. She survived it!

Ren activated Dead End V.

Yukino guarded the attack, taking 711 damage.

“Urgh!”

How did she guard so far?! Did she figure out something was off when she saw how I was moving? Dang, Yukino! But man, now I’m in real hot water!

Each of us only had a sliver of HP left, but I was clearly at a disadvantage.

“Not bad, Ren! Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m still alive! Now it’s time to finish you off!”

Yukino rushed at me, axes at the ready!

“Skill Set A!”

I quickly switched to my guarding set, but if she were to hit me with her enchanted weapon, I’d be done for.

Crap, crap, crap! I need a plan! Agh, I seriously didn’t see this coming! I don’t have another one this late in the game! Nooooo!

“Take this! Ultimate attack!”

But her ultimate ended before it even began.

“Hngh?!”

Yukino’s body froze in place, then shuddered a bit before toppling face-first onto the ground.

Uh, did she run out of HP? Why...? Oh!

“Ah?! The poison damage?!”

Now I remember! She poisoned herself to stop me from putting her to sleep. It must have taken away the last sliver of her HP.

"Hahaha... Oops. Guess I should've stopped and healed myself before rushing in."

Her laugh was muffled by the ground from her face-plant.

Duel complete! Ren is the winner!

Ren's duel record is 4W / 0L.

"And it's oveeeer! Takashiro wins again!"

I smiled weakly as the audience roared with applause.

That was super weird, but I'm just glad I won! Yay, me!

"But wow, Takashiro is just full of surprises! That ultimate, Dead End V, must've come from a Canesword with a Peregrine Stone! In that case, he threw away two million Mila to try to secure this win! Was he really that set on victory? He must be one of those eccentric geniuses!"

When everyone else heard Ms. Nakada's commentary, there was a bit of a commotion.

Well, she's not wrong. I mean, I never would've done something like that of my own volition. I wouldn't have even put the stone into my Canesword. Who would?! Breaking it is such a waste!

That said, as soon as I'd acquired Dead End V, the stone was pretty much destined to be my ultimate trump card. I wouldn't have sold it for some quick cash even if I could have. It's important to focus on the future, right? Either way, this is all just because Homura valued Yukino's defeat more than two million Mila.

The duel officially ended, returning Yukino's HP to 1. I walked over and helped her up.

"That was really close. If you *had* healed back there, I would've been in big trouble."

"Heh... Bad decision-making on my part. Still, that was a blast. I've never seen

someone throw away two million Mila just to beat me, but I respect it, ya big goof! Hahaha!”

Technically, Homura threw it away, but I’m supposed to keep it a secret.

“Uh, yeah, you’re right. Haha!”

Eh, I might as well keep my mouth shut.

“Keep leveling up, and you’ll get access to tons of different weapons, arts, and magic. Just get stronger and stronger, so next time we can fight without the level restriction!”

She offered her hand, and I graciously shook it. Yukino’s hands, much like her face, were pretty and delicate. How’d she manage to become such a beauty *and* a PvP-freak?

At the very least, the two million Mila fireworks had been memorable, even if they were a bit of a dud. If I ever needed to throw away my own money like that, I’d have to make sure it would be a clean hit.

I can’t believe I beat the final boss! Of the tournament, anyway. If I keep this up, Libra’s Brush will be ours in no time!

Chapter 5: Wow, it Really IS a Small World for Us Gamers!

“Good job, Ren! That was awesome!”

I was once again greeted by Akira’s smile in the waiting room.

“Yeah, but it was really close! It was all thanks to the almighty Peregrine Stone.”

“It doesn’t really matter *how* you won as long as you did. Y’see, it’s not that the strong always win; it’s just that the winner is strong. You just proved that you can even beat magic knights as long as you have some extra cash. No brakes on the drama train!”

Well, it was my ridiculous firepower that brought her down through her guard, I can at least be proud of that. Even if there’s really nothing else to be proud of... There’s an element of drama to an ability that juuuust barely fails to secure the kill too! Cost aside, big damage always has drama at its core!

“Hah! You acted all big, and then you lost! I can only imagine your embarrassment, you nobody!”

Homura arrived and immediately began taunting Yukino. She looked really happy about it, too. No surprise there, considering how much she paid to see it.

“Oh, shut up. I’m not ashamed to lose to Ren. He’s just about as skilled as I am.”

“So what? You still lost! You lost, you lost! Looooooser!”

“What?! You wanna see who’s really a loser? Don’t leave your room, ’cause as soon as you do, I’m gonna come and give you a big whack upside the head!”

“Hey! No melee attacking in real life! That’s against the law!”

They both logged out to settle their problems elsewhere.

I think they might actually be fighting. Hope they’re okay.

“Um, anyway, now that you’ve beaten Yukino, it’s all uphill from here. I think

we might really reach the finals together. You'd better win your semifinal match!"

"Yeah! I'll be up against Akabane, huh?"

Akabane had already secured her advancement to the semifinals, which meant she and I were guaranteed to face each other. Akira's side of the brackets was nearly at the quarterfinals.

"Yep. You're sure to win, right? Tell me it's gonna be you!" Akira stared at me heatedly, her face only inches from mine.

"Erm, yeah, sure. Y'know, it's not often that you dislike somebody so much."

"It's not like I'm some kinda zen master. If someone like her had stuck to you like glue ever since kindergarten, you'd come to hate her, too. Spending time with *you* is fun, so that's probably why you only ever see me smiling."

"Mmm, I guess that makes sense."

"Anyway, I'll see you in the finals! Got it?"

"Yeah!"

At that moment, Akabane walked up to us.

Speak of the devil.

"My, I hope you don't think you can win against me that easily."

"Urk... Hello, Nozomi." Akira's expression hardened.

"Heya, Akabane. Good luck in our battle."

"Yes, of course. But be prepared to lose. They may call you the Emperor of the Underpowered, but you've already shown off everything you have to offer. You've given me ample time to prepare countermeasures."

"Oh? I had no idea you knew anything about me."

"Of course I do. I entertain myself with a video game or two once in a while, you know."

I took the opportunity to get a good look at her. She was surprisingly pretty, and her smile told me she was cool, calm, and collected.

I dunno. I'm not really getting any bad vibes from her yet.

"If anything, I'm rather disappointed that the player himself ended up being so drab."

Whoops! Never mind.

"Don't be mean to Ren, please," Akira said, standing in front of her.

"I was just being honest."

"That's not honesty, it's just being rude. He might be 'drab,' but he's still cute!"

"Oh, I see. You don't want me to insult your little boyfriend. I find it strange that the daughter of such an esteemed family would be so interested in a commoner."

"It's not strange. But you're one to talk, huh? With a personality like that, I bet you'll be forever alone anyway."

"Heheh. So you think *you're* something to write home about?"

"I'm better than you, at least."

"How strange. I think I may agree."

Whoa. The friction between them is kinda scary. Mmm... Maybe I should do something about this.

Behind Akabane, I could see Kataoka shivering with fear.

Just then, I felt a finger poke my back.

"Huh? Oh, hey, Yukino."

Looks like she's back.

"Ren, come over here for a sec." She pulled me away from the feud.

"I could feel the weird murderous vibes from a mile away."

"Really? Are you sure it wasn't just you and your sister?"

"Yeah. Fighting for us is like breathing. It's totally natural."

While Yukino and I were talking, Homura had logged back in and stepped

between Akira and Akabane, forcing both of them to calm down.

Maybe these two aren't a bad combo after all.

Yukino continued speaking in a hushed tone. "You guys were pretty good friends back in EF, right? Why are you all fighting now?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Do we know Akabane, too?

"Oh, so she didn't say anything? She said she would..."

"Umm, who is she?"

"Scarlet. You were good friends, weren't you?"

"What?! No way!"

Just like with Yukino's character, Snow, Akira and I were both friends with Scarlet. Scarlet had started playing EF about a year ago. He was a red-haired pretty boy who knew his way around a broadsword. We happened to meet him on his first day, so we'd taught him the ropes and helped him out. He was really good at the game now—almost as much as Yukino, actually.

If Yukino's telling the truth, then Akabane is actually one of our best pals! The gaming world is a little TOO small, don'tcha think?! But hey, if we could befriend each other in EF, I'm sure we can do the same here. Even if there are some other things going on behind the scenes.

"Ren, you've gotta help them make up. Those two were super chummy when they couldn't see each other's faces, so they've got no reason to fight now."

"You're right. Leave it to me," I said, nodding.

I think Yukino is onto something here.

◆◆◆

"Duel complete! The winner is Akira Aoyagi!"

The crowd went wild, chanting her name.

"Akira! Akira! Akira!"

Once she'd finished her battle, Akira whipped out her otherworldly lens to

take a bunch of screenshots of the Arena.

Wow, Akira is seriously popular! I guess it's because she's smoking hot. Everyone loves a good sword dancer. Also, she's got mad skills, unlike Hime-chans who just get carried. She really was flawless. It's no surprise that she's earned herself idol status.

I can't help but wonder how I ended up becoming best friends with this gal. I always thought "Akira" was some judo-type guy with a gruff voice and rippling muscles. It's still a funny story. What twists and turns did I take to end up on this girl's route?

Bah, enough reminiscing. I ought to go congratulate her!

"I'll be off, Ms. Nakada!"

"Yes, of course. Thank you for joining me!"

With that, I exited the announcers' booth. For this match, I had been in charge of player analysis. It was a little nerve-wracking, but fun overall! Thus, I headed toward the waiting room to meet Akira.

"Nice work out there! You nailed it!"

"Chirp chirp! Chichichirp!" Draco fluttered around at my side.

"Heehee. Thanks, Ren! And you, too, Draco."

"It wasn't even close, huh?"

Akira and I had both advanced to the semifinals. Just one more win for both of us, and we'd be able to face off in the finals!

"Yep! The only real challenge was having to fight in front of a crowd wearing this stuff."

"Well, I sure had a good time watching! In fact, let me represent the entire crowd when I say thank you!"

I bowed to express my gratitude. Draco mimicked me, following suit. It was adorable.

"Ugh. Yeah, yeah, you're welcome. But don't get too used to it, okay?"

"Why not? Isn't it all right to appreciate something beautiful over and over?"

“Hrm... I guess it’s better than you getting tired of it.”

“Akabane just puts it all out there and doesn’t even care. That’s a bit too much for you, huh?”

“Yeah! Unlike her, I actually have a sense of shame.”

“Excuse me? I’d very much prefer if you didn’t speak of me as if I was shameless,” Akabane cut in. I guess she was close enough to hear us.

I think I know where this is going...

I decided to forcefully change the subject of conversation.

“Oh! Hey, Akira. Remember Scarlet from EF?”

“Hm? What about him?” Akira looked taken aback by the sudden question.

I watched Akabane carefully in my periphery. She didn’t butt in, instead listening intently to the conversation.

Oh, yeah. She’s definitely interested.

“We played with Yukino a while back, but it’s been a while since we saw Scarlet. Maybe we ought to hit him up soon?”

“Yeah! I’m in. In fact, once we’re all finished here, we should all play some EF together. Assuming he’s online, anyway.”

“Nice! I’ll shoot him a message later, then.”

“I can’t wait! Geez, it feels like it’s been forever. I’ll have to take him on another sightseeing tour!” Akira, ever the sightseeing maniac, was getting excited.

I once again stole a glance at Akabane.

Oho, is that a smile I see? She thinks she’s being slick by looking away, but I definitely saw it. Akabane is definitely happy to know that Akira’s excited to play with Scarlet. She really is him, then.

As if she’d noticed my gaze, Akabane huffed loudly and walked away.

Heh. I feel like she’s one of those girls who’s haughty on the outside but sweet on the inside.

“Hm? She left.”

“Maybe she was annoyed because we weren’t talking about her.”

“You think so? Well, anyway, you’re up next. Good luck!”

“Yeah, baby! I’ve got this in the bag! But first, I’d better check my gear again. I got so wrapped up in doing commentary last match that I didn’t have time for anything else. Oh! Before that... Draco, eat up.”

I pulled an apple out of my inventory and offered it to him.

