

THE GM GAME MASTER HAS LOGGED IN TO ANOTHER WORLD

01

AKATSUKI

ILLUSTRATORS

MERONTOMARI/YUUI

SOL PRESS


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Sniper Queen
High Warlord
Masaki Toudou


The bullet whizzed right past me. How was that possible? No way anyone could spot me at this distance while I had Invisibility activated.
“Gwaaaargh!”
I whipped around at the sound of the screech, only to hear a wild gryphon crash out of the sky. So *that* was the Sniper Queen’s target, huh? I had to hand it to her: not many could pull off a shot like that.

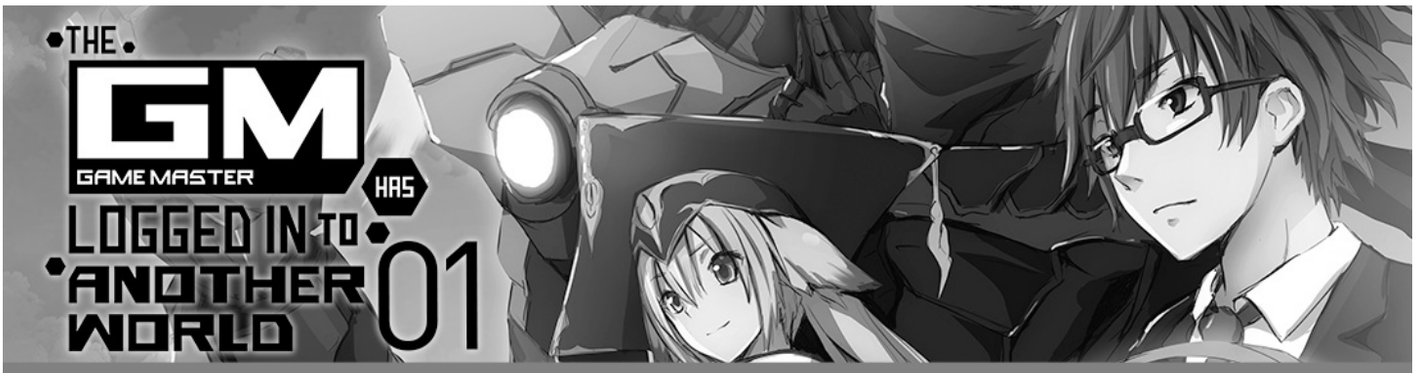


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1.

“I hear the event won’t fire for some of you. Are you sure you triggered the NPC?”

“I thought so, but...”

“Oh... wait, remember how before we tried...”

It was ten at night. I sat in an empty room, illuminated only by the lamp above me and the glow of my screen.

I’m Masaki Toudou, a Game Master—GM for short. Many players took issue with my occupation, but I didn’t let it get to me. I was satisfied with my job. It was another night of overtime, a constant in my understaffed department. I’d had to quickly adjust to long shifts, so this was nothing new.

“Yeah, this dumbass forgot to actually start the event. Thanks for coming!”

“Ah, right, thanks. I’ll teleport back and fix it!”

“On the double!”

I smiled at the players. “I’m glad I could help. Have fun out there!”

It was an easy ticket, luckily. Little issues like that cropped up all the time. A player would forget to trigger an important event, and suddenly find themselves barred from the boss area. Then toxic players would immediately start berating the poor soul who picked up the ticket. The worst part of it was, I couldn’t even blame them. Our staff were pretty notoriously casual about their responsibilities.

On the other end of the spectrum were players who’d gather around like the GM was a panda at the zoo munching away at bamboo. They’d take screenshots of us waving at them and post them on bulletin boards. Especially since I didn’t show myself to players without reason, these guys made me feel like a rare monster. Regardless, it felt nice to be thanked for a job well done.

“Good work, Masaki. Here, I brought you coffee,” someone called to me from

behind just as I returned to the consoles. It was my senior of five years, a good guy who often brought soda or coffee to staff at break time.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the coffee. “Luckily, today went smoothly. Nothing about that rumor, either.”

I sipped the coffee, glad for the breather. My eyes stayed on the GM console, my most essential work tool. It gave me access both to exclusive commands and user tickets. Requests (0). I was free to relax. I adjusted my glasses and leaned back in my chair.

“Yeah, I guess not.” He sighed. “But the fact that we’re even kind of associated with players vanishing from their computer chairs is as bad as it gets.”

My thoughts exactly. The rumor was totally ridiculous, basically creepypasta.

“I know, right?” I shook my head. “Sounds to me like some kids just ran away from home. Looking for them is way outside the scope of a GM’s duties. That’s where the police come in.”

Other GMs told me the incident was pretty widespread. It didn’t just affect Brittalia Online, the MMO my company managed, but other MMOs and some VRMMOs as well. But really, it couldn’t be anything more than an urban legend.

“Oh, by the way. Can I take off Sunday and Monday, two weeks from now?”

“In two weeks?” He glanced over the calendar. “Hmmm, looks like it won’t overlap with any events. Sure, go ahead. Got special plans?”

“Yeah. My old guildies organized a meet-up.”

The guy who organized the meet-up, my old Brittalia Online guildmaster, was my mentor. He took me under his wing, taught me the ropes, and showed me the joys of hunting elites with a party, and making connections online. He accepted me into his guild, The Round Table, where we tackled tough quests and story missions together. I followed his example and helped our new members out however I could. To this day, I was proud to have been a member of The Round Table. *Those were good times.*

Our guild got pretty tight knit, and we started meeting up to send players off

whenever they quit the game for whatever reason. When I developed an interest in becoming more deeply involved with Brittalia Online and was hired on as a GM, I was the subject of one of those parties. It was a fantastic night, but it marked my official resignation as a Brittalia Online player. Company policy stated that GMs couldn't be active players.

Like all new hires, I had been required to wipe my account before getting started on my duties. In-game work comprised things like sneaking into parties to check quest balance and patrolling the game world with GM Invisibility. Luckily, however, the coworker who I was currently spending my break with had stood up for me. He'd managed to convince management that it'd be a shame for all the items, skills, and achievements I'd worked so hard for to be deleted, so I got away with a simple name change. Understanding seniors were truly a blessing.

Though my days as a guild member had come to an end, my days as a friend were far from it. I was sincerely looking forward to the guild meet-up. My guild master mentioned having some questions for me. Since most of my work was confidential, spilling details was strictly off-limits. Still, I wondered what was on his mind.

"You've barely taken any time off this year, so you deserve the break. Just make sure you get me a souvenir." Thank goodness. Understanding, as always. I made a mental note to pick him up a nice bottle of sweet potato shochu. "You haven't had dinner yet, right? I'll take care of the rest; you go eat."

Damn, work had really sucked me in. I hadn't noticed the hunger creeping up on me. I could definitely go for a bite.

"I'll take you up on that."

"Good. Take care."

I showed my gratitude with a slight bow, readjusted my glasses, and started my walk down the dark corridor. Our instructions were to turn off any light source we weren't using to save power, and I didn't want to bother flicking the switch. I knew the place like the back of my hand anyways.

What should I have tonight? Hmmm, ramen sounds good. Decision made, I headed in the direction of the ramen joint, when I noticed that something was

off.

Huh?

My legs wouldn't move, and even my confused grunt caught in my throat.

Am I paralyzed? No, that makes no sense. I'd have collapsed. Ah, no, wait! It's getting dark! Ah... ah, no... I'm losing consciousness... I'm losing... my ramen!

As I lamented my mouthwatering dinner, my consciousness faded out.

◇◆◇

"He looks all right. Let's see his abilities, shall we?"

"His strength is... abysmal. Magic... below average. Disappointing."

As I slowly slipped back into consciousness, I heard a voice, and it clearly wasn't my coworker. It sounded more like a cocky old man. Hadn't he had the audacity to declare me just "all right"?

What about this is all right, old man?! Actually, scratch that. My strength is abysmal? Just so you know, I work out to stay in shape!

The floor was cold and hard. I wanted to get up, but I still couldn't move. *Dammit!* With my hazy vision, I could only see the gray of the floor. Beyond that, everything was dark.

"This one's a failure. Put him in a slave collar and break him. At once!"

"A failure"? What's he on about? And, did he just say "slave collar"?! That crap's been abolished for ages, and I'm not into S&M stuff if that's what this is about, thank you very much!

I was still disoriented, but could clearly feel someone approaching.