It’s just so sad to watch him go hungry. Now to scope out my gear...

“Chirp chirp! Chirp chirp! Chichichirp!”

Draco’s body started to glow while he was pigging out.

Could it be...?!

Draco’s growth level increased!

Please choose a skill for it to learn: YESSSSS! I know there were signs that he was gonna level up soon, but it finally happened!

“Ooooh! Is it time for another new skill?”

“Yep! I’ve finally realized my long-awaited dream of giving Draco a new skill!”

“So, what’s it gonna be?”

“Let’s see what we’ve got.”

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.

Baby’s Breath (In-Battle) Effect: Baby dragon breathes fire, supporting its master.

Pet will target whatever the player targets.

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

"Ooh! There's another skill you can use in battle!"

"Yeah. The other two are the same as before... Interesting."

"What are you gonna do?"

"What do *you* think I'd do?"

"Baby's Breath would give you some more consistent damage in normal parties, so that's pretty useful. But for right now... maybe Pickup? I'm sure you want both eventually."

"Excellent work, my dear buddy! I agree with you one hundred percent. Let's go with Pickup, then!"

It probably won't be anywhere near as useful as Target Marker, but Pickup has its own appeal.

I chose Pickup and pressed confirm.

What kind of stuff will he find, I wonder?

"Chichirp?" Draco suddenly seemed on high alert.

"Hm?"

"Chirp! Chirp! Chirp!"

Then he flew straight out of the waiting room window!

While we were technically on the underground floor of the Arena, the Arena itself was in the Lagoon of floating islands. The "underground" floors had windows leading out to a little nature park, which was surrounded by blue sky and puffy white clouds.

"Where are you going, Draco?!" I asked.

"Maybe he went to make a Pickup?"

He descended on a corner of the park, and soon...

Draco picked up a Healing Potion!

Ren obtained a Healing Potion!

“Ooh! He brought me a potion!”

His Pickup finished, Draco flew back in through the window.

“Wow! You’re a fast learner, huh, cutie?”

“Chichirp! Chichirp!”

This is pretty nice. It’s like pulling a gacha once in a while. I think I made the right choice. I wonder what else he’ll bring me? How exciting!

“The first semifinal match is about to begin! Fighters, make your way to the stadium!”

Oops, it’s already time to go. Guess I’d better get to it.

Akabane and I left the waiting room. The stairway up to the stadium essentially served as a private area for the fighters, so I decided to talk to her about the whole Scarlet thing.

“So, uhh, do you have time to play some EF later?”

“Wha?! Why, I... Wh-What could you possibly be talking about?!” Akabane stammered, her eyes wide.

“You don’t have to hide it. I already know. Right, Scarlet?” I clapped my hand on her shoulder.

“Oh... H-How do you know about that?!”

“Yukino told me.”

“Darn you, Snoooooow! How could you sell me out?!”

“You told her not to tell Akira, but you didn’t say anything about me.”

“Now you’re just splitting hairs! If *you* know, then it’s only a matter of time before she finds out!”

“Well, I haven’t told her yet. If you want me to, though, I will.”

“Stay out of it! I’ll do it myself, so don’t go sticking your nose into our affairs, understood?!”

“Why don’t you just do it now, then? Don’t you get tired of butting heads for

no reason?”

“I said stay out of it! I have my reasons, and I’ll do it when I’m good and ready!”

“What are your reasons, then? If it’s hard for you to tell her, then I’d be happy to do it for you.”

“I have no obligation to tell you that!”

Yep. Real-life Scarlet definitely puts up a front.

Back in Eternal Fantasy, he seemed like a genuinely pleasant guy.

“All right. How about we make a bet, then?”

“With what stakes?”



“If I win this match, you have to tell me why you won’t just spill the beans to Akira!”

“And if I win?”

“I’ll never mention this again!”

“Very well. I accept your challenge.”

“Nice! Unfortunately for you, I’m gonna win this fight.”

“You took the words out of my mouth, you rascal!”

With that, the two of us stepped out of the staircase.

“Nozomiiii!”

“It’s Nozomi!”

As soon as they saw her, the men in the audience went nuts over Akabane. She was a sword dancer just like Akira, and she was just as hot. I couldn’t imagine a scenario in which she *wouldn’t* become a gaming celebrity. It was just the law of the land.

This is totally her turf... I guess this will be more of an “away” game for me, huh?

“Welcome, everyone, to the first semifinal match of the Spring Newbie Spotlight! Now that one of the two sword dancers heating up this tournament has taken the stage, the whole crowd is busy screenshotting away!”

“Aw, yeah! I’m gonna take some *choice* pics!” Kataoka was clearly having the time of his life.

Akabane walked some distance away from me before turning back and readying her weapon: a two-handed sword. Sword dancers can use both one-handed and two-handed weapons, as it turns out.

Scarlet used a two-handed sword in Eternal Fantasy, too. Maybe Akabane just likes them. From what I’ve seen of previous battles, her sword is fitted with a Peregrine Stone. I wonder if Kataoka ponied up that two million Mila for her. I wouldn’t be surprised, honestly. Anyway, I can expect those attacks to hurt. I’d better be careful.

For now, I decided to go in with the Fanatic's Staff equipped.

"Looks like we're ready to begin! Ready... Go!" The gong rang out once again.

I waited and watched Akabane's movements.

"Here I come!"

Her first action was to use Toxin, just like Yukino.

She's trying to keep me from putting her to sleep. I figured that would happen. I'd do it if I were her. But now Soul Spear won't be very helpful. As usual, Dead End is my only way out of this... dead end. Even if I could cut down her HP over time, sword dancers have a really good rate of recovery. I have to bring her from full to zero all at once, or else she'll just heal right back up.

Anyway, I had expected Akabane to poison herself, so I immediately moved to craft a Canesword. I opened the crafting menu from my inventory and combined an iron staff and an iron sword, completing the action immediately thanks to the Efficiency talent.

Now, what do I have left in my inventory?

I had twelve iron ingots, three iron staves, and three iron swords.

"Haaah!"

As I finished crafting, Akabane charged at me ferociously.

I need to guard!

Thanks to my Parry Ring, I could gain AP even if I took no damage. Just blocking her attacks would be advantageous to me.

She led with a wide downward swing, using the momentum from her dash. I held up my staff just as her sword finished its arc, guarding the blow.

Nozomi attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

All right, nice. Thanks again, Fanatic's Staff!

Immediately after my guard, a phantom sword traced the same arc as her previous attack. This was the effect of the Peregrine Stone.

Nozomi attacked.

But Ren guarded the attack!

Since the attacks both traveled the same path, guarding the second one was pretty easy; all I had to do was stay still. However, while I was guarding against the second attack, Akabane had time to perform her next action.

These phantom attacks are minor, but they could cause a real disadvantage because they force the defender to guard for longer than the attacker's animation. This leaves the defender with little to no time to counterattack. On top of the extra damage, this is what your two million Mila is *really* paying for.

"Your reaction time isn't half bad!"

"Thanks!"

"Heehee. Trust me, you won't stay confident for long!" Akabane grinned fearlessly.

"Raging Blade!"

With a swooshing sound, her sword was enveloped in an aura.

This is a self-buffing two-handed sword art that temporarily raises your weapon's stats. It lasts two minutes and costs 100 AP. Whether this is too expensive or surprisingly cheap depends on how well you use those two minutes.

But she shouldn't have any AP, right? How did she use it? Ahh, that's right; she has Breath of Ares equipped, too.

As a top-tier talent that essentially gives you free AP, it costs a whopping 1,000 Merit Points.

This smells like Kataoka, too. I doubt she has Akira's crazy luck, at least.

"Take this!" She swung her two-handed sword horizontally.

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 21 damage.

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 20 damage.

The buffed sword was able to break through my guard.

“Nothin’ but a scratch, I tell ya!”

“Don’t worry, it’s more than enough. Stock Shatter!”

This time, the aura changed color to a pale green. This skill is learned by setting it in one of your talent slots, like Final Strike. I knew of its existence, but I’d never expected to see it during our duel!

“Wha...?! Now I see what you’re up to! You’re gonna do that here?!”

“I won’t let you escape!”

Akabane never let up, continuing her relentless assault. I didn’t have the time to do anything but guard.

But— Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 20 damage.

Ren’s Canesword broke!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 19 damage.

Ren’s Iron Sword broke!

“Gah!”

I’m not taking much damage, but man, this is bad!

As its name implies, Stock Shatter breaks an item in the target’s inventory after every hit. Broken items don’t disappear from your inventory completely; you still have them, but their abilities are degraded. The item names change to include “Broken,” too. With a Broken Canesword, for example, I couldn’t use Quickdraw. I could craft a new Canesword, but if one of the ingredients was broken, the crafting would fail. Broken items were useless to me until I could get them fixed.

“Your fighting style ignores the long-term costs of materials and goes in for one-hit kills! You’re stretching your inventory to the best of your ability, which

makes sense because you have to break a weapon each time you want to attack. But what will you do when all your weapons and materials are broken?!”

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 21 damage.

Ren’s Iron Sword broke!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 22 damage.

Ren’s Iron Sword broke!

Arrrgh! All of my iron swords are broken! If I want to make another Canesword, I’ll have to make more swords from scratch with the ingots! If only I could fully guard her attacks, my items would be safe. But if I take even one point of damage, I can kiss an item goodbye.

Stock Shatter lasts for a minute, and its cooldown is five minutes. It breaks items in order of their positions in the target’s inventory, with no distinction made between weapons, gear, potions, and materials. There’s not much point in breaking an NPC’s items, so it mostly sees use in PvP. And in a game where crafting isn’t usually possible during battle, there’s not much point in breaking your opponent’s materials.

For item destruction, there’s also Drug Drain for breaking potions, along with Sword Snap for weapons and Gotcha Gear for armor. All of these are used often, because you can choose exactly what you want to break. Stock Shatter is generally inferior because it can pointlessly break crafting materials, so it’s almost never used. But to me, a guy who puts his materials at the top for quick crafting, this was like a critical hit! Her strategy was crafted entirely to counter me!

I’m so deeply moved! Thank you, thank you! Come to think of it, back in EF, Scarlet was always pretty clever! Ugh, I didn’t even get the chance to sort my inventory and put some random stuff at the top, thanks to the Peregrine Stone putting me on eternal guard duty. I have to buy time somehow!

“Windmill!”

The rising uppercut propelled me upward and out of range of her double attacks.

“You’re not getting away that easily!”

Akabane had moved to my landing zone and prepared to attack. However...

“Stinging Shot!”

I shot it in a random direction just to move my landing zone. As a result, I avoided being attacked from behind.

“Well, aren’t you restless?!”

As bad as they are, two-handed staves aren’t *completely* useless. Even if they can’t be used to inflict damage, they’re perfectly usable when it comes to survival. At least they’re good at moving the player around, y’know?

Before Akabane could close the small gap I’d created, I opened my inventory.

Let’s sort this out ASAP!

After my now-broken iron swords, I had three iron staves and twelve iron ingots.

If these break, I’m in big trouble. Instead, I’ll put some trash at the top of my inventory! Annnd... there!

Sawdust x56

Iron Ingot x12

Iron Staff x3

Healing Potion x6

I put my most worthless item at the top. I had plenty of ingots, so I placed those second. This was the best I could do with so little time, but it would probably work well enough.

“Stay still!”

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 21 damage.

Ren’s Sawdust broke!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 19 damage.

Ren's Sawdust broke!

"Nice!"

It was at that point that the aura on her sword faded from pale green back to its original color.

It's over for now! I have four minutes until her next Stock Shatter! I made it through the worst! Now's the perfect time for a counterattack!

"Don't let your guard down yet! Sword Samba!"

She's gonna reset Stock Shatter's cooldown, but I should be good!

"Now, ultimate move!"

"Huh?"

What's she going to do?!

I braced myself.

"Hecaton Wave!"

A pale-green shockwave burst out from Akabane, spreading throughout the arena. With how fast it moved, all I could do was guard.

Nozomi activated Hecaton Wave.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 74 damage.

Ren's 54 Sawdusts all broke!

Nozomi activated Hecaton Wave.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 77 damage.

Ren's 12 Iron Ingots all broke!

"What the...?! Nooooo!"

An ultimate with Stock Shatter in the mix?! Judging by the animation and the shockwave, the AoE art Grand Wave must be in there too. They stack together to make an item-breaking wave?! Geez louise!

Even worse, she still had her normal attacks ready to break the rest of my inventory.

She's coming in with a downward slash!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 21 damage.

Ren's Iron Staff broke!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 19 damage.

Ren's Iron Staff broke!

"Haaah!" She immediately transitioned into an upward swing.

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 18 damage.

Ren's Iron Staff broke!

Nozomi attacked.

Ren guarded the attack, taking 20 damage.

Ren's Healing Potion broke!

Akabane grinned as she glanced over the log.

"Heehee! All out of materials, huh? You've been declawed!"

She's got that right! Urgh, I wish I had some kind of talent or equipment to nullify her item-breaking effect, but right now I've got nothin'! This is bad. Like, reaaally bad. She totally foiled my plan! At this rate, she's just gonna slowly grind me down to zero HP.

Grrrrr! Like hell I'm gonna go out in such a boring way! Is there really nothing I can do?!

Just as I thought it was all over, two messages popped up in my log.

Draco picked up a Bronze Axe!

Ren obtained a Bronze Axe!

“Huh?! He used Pickup?”

Pet dragons can’t join the battle, but Pickup still works?

Now that I’d gotten the bronze axe, it meant Draco could find weapons for me. If only it’d been a bronze sword, then I would’ve been able to make a Canesword. Even with just a bronze sword in it, one good whack with a Canesword would be enough to kill her. An iron ingot wouldn’t have hurt either.

I’ve still got my Fanatic’s Staff... If only I can get a sword, then I can immediately craft with them. In other words, I can still win! My usual playstyle is heavy grinding and thorough treasure-hunting, but now we’re goin’ the gacha route! All aboard the Pickup train! Choo-choo!

Draco! My boy! My little baby boy! Draco, my lord and savior! Please, please, please! Find Daddy a bronze sword or an iron ingot! Pleeeease! If I can get that, I’ll definitely make it through this!

“You’re free to surrender anytime, you know. It really does wound me to hurt a friend.”

“I’ll pass, thanks. I haven’t lost yet, and I sure as heck don’t plan on it!”

“Still got a scheme up your sleeve, eh? Some devious little plot to turn the tables?”

Well, not yet, at least! I’m in a luck-based game now! It’s all about the Pickup gacha!

“Maybe...? Even I’m not so sure.”

Just gotta ask myself one question: do I feel lucky?

“Well then! While you’re figuring out your plan, I’ll be happy to entertain you!”

Akabane kicked off of the ground and spun in the air like a figure skater.

That’s a classic sword dancer move!

“Vanishing Whirl!”

Suddenly, she disappeared completely.

“Hmm?!”

This dance conceals the user so she can move with stealth. It's mainly used for moving past active enemy monsters without being seen. In PvP, it can be a powerful way to ensure a safe attack. Kataoka's rogue class has a similar stealth skill. That one allows the user to take the enemy by surprise, adding a damage bonus. Because of that, rogues are better than other classes when it comes to attacking from the shadows. Even though their stealth skill is a little inferior, sword dancers can still be a major threat.

"Hiyaaah!"

"Oof!"

Out of nowhere, an attack came down on my right flank. I was able to block the second phantom hit, but I'd taken the first one in its entirety. Before Akabane could land another one, I used Windmill to jump out of the way.

"Ouch, man! You got me!"

"Nice guard, even if it was only the second attack. It's not easy to block against an invisible enemy." Akabane slowly reappeared, smirking.

When a player attacks from stealth, it ends the stealth effect. It's not immediate; it takes a few seconds for them to fully reappear, which allows you to keep up your combo for just a bit longer. Rogues' stealth ability, on the other hand, *does* cause them to reappear right away. That's just another one of those subtle differences between skills. There's the rogue who goes in for one big hit, and then there's the sword dancer who can go through a whole combo before her invisibility fully wears off. By the way, sky pirates don't have stealth, which is a little strange.

Oh, there it is!

Draco picked up an Oak Branch!

Ren obtained an Oak Branch!

Aww, lame! Next! Get to the next one, please!

"Raging Blade! Vanishing Whirl!"

Akabane disappeared once again, this time combining the stealth skill with her weapon buff.

Vanishing Whirl requires AP to activate, but because of the AP gain from Breath of Ares, she's able to attack freely from the shadows. Her attacks become even more fearsome at a time like this, when there's a huge, loud crowd all around you. If this place had been peaceful and quiet, I could've judged where she stood by the sound of her footsteps.

"Oh well!"

I needed to keep buying time, even if it wasn't a perfect solution to all my problems. I rushed to cast an Enfeebling Circle with a relatively small radius centered around my feet. After taking a deep breath, I concentrated on my surroundings, trying hard to make out any telltale sounds in the ring.

If she steps into my circle, I should be able to see her silhouette blocking the light... Not! It's a shame, but things just ain't that easy!

My Enfeebling Circle created a red, cylindrical field of light. Standing inside it slightly muffled sounds coming from outside. I shut my eyes and silently willed it to work.

Tap-tap-tap.

There she is! She's coming at me from the ten o'clock position!

After roughly imagining the arc her sword would take, I raised my Fanatic's Staff to guard. Immediately after, a powerful impact shook the staff. Knowing another one was coming, I waited in place and guarded it successfully.

Her next animation is an upward slash!

I imagined the animation playing in my head and matched my timing to it, attempting to guard!

Thunk! Thunk!

I successfully guarded two more hits. Thanks to Enfeebling Circle, she was now dealing less than five damage per attack.

"What?! How can you guard without seeing me?!"

"Aha! I know the sword dancer's animations like the back of my hand!"

As long as I know what direction and distance she's attacking from, I can

guard no problem! Plus, I'm used to being attacked by someone under the effect of Vanishing Whirl, thanks to my sparring matches with Akira!

"That makes no sense!" she cried.

"Hey, who cares! It's just beaten into me at this point, all right?!"

Still, this doesn't solve my bigger problem. If she just waits until my circle dissipates, then that's it for me. That means I have to cast a new circle just before each one dissipates. My MP is limited, though; at some point, I'm gonna run out. Once again, my lack of action puts her at an advantage. That said, I still need that time, so stalling is my best option. All right, let's keep this up for now!

When I opened my eyes, I saw something amazing.

Draco picked up a Peregrine Iron Sword!

Ren obtained a Peregrine Iron Sword!

WHAT?! I can't believe my eyes!

"No waaaay! How did he get his hands on this?!"

Two million Mila again?! Wowie zowie! This must be the rarest thing ever! Like, the most miraculous pull for anyone in the entire game! This is my Skyfall! Unlike Akira and her tremendous luck, I have lower-than-average luck when it comes to item drops. This might be my luckiest moment in all of my school years! Yeehaw! I'd better save this! Good job, Draco! You da man! Now go find the next one, please!

I parried Akabane's attacks one after another, waiting for my next roll with bated breath. But much to my surprise...

"Chichirp! Chichirp!"

Draco flew into the Arena through a window near the ceiling, looking happy as a clam. He headed over to Maeda in the audience, then dropped right into her arms and went to sleep.

He did NOT just go to sleep, did he?! Aww, man!

When he gets to sleeping, he conks out for hours.

"Seriously? No!"

I had nothing else available to make a Canesword. With Draco asleep, he probably wouldn't pick anything else up for hours. There was no way I could keep this battle going for that long; I'd definitely die. If I wanted to win, I'd have to use the Peregrine Iron Sword!

"I could've done this with a bronze sword, but now I'm stuck wasting two million Mila again!"

This is once-in-a-lifetime luck here! Am I really going to throw it away just like that?! Arrrrgh! What a waste! Sure, I'd love to throw out a Dead End V using my own money at some point... But now?! Urgh, I guess this is the only way to win. The one! And! Only!

"Argh! Fine! I'll do the darn thing!" I roared, tears in my eyes.

I have finally awoken my own Satsui no Hado! Now I'm ready to unleash Dead End V once more! First, I have to make a Canesword. I'll have to find the right opportunity to do so.

"Thunder Smash!"

The invisible Akabane activated an art with a lightning affinity. Attacks with magic affinities counter my Fanatic's Staff, since it lowers both INT and MND by 60. They actually increase in damage when I wield it.

"Windmill! Stinging Shot!"

The combo allowed me to evade the attack and move far away from her.

I'll finish this in one go!

"Enervating Circle!"

I activated the circle with just enough range to reduce my MP by a third of a bar. The green magic circle enveloped both of us. I immediately began casting another circle, attempting to get several in while she approached.

"Enfeebling Circle!"

This one was red, with the same radius as the previous circle. Magic circles vary in color depending on the kind you use.

"Stupefying Circle!"

This circle was blue. Now, all three of my circles overlapped.

“What?! Where’d you go?!” Akabane yelped in surprise.

Her surroundings had suddenly grown dark, reducing her field of vision. As a result, she lost sight of me.

Not only does a magic circle’s color vary by type, but if you overlap their ranges, the colors mix. When red, blue, and green are combined, the result is black. Avatars become pretty much impossible to see when black light covers the area. I discovered this phenomenon while testing, of course. The black light acts as a smoke screen using the game’s graphics system. Black paint made from red, blue, and green in real life reflects light when you shine something on it.

As for why it remains black in the game, that’s because it’s just part of the graphics; obviously it isn’t real light. There’s no such thing as truly black light in real life, but in the game, you can think of it as being created by shadows or something.

“Grr! Vanishing Whirl!”

Akabane kicked off of the ground and danced in the air. I would’ve preferred if she had stayed still in the confusion, but I wasn’t exactly surprised. She reacted quickly to danger and hid herself accordingly. I admired her skills as a player.

But... Not so fast, Akabane!

I activated my Blowgun art, Shadow Dart.

“Huh?!”

Ren activated Shadow Dart!

Dealt 25 damage to Nozomi!

Nozomi fell asleep.

Shadow Dart hit her and successfully put her to sleep. Poison damage would quickly awaken her, but at least I’d managed to stop Vanishing Whirl. Though it may seem hopeless at first, poison damages the afflicted every three seconds. That meant she was trapped for three seconds. It would only block her

movement until she had been hurt or a very short time had passed, but if I used this time wisely enough, it could be incredibly advantageous.

I have to win in these three seconds!

I immediately crafted a Canesword using the only things available to me: the Fanatic's Staff and the Peregrine Iron Sword.

"Windmill!"

I jumped high into the sky.

Nozomi woke up.

"Hrm...? Vanishing Whirl!"

She kicked off of the ground once more, but...

"Too little, too late!"

I had already landed right behind her. I unsheathed my very expensive Canesword.

Now, behold the greatest waste of money this world has ever seen —part two!

"Ultimate move! Dead End V!"

SMAAAAASH!



I sliced twice in the air, rapidly tracing the shape of a V. The attack seized Akabane just as she was about to come after me.

“Eeeek!”

Yes! I did it!

Akabane flew high into the air, barrel rolling until she finally hit the ground.

Whoooa. She flew crazy high, like a firework!

Since the last part of the attack was an upward slash, she was launched at an upward angle.

Ren activated Dead End V.

Dealt 5,244 damage to Nozomi!

Ren has defeated Nozomi.

Duel complete! Ren is the winner!

Ren’s duel record is 5W / 0L.

“Heh... Heheheh. I’m sad to kiss that money goodbye, but wowie!”

Would you look at that damage! It doesn’t really matter, but man, 5,244?! I killed her how many times over?! Gotta be at least five! Daaang, Ren! You’ve outdone yourself!

My hands were quivering with excitement.

“Man, oh, man. That felt awesome! Big numbers like that have a seriously big impact!”

I can feel my endorphin levels rising! They’re going through the roof! This is it! This is the true pleasure of the money—I mean, drama cannon!

In the face of the drama cannon’s long-distance shot, the crowd was bewildered.