S-Stop! D-Don't come any closer! Arghhh, move! Move, dammit!

I struggled like a wounded beast, but to no avail. I just lay there as a hooded man approached, a collar—a *slave collar*—in hand.

I was ready to accept the fate the painful click of the collar's lock would bring. What I got instead, however, was a loud snap. When he tried closing the collar around my neck, it blew out of his hand, pieces scattering across the floor.

“What?!” The hooded man yelled in shock.

My vision was beginning to clear up. I glanced around and noticed that the only light sources illuminating the room’s solid stonework were candles dotting the wall. There wasn’t a single window, and both the entrance and exit were manned with armed guards, ensuring that any escape attempt would end in failure.

Under me, there lay a magic circle.

Looking ahead, I spotted the old man who’d spoken before. He wore a red mantle that looked like something straight out of a fantasy game or anime, and topped it all off with a golden crown. Even more intriguing was the staff in his hands, complete with a magic crystal at its tip.

“What happened?” he demanded.

“It may have been defective. I’ll bring another at once!”

As my senses slowly returned, I felt my body tense with panic. I tried to move again, but no luck. While I struggled to get myself together, the hooded man produced another collar. He approached once more to fasten it around my neck, but some invisible force tossed it aside again, sending the pieces skittering around the room.

“What’s the meaning of this? Why are the collars failing?!”

“It’s unclear. I suspect some unknown power to be at play.”

“A mysterious power barring us from breaking him in, you say? Well, he’s useless to us without the slave collar, and it would be a shame to kill him before learning more about this ‘power.’ Throw him in a cell.”

“At once, your majesty!”

Having finally regained my senses—more or less—I could clearly hear them talking about killing me. It was unsettling, to say the least. Fortunately, it seemed I’d have some time before I met my ultimate fate, but I was still being thrown in jail. And what was that about a mysterious power? I felt like I was trapped in an isekai light novel.

Still unable to move, I just glared at the old man as he slowly stepped toward

me. Then he whacked me in the head with the gem embedded in his staff.

“Nh!”

“One week. If we’re unable to subjugate him in a week, we’ll offer him as a sacrifice and summon a new one. Now, off with him.”

I hadn’t experienced pain like this since my dad smacked me for doing something stupid when I was a kid. Damn, did it hurt. But, at least, it made one thing agonizingly clear: I wasn’t dreaming. The major downside was that he’d hit me in just the right spot; I was rapidly losing consciousness again. Wondering why this had happened to me, I submitted to the darkness.

When I eventually woke, I was in a dark room with thick iron bars covering the door. They hadn’t chained me up, but this was obviously the jail cell they’d mentioned. In a movie, we’d be in the hype part where the MC’d cook up a master plan to escape from captivity. At that moment, though, excitement was nowhere near the list of emotions coursing through me.

“Let me out, dammit! I didn’t do anything! Why am I in jail?!” I frothed alone, with no target for my boiling rage.

At least I finally had full range of motion back.

Owww... that rat bastard sure didn’t pull his punch. I traced the bump on my head and took stock of my surroundings.

The pungent smell of mold hit my nostrils as I examined my cell’s sturdy stone wall. If there were an authenticity award for prison cells, this would doubtless be a top contender. I tested the wall and bars, faintly hoping that they’d move, but neither budged.

“‘Mysterious power,’ huh? What’s that all about?” I looked down at my hands, but they seemed the same as ever. The only interesting feature was the dark mole I’d always had. My hands didn’t produce red lights, or any other common visual cues for magic users.

I looked out of the small, barred window. I had held out hope that these bars would give way, but they turned out to be as sturdy as the ones on the door. The view beyond the bars made me do a double take.

The landscape was ripped straight out of a fantasy novel, strikingly different from the skyscrapers of the metropolis I was used to. As if the view outside my window were the intro to a movie, I watched an eagle-like monster—probably a gryphon—soar across the vast, blue skies. I watched it approach a massive tower and enter through an opening. In the distance shone a gorgeous azure sea, with a couple dozen large ships dotting its surface. Some of them reminded me of fifteenth-century frigates. A breathtaking sight, that's for sure.

Beyond them floated, I presumed, trading ships. Though, at second glance, they looked more like pirate vessels—

Hold on a second, I thought to myself as something strange caught my eye. I'd been preoccupied by the fantastical scenery, and had only now noticed my eyesight was much better than I remembered. I brought my hands to my face and discovered that my glasses were nowhere to be found.

After a glance around, I found them on the ground. Thanks to their sturdy titanium frame, they were still intact.

"It's great to have better eyesight, but what now? They said they'd do another summoning in a week, so I'll have to come up with a plan to get out of this hellhole before then. If I can't... I'm probably dead. Well, in the first place, it'd be nice to know where in the world I am."

I sat on the cold, hard floor and closed my eyes in thought. The moment my eyes fell shut, a window popped up in front of me.

It looked an awful lot like the GM console I used at work.

What's the game menu doing here? Wait, is this my special power? Or maybe I was slotted into a VRMMO while I was out? Though VR tech can't transmit pain into the real world yet. At least, I've never heard of anything like that.

Regardless, I had to do some testing and figure out what was going on. I clicked one of the buttons with a finger and a bunch of options popped up.



“Map, equipment, skills, spells, items... ah, here it is! The GM console. *Invincibility*, *Invisibility*, *Teleport*... No log out button, though.”

I examined my trusty GM-only screen. The box next to *Resist All Debuffs* was checked off, but the boxes next to Invincibility and Invisibility were empty. Resist All had to have been what prevented them from attaching the collar. I still couldn’t grasp what had happened to me, but if this screen reflected my actual abilities, then I had a chance of escape.

There were major differences between player and GM settings. For instance, under the Skills menu, I could use any skill available to players, completely ignoring class restrictions. I remembered having access to ten menus in-game, and they seemed to have fully translated to my new situation. Ticking each box would hopefully give me access to every active and passive skill.

Next up: magic. As with skills, I should theoretically have had access to all spells, but I clearly didn’t. The spell names were grayed out, meaning they were unavailable to cast. It certainly wasn’t a mana issue, as I couldn’t even cast any level one spells. Considering my circumstances in game terms, there was a high probability that the cell was an anti-magic zone. For now, I’d have to come up with a plan that didn’t rely on spells.

I moved on to the next menu: equipment. Luckily, the company had allowed me to keep all my items. I scrolled down the list of loot I had squirreled away. I only had to consider equipping a mythril sword from my list, and it popped out of thin air in front of me. I caught it quickly to avoid alerting the guards with a loud clang. I hadn’t expected the sword to appear until I selected it with my finger, but apparently not.

I wiped cold sweat from my forehead and began to examine the sword. I had a wooden one at home, but you just couldn’t compare it with the blade before me. It was gorgeous and felt completely different from my mock wooden sword. Thanks to the passive skill *Melee Combat Boost (Greater)*, handling the sword was a piece of cake. I gave it a couple experimental swings. To my surprise, it was easier to handle than the wooden one at home.

How refreshing! I needed a taste of success after everything else that had happened.

Imagine what I could do outside this musty cell. Hahhh, I can't wait to get out.

I tried to sheath the sword, but it vanished from my hands. At that, I decided on another test. I picked up my glasses and mimed putting them in my pocket. Sure enough, they poofed out of existence and appeared in my inventory. Seemed like I could store all my stuff there.

I took a look at my glasses' stats.

ITEM

Titanium Glasses

Sturdy *Light* Corrosion Resistant / Heat Resistant

Rarity: R

ITEM

There were six item rarity rankings total: C for Common, U for Uncommon, R for Rare, HR for High Rare, UR for Ultra Rare and SR for Secret Rare. It was strange to see a normal pair of glasses with an R ranking, but they were apparently valuable enough to warrant the rarity. I assumed the materials must've been unavailable in-game.

Next, I gave sheathing the piss bucket from the corner of the room a try, but it didn't vanish. I still couldn't be sure exactly how the mechanic worked, but if I had to guess, the system didn't recognize the bucket as belonging to me and wouldn't allow me to store it.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps interrupted my train of thought. Likely a patrol. I decided it was probably safest to pretend to be asleep.

"Good, he's not up to anything funny... hey, wake up! Time to eat." The guard slammed the iron bars with his staff to wake me.

I pretended to be coming to my senses after a deep sleep and slowly rose. "Wh-Where am I?"