“Dead End V again?! This guy’s nuts!”

“That’s what makes him so fun to watch! God, look at that damage!”

“Holy crap! That was incredible!”

Hah! As long as they're having fun, that's what counts!

"Duel complete! Takashiro is the victor! Congratulations, buddy! You're heading to the finals!"

"Mwahaha! Did you see that damage?! Can't have real drama without quadruple digits, baby! Everyone, change your class and join me in the symbologist corner!" Feeling elated after my victory, I started calling out to the audience.

"Who cares?! How dare you hurt our poor Lady Nozomi like that, you monster?!"

"Yeah! We wanted to watch Lady Nozomi and Akira face off in the finals!"

"Your duel might've been awesome, but I wish you'd lost your money *and* the fight!"

Incensed, Akabane's fans started booing me.

Well, it's whatever. Like I said, I was pretty much playing an "away" game anyway. Either way, I wooon! Not only am I going to the finals, but I also get to hear Akabane spill the beans!

◆◆◆

"So, why won't you tell Akira that you're Scarlet?"

After the duel, I confronted Akabane on our way to the waiting room.

"Umm, well..." She started to fidget.

"Well...?"

"What if I told her and she started avoiding me in Eternal Fantasy?! You should know as well as I do that she wants nothing to do with me!"

"I mean yeah, I guess she does look a little peeved around you."

Little doesn't begin to describe it, though; she looks like she genuinely hates Akabane.

"Right? As soon as she found out the truth, she'd probably keep her distance in EF, too. I'm terrified of that happening, so I don't want her to know."

I see. So it's the opposite of what Yukino and I thought.

We believed that, since they could be friendly in EF, they could also be friendly here. But Akabane felt that since Akira avoided her here, she would probably do the same in EF.

"Huh. Considering it's Akira we're talking about, I don't think you have to worry."

Akabane's worried expression quickly soured.

"Don't speak so lightly," she said sharply. "If you tell her and she starts avoiding me in EF, will *you* take the blame?"

"Oh, well, uh —"

"Exactly. Anyway, it's just too risky to tell her right now."

"Hmm. Are you saying you want things to stay the way they are?"

"Absolutely not. I said 'right now,' as you might recall. That's why I've been trying to meet her halfway, in order to pave the way for future friendship."

"Halfway?! You always look like you're practically begging for a fight with her."

Akabane's eyes widened.

"What? Are you kidding me?!"

"Lady, that's my line! Why don't you just talk to her like a normal, non-hostile human being?"

Is that it? She just doesn't communicate her feelings well? Seems like people who grow up rich and famous try to assert their dominance without even realizing it.

"How dare you! What do you even mean by 'normal'?! Aren't real friends supposed to come to you?!" Akabane's face flushed with red.

She must be embarrassed.

"Uh, have you really never tried making the first move yourself?"

"Erm... No, I haven't."

Celeb types like her are used to other people flocking to them. Akira probably grew up in a similar environment... I'm sure it bored her out of her mind. That's probably why she got into online games, since then she could ignore the real world and immerse herself in a better one.

"All right, fine. I'll help you out! I won't say a word about Scarlet, and next time you want to try to talk to Akira, I'll help you bridge the gap."

"Hmph! I don't need your help! I'll be just fine by myself!"

I have some serious doubts about that. If she continues going about it in her own way, things will probably never change.

"Well, that goes without saying. I just feel like lending a hand here. If we can all game together, then I bet you can be good friends in real life, too."

"If you insist, then I won't stop you, but our circumstances are rather unique. Each of us was constantly told growing up that we had to be better than the other."

"Hmm... That's right, your parents are kinda like business rivals, right? How did all this come about, anyway?"

"Little more than coincidence, really. My brother had recommended EF to me, and the first players I met were you and Akira."

Right. We became acquainted with Scarlet on his—erm, her first day, so we helped her out and played together often.

"It was deliciously fun. I might not be able to escape my responsibilities as the daughter of the Akabane family, but in EF, I was free."

"Akira said something like that, too."

"Really?" Akabane giggled. She looked a little happy to hear that. I wondered if it was because they had that little connection.

"Playing with the two of you was so fun that —pardon me for this —I looked into your backgrounds a tiny bit."

"Huh. So that's how you figured out Akira was Akira Aoyagi, right?"

"Yes. Until that point, I only saw Akira Aoyagi as an enemy to be defeated. But

then...”

“You realized she was actually a good person.”

“Right. I grew tired of fighting with her, calling her an enemy and a rival, but we already had such a long history.”

“I feel you. You’re starting from less than zero on the friendship scale, so it takes time.”

“Yes. Right now, Akira hates me and wants nothing to do with me. Until we can overcome this barrier, I’m going to withhold from telling her I’m Scarlet.”

Right, right. From Akabane’s point of view, her plan to befriend Akira is already in motion. But because of her poor communication skills, it’s just not going well.

“Okay, got it. Let’s see what we can do until then!”

“You’re quite the busybody, you know that?”

“You think so?”

“Yes. Just like you were in EF.”

Ooh! This is the first time I’ve seen a gentle smile wriggle its way out of Akabane. It’s honestly beautiful.

With that, we entered the waiting room.

“Great job, Ren! You made it to the finals!”

“Yeah! Go win your next match, too, Akira!”

“Hmph, such a shame. I would have liked to take you down myself.”

Uh, wow, okay. That’s not being friendly at all, Akabane! Ahh, geez. The road ahead will be long and treacherous, but I’ll do my best to help their friendship blossom.

Chapter 6: Final Battle!

At last, the spring PvP tournament sponsored by Mystic Arts had come to its final round! The final match was me versus Akira, two members of the same guild duking it out! The two of us walked up the stairs, side by side.

“We finally made it! And we’ve got Libra’s Brush in the bag! We did pretty darn good, huh?” Akira chirped, grinning.

Since the two of us were facing off in the finals, Libra’s Brush was already guaranteed to go to our guild. That made this fight more like a bonus stage or an exhibition match. We could pretty much kick back and have fun from here on out.

“Man, that was a long, hard road. All that money, lost to the darkness...”

“Haha, you did waste a lot of money, huh? Four million Mila in total. Cha-ching!”

“Don’t forget my Fanatic’s Staff.”

The staff wasn’t all that expensive, but I was worse off without it. I was able to get an iron sword to use for a Canesword in this fight, but unfortunately, I hadn’t had time to get a new Fanatic’s Staff. I made a mental note to go shopping soon.

“Well, both of the weapons were either given to you or picked up by Draco, so I’d just give up and say the money wasn’t yours to begin with.”

“Nah, I don’t regret it anymore. After seeing one hit do over five thousand points of damage, I don’t mind one bit! Huge numbers like that are dramatic, Akira! You’ll get what I mean when you try it yourself.”

“Huh? You want me to give up being a sword dancer? Guess I’ll become a symbologist.”

“Whoa! No, no, no. Stay a sword dancer, please.”

The drama cannon can hold its own in one-on-one duels if you ignore the cost, but I really shine when I’m partied up with my sword dancer sidekick. Our partnership is what grants us our real power.

“Oh? You mean for my abilities, right?”

“Yeah, for your abilities. We have perfect synergy.”

“I kinda feel like you’re also in it for the eye candy, though.”

“You got it! It’s honestly just a small bonus, but I’m always appreciative!”

“Geez! I never know whether you even *mean* the first one these days, considering you’re always checking me out. If I were any other girl, you’d have been screamed at a hundred times by now.” Akira gave me a fierce glare.

“Heh... Well, uh, y’see—”

Luckily, we were interrupted by an announcement.

“Now for the final match! Contestants, enter the ring!”

“That’s our cue!”

“Yeah. Let’s get to it.”

“I’m not gonna hold back. Give me all you got!”

“Totally. No hard feelings!”

Akira and I nodded as we walked up the staircase. The staircase was essentially a private space where nobody else could see us. Akira and I were walking close together, when suddenly she linked arms with me. Her robust chest pressed against my arm, and I marveled at the softness.

“Hey! What the heck?!” I asked, a little flustered.

“Heheh. Is there a problem?”

“I mean, where’s this coming from?”

“Just using seduction to my advantage! I’m gonna make it impossible for you to concentrate so I can get ahead early! Plus, if we walk out like this, you’re gonna get the whole crowd’s aggro. Teehee!”

“Whoa, now that’s just dirty.”

“Mwahaha... I told you I wouldn’t hold back. All’s fair in love and war, Ren!”

“Man, you’re the most ruthless opponent I’ve had yet.”

“So? You know my dirty tricks, but you’re not gonna pull away?”

“Well, however dirty you decide to fight, I’ve gotta fight you back fair and square.”

“Sounds like you’re just having fun to me!”

“No comment!”

“I see how it is. Clamming up now that your back’s to the wall, huh?” Akira chuckled. “Nah, honestly, I was just trying to hide my embarrassment. You made it to the finals, just like you promised. I’m so happy, I couldn’t help latching on. Heehee. Sorry if I surprised you.”

“Oh, well, umm, it was kind of a nice surprise, if you know what I mean...”

We both fell silent, a bittersweet, ticklish emotion fluttering in our hearts. The arena was coming into view as the clamor within grew louder and louder.

What in the world?! I’ve never heard of something like this, even in dating sims!

Akira let go of my arm and ran a few steps ahead.

“Just kidding! Great emotional warfare, right? Now you *really* won’t be able to focus on the fight!”

“It was all a ruse? Gah, you’re such a jerk!” I ran after Akira in an attempt to catch her. Just as I did, we both lost our balance and fell over.

“Aah!”

“Whoa!”

We both tumbled to the ground in the center of the stadium. As a result... The first impression we gave as we entered was me pushing Akira over. On top of that, my hand was positioned right on her chest! It was almost like I copped a lucky feel, but out here, it was actually pretty unlucky.

Is this what the real deal feels like?! Man, it’s sooo soft! I wonder if it only feels like this in-game, or if it’s like this in real-life too...

“Hey, buddy! Is sullying our precious Akira part of your entrance schtick?!”

“You tryna pick a fight with all of us, dumbass?!”

“I paid to see something like this?! Whoever’s idea this was, I wanna see you right this second!”

“Takashiro, I misjudged you! That’s not what a follower’s supposed to do! We look, but we don’t touch!”

The ground beneath me seemed to shake as the crowd erupted with boos.

“Ahahaha... Sorry, Ren. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Don’t sweat it. I already knew you’d be the fan favorite. Let’s just ignore them and get on with it.”

“Okay. Mind getting your hand off my boob, then?”

“Oops! Sorry, my bad.”

“No, it’s my fault, too.”

We both stood up in a panic and faced each other in preparation for the duel.

“Now that I’ve been faced with the fact that I *still* don’t have a boyfriend at my age, I may have lost some of the wind in my sails, but we’re getting ready for our final match! I’m sure most of the audience understands how I feel!”

A good chunk of the crowd cheered, supporting Ms. Nakada’s sudden admission.

“Go on, just flirt the whole time, why don’t you?! Okay, okay. Start the match, I guess.”

The gong sounded a little sadder this time, too.

Here we go! The final battle is on!

Akira and I stared off amid the relentless booing. I’d been able to scrounge up materials for a new Canesword after the last match, but I was still missing a new Fanatic’s Staff. That meant I wouldn’t be able to deal with Akira’s attacks by guarding for zero damage.

Even so, the shockwaves from Skyfall use magic stats for damage calculations, so a Fanatic’s Staff wouldn’t have been much help anyway. I figured I should aim for a short fight in which I won in one strike. She also had Breath of Ares to fill up her AP bar, so the longer the battle got, the greater her advantage.

If she *did* manage to secure enough AP, Akira could use Vanishing Whirl to really drag the battle out, like Akabane had. Additionally, she had some sort of brand-new card up her sleeve I knew nothing about.

Once again, the more AP she gets, the worse things get for me. Long battles aren't good for me, so I should aim for a quick win. All right, first up...

"Enervating Circle!"

I cast the circle with a radius large enough to clear out my MP bar! I wanted to finish her off in one go.

My foe, Akira, used a Toxin to start the match. This was to be expected at this point, so I had entered the battle already holding a Canesword.