"This is one of the jails of the Gran Fang Empire. Now, eat up!" He shoved a plate with something resembling food into my hands. Bread burnt to coal, and

vegetable scrap soup.

Luckily, the guard departed without confirming I'd eaten, so I took the chance to note the time he'd arrived. I used the clock on my GM console to accurately pinpoint the time and summoned paper from my inventory to take it down on.

Gran Fang Empire... Never heard of it. Whatever, I'll worry about that later. I have no idea how long it's been since I last ate, but I'm sure as hell starving.

"Let's see... owww, it's so hard!"

I ate the black brick masquerading as "bread," and the salty, but otherwise bland, vegetable soup as I watched the sun slowly disappear beneath the horizon. I decided to call it a day and continue strategizing tomorrow.

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"Morning, huh? Fwanhhhh..."

The rays of the morning sun shining through my barred window woke me.

Sleeping on the frigid, stone floor of my cell would've been difficult, and I wasn't overly keen on wrapping myself in the filthy blanket I'd been provided, so I pulled a *Pelt of a Giant Sheep* from my inventory to lie on, and used my jacket as a blanket. The pelt carried a thick farm animal smell, but it was still the better option of the two, especially considering just how soft and fluffy Giant Sheep were.

Though I tried, my efforts simply couldn't replace a proper bed. I was stiff, aching all over from my night in the cell. I'd turned Invincibility off, not wanting to raise suspicion in case someone came in to hit or torture me. I couldn't be sure if the skill would combat the crick in my neck.

GM skill: Invincibility. As you'd expect, it blocked all damage, regardless of the source.

Interestingly, GMs hadn't been given access to Invincibility when Brittalia Online first launched. From what I heard, it was added after a GM went to help a player who'd gotten stuck in a wall. The GM got caught up in a boss' attack and their character died. The story sounded made-up to me, but who knows? Maybe it was true.

“I don’t foresee a bright future if these guys find out I have a trump card like this.”

Though I was in pain, I didn’t think it was worth it to turn Invincibility on now. If my life were in danger, I’d obviously flip it on, but my situation seemed relatively fine at the moment. The Emperor would let me live for another week, so it was safe to assume that the guards wouldn’t defy his will and risk punishment.

After my less-than-splendid meal the night before, I found another skill I wanted to try out. Unfortunately, after I sifted through my equipment and inventory, I noticed an issue with the plan.

“If only I had food in my inventory!”

I’d gotten hungry during the night, so I had scavenged around my cell for anything remotely edible, but no dice. I’d usually keep curry and a variety of meats in my inventory, but if I had to guess, I’d probably cleaned it out before my final elite hunt, eating everything I’d brought on my trek during the journey.

I can’t just lay around all day. I’m hungry as hell, but I should still get up, move, and loosen up a bit.

I got up and did push-ups until I heard footsteps approaching my cell.

“Hey, it’s time for breakfast... what are you doing in there?”

“Working out. It’s part of my daily routine. I don’t want to get fat.”

“Oh, yeah? I have a bit of a belly myself. Any idea what to do about it?”

“Try a walk first thing in the morning. Even if it’s just half an hour, the results will show in time.”

“Huh, a’ight, I’ll give it a shot. Here, your breakfast.”

Cool. Let’s take down the time for breakfast.

That was all for my workout routine, so I sat down in front of my plate. “Let’s see what we have here. Ah, but before that—” I opened my map and put a checkmark on the guard.

I’d made another discovery last night. I concentrated on seeing a map of the

castle and, sure enough, it popped up without issue. Players could only see areas of the map they'd actually explored, but GMs could see the entirety of the map, including interior spaces and sub-sections.

The checkmark allowed me to track the guard's movements on the map. He was masked, so I couldn't see his face, but this clearly wasn't the same guy who'd brought me dinner last night.

I sipped some water, watching him make his way into another room. Then I jumped into testing the idea that'd been growing in my mind since the night before. I had access to the *Improve Quality* skill, which players acquired about halfway through leveling. It improved the quality of items by a couple levels, with the catch that it could only be used once on any given item.

Food items like the soup were considered more complex, so I'd have to approach the problem slightly differently. First, I'd try the bread. I cast Improve Quality on the blackened, rock-hard bread. A dim light enveloped it for a moment, before the burn marks vanished and the solid bread became a loaf of beautiful white bread that looked oven-fresh. It was light and fluffy and its sweet aroma made me salivate.

"Oh, nice! It worked!"

My hypothesis proved correct: I could use skills as long as they weren't classified as "spells."

Next up, the soup. I'd use the crafting skill *The King of Flavor - Secret Technique*, favored by cooks in the game. While the skill's name might invoke the image of an old man in a chef's jacket vomiting a beam of light to blast any ruffians that dared trash his restaurant, rest assured: it wasn't quite that grandiose. All it did was raise the level of low-quality food items. In the game, it was pretty useless, but Lord was it ever a lifesaver now.

After I cast it, the sewage water in my bowl turned into a beautiful, golden soup. I checked its description.

ITEM

Golden Consommé

A rich and extravagant soup with slow-boiled chicken, beef, fish, and various

vegetables from the best fields around the country.

ITEM

From the description, my skill had done the trick. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to appreciate the magnificent flavor. The mouthwatering aroma could alert the guards if I let it sit for too long, so I had to finish my breakfast quickly.

My bread had become warm and springy. Hard to believe it'd been a black mass before its transformation. The soup was, God, so unbelievably delicious. It brought warmth to my soul as I sat in my lonely, depressing cell.

If I'd discovered this earlier, I could've had a nice, luxurious dinner lash night, but oh, well. No use crying over spilled milk. I now had a hearty breakfast, a major improvement over anything I could have hoped for. I wolfed it all down in minutes, not only to reduce my risk of discovery, but also because my dinner the previous night hadn't quite filled me up. Fortunately, neither of my skills changed the dishware, so I could likely enjoy improved meals for the remainder of my jail stint.

I hadn't had much chance to take a good look around yesterday, but surely there had to be other cells beside mine. Afraid that the smell of my meal would reach another occupant, I tried calling out, but no response. As far as I could tell, I was all alone. Alone, and free to test my skills to my heart's content.

With breakfast out of the way, I could take the Imperial capital in. Now that I could see it in daylight, it seemed like a lively, vibrant city. I looked over the sea where I'd seen frigates last night. It turned out there was a naval port, packed to the brim with warships. Merchant ships idled a bit further off. I had only seen a dozen or so ships before, but they'd multiplied overnight. There were now more than a hundred. From what I could tell, we were on some kind of island or peninsula, which would justify the fleet.

I watched as a line of people in chains were led from one of the ships and into the streets. Between the prisoners and the sheer number of warships docked, it seemed safe to assume that the Empire was at war. I stared harder at the chain gang and spotted a werewolf-like man, a dog-eared girl, and a girl with rabbit ears on the line.

Despicable. The treatment of these men and women disgusted me. I was

going to have to put an end to this brutality.

I sat down to mull over what I'd seen.

So, I guess there are beast-like demihumans in this world. Not gonna lie, dog ears and bunny ears are kinda my thing... Ah, no. Scratch that. This is no time to be horny. Seems like we've got a war on our hands. Judging by the number of prisoners, the other nation must be pretty large. My guess is that the Gran Fang guys are summoning players from different games to use their skills in battle. If I'm not careful, I'll end up a sacrifice for their next combatant.

If one of those prisoners ends up in the next cell over, I might be able to tap them for more information about this world and the war. Right now, I don't have enough to go on. I'm gonna have to hold out until the last possible moment. It's risky to bet everything on a single horse, but it's my best chance for survival. If I mess up, whatever happens, happens. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

I prayed that someone would move into the cell next door, but life wasn't that kind. All I wanted was someone to talk to, because I was starting to get seriously lonely in here.

Suffering in solitude, my second day in the cell slowly ticked by.

Toward sunset, the rude guy from yesterday came by to provide the castle's one-star room service. I put a checkmark on him on my GM console, and used my skills to turn my usual bread and soup into fresh-baked five grain bread, and a lovely chicken soup. Why they'd become something different this morning, I had no idea.

As night fell, cheers and laughter began seeping through my window. I peeked out and spotted a group of soldiers celebrating the loot they'd pillaged in their last battle. Watching them throw a party with bloodied coin was distressing, but I knew it was just another part of war. The world I'd come from had been at peace for generations, so I'd never had to experience war myself, though I'd heard many stories of past battles.