"Comin' in hot!" I took off toward Akira, ready to end the battle immediately.

"No way!" Akira turned and started running away, trying to escape the circle.

Guess she's not willing to intercept my charge.

"Hey! Get back here, you!"

"Aaah! He's chasing meee!"

As I chased the poor girl, attempting to cut her down, I probably looked like some kinda despicable thug.

This is prime time if I wanna win, though! There's no other way!

I ran faster, gradually closing in on her, and soon she was inside the Enervating Circle. Just as I got within attack range, however...

"Vanishing Whirl!"

Akira sprung into the air and disappeared.

"Gah, darn it! You got enough AP for it that fast?!"

I had completely lost sight of her. Now the situation was reversed; she was on the offensive and I was forced to proceed with caution. No matter how much time passed, though, she didn't attack me. My circle eventually dissipated after its effect time ran out.

"Oh, I get it. You don't want me getting even a single point of AP."

AP increases whenever you attack or are attacked. Also, my Parry Ring also gives an AP boost whenever I take zero damage while guarding. I didn't have any strength behind my normal attacks, so all I'd been able to do until now was build up AP through guarding and having my guard broken.

Akira was cutting off my one source of AP.

"That's right. Windmill and Stinging Shot may not be strong, but you can move in tricky ways when you combine them. I know if I give you too many options, you'll come up with something crazy, so I've gotta take them away from you instead."

Not only was she still invisible, but her voice was also constantly moving, so I couldn't figure out where she was.

That's Akira for you. She's always on her guard, never leaving an opening. She's probably waiting until her AP bar fills up completely.

Thanks to AP Limit Break, Akira's max AP was multiplied by 1.5, making for a total of 450. Once she hit that new maximum, she would probably come at me with her trump card—a legendary move she hadn't even teased during the entire tournament! This would be our first time facing off since she'd come into possession of it, too. We hadn't even tested it together at the training grounds.

"Planning on using you-know-what?"

"Mwahaha. Remember, I'm not pulling any punches. I've got a feeling I'll need it to take you down, Ren."

"Are you sure, though? There are tons of people here."

"Um, I'll be fine! I think!"

She's unsure. Well, that's normal, considering what it is.

After a few more minutes passed, I figured she was probably nearing 450 AP.

"Okay, um, here goes nothin'! G-G-Get ready for this!"

She faded back in from where she'd been stealthed, and one thing about her was *very* different.

"Aww yeaaaah! Hot dang, Akira!"

“Woohoo! Yowza!”

“Whooooa! Nice, nice, nice!”

The crowd went absolutely bonkers.

“Wow! That’s insane!”

Akira was wearing totally new gear that was much more revealing. It was basically an eye-popping bikini with its own built-in wrap. Compared to what she was wearing before, this was on a whole other level. The top piece was silver with gold embellishments, and the silvery bottom was a ruffled miniskirt that sparkled in the light.

The outfit really showed off her assets, pleasantly defining her full, round bust and curvy hourglass figure. Her whole belly, including her navel, was clearly visible. While her lower body was just barely covered, the fabric was being moved around so much by the wind that it might as well have not been there at all.

Wow, what an amazing outfit. It’s the perfect marriage of sexy and cute!

“S-Stop staring at me! It’s embarrassing!”

“I’d be a fool to look away from my opponent in battle. Besides, everyone in the crowd is staring at you too, y’know.”

“Augh! Don’t say that! I’m trying to ignore it!”

Her gear was called Angelic Charm. It was another item we’d found at Almishr’r Burial Ground. As you might expect from its appearance, just looking at it is enough to charm you. Its special effect makes it so that members of the opposite sex can’t guard against your attacks. The ability is probably meant to reflect the idea that the enemy is so distracted by you that he neglect his own self-defense. It’s a surprisingly—or should I say, incredibly—strong effect.

On the other hand, the outfit stands out so much that it nullifies all stealth skills, including Vanishing Whirl. With carefully timed outfit changes, that weakness could probably be avoided outright. Akira didn’t have an Equip Ring or the Quick Change talent, though, so she had to change manually. She was probably going to keep Angelic Charm equipped for the rest of the match.

From here on out, I wouldn't be able to guard any of her attacks. Even if I made the guarding motion, it wouldn't decrease the damage I sustained. I could only assume she held back something this powerful for so long because it was so humiliating to wear. It was only here and now that she'd broken the seal on this legendary gear.

"G-Get ready! I'm gonna give you the beating of a lifetime!" Akira declared, her face as red as a beet.

"Haaah!"

For the first time in our match, she came in for an attack. Akira slashed at the air from a safe distance, creating a shockwave with Skyfall. Thanks to Angelic Charm, I wouldn't be able to guard her attacks. She dashed right behind her shockwave, ready to attack me as soon as I moved to evade.

So, what should I do? I could avoid the shockwave, but Akira's poised to follow my dodge with her own direct attack. With no AP, I can't use Windmill's jump to avoid her.

My actions were heavily limited. The only way forward was to go on the hunt for my one-hit kill! I ignored the shockwave and charged straight ahead. I withstood the attack that threatened to blow me away, pressing onward.

Akira attacked.

Dealt 73 damage to Ren!

That's nothin' to cry about!

I rushed into range of Akira, who was still right behind the shockwave.

"Hawk Strike!"

She activated her art and leapt into the air above me.

She's gonna flee for now, huh? I guess she does have 450 AP to blow through.

"Tch. Running away?"

"Nope! Eat this!"

Fwoosh!

Another shockwave was headed in my direction.

If I take this one head-on, she'll just run away again!

I ran away at an angle to put as much distance as possible between us as I evaded her shockwaves. As soon as I stopped moving, Akira unleashed another attack.

Skyfall and Angelic Charm make for one heck of a combo! It's a perfect storm against men. If I take it head-on, she runs away. If I run away, she comes after me. Hmm...

"All right. I see how it is!"

I faced the shockwave, opened my inventory, and used a healing potion. My HP recovered just as I took the hit. As a result, I healed about as much as I lost.

Akira's watching out for my ultimate move, so she won't step into close range.

Another shockwave came in from beyond my range, so I started running away once more. We followed the same sequence as before: after my quick turn, she shot another shockwave at me as I gulped down a potion. My HP was still the same as it was before. After this second repetition, Akira stopped and stared at me.

"I see... You're trying to gain AP."

"Whoops! You got me."

The reason I moved away from her was because the potion animation takes time. If I hadn't put a gap between us, the shockwave would've reached me before I finished drinking it, interrupting the process. I had calculated the distance between us so that the shockwave reached me just after I finished. If I kept this up, I could build up enough AP to give myself more options. The only way to stop me from doing that was to fight at close range, which would make it possible for me to OHKO her.

So, what'll you choose, ol' buddy of mine?

"All I have to do is keep going until you run out of potions," she said.

That was my biggest worry. If she just continued coming at me with shockwaves, I'd be done for. The amount of AP you get from an enemy's attack is based on the attack type, rather than the damage dealt. For example, if you

deal ten damage or a hundred damage with the same attack, the AP gain would be the same. I took a lot of damage from Akira's attacks because I couldn't guard against them, but it wasn't giving me any more AP than I would've normally received.

In other words, I was getting AP at a very inefficient rate. I wouldn't be able to guard and build up AP over time like I had before since there was a good chance I'd die first. Plus, I didn't have that many potions left. The sooner I could make this a close-range duel, the better.

"Heh. Are you sure you have the time to spare? I think you'd better hurry. Take a look!" I waved toward the audience.

Whenever Akira stood still, they had the perfect opportunity to snap as many screenshots as they wanted. Flashes from otherworldly lenses filled the stands.

"Aaahhh!"

"Imagine all the pictures people are taking of you in your Angelic Charm."

"Why don't you yell at them?! Or, umm, I don't know, stop them or something?!" Akira's voice squeaked. Her face was flushed red, and her eyes were brimming with tears.

Oof, maybe I went a little too far.

"Okay, fine, sorry. Time-out for a sec, so I can cover you up."

"Wha...?"

I used a mana potion to replenish my empty MP bar.

"Enervating Circle! Enfeebling Circle! Stupefying Circle!"

The three-layered circle turned black as my MP fell to zero again. Now Akira and I were pretty much invisible to the crowd. It was dark in the circle as well, but not dark enough that we couldn't see each other.

"There. They can't see you now."

"Oh. Um, thanks, Ren."

"Hey, no need to thank me. I was just pretending to be nice so I could debuff you."

“Uh-huh, suuure. You say that, but I bet you just wanted me all to yourself, right? Am I right? Well... I can’t say I’m not flattered.”

“I can remove the circles at any time, y’know.”

“No! Please don’t!”

“Then let’s finish this before they run out! We’ve got one minute!”

“All right! If that’s how it is, let’s see which one of us can OHKO the other first!”

We both moved into close range, readying our weapons. The anticipation of this decisive confrontation sent my nerves crackling. I had about 50 AP, which was enough to use Windmill and Stinging Shot once each.

I’ll have to use them wisely if I wanna win this!

“Let’s do this thing, Ren!”

“Yeah! Three... two... one...!”

“Go!”

With that, we charged toward one another.

“Ultimate move! Cross Crescent!”

This move is a blend of Double Slash and Crescent Slash. It combines Crescent Slash’s wide-range crescent moon effect with Double Slash’s two-hit effect. It even activates Skyfall’s shockwave ability as a bonus. The attack had a wider range than my ultimate move, so I took the full brunt of it and kept moving.

Akira activated Cross Crescent.

Dealt 494 damage to Ren!

I’ve still got 450 HP! I made it! Now Akira’s right in front of me! If I use my ultimate, it’ll hit her for sure! Agh, but I’m all out of MP. If I use Dead End, it’ll bring my HP down to 1. So if we both attack at the same time, the battle will probably end in a draw. I’ll have to win by using Dead End right after one of Akira’s attacks, almost like a counterattack. All right, next time she attacks, I’m gonna go for it.

“Ultimate move! Aerial...”

The first blow launched me high into the air.

She used Aerial Crescent?!

Because I was forcibly moved by the first attack, I couldn't counter the second. As I floated in the air, I caught sight of Akira jumping up and pulling back her sword for the next hit.

This is bad. Am I gonna survive this?! I'd better use Dead End to force a draw!

When I saw my HP bar, though, I noticed I had a whopping 228 HP left. The first blow had dealt 222 damage.

Huh, that's funny. Aerial Crescent's first and second strikes both deal the same amount of damage, so after I take 222 more damage, I'll be down to 6 HP. I can take this hit and counter for the win! But would Akira make a mistake like that? My best friend Akira, of all people? I wonder if she's got another trick up her sleeve. Wait, that means...!

Akira's move wasn't Aerial Crescent at all. It was something else entirely.

"...Full Moon!"

Akira rose even higher into the air, holding her sword aloft. She then began rapidly somersaulting toward me. As I watched the flashy animation of her spinning blade, I marveled at the extraordinary feat. This ultimate was probably made by throwing another art on top of Aerial Crescent.

If I had tried to attack her right before she leapt into the air, I would've totally whiffed it. Even if I'd wanted to counterattack, her ultimate move—which hit more than just twice—would have killed me.



Thank goodness I noticed something was off!

I set Dead End aside for now and changed my course of action.

“Stinging Shot!”

My direction changed in midair. As she spun by, her sword just missed me.

“Huh?!”

“Skill Set C! Skill Set B!”

I changed sets twice, switching from Canesword to iron staff to Canesword again. I had just launched my Canesword away using Stinging Shot, but doing this brought it back immediately. Normally, you can’t fight while your staff is returning to you, but if you change equipment fast enough, it skips that altogether.

I can’t let this moment go to waste! With my Canesword back in hand, there’s just one thing left to do!

“Ultimate move! Dead Eeeeend!”

It was a direct hit on Akira, who was still spinning in midair.

Smaaaaash!

“Waaaagh!”

Ren activated Dead End.

Dealt 2,622 damage to Akira!

Ren has defeated Akira.

Duel complete! Ren is the winner!

Ren’s duel record is 6W / 0L.

“What’s this? It’s over! The winner is Ren Takashiro! Congratulations!”

I won! Woohoo! Go Ren, go Reeen! Winning is always a thrill, but for the Emperor of the Underpowered, winning with a weak class is all the sweeter!

“Good work, Akira. That was a great fight!” I walked over to Akira and extended my hand, offering to help her up.

“Darn it, I can’t believe I lost. I put on that embarrassing outfit for nothing!” She took my hand, already back to wearing her usual gear.

Wow, she’s quick!

“That was so close! I was like, literally seconds away from losing. We should do that again!”

“Yeah, it was pretty fun! We get Libra’s Brush, too. I’m really glad I joined this tournament.”

“For sure. Pretty sure I got to show the world just how much potential symbologist has. Did you see that, everybody?! You fall in love with symbologist yet?!”

“BOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Wow. They’re still at it, huh? I’d better get out of the spotlight.

“They clearly hate me. I guess they were all rooting for you, Akira.”

“Hahaha... Oh well.”

“How about we get outta here?!”

“Sure. Let’s go!”

Thus, we exited the stadium and moved toward the waiting room. As we descended the stairs, I shot Akira a bashful glance.

“So, uh, is it cool if I take some screenshots of Angelic Charm later on?”

“Huh? Absolutely not!”

“What?! I can’t believe you!”

“I’m super mad because I lost, so you don’t get to see nothin’! Maybe next time, bucko!”

With that, we successfully took home Libra’s Brush!

Chapter 7: Time to Make Our Shop a Hit!

The day after the tournament, our guild crew met up after school to discuss how we could make the shop prosper.

“This thing’s pretty cool! It makes coloring a breeze, too!” Yano looked happy as a clam as she practiced with Libra’s Brush.

Using the wooden table I’d created as her canvas, she painted a rectangular flower pattern. Rectangles, circles, stars, and other shapes can be used for designs. Drawing lines of varying thickness is easy as well. Lines can also be made into preset designs. It didn’t take her long at all to cover the wooden table in patterns.

“Aww yeah! Thanks, guys! This thing makes drawing and painting a breeze.”

“It certainly seems that way. You can paint designs in an instant once you’ve saved them,” added Maeda.

“Then we could even handle mass production! As long as we have the designs, any one of us could paint our products! We’ll just have you make and save the designs, Yuuna!” said Akira.

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to do an amazing job, but since you and Takashiro fought so hard to get this, I’m willing to do everything I can to help out.”

“Once we have plenty of items to work with, we can paint them and put them up in our shop.”

“And that’s where yours truly comes in!”

I’ll make the items, then we’ll make them all pretty with Yano’s designs and sell them as textured items! I may be out of ingots, but I still have some wooden materials to craft tables and chairs. For now, I’ll invest everything I’ve got into makin’ our products! I also ought to make a sign or something for the shop.

“What should we do, then?” Akira asked.

“For now, focus on stuff like advertising, shopkeeping, and helping out with stock.”

Advertising is definitely important. Same with shopkeeping. Fortunately, Maeda and Akira are both pretty hot, so they'll definitely bring in customers. In fact, I have some secret plans to help with that.

"All right, time to prepare for our grand opening! Yano, keep on making up designs. I'll prepare base items for you to work on."

"Kotomi, how about you and I go gather crafting materials? Ren's running really low right now."

"Sure, I'd be happy to."

"Oh, and be sure to get tons of ingots. I've got plenty of wood-based materials, but I'm all out of metals."

"Okay!"

The four of us split up to begin our respective tasks. Akira and Maeda left to procure materials, and Yano concentrated on making patterns in the second-floor living space. Meanwhile, I locked myself up in the first-floor atelier and got to crafting.

I still have a few materials on hand. Maybe I'll make a table first.

Crafting in the atelier grants you various bonuses. In addition to giving your crafting level a boost, it reduces the risk of failure with Material Saver, uses less materials than usual because of Material Theory, allows you to have NPCs do the crafting for you through Employ Craftsman, and so on. There are tons of other effects, which vary based on the facilities in your atelier. Naturally, better facilities lead to better effects. The public crafting room in the school comes with Material Saver, but that service is just the bare minimum.

Also, there are several different kinds of crafting skills, each with their own levels. I'm mainly leveling up smithing, woodworking, and alchemy. As for why I chose them, it was all about making hidden weapons, though I hoped that one day I could max out every crafting skill.

Smithing is for metal equipment like weapons and armor, and woodworking is for staves and furniture, so I decided to use those two for textured items. Alchemy is mainly used for making medicines and processing certain materials, so it wouldn't be of much use for making textured items.

“Okay. First off, a wooden table!”

Furniture is perfect for making textured items. You don’t take furniture into battle, so you don’t have to worry about stats or anything.

“Wooden chair!”

A normal wooden chair for single-person use.

“Wooden bench!”

A wooden bench, if you could believe it.

“Wooden cup! Wooden plate!”

A cup and a plate. Simple miscellaneous items.

“Wooden mannequins!”

I could use this for the shop display! There’s a showcase in the shop, so I could set these up and decorate them with equipment.

“Oak shield! Oak staff!”

Obviously, I didn’t expect these to sell; they were going to show off what a custom paint job could do to players’ equipment. Players were pretty much clamoring to have their most precious weapons painted with a design of their choosing.

“Woop! I’ve got a couple designs ready! Let me try ’em out on your stuff, Takashiro!” Yano called, running down to the atelier. “Oh! Looks like you’ve got some test subjects ready, too.”

“Yep. Feel free to try out whatever you’d like!”

“I’ll take this one, then.”

She picked up the wooden plate and painted it white with Libra’s Brush. Next, she opened a menu in the air. After a few flicks of her pen, a design selection screen appeared. She chose a picture of several fruits, then tapped the wooden plate with the end of the pen, pasting the fruit design onto it. The wooden plate was officially decorated!

Hot dang! It didn’t even take her a minute!

“So, whaddaya think? Pretty cool, right?”

“Yeah, it’s amazing! It looks like something you’d find at a general store!”

And to think, this was originally just a boring ol’ wooden plate! It’s perfect! I bet a bunch of these would sell like hotcakes. Ooh, I can’t wait for us to open up shop!

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Two days later, our guild shop’s showfloor was stocked and almost ready to go. In the center of the store, we had tables, chairs, and other furniture. The wall shelves had small, miscellaneous goods like cups and plates. The display facing the road contained armored mannequins, and staves, swords, and other weapons were lined up beside them. Naturally, none of these items had their default appearance; they were all textured items decorated with Yano’s designs.

For the most part, our inventory was covered with brightly colored designs; female players would probably be more interested in these things. No surprise there, since our designer was a gaudy gal-type.

That said, there were plenty of things that would catch the eyes of male players, too. For example, we had a shield with a cute, teary-eyed girl on it. After all, who could attack someone holding up a shield like that?! Besides the shield, we had plenty of other items decorated with prints of cute girls. I mean, it’s not unheard of these days to have a car or bag plastered with anime girls, right?!

“Whew! We’ve got so much stuff here!”

Holding up a hand to shield my eyes against the morning sunlight, I nodded, feeling satisfied.

“We sure do! This little toy’s made for fast and easy work!” Yano twirled her beloved Libra’s Brush around in her fingers.

She did a great job. Even better that she had fun doing it, too.

“Now that we’ve got this much done, we should be able to open up shop soon.”

“Yeah. I really hope people like it.”

Yano had made a wide variety of patterns, and we were just about to finish stocking up the shop. The time for our grand opening was finally coming into view. That meant we had to move to the next phase.

“On that note, we’d better advertise soon, huh?”

“Advertising, eh? What’s the plan, Ren?” Akira asked.

“We’ll hand out flyers after school. I hope you’re all available and willing to help out!”

“That does seem important. I’ll be there,” said Maeda.

“Sweet! Want me to make a design for the flyers with Libra’s Brush, too?”

“Yes, please.”

All that was left was to wait for the school day to end. Still, just handing out flyers wouldn’t make enough of an impact. As the guild master, I was ready to pull out all the stops!

At lunchtime, I inhaled my food before paying the third-year classrooms a visit—classroom 3-A, to be precise. Homura was sitting in a window seat facing the hallway. I called out to her as she stared vacantly at the doorway.

“Hey, Homura! I’m here to pick up the stuff!”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s you, Takashiro. Here you go; everything’s ready.”

“Thank you so much!”

“This is supposed to be on exhibition at the museum, though, so make sure you give it back when you’re done, okay? Also, keep in mind that...”

While I listened to Homura, something unusual caught my eye. The students walking around outside were as normal as ever, but among them, there was someone who was *clearly* out of place. I mean, what else would you say about someone wearing a full-face iron mask and literally nothing else?!

Homura, on the other hand, didn’t even flinch.

Did she not see that?! No way, she was looking right out the window!

“Remember, this is just a loan. As repayment, you’ll be joining us on our next item hunt.”

“Uh, sure thing.”

I looked for the figure from before, but they had already disappeared.

Huh? What the...? Was I just seeing things? Maybe I’m just tired. Could it have been an illusion?

“Thanks again for letting me borrow this!”

Ah, whatever. I’m not too worried about it.

I thanked Homura again and exited the classroom.

After school, we once again assembled at the guild house.

“Okay, we should start handing out flyers. One thing’s first, though.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Let’s change clothes! We need to stand out, and I’ve got just the thing from Homura!”

This may have been a sketchy way of boosting our advertising potential, but it would definitely work! I brought Homura’s “loan” out of my inventory and held it before my guildmates: three Brilliant Gothic Dresses.

The Brilliant Gothic Dress is pretty much a maid outfit. It’s mostly prim and proper, although it does emphasize the wearer’s chest a little bit. The outfit’s greatest feature is that it glitters with light. It’s mostly meant for fun, so it isn’t too good in battle, but it still stands out a great deal, thanks to the sparkle effect—even more so when it’s worn by a cute girl. Fortunately, this small army of girls was one hundred percent cute.

“So this is it, huh? Wow, it’s so sparkly and pretty!” Akira gasped.

“It really does stand out quite a bit. I’m a bit afraid of wearing it,” said Maeda warily.

“Oh, wow... I think I have some, uh, designs I need to work on. Maybe it’s best if I stay in the guild house.”

“Permission granted, Yano.”

“Woohoo!”

There’s no need to force our designer to advertise, anyway. Even if she was just saying that to get out of it, I’m sure she has more designs to crank out.

“Th-Then I should also—”

“Not so fast! You and Akira are in charge of sales and advertising for our guild, so this is pretty much your job. Go on and be the best saleswoman you can be!”

“B-But...!”

“Don’t worry! I bet it’ll look great on you, Maeda!”

“Oh? Really? Erm, okay. I suppose I’ll give it a try.”

Akira, on the other hand, had already finished changing into her Brilliant Gothic Dress.

“Ta-daaa! I couldn’t help myself!”

“Ooh, nice! I like your enthusiasm! And you look perfect.”

“Yep! Besides, this is nothing compared to what I had to wear the other day.”

“Angelic Charm? Hey, the crowd loved you.”

“After that mess, something this modest and cute is like a reward for the trials I’ve endured.”

“That’s my girl! Reliable as ever.”

“It’s completely your fault, Ren! How much more humiliation will I have to go through? Sniffle...”

“Whoa, we’re not here for slander.”

“It’s true, though! Anyway, those flyers won’t hand themselves out!”

“Um, I’m all ready.”

“Ooh?! Maeda, you’re looking fantastic, too! We’re guaranteed to stand out now!”

They’re gonna draw a real crowd! Let’s go promote our shop!

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“Hello there! Hell’s Crafters’ guild shop will be opening soon!”

“Hi! We’ll have discounts on every item for our grand opening!”



“Um, excuse me...!”

We stood in the middle of a major street and put our all into passing out flyers. Akira seemed perfectly at ease, but Maeda was shaking in her boots and tripping over herself constantly, clearly self-conscious about her outfit. Regardless, our beloved saleswomen had an incredible effect on players and NPCs alike. They could hardly keep their eyes off the girls.