Admittedly, as I lay in my tiny cell under the pale moonlight, war was the least of my problems. I closed my eyes and let dreams take me, as the guards continued their revel outside.

The next morning, a guard came to talk to me. “I woke up a bit earlier today. The morning air really gets the circulation going, huh? Here’s your breakfast.”

“Yeah. With nobody to kick up dust, the air’s nice and clean.”

The guard left after our brief conversation. I quickly used my skills and enjoyed my fluffy bread with lightly salted vegetable soup. The difference between a properly seasoned veggie soup and the crap they served me was night and day.

After breakfast, I spent some time thinking about how to use my skills and items to escape this cursed place, only to be interrupted by the sound of footsteps.

I quickly stuffed away the items I’d taken out, and rubbed some dirt from the walls on my face and arms. I’d noticed the guard last night becoming suspicious of my healthy color. I thought he’d been staring at me because it was dark, but he’d clearly caught on that I was holding out better than their usual victims. I was going to have to do everything in my power to keep a low profile until the perfect moment.

“Hey, we’re coming in! Don’t try anything funny or you can say goodbye to your head.”

I nodded at his authoritative command and waited for them to enter. The door swung open with a loud *krrrrk* and the soldiers stepped in, all wearing neutral, blank expressions. My attempt to look as unthreatening and frail as possible seemed to have paid off. Unlike the guards, my new guests were clad in well-made full body armor. Each had an imposing sword at their waist. I would’ve loved to take more detailed stock of their garb, but I was sure they’d hit me if I stared too much. With my Invincibility turned off, I wasn’t eager to subject myself to unnecessary pain.

A hooded, robed figure stepped out from behind the soldiers and tried to attach a collar to my neck, but it shattered on the ground just as the previous ones had.

Robe guy rounded on the soldiers. “Tch, this one’s not working either?! You better not be screwing with the collars!”

“Not at all! We put everything we had into this one, but it seems like we’ll have to use stronger materials next time.”

Of course, their issues had nothing to do with materials, but they didn’t need to know that. A soldier threw me against the wall in frustration before marching out of my cell.

“Gahhh!”

“Arghh, why do I have to deal with this crap?! Just kill his useless ass and leave me out of it!” one soldier complained.

The hooded figure shrugged. “Nothing like this has ever happened. We’re not allowed to kill him. If he starts trouble, however, we have full permission to join the guards in beating him down.”

“Then break him! I don’t care how, just put an end to this circus, understood?! Show me some quick results, or else!” As I watched the soldier blow up at robe guy, it started to become clear that power harassment was an issue across worlds. I started to feel for the hooded fellow with an impossible task.

I cowered, nursing the pain from being thrown against the wall, until the soldiers all left. I put a check mark on the hooded figure, and a mark of a different color on the soldiers so I could easily tell them apart. After that, I activated my passive *HP/MP Regeneration* skill to heal up.

“Owwww... screw the guy that threw me at the wall. But at least, they didn’t catch on.”

I hadn’t expected to have to hide the glow of health that eating quality food lent me, but luckily, my dirt disguise worked. All I wanted was to take a shower. The worst thing about it was that I *could* have showered—if I weren’t in an anti-magic field.

The spell *Room* created a magical space with various furnishings, such as a sofa and a bath. You could use the bath in the game, so I’d likely have access to that same luxury here. Having said that, even if I could cast a spell, a sparkling-clean prisoner would doubtless raise some eyebrows. I wiped the dirt off of my face and glanced at the collar pieces scattered in the middle of the room.

Though it was in pieces, a closer look suggested that it'd been made pretty well.

Maybe I can piece the broken bits together with string to create a fake collar. It's worth a shot.

I read the item description:

ITEM

Shattered Collar

An enchanted collar. When it touched a wearer with high debuff resistance, it shattered.

Enchantment faded, it's now classified as junk.

Rarity: C—

ITEM

Interestingly, it did have an assigned rarity, unlike the bread and soup they'd brought me. The "minus" was probably because it was broken. Regardless, I put it in my inventory, and used a skill I hadn't yet tried: Invisibility.

As I concentrated on the skill, my body became translucent.

GM skill: Invisibility. It worked. As a GM, it was one of my most frequently used skills, as it hid my body from prying eyes. Neither *Detect Life*, *Detect Heat*, *Detect Sound*, nor *Detect Smell* could counter it. I could be stealthy as a snake without relying on cardboard boxes.

I touched the wall, hoping to slip right through it, but it didn't work. I couldn't fit between the iron bars, either. I was just about to give up and release the skill when I noticed movement from the corner of the cell.

There was a little mouse squeaking there, minding its own business. A mouse in a dusty, moldy jail cell? No surprise, but it gave me an idea. Could I turn the mouse invisible too?

He'd come out of hiding as soon as I'd activated Invisibility and didn't seem on edge. These little fellas scattered at the tiniest sign of danger, so he clearly hadn't noticed me yet. I slowly approached the tiny mouse and caught him in

my hands. The moment I did, Invisibility canceled, and I became visible again.

Apparently, an attack or action that threatened another being canceled Invisibility. I was curious to test how far I could push that, but I had something more important to look into first. Holding the mouse, I activated Invisibility again, and watched as the little guy turned translucent in my hands.

All right. Now it was time to get back into the nitty-gritty of the mechanics of the skill. I jumped, and sure enough, Invisibility didn't deactivate. Next, I released the mouse outside the bars. His Invisibility deactivated, and I watched him look about in utter confusion for a moment before scurrying off.

Seems like I can share Invisibility as long as I hold onto my partner. Hopefully it works on bigger things, too. Like an invisible car, or something. Even the thought spooks me. Luckily, I'd be the one doing the spooking in this example. Anyway, it's my third day in here, huh? I have four more to make a move...

I had nothing else to do, so this was the perfect chance to choose my kit for the big day. Setting up four days in advance might look generous, but better to prepare when I had the chance.

SKILL

Passive

Agility Boost *Physical Stats Boost (Extra)* Melee Combat Boost (Greater) *Stealth Boost (Greater)* MP Regeneration (Medium) *HP*MP regeneration (Medium)

Active

Silent Attack *Wind Rush* Surge / Time Bomb

SKILL

Should be a winning combination, but it was a real shame that I didn't have access to higher-tier Regeneration skills. They were planning to add them in the next update, so I just missed 'em, which made the loss sting even more.

With both Agility and Stealth Boost active, I was starting to feel like some sort of a ninja. As its name suggested, Time Bomb was a bomb. It was no normal bomb, however. It presented as a mob with its own health bar. The explosion could be used as a diversion, or to create chaos in the enemy ranks. The best thing about Time Bomb, though, was that you could set up all the bombs you had MP for. As a GM, I could guarantee that I'd have enough mana at basically all times.

My Silent Attack skill ignored any armor and, surprise, surprise, silenced my attacks. It was the ideal skill to take foes down without drawing attention.

Wind Rush was an active skill that increased my movement speed. It tended to come in handy, especially on quests that had you running all over the world.

Surge might sound like a skill that would allow me to shoot energy balls from my palms, but it actually just created an aura that surged out of the tip of any blade I carried, increasing its melee range, and boosting its attack. Surge was a staple of the Knight class, one of their most favorite abilities. Not only did it look cool, but it did a lot. I'd be a fool to pass up on it.

As I sat, reflecting deeply on my skills, I heard footsteps. Dinner time.

"Here's dinner. Don't try anything funny," the guard told me bluntly. He'd usually turn on his heels and return to his post once he'd served me, but today he just stood there, staring at me.

"..."

"What?" I couldn't use my skills in front of him, and I sure as hell wasn't going to eat the daily slop.

"Two days."

"Huh?" Two days? Two days to what?

"If they haven't broken you in by day after tomorrow, you're done. Pray to whatever deity you believe in that the collar closes around your neck without trouble."

What?! I should still have four days to go! Seeing the shock on my face, the guard left me to ponder my fate.

Today, my skills produced bread with pickled radish pieces in it, and a Japanese-style vegetable soup.

I don't get how this works! And the bread doesn't go with the soup at all! Arghhh, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! I got careless!

The next day, I asked the morning guard about the timeline, and he informed me that a week was only five days in this world. These new developments had kept sleep away from me for the better part of the night but, when morning came, I had more pressing things to do than worry over sleep deprivation.