In this game, the NPCs’ thought processes and actions are so refined that they’ll respond to advertising and even come to buy stuff. The alliance of companies behind the game-school combo really didn’t hold back when it came to trying out new things. The NPCs here apparently had some really cutting-edge AI.

“Kotomi, you’re looking a little uneasy. Why don’t you relax?”

“Right, well... I’d like to, but unlike you, some of us aren’t used to being gawked at. I just can’t stop thinking about what I’m wearing.”

“What...?! It’s not like I’m wearing this for fun, y’know! Blame Ren!” Akira glared daggers at me.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“This is just my opinion, but I think it’s totally unfair that only girls have to wear revealing clothes like this. We should be allowed the joy of seeing boys do the same! It’s all about equality!”

“Huh?! Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah! Get half-naked and wear nothing but a bowtie on your upper body or something. Isn’t this super unfair, Kotomi?”

“I suppose you’re right. Men and women should be equal, after all.”

“Whoa, whoa. It’d be creepy if I did that. People would just think I’m some sort of perv!”

I glanced over at the guy with the iron mask. Now there was a real creep.

Wait, what?! There he is again! I knew I wasn’t just seeing things!

“Oh!”

By the time I had taken a second glance, he was already gone.

Geez, this is kinda freaking me out. If some spirit or fairy or something were revealing itself to me, then I'd be able to brush it off as a pure and mystical encounter. Instead, I just keep catching sight of some random pervert running around. Then again, why would I expect something pure and mystical to visit me in the first place?

"Could I have a flyer?"

"Oh, of course! Hey, Homura!"

"Howdy, Homura."

"H-Hi there..."

"Ooh, textured items? As an item-collecting addict, I can't say I'm not interested. I'll come check it out tomorrow."

"Okay! Thank you!"

"Hey, wait, Homura!"

"Hm? What's up?"

"Do you have any sexy, revealing outfits for guys in your museum? It's super unfair that only the two of us have to dress up like this!"

"Hmmm?"

"Not to worry, gals! I've got just the thing!"

"Oh, hey, Yukino!"

"I just happened to overhear your little predicament as I was passing by. You can borrow the outfit our guild uses for the Century's End Challenge, if you'd like!"

"Hey, whoa, what is that?! That sounds way too suspicious!"

"It's when you wear a spiked leather jacket and a mohawk and get mowed down by horses! The people who get trampled the most lose, so it's kinda like tag, in a way. I'd say the outfit is plenty revealing."

"You meatheads make no sense."

“Hmph. It’s not my fault. Even if it’s weird, it’s pretty much a tradition in our guild. Plus, it’s mimicking a manga we all love dearly. It only makes sense that a bunch of PvP-freaks are into that kinda stuff, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. All the Martial Artists in this game probably love it.”

“Can we please borrow the outfit, Yukino? Then we can be even, Ren!”

“Fine, whatever.”

Not like I can refuse, anyway. Plus, I also happen to like that manga. My parents have it at home. But man, do I really have to do this alone? I’d feel better if I had another guy with me.

Maybe the guild is too feminine. Draco and I are the only guys, after all. I wasn’t worried about it before, but now... Oh well. Guess I’d better suck it up and get changed.

“Yeehaw! I’ve come to advertise, baby!”

If I get embarrassed now, it’s all over! I have to push through with all I’ve got! Become a complete idiot, Ren! Don’t let a single thought enter your mind! You are just a vessel for the Century’s End!

Akira and Yukino giggled as they watched me. Maeda, on the other hand, was clutching her sides in pain, as if my act had been a direct hit to her funny bone. Her shoulders quivered, and she was struggling to breathe.

“Hey, are you all right?”

“I-I can’t take it! Please, don’t look at me! Oww, my sides hurt!”

Well hey, if it’s that funny to her, I’m happy to be of service.

Afterward, she was off pitching the shop like she’d been born to do it.

With that, our mission to advertise was complete!

◆◆◆

“A flashy centerpiece?”

“Yeah. Prep for the shop is done, and so is the advertising. Now I’d like something that really symbolizes us as a guild. Whether it actually sells or not is a different matter.”

As we waited for class to start the next day, I proposed this idea to my three guildmates.

“Got something in mind, Ren?”

“Sure do. Check this out!”

I revealed a brown bottle with a special liquid inside. It was Merlin’s Finest Taxidermy Solution.

“What is that?”

“It lets you stuff monsters. I made it with alchemy.”

“Takashiro, what does the ‘finest’ part mean?”

“This one lets you stuff boss monsters, too! Y’know, the ones with the crown.”

“Oh, really? Nice job!”

“This baby happens when you flawlessly craft a normal taxidermy solution. With this, we could preserve super-rare monsters, paint them, and stick ’em in our shop. It’d be like a huge, in-your-face catalog!”

A monster display would make one heck of an impact on buyers, and it’d be great advertising for our painting service.

“Interesting idea, bud! It just might work!”

“Oh my. That could have quite a positive impact on our reputation.”

“Does that mean we’re going hunting for rare monsters? It’s been a while since I had a good scrap!”

“For real, Yuuna. We’ve been so busy with the shop.”

“What should we search for, Takashiro?”

“Well, I’ve already got one idea...”

After school, we boarded an airship. Our destination was the Gelkael Battlefield on the Mishr continent. It’s pretty far east of Almishr’s Burial Ground. This location was the site of the greatest battle in a war of independence that led to the founding of Mishr’s biggest country, Mishuria.

Even now, rusty weapons and siege engines littered the area. If you ignored those, it was a peaceful plain filled with lush vegetation.

"Oh! There it is!" I said, pointing at a monster roaming about the area.

Bloody Ooze: Level 35

It was a formless red monster, practically a reskin of your everyday slimes. Bloody Oozes are normal mobs, not worthy of Merlin's Finest Taxidermy Solution. However, they have a very special gimmick, one which makes them quite valuable.

"Akira, how's your AP looking?"

"It maxed out while we were on our way here."

Nice. Sure wish I had Breath of Ares.

"All right. You're up, Yano. Draco, stay with Yano, okay?"

"Okay! C'mere, boy!"

"Chirp!"

Draco flew over and nestled in her arms.

"Enervating Circle!"

I cast the spell on Draco.

"Cool! Off I go!"

Yano dashed off, enveloping several Bloody Oozes in my Enervating Circle. As we chased after her, I placed new circles as needed. Soon we were running all over Gelkael Battlefield, bringing hordes of enemies into the fold.

I'd say this is the finest train of Bloody Oozes I've ever seen!

Yano's little army now consisted of dozens of red slimes.

"Should I keep going? I'm getting grossed out by their sound effects!"

"We should be good soon! Maeda, let's do the thing!"

"Okay!"

Maeda and I joined hands as our voices overlapped.

“Joint Magic!”

Time to use some of the strongest magic out there to mow down some mobs!

I cast Enervating Circle while Maeda cast Diabolic Howl. Our combined magic spread out into a wide circle, with Draco at the center. Yano slowed her pace a bit as the dragon’s head from Diabolic Howl appeared within the magic circle. It chomped down on all of the Bloody Oozes, reducing their HP by 75% each. This combined magic cuts down regular mobs’ HP in one hit. As a result...

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

The Bloody Oozes combined!

Messages poured into my log like a waterfall of gushy oozes!

These monsters will try to combine with other Bloody Oozes when their HP gets low in an attempt to recover their health. After being weakened by our combined magic, they were fusing together over and over, growing bigger all the while, until the resulting mass towered above our heads.

“Ooh! It worked!”

“Whoa! It’s huge!”

“Incredible...!”

“Blegh, this is grossing me out!”

In order to get to our true target, we had to force all those Bloody Oozes to combine. They call him... King Bloody!

Apparently, when you stuff amorphous monsters like slimes, you can change their shapes whenever and however you like. It becomes a totally dynamic

decoration that never gets boring. Hence, I'd decided to come for this guy. But now that it was here in front of me, I noticed something strange.

Draconic Bloody: Level 60

Crown Icon (rare monster)



“Huh? That doesn’t seem right!”

“Shouldn’t they normally form a King Bloody?”

“Yeah, and it should be level 45.”

“It has ‘Draconic’ in its name, and it’s a really high level! What the heck happened?!”

The humongous red mass in front of us began to twist and bubble as it changed shape. Finally, a giant dragon’s face floated up from within the slime.

Skreeeaaahhh!

It roared like an actual dragon, spewing fire breath from its mouth!

“Aaaahhh!”

The Draconic Bloody breathed fire!

Dealt 385 damage to Ren!

Dealt 298 damage to Akira!

Dealt 260 damage to Kotomi!

Dealt 277 damage to Yuuna!

The reason I took the most damage was because of my Fanatic’s Staff. Evidently, it wasn’t done with us yet.

Groooaaaawr!

The Draconic Bloody is enveloped in a Blazing Aura!

The flames dealt 10 damage to Ren!

The flames dealt 10 damage to Akira!

The flames dealt 10 damage to Kotomi!

The flames dealt 10 damage to Yuuna!

“Ouch! It’s really hot!”

The Draconic Bloody’s body was covered in a flame effect. I could feel the heat singeing my skin.

“Looks like you take fire damage if you get too close!”

“So, it’s making a flaming damage field...”

“What do we do?!”

“We have to run for now! Draco, stay next to that thing!”

“Chirp!”

“Enervating Circle! All right, girls, let’s get away!”

The monster was slowed down as Draco stuck to it like glue. It was actually so big that part of its body was poking out of my circle, but the slowing effect still worked. We ran as fast as we could, putting a fair distance between us and the ooze. Akira occasionally cast Healing Dance+, replenishing our HP.

Once we had gotten far enough away, we no longer took damage from the flames.

We’d better fight from a distance! If we get too close, we’re gonna keep taking damage from his flame aura. Plus, we’d be in range of his fire breath. Too dangerous.

“Let’s fight him from outside of his attack range!”

“Okay! Hah!”

Akira swung Skyfall, sending a shockwave at the slime. It reached him, successfully dealing damage.

“I wonder why this happened, though?”

“Things like this just happen sometimes! I don’t know if this makes us lucky or unlucky!”

“It might have to do with how we hurt the Bloody Oozes. Maybe this is what happens when you use draconic magic on it! Either way, this guy might be really rare!”

At least, I didn’t know about him!

“A rare boss is perfect for attracting customers! C’mon, girls, this is like a blessing in disguise!”

“If we win!” the three of them shouted.

Shot down by all three at once?! Ouch!

“Don’t worry, we will! I’ll make sure we don’t lose him!”

I used Merlin’s Finest Taxidermy Solution on the Draconic Bloody. Or, more specifically, I lobbed it at him.

It worked! Now we’re good to take him down! Unfortunately, though, I’ll have to lock away the drama cannon for now. If I try to use Dead End, the flow of events will be Dead End -> 1 HP -> Die to flame damage. Instead...

“Ultimate move! Soul Spear!”

Psheeeew!

My purple laser pierced the Draconic Bloody.

Ren activated Soul Spear.

Dealt 251 damage to Draconic Bloody!

Draconic Bloody is now poisoned.

All right, great! Now we’ve got poison damage on our side!

Soul Spear’s poison does about 80 damage every 3 seconds. Over a minute, that makes 1,600 damage. It’s the perfect strategy for super long battles.

“All right! Stay back for now!”

But our enemy wasn’t about to go down without a fight. The slime once again changed forms, this time becoming the torso of an armor-clad knight. He had a massive bow, too.

“It changed shape again!”

“Yeah!”

An arrow made from some of the slime’s body whistled through the air. As it flew toward us, it split into countless tiny arrows, showering us with a rain of pain.

Grrrrr! Each hit only deals a few dozen points of damage, but there are a ton of ’em. Even moving away from him doesn’t guarantee our safety!

“I’ll heal us! Healing Dance+!”

“Me too! Exheal!”

Akira and Maeda recovered our HP.

“Thank you both!”

“No prob! But if we keep taking damage like this, we might not be able to pull through!”

“Should we split up? That should reduce the amount of damage we take at once!”

“What to do?!”

If we split up, it’ll be harder to coordinate. That presents its own problems.