Dammit! It's so obvious! I should've suspected this world would have a different calendar!

Panicking made me hungry. I used my skill to turn my breakfast into fluffy white bread and consommé soup. Belly filled, I calmed down and started to think.

"I'm glad I prepared my skills yesterday, but I should've pushed the morning guard for more information. At this point, I could even drop the pretense of being a powerless, frail prisoner."

I checked the map and watched the morning guard patrol another floor. The night guard was stationary, likely sleeping in the barracks. The robed fellow was nowhere near my cell, which was a good sign. I never wanted to see him again. I looked out of the window, trying to glean any extra information I could find. Outside, I saw the usual fleet of warships and merchant vessels, which I assumed were caravels.

Nothing new. But just as I was about to turn away, I spotted an older, brawny man being led in chains by soldiers. He was already severely injured, and the soldiers just kept beating away at him as he tried to drag his feet. Seemed safe to assume the soldiers were responsible for all of his wounds.

Thanks to the Stealth Boost passive skill I'd activated yesterday, they didn't notice my gaze. Either that, or the window was too far from the action for anyone to feel my eyes on them. Either way, I hopped back from the window and returned to mulling my escape over. I had a number of ideas, but most of them needed more prep than I could manage today.

I could break the bars, but that'd attract too much attention. Even if I could slip past the guards, I had no idea where I was or what the surrounding areas were like. I had a severe lack of critical information. I could go for a quiet prison break, but I didn't have any lockpicks in my inventory.

If you lack something, just make it yourself, I thought to myself, as I scoured my inventory for anything I could use as a DIY lockpick. I had a bunch of potions and elixirs and random loot like horns, wings, and fur. Neither potions nor monster parts made great lockpicks, as far as I was aware. I kept all my crafting items in my home box, so the lack of materials wasn't much of a surprise. Man, I'd kill for an iron ingot right now. With that, crafting a key would be child's play. Magic could've also worked, but that was, sadly, out of the question.

I scanned the room, desperate to find anything that could work. That's when I spotted the one thing that could save my life: my titanium-alloy glasses. They'd taken my wallet, phone, and house keys, but they left my glasses with me.

I had an idea. *Can I turn my glasses into lockpicking tools?*

As long as I had access to a thin wire, I could use my *Metalsmithing* skills to make a lockpick. My frames would probably be counted as a wire, but the titanium could be a problem. Success meant unlocking the first step to my escape, but failure meant needlessly turning the precious glasses I'd had for years into an ordinary wire. They weren't overly expensive, but their sentimental value was huge. After spending a while deliberating, however, I decided to try it.

I can't put a price on my life, even a sentimental one.

My *Decomposition* skill broke my glasses down into a frame and two lenses. I stashed the lenses in my inventory and opened the Metalsmithing menu. I concentrated on crafting a lockpicking set, wishing for it like my life depended on it. *I'm begging you, please work!*

I clutched the frame in my hand as it began to glow with a bright light. My heart bashed against my ribs as the light slowly faded away. I opened my palm, and...

ITEM

Lockpicking Wires of the Bandit King

Sturdy, heat-resistant lockpicking tools made from a mysterious metal. The curvature makes them perfect for picking locks. There are only a handful of doors and chests that can withstand the power of this tool.

Rarity: SR

Yes! I cheered internally. I hadn't put that many levels into the thief job, but I was confident that my cell door stood no chance against these tools.

I scanned the map for guards on the floor, then slowly inserted the pick into the lock. The lock clicked whenever the guards opened it, so I made sure to be as gentle as possible as I searched for that click. I skillfully probed the lock as if the lockpick itself were leading my hands, and slowly, ever-so-slowly, turned it.

It was the tiniest of clicks, but with a gentle push, the door slowly fell open.

I did it! I cheered silently, shutting the door again. I couldn't leave it hanging open just yet. I slid the lockpick out, and noticed that it had changed shape inside the lock. Damn, these lockpicks were the best.

With a big, dumb grin on my face, I checked the map—only to see two guards approaching my floor. I quickly stashed the lockpick in my inventory and leaned powerlessly against the wall.

Besides the footsteps, I could hear something being dragged along the hard stone floor. It suddenly stopped at the cell next to mine. The door opened and what-or whoever they'd been pulling behind them was tossed into the cell.

"Never seen a pirate give up his freedom so his lackeys could make a dash for it. Sorry, bud! Your heroism was all for naught. We'll catch them soon enough and, once we do, you'll all hang in the town square to show what happens to criminals who dare defy the Empire!"

That stuck-up, power-tripping soldier again. I'd just been thinking that his voice was gonna drive me outta my head when his face peeked into my cell. So much worse.

"And you," he sneered, "we'll have the collar by tomorrow. If it doesn't work out, your head's gonna roll through the dirt. If it does, you'll be tossed in some

mine for hard labor. Point is: I ain't never gonna have to deal with your sorry, otherworldly ass ever again."

Apparently, he wasn't fond of otherworlders. The guards at his side were my usual morning and evening patrol pals. The evening guy didn't seem to care for the asshole remark, but I spied a hint of empathy from the morning guard. I simpered like a scared puppy, which seemed to satisfy the power tripper. With a shit-eating grin on his face, he departed with his companions.

God, I wanna puke. Thinks he's all high and mighty. Look at the other guys, they're cool. Just leave. Nobody's paying you to talk.

Anyway, my execution is tomorrow, so I should probably get going. Though, I can say "get going," all I want, but where? I don't know anything about the country, and I'm broke as a joke. Even with Invincibility and Invisibility, traversing an unknown country is gonna be rough. I have no clue how to escape the Empire's grasp.

"Nghhh... aghhh..." The pirate in the next cell groaned painfully. My long-awaited neighbor must've been roughed up pretty bad.

"Hey, are you okay?" I called out to him nervously.

"Do I sound jolly to ye? Damn ye all to hell! Run lads, run if ye hold yer life dear!" An older guy, it sounded like, wishing for the safety of, I assumed, his crew.

"Hey, old timer, you a pirate?"

"Aye?" he demanded. "And if'n I be, aye? Ye out for a bruisin'?"

Pirates meant ships. I could get on that ship if I played my cards right.

I took an item from my inventory, a small vial filled with a light blue liquid.

ITEM

High Potion

A high-tier potion that restores a large portion of health and regenerates severed body parts.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “Drink this, but don’t make a ruckus. It’s a potion.”

“Eh?”

“Just hurry up and drink it while no one’s around!”

“A-Aye, all right... wha—?! Sink me! My finger be growin’!” The empty vial rolled out of his cell, slipping from his startled hands.

Upside, that medicine went down easy. Downside, how trusting can you get? Isn’t this guy a pirate? I could have poisoned him as easily as healing him.

“Cheers, mate. But ye mind tellin’ me how ye wound up in the brig with a stash of super rare potions like that? Those’re tricky to find, even for rugged vets.”

“Things happen. Actually, now that you’re doing better, you mind if I ask you some questions?”

“Aye, aye! Ask whatever ye like, we be mates now.”

Pirate or no, seemed he lived by some code of decency. I could trust him for now.

“Who is the Empire currently at war with?”

“Who ain’t they? They sliced a campaign all up ’n down the southern coast; don’t know much south a’ that. Scuttlebutt says they’re layin’ siege t’ a city cross the mountains, but they’re still pushin’ into the Kingdom a’ Sentrag up north.”

Two fronts, huh? Their captives must’ve been great ammo for suicide missions. With an endless supply of prisoners and a powerful flotilla of frigates, they could spare some losses here and there if that were the price of victory. With the gryphons I had seen before added to the mix, they could attack by land, sea, and from the air.

“All right. Next question: are you crew and ship intact?”

“Aye, they ourghtta be. I had the lads hie to me secret lair whilst I made the boys here work for their coin, but it’s only a matter o’ time afore they find me

crew. Can' be more'n two or three days. If'n they flee, 'twill have t' be ta sea."

"That could do the trick."

"Ey? Trick?" I was no mind reader, but I'd wager more than a bowl of ramen he was thinking something like, "what's this landlubber babblin' about?"

"Captain Graybeard."

"Ey? Still got an ear for news?"

"Do you want outta here?"

The pirate offered me a real chance at freedom, and I wasn't about to let it slip by. If I slept on this, he and his entire crew would die, and I'd be abandoned to this unknown world once again. Between Invincibility and Invisibility, I'd probably survive, but actually getting out of the Empire's clutches was another kettle of fish. For that, I'd need the old guy's help.

"Aye, I'd be happy t' sail on outta here—hohoho! Poppycock!"

"I have a plan."

"Say what?"

"I can get you back to your crew and ship, but I'm gonna need some help. Deal?"

The old man fell silent, so I pulled the lockpick out to demonstrate my point.

But if we were gonna co-op this escape mission, I'd need to change my skill loadout. I replaced Surge with the passive *Perception Boost (Greater)* in my repertoire. At that instant, markers I'd never seen popped up all over my map. With its scope expanded to the exterior of the prison, I could even track the movement of dogs and eagles. Now all I had to do was keep out of sight.

"If I sit 'ere pretty as a damsel in distress, me lads're done for, so you've a ready hand in me, mate."

"It's a lot to explain, so let's put it this way: the Empire thinks I've got a 'mysterious power.'"

I pushed the cell door open quietly enough to avoid notice. To escape, we'd have to get past the occasionally manned checkpoint. There were already a

bunch of guards converging downstairs—including my power-tripping pal.

This would be no walk in the park.

“Hey, nice to actually see you. I’m opening your door.”

“How’d ya sneak that in ’ere?”

“Mysterious powers,” I repeated as shorthand for “it’d be a pain to explain.”

I went to stealthy work on the door with only my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Unfortunately, his door wasn’t quite as well-maintained as mine had been and let out a painful screech as it swung open. A quick glance at the map confirmed that I’d gotten lucky: nobody seemed to have heard.

“Secret, sorry.”

“That’s a right fancy lockpick ya got, lad. I hear the prison’s got an anti-magic field, don’t it?”

“Guess that’s why I can’t cast spells.” My console was working perfectly, so it seemed pretty likely that the anti-magic field was screwing with my options. Still, I’d have to confirm it once we’d gotten to safety. Better safe than sorry.

“So, what be the plan, matey?”

“You climb on my back, I’ll use my powers.”

“Ey? Ya havin’ a laugh? I’ll crush yer scrawny li’l body.”

“Worry less about me and more about your beer gut, bud. How’re you gonna catch fine booty when you look like a barrel?”

“Ughhh... hittin’ me where it hurts, aye? All right, I’m in yer hands.”

He finally climbed onto my back. I’d considered just holding his hand, but I couldn’t ignore the possibility of psychological damage. No way would I risk the face of a girl I strolled hand-and-hand with being replaced with his.

He may have been a burly guy, but with my passives, Physical Stats Boost and Melee Combat Boost, he was lighter than a kid. I’d had ample time to test the feel of my movement with the passives on. My speed and jump height both increased drastically, so much so, that I’d hit my head on the ceiling during testing. Invincibility had saved my head. Literally. With that training behind me,

I could now move freely, like I'd been born blessed with this strength.

Which was another reason I'd put the old-timer on my back: if we held hands, there was a non-zero chance I'd accidentally bash him into a wall or something. Now that I understood how powerful MMO characters truly were, I'd have no qualms casually duking it out with dragons and whatever anymore.

Now, my focus was on getting the hell outta Dodge. I activated Invisibility, rendering me and Gramps invisible to third parties, and translucent to one another.

"A'ight, Gramps. Hold tight, you don't wanna fall."

"Sink me... Son, tell me true, 's this a scurvy dream or didja turn us invisible? I've 'eard tales in me time, but I reckon I ain't seen nothin' like this. Where're ya takin' me off ta...?"

"Don't sweat it. Nobody's gonna sense us like this. I'll explain later. Now hold on."

I also switched Invincibility on, just in case the Invisibility didn't work out. The plan was foolproof. No matter whether we were thrown before the Emperor and all his royal guard, or came face-to-face with an ancient dragon, I'd be just fine.

I set off running and immediately felt the superhuman speed we were traveling at. I got the feeling that running on walls might be within the realm of possibility, but no way was I gonna try with the old man on my back.

"Aaaaaah?! Yer gonna break both our necks!"

"I'm not slowing down, so just make sure you don't hurl all over my back."

"Hell d'ya take me for, son?! I be an old sea dog, not some squealin' babe! Damn, y'ain't holdin' back!"

When they brought me in, I was out cold, so I didn't know the floor sported a long row of cells. Armed with this new info, I brought my map up and drew up an escape route. Just as I finished, we reached the checkpoint. It was manned, but my Invisibility kept the guard none the wiser. We slipped by without disturbing a mote of dust.

“By the sea... you got us through!”

“Mouth shut, Graybeard. Don’t want you to bite your tongue in the jump.”

“Say whaaaAAAA—?!”

Beyond the checkpoint was a wide veranda. I took aim at it and activated Wind Rush to push my speed even higher. Further on was a massive wall, which likely surrounded the palace. I waited patiently for the right moment and then leapt forward with everything I had—which turned out to be a mistake.

I thought I could safely hit the top with my current loadout and while that was technically correct, I actually overshot: I flew over the three-story wall and found myself plummeting down toward the streets of the city.

“I-I’m gonna dieee!”

I’d love it if he weren’t screaming in my ear, but he had a point. Invincibility would protect me, but he was about to become tomato pulp on the cobblestones.

I opened my console and checked my spell tab. Outside of the anti-magic field, I could cast *Wing*, allowing me to soar the skies for as long as my MP lasted. Wing’s utility couldn’t be overstated: it was great for reaching high places, and for avoiding the annoyances of traveling on foot. It had some downsides, though. It couldn’t be used for aerial contact, the spell’d cancel when the caster’s mana ran out, and the fall damage could kill or cause severe injuries. I used to hear stories about players flying up as far as they could and ending the spell so they’d plummet to the ground for fun.

Wing was a pretty big mana drain, but between my recovery and my passive skills, I barely made up for the loss. In the game, most players who could cast Wing only had access to MP Regeneration (Lesser), but devs don’t balance around GMs, so we could fly free and unrestricted. It somehow didn’t break my Invisibility, either, which meant I could probably apply buffs while invisible. We’d likely have been attacked if Invisibility broke, though, so I wasn’t about to complain. This was the perfect opportunity to casually glide up to old Graybeard’s safehouse.

“Ey... we flyin’, son?”

“Yeah. I cast a spell.”

“By the seas, you cast spells too?!”

“About that hideout you mentioned?”

“J-Just yonder. There be a cave in the forest.”

“Thanks. Keep holding tight, ’cause we’re flying there. If you fall, you’re done.”

“Son, I’m clingin’ to ya for my life.”

Cool. I checked the map to confirm that the gryphon hadn’t noticed us either. I’d worried it’d react to my spell, but it seemed Invisibility masked my cast too.

With my heart racing at my first successfully cast spell, we winged our way toward the cave. At our speed, it didn’t take long before we arrived. A new map popped up on my console as we entered the cave. Seemed like a pretty complex cave system with countless winding paths and dead-ends. On top of that, it was close to both the Empire and the highway, so the pirates could buy whatever they needed from traveling merchants, too, be that food for day-to-day survival, or new digs to throw their pursuers off. The cave was an ideal hideout.

It opened onto the sea, where I could see eight people waiting. Graybeard’s crew, if I had to guess. Aside from them, I could only see a couple dozen batlike creatures on the map. They must be the cave’s mobs.

I set the old man down and canceled Invisibility so he could actually see me.

“Aye, me back...”

“You okay?”

“After that stunt? Are ye mad, boy?!”

Well, not like I could blame him. After our escape, we ran at about forty miles an hour, leapt way over a twenty-five foot wall, and soared the skies at breakneck speed. No wonder the old guy’s body wasn’t up to the task. It took him a couple minutes to pull himself together, but with no one on our tail, he had the luxury of resting. Back at the castle, they probably hadn’t even realized we were gone yet. The soonest they’d realize would probably be dinner, more

than two hours from now.

“Right. I’ll take ya to our li’l spot direct. Ah, hold up. Where’re me manners? I ain’t even introduced meself. Name’s Barbarossa.”

“I’m Masaki Toudou. Toudou is my surname, so call me Masaki.”

“Masaki, gotcha. Yer me... nay, *our* savior. Whatever ya be needin’, me lads ’n’ me’ll be there.”

“Thanks, I’m glad to hear it. Just, please. Don’t expect me to keep your whole ship invisible. I’m still testing my abilities.”

“Doncha worry about that none. Follow me.”

Barbarossa rolled a big boulder away, revealing a switch in the floor. When he stepped on it, a cave wall began to rotate, rumbling loudly. I hadn’t noticed it on my map, but when I zoomed in, sure enough, there it was. Looked like the path was mob free, too.

I followed Barbarossa, considering my next steps, until he spoke.

“Chief, mind tellin’ me somethin’? Why not join up with the Empire? Power like that, ya could be sittin’ pretty in a general’s uniform.”

“Ah, right. Okay, I’ll explain.”

I told him I’d been summoned to this world on my way to get dinner. I then explained how they’d treated me when I arrived, the collar kerfuffle and, finally, that they’d imprisoned me.

“No way I’m gonna work for someone who tried to enslave me.”

“Aye, I c’n respect that, Chief. Another world, ey? Well, ’s far’s me laddies ’n’ I are concerned, we got caught up in a scuffle with the army, but we was betrayed ’n’ scattered ta tha four winds. An’ here be the result. These days, only a handful o’ pirates this side of the globe c’n cross the Empire and live ta tell the tale.”

“With their monster army, that’s no surprise.”

“’Tweren’t always like this. Only a few years back, the Empire was as quiet as tha windless sea. That be when the storm struck. Outta tha blue, they started

stockpilin' weapons an' sendin' whole fleets out. Ya musta seen the ships, laddy, makin' a triumphant return from the small Beastmen and Demonkind countries they raided. We did what we could for 'em, but the Empire bein' what it is... ye understand, doncha, son?"

"There are Demonkind too, huh? I don't know much about this world yet, but I'd expect them to be a strong race."

"Aye. They got powerful mages an' plenty of 'em're crazy good with axes 'n' swords, too. Alas, ya only got 's many soldiers as ya got. Empire's got tha numbers t' overwhelm small coastal nations. If the Empire'd attacked the Demonkind's capital, t'woldn'tta gone so pretty for 'em. Shame the capital's so far away. Ah, I be prattlin' on, ey? Here we be, Chief."

We stood before a weatherbeaten wooden door. Through the cracks, I caught the distinct smell of seawater. The sea couldn't be far off.

Barbarossa swung the door wide and announced himself with a hearty shout. "Oi, bastards! I've returned!"

His tearful crew came crowding around him immediately.

"Captain?!"

"You're alive! Blessed seas, I feared you'd perished!"

"Th-That ain' no haint! He's got legs! The Captain's alive! He's alive!"

I could see how much his sacrifice had meant to them.

While the pirates had their emotional reunion, I tried to take the hideout in. Past the large gathering space floated a proper pirate ship in all its glory.

A polite man in an apron approached. "Barb, my brother! Thank the stars you made it! I'd heard the Empire snatched you up! Nobody makes it past their security. How'd you manage to escape? And on that note, who's the gentleman behind you?" It was pretty surreal to see an apron in a pirate sanctuary, but the way he referred to Barbarossa really caught my ear: the old guy apparently had a sibling.

"Right, I'll introduce ya. This be Chief Masaki, tha man who freed me from peril! Give 'im a warm welcome, me hearties!"

“Thank you for your aid, Chief Masaki,” they all shouted, giving me a bow in unison.

I wasn’t used to being treated with this kind of respect. It was sure nice, but I couldn’t let it get to my head. Danger still loomed over us.

“I needed Barbarossa as much as he needed me, so thank you. Now, I’d like to get out of the Empire as soon as possible. Can I count on you all?”

“Aye! We be at yer disposal, but how’re we ta slip through the blockade? Empire’s got this whole area on lockdown.”

The frigates would definitely pose a problem. With access to more ships, we might be able to do something about them, but a single vessel had no chance against a well-armed fleet. One focused attack and we’d be blown to hell. Our only chance was to strike first.

“I have an idea. Are you ready to depart immediately?”

“Aye-aye. We ain’t even touched tha supplies we picked up on our last trip.”

“Great. Prepare for departure. I’ll go handle the fleet.”

With that, I cast Wing, shocking the crewmembers to their cores. I supposed that flight spells weren’t a thing in this world. Anybody with access to spells like these probably had to be summoned from another world.

“H-He’s flying?!”

“You c’n fly, Chief?!”

“Damn, if I had that spell...”

Seemed at least one of the pirates was a spellcaster. Unfortunately, even if I taught him the spell, I doubt he’d have the MP to even cast it, let alone maintain it for flight.

“Back soon!”

With Barbarossa literally off my back, I could push my flight speed to the limit. I activated Invisibility and Invincibility, essentially turning myself into a futuristic stealth bomber, and flew from the cave, arriving at the fleet in a flash. I opened the map and glanced around for an abandoned place to land. There, I began

adjusting my skills.

I planned to avoid direct confrontation, so Silent Attack and Melee Combat Boost would be useless. Instead, I took *Underwater Breathing* and *Master Swimmer*, so I'd become the perfect submarine.

A significant portion of the Empire's entire naval force was docked at the port. I scanned it for a secluded spot to submerge myself in the water. Underwater Breathing kept my breath flowing easily, and swimming didn't break my Invisibility, either. So far, everything was going to plan.

Master Swimmer allowed me to dive down under one of the ships so I could attach a Time Bomb to the hull. I set the timer to two hours so I could sabotage as many ships as possible without being discovered. Which was going to be more difficult than ever to ensure—Time Bomb broke my Invisibility the moment I used it. It made a fair amount of sense. Planting a bomb was, at the end of the day, an aggressive action. I had to reapply Invisibility on the fly while juggling the bombs' timers to keep them more or less in sync.

An hour passed, but Physical Stats Boost and Underwater Breathing kept my stamina strong. Things were going smoothly, but I'd need to pick up the pace. In the next twenty minutes, I'd have to attach bombs to another hundred ships.

It would be a spectacle. Time Bomb was an incredibly powerful skill, capable of dealing massive damage. The only catch was that the bomb had its own HP bar. When it ran out, the bomb ceased to function.

Ordinarily, it took more than a dozen attacks or spells to break through a wall, but a single Time Bomb would blow right through. Structures simply couldn't stand up to the skill. I had no doubt every one of these ships would be at the bottom of the harbor once the timers ran down.

I made sure to attach the bombs to the ships' keels. A ship with its keel blown apart couldn't be repaired by normal means. Not to mention, scuttling the ships introduced the difficulty of corpse recovery: they'd have to be dredged out of the sea with magic or something even more time-consuming.

Job done, I surfaced and cast Wing under Invisibility. Casually retreating to safety, I felt like a handsome, charming British spy armed with state-of-the-art tech.

I arrived at the cave and confirmed that the pirates were ready to set out. I landed on the deck and canceled Invisibility, prompting a hearty welcome. “Welcome back, Admiral!”

Wait, wasn’t it “chief” last time?

“Barbarossa, what’s with the ‘admiral’ thing?”

“Aye, well... ya helped me escape that hellhole, and we ain’t never seen tha likes uh yer magic ’afore. Figured ‘admiral’ be a title worthy o’ ya, Chief.”

Man, this guy just does whatever he wants, huh? Now I feel like I’m his boss or something. But I gotta admit, going from inmate awaiting execution to pirate admiral is a pretty sick promotion.

“Okay, but I gotta tell you, I don’t know the first thing about the sea: I don’t know how to sail, to navigate, nothing. If anyone’s gonna be the admiral, it should be you.”

“Pff, poppycock, son. Us sea dogs’ll manage the sailin’, you just use us however ya see fit! Truth be told, without ya, we be outta this life, e’ery one o’ us. Mosta our mates were lost to tha sea in fights against the Empire. We be the lone wolves of these waters now.” Coming from Barbarossa, this was a plea; I could see heart-wrenching sorrow in his eyes. He cared deeply for his comrades and saw me as his only chance to protect the life they’d all built.

It was a touching moment, but I couldn’t let it linger. We had to move, and quick. In less than ten minutes, the bombs’d go off.

“I see... All right. Well, let’s talk about that later. Now, we gotta move. You guys ready? Equipment at hand? Everybody good?”

My now-filthy business suit would draw eyes in this world, so I figured now was the perfect chance to work on my equipment. I decided to go with an assortment of GM items.

ITEM

Head: Valkyrie’s Soul (33% MP Cost Decrease / INT+40)

Chest: Surt’s Pride (10% HP Increase / STR+50)

Bracers: Loki’s Scheme (Attack Speed Boost / Casting Speed Boost / DEX+40)

Leggings: Gleipnir’s Horseshoe (AGI+40 / Movement Speed Increase)

ITEM

Kitted out like this, my stats shot through the roof and I glittered with the jewels and ornaments decorating my equipment. I should probably toss on some camouflage, too.

ITEM

Azure Dragon’s Cloak (Spell Power Boost (Lesser))

Made from the tanned hide of a legendary Azure Dragon, this cloak camouflages the wearer while offering a small Spell Power boost.

Rarity: SR

ITEM

The cloak was blue and noticeably scaly, but it sure stood out less than my GM gear. As a bonus, I didn’t actually have to pull the hood up because the camo effect tempered the light Valkyrie’s Soul shed.

“Admiral, I can’t help but notice that yer twinklin’.”

“Just your eyes playing tricks. Anyway, how’re your loadouts? I can spot you some equipment if you need it.” Not enjoying their stares, I tried to move the conversation along.

“Aye, aye, I reckon we could do with new swords, ours’ve surely seen be’er days. Our bows’ve ’ad it pretty rough, too.”

“Swords and bows? Yeah, I should have some spares. Gimme one sec.”

On me, I only had my mythril sword and rare items I doubted the pirates could handle. I’d have to use Room to check my item box.

I focused on the cast and, a moment later, a door appeared before me, to the audible shock of the crew. I casually strode through the door to experience firsthand the marvelous spectacle of the spell. Beyond the threshold was a cushy sofa and other elegant furnishings, a marble fireplace with a dainty little fire dancing in the crate, and a faucet—which, in this world, was probably the most valuable thing in the Room. The collab items I’d spent hours farming also

stood on proud display.

I took a moment to just circle the Room, touching everything to see if any of it was actually real. The sofa was plush to the touch and the faucet functioned properly, dispensing clean drinking water. Music played gently from the speakers and, if I'd had a yen, I could've even made myself a cup of coffee.

As much as I wanted to really take my time and relax in my Room, I had pressing issues to attend to. I battled the call of the bathtub and comfy sofa, and opened the box sitting against a wall. I riled through it, pulling out items for the pirates and a couple weak potions, just in case.

When I left the Room, the crew still stood frozen in shock.

"Admiral, what'n the ocean depths be that?"

"I'll give you the tour sometime. For now, let's get back to business. You guys ready?"

The fireworks were only a couple minutes away, so it was go time.

I laid the items on the deck. From right to left, I'd grabbed them the straight sword Hundred Swords, a Mythril Knife, an Elder Wyvern Bow, the wand Shirakaba, and a bunch of other arms I'd used for leveling. I also prepared some armor for them so they could take a couple hits if it came down to that.

"M-My word... are you certain? Th-This one's mythril!"

"A wyvern bow? There can' be more than a couple of these in the whole world!"

In pure amazement, each took the item they were most comfortable with.

I'd picked up three wands since I didn't know how many of the pirates could use magic. Only one wand remained. So, to summarize, we had two spellcasters, five melee fighters, and a ranger. A pretty balanced party, all told. Decked out in adventurer's garb, the crew looked way more like the Brittalia Online players I'd seen running around every day for years than the pirates they were.

Barbarossa's brother ran up to me just as I was checking the timer. Incidentally, he'd picked out the Flaming Sword for himself. As fantasy weapons

go, it was pretty cliche, but if it got him going, I wasn't gonna judge. Interestingly, he'd donned the chainmail armor I'd provided, but put his apron on over it. I didn't object or anything, but it was an odd choice.

"Admiral, the preparations are complete. We're ready to set sail!"

"What's your name, sailor?"

"Ah! I'm Barbarossa's brother, Rohas!" As I'd noticed earlier, he was much more polite than his brother. The two had totally different vibes.

With all the rage I'd been building since my capture, I shouted: "Listen up! Here's your admiral's first order: set sail for the north and don't slow down, no matter what!"

"Aye, sir, aye!"

As soon as we set off, the shockwaves of a titanic explosion rocked the ship. My Time Bombs had gone off without a hitch. Blasts continued, one after the other, the chain reaction devastating the Imperial fleet. Any oil stored on the ships or the dock probably caught fire as well. I could only hope there wouldn't be any civilian casualties. The docks were pretty closed off from the rest of the city, but you could never be sure. As far as non-civilians were concerned, I couldn't care less. This was war.

The Empire raided and plundered the smaller coastal nations, ending countless lives in the process. They had no right to play victim if one of their enemies struck back. That same logic applied to me. I was now at war. I had to be ready to stand my ground and, if necessary, take a life.

The crew only spared the blasts a glance or two. Their focus was on getting us underway, not rubbernecking. One of the pirates stood, waving his new wand around. At first, I didn't understand, but after a second glance, I realized he was controlling the wind. Sure enough, with the tailwind he created, we were at full speed.

The harbor must be in total chaos, and the castle guards should be noticing our absence about now. With their navy in flames and prisoners missing, nobody had eyes to spare for a lonely ship speeding out of the Empire's grasp. As a symphony of destruction raged in the distance, we sailed into the open

sea, leaving no one on land the wiser.

2.

The Empire ruled the southern seas. A mere two frigates on our tail could take our ship down with ease. Losing the ship wouldn't present me much of a problem, but letting my new crew die wouldn't sit right with me. In the north lay the Kingdom of Sentrag, fending off the Empire's grueling assault. That's all I knew.

Now that I finally had some time to consider my place in this world, I noticed that all my spells were inherited from my Brittalia Online character. If I knew how the magic system here worked, I might be able to learn some of this world's spells. I decided to press the crew for more information.

I learned that adventurers and soldiers had access to a variety of skills. Barbarossa and Rohas each had more than fifty levels in swordsmanship, placing them in the middle of the pack. It turned out that only skill trees had assigned levels, not people themselves. Skills could be increased with training. Swordsmanship, for example, could be practiced in battle. If you felt like your skills had improved, you could confirm your level at an Adventurers' Guild. To my surprise, the Guild happily provided their services to anyone, from standard adventurer, to pirate, to bandit. I supposed they must not ask for personal information. They probably just did their assessment and let you go, regardless of your other dealings.

It turned out that spells followed the same leveling scheme, except you gained access to more spells the higher your spellcasting level. Magic users were rare in this world and highly valued by their respective countries. Having two in our pirate crew was pretty far out of the ordinary.

Next, I asked about the other people who'd been summoned from my world.

"The rumors are terrifying. Some can summon giants made of iron, others can mow rows of soldiers down with a single strike. Monsters, I'm telling you. Monsters, all of 'em."

All the summons had their own abilities. If my situation was anything to judge

by, it was safe to assume they'd inherit their skills from whatever MMO they played. For example, the ability to summon an iron golem sounded eerily similar to an in-game skill, so my hypothesis was feeling pretty strong. Maybe all those people who'd reportedly vanished while gaming had appeared here. It was a crazy idea, but there might be something to it. Either way, I couldn't confirm anything without talking to someone else who'd been summoned.

Since I had all the time in the world, I decided to ask Pedol and his twin brother Padol, our two spellcasters, more about magic. According to them, the road to becoming a spellcaster started with magical aptitude. Adepts used the "mana" in their bodies to open a gate to the so-called "Material Plane" to cast spells. The spell unleashed depended on the image the caster held in their mind while casting. The twins taught me the basics while showing off the results of their training by pushing our ship further north with their wind spells.

They wanted me to give the spell a try, so I obliged and cast a wind spell. As it turned out, controlling my output seemed an impossible task.

"Ooooi! Admiral! Stop! I'm begging you!"

"Ah... sorry."

I'd only cast *Storm*, a spell most aspiring mages learned in their first few weeks, but I cracked the mast. In this world, spellcasting was all about control. After spending an hour imagining a gentle breeze flowing from my hand, I finally got it down, to the absolute joy of my twin teachers.

"Damn, Admiral, you're a quick study! You're like a hero out of legend!" Padol enthused.

"'Hero,' huh? From a different perspective, every hero can be a vicious monster. It's a meaningless title, conferred by those who come long after." The concept of heroes didn't fool me for a second. I knew it was all farce. In my world, it was the winners who were celebrated as heroes, and losers who were branded villains. This went double for religious conflicts.

"Yeah, I suppose the Empire ain't exactly singing