The monster was difficult to fight up close, so trying to go that route would be really risky. This particular foe was the type that could fight well both at close range and at a distance. Because he had no clear weaknesses in either case, it was tough to choose either strategy.

Long range or short range? Wait, no! We have a third option!

“Maeda! Give Yano your Sniper’s Ring!”

The Sniper’s Ring raises the effective range of bow, gun, and magic projectiles. This was yet another treasure from Almishr’s Burial Ground. Maeda had taken this one for herself.

“Understood! Here, Yuuna!”

“Gotcha! So we’re gonna go long, then, Takashiro?”

“You guessed it! We’re going for super-long-range fire!”

Put simply, we were going to fight from beyond even the enemy’s arrow range.

“Sonic Arms!”

Maeda cast a spell on Yano. This buffing magic increases the range of projectile weapons. With the combined effects of the ring and the buff, her attacks had double the range.

“Longshot!”

Yano’s skill also increased the range of her projectiles. The effect lasted for two minutes, while the skill had a cooldown of five minutes. Now we had *triple* the attack range! We continued to run further and further away from the slime until we hit a point where his arrows could no longer reach us.

From this position, Yano attempted to fire a bullet at it. At least she could land a hit, even if none of the rest of us could.

“Okay! I can hit him!”

“Nice! Now, fire away! Akira, use Sword Samba to reset Longshot’s cooldown!”

“Got it!”

Using Yano’s attacks to outrange the enemy, we continued our long battle. I recast my Enervating Circle and Soul Spear as needed, further reducing the monster’s health.

Once the boss’ HP fell below 20%, it changed form one more time. This time, it was a huge red bird. It rose high into the air and then took a sharp dive, hurling itself at us. Because Yano was our main firepower, she had the most aggro, making her the target.

“Eeeek!”

“Yuuna!”

Akira and Maeda immediately used their healing abilities, bringing her dangerously low HP back up to full.

“Tch! That form’s annoying as heck!”

Since he’s not on the ground, my circles won’t affect him anymore. What a pain! Now we don’t have a way to stop his attacks on Yano.

“Yano, are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine for now!”

As we spoke, I realized that we weren’t taking damage from its Blazing Aura any longer. I didn’t know whether it had stopped because the monster changed

forms or just because enough time had passed, but one thing was for certain: I could safely use Dead End!

The giant bird-shaped slime ascended before once again heading straight toward Yano. That girl was really putting in work. I stood next to her and took aim at the dive-bombing Draconic Bloody.

“Time to finish this! Ultimate move! Dead Eeeeend!”

And end the fight it did. We safely acquired one stuffed Draconic Bloody. Unfortunately, that meant we didn’t get any EXP or item drops.

Still, I have a feeling that this’ll make an incredible attraction!

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The next day, I woke up at 5:30 AM.

Woohoo! Today’s the day! It’s the grand opening of our guild shop!

Once I finished getting ready, I logged in at six o’clock sharp. Business hours start at 6:00 AM and continue through class time. You can hire employees to work for you during school hours, but we didn’t have the money for that—not yet, at least. If operations went smoothly, though, we’d be willing to hire.

“Woo! First login goes to me!”

When I popped in the guild house’s second-floor living space, Draco jumped out of his ceiling hammock and flew down to greet me.

“Chirp chirp! Chichirp!”

“Good morning! Have you been a good boy?”

“Chichirp!”

As we played around, Yano logged in.

“Morning...”

“Hm? Hey there. Man, could you look any less excited?”

“I’m just feelin’ nervous, that’s all.”

“Oh?”

“Well, if our shop is a flop, I’m the one who goes on trial, yeah? I’m the one

who customized all of our stuff."

I get it. She's shouldering all the responsibility and pressure. Beneath all the heavy makeup, she's an honest, genuine person. Err, not that I have a thing against all the girls out there who do wear heavy makeup. What I mean is, Yano's a lot more anxious and self-aware than she appears at first glance. Compared to her, Akira's more headstrong. Well, I guess that's kinda the pot calling the kettle black, heh.

"Don't worry about it! That shield was all me, and that armor is Akira's fault."

The shield I was referring to was the one with the teary-eyed girl on it, while the armor was printed with muscles. I didn't exactly have the best artistic skills, so I'd had Yano draw the cute girl for me. Akira, however, was perfectly happy to draw her own design herself.

Is there nothing we can do about this girl's obsession with macho men?

"I suppose..."

"I think it all turned out pretty darn great. But either way, there's nothing we can do about it now, so fretting over it won't do you any good."

"Mmm... Yeah, you're right. All right, I'm done stressing out about it."

"There you go. And hey, if people don't like your stuff, that still gives you feedback to incorporate into future designs. Even in the worst-case scenario, our efforts weren't wasted."

"Hahaha. You're like a broken record, Takashiro."

"I think it's important to stick to your guns."

"Well, I'd say it depends on the time and place."

During our conversation, Akira and Maeda arrived.

"Good morning! Finally, it's opening day!"

"It is! I'm really looking forward to it."

Now everyone was present.

"Thanks for coming, girls. Let's open up shop, shall we?"

Thus, our guild shop opened for business! We didn't have to wait long before customers started trickling in. Maybe our advertising was worthwhile after all.

Our stuffed Draconic Bloody outside the store stood out, too. As planned, we had decorated it with all of the patterns offered by our painting service. It also served as further advertising. Today, the slime was in the form of a dragon head and positioned on our roof.

Even our classmates showed up to check out the shop, along with Homura, who was a sucker for new items. Our goods sold well, making Yano happy as a clam. Altogether, I think our miscellaneous goods sold the most. For early-morning business, I'd say it all turned out pretty great.

By the way, the shield I designed and the armor Akira designed were both completely ignored.

Oh, well. We're only just getting started!

After class, we opened the shop once again. While Yano and I worked in the atelier to replenish our stock, Akira and Maeda worked the floor. Once our stock was replenished, we took shifts working in the front to give each other some breaks. While it was okay for us to focus entirely on the shop for a while, we'd have to go adventuring again someday.

I wonder how much it costs to hire NPC workers?

Akira and I chatted leisurely during our shared shift.

"Arena tournaments are great and all, but this kinda thing is nice, too."

"Definitely."

"The shop feels so realistic. It's just like the real thing! This is a new experience for me."

"We'll probably be busy with the competitive guild mission soon, so we may as well have fun making sales here until then. Making a profit is important, too."

Especially for a playstyle like mine, which by definition required constant spending. Getting my crafting level up was essential to making better hidden weapons, and I needed funding equivalent to that of a small army. Loading up

the drama cannon took both time and money. If possible, I would love to stock up on Peregrine Stones so I could fire off some Dead End Vs in a pinch. You can never have enough money, really.

Yukino said the road ahead would be difficult. I'm sure it would be, if I didn't care about crafting or fundraising. You have to be the kind of guy who enjoys all aspects of a game. Doesn't that describe me just perfectly?!

"The competitive guild mission, huh? I wonder what it'll be like!"

"Who knows? According to Yukino, it changes every year. You never really know until it's announced."

The front door opened as another customer walked in.

"Yo."

Ooh, it's Akabane and Kataoka! I guess the Hime-chan deigned to bring her follower along. This Hime-chan is looking to be good friends with Akira, but she's pretty bad at being legitimately friendly, thanks to her celebrity upbringing. Wonder if they'll manage to fight over something stupid again today? Anyway, good luck! I'm rooting for you two!

"Ew!"

Akira made a sour face as soon as she saw her. Akabane really was less than zero on the friendship scale. After a brief wince, Akabane quickly pulled herself together and tried to talk to Akira.

"I'm not here to pick a fight with you. I'm just here to take a look at the new shop that everyone's gabbing about."

"Ahaha... Sorry, it's just a reflex. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Is that so? Well, no matter. I'd like you to show me around this place."

"Oh, of course!"

"Enjoy!" I called out after them.

That was relatively peaceful. I believe in you, Akabane!

Thus, Akabane started strolling around the sales floor.

"These designs are surprisingly decent."

What incredible praise! I wish Yano were here to hear that.

She stopped to stare at a poster that advertised our painting service.

“Excuse the abrupt inquiry, but you’re willing to paint a design on any item of my choosing?”

“Yep! Just give us any item, choose a design, and—”

“Would this be acceptable, then?” Akabane held up her fingernails.

Oh, I see. She wants us to paint her nails. I don’t see why not. We should be able to do that.

“I think so, yeah.”

“Then I’d like to do it now, please.”

We had Akabane sit down at the front counter so Akira could do her nail art. Even though we both knew how to use Libra’s Brush, I’d decided to leave it to her. We opened up the color-picking menu and had Akabane choose one.

“I’d like to use this shade of red as a base. For my accent nail, I would like some sort of art. You can handle the design.”

“Oh, me? Okay!” Akira’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

Akira painted Akabane’s pointer finger a deep red color. Once this layer had been neatly applied, she picked a design from the menu and pasted a tiny version of it onto her customer’s nail. Obviously, the design Akira chose was...

Argh! Of course it’d be a demon guy with loads of muscles! Wait, I recognize that beefcake... It’s the one that lost the right to be on our guild emblem! When did she add that design to the list?!

“All done!”

“What the...? What is this outlandish design?! Are you trying to insult me?!”

“Whaaat?! But, um, you said I could choose...”

“Don’t sweat it, Akabane. This is what Akira is genuinely into. I mean it.”

“Really?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Akira asked, pouting.

“Erm, okay then. I suppose it’s my fault for asking you to choose. Could you please erase it and show me the list so that I can pick one of my own?”

This time, Akabane’s pointer finger was stamped with a much more tasteful design.

I wish this icy atmosphere would thaw just a bit, though. I’m still in your corner, Scarlet!

Afterword First off, I'd like to thank you for reading this from the bottom of my heart.

This is volume two of the novelization of my work on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. With such a short span between updates, what I plan in my mind versus what actually comes out in the end can be a bit different. If all had gone according to plan, this volume would have included the competitive guild mission.

The spring rookies' tournament was supposed to be a lead-up to it, but before I realized it, the tournament itself had taken up nearly an entire volume... That's a result of constantly pushing out updates without proper planning. I was ad-libbing a lot. This sequence kept going until it eventually became a whole book.

I've learned from experience that when you publish on the web or in a physical book, the contents of your work morph to fit the medium. When you're publishing online, it feels like every new update has to have its own big turning point. I think that having one with each update really does help maintain the tempo of the work at large.

On the other hand, you can't dig as deeply into character development and world-building. Sometimes, you start to think, "Oh no! This part doesn't have any big events!" Then you worry that the prose doesn't have enough punch. There are pros and cons to both web and print publishing, but for works without a defined vision or established flow, I'd say web publishing is the better option.

For me, the bottom line is simply to write fun things! Instead of careful calculation, I emphasize the atmosphere in the moment. Energy and enthusiasm are important! I'd like to keep ad-libbing and going without a solid plan for as long as I can manage.

When I was writing battles in the past, I would constantly think about how I could write the strategies, tactics, and characters without contradictions, so that the explanations were convincing. Having a novel that can stay afloat despite taking the opposite approach shows that authors can be both open-minded and profound.

I'd love to be able to take on both approaches at the same time, publishing on the web while also working on new releases, but my fingers just can't move that fast! However, I do have more ideas for web novels. Robots, time travel, war stories... It's a shame I can't manage it all. I would like to be a faster writer, or maybe make more time in my day for writing.

Perhaps labor reforms will suddenly rise up and get us those three-day weekends. I don't need a higher salary, just more time! If I have that, I can make money on my own terms! Please!

So, like I touched on before, next book, we'll be getting into the nitty-gritty of the competitive guild mission. My plans aren't quite solidified, though, so I might end up getting totally sidetracked. Who knows?

I publish my works on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* ahead of time, so if anyone's interested, be sure to check it out there.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for everyone who helped me with this work: my lead editor, N; my lead artist, Hika Akita; and to everyone else involved, I thank all of you for your considerable efforts. This volume's illustrations were so wonderful; I can only imagine what the next ones will be like.

Well, see you next time!


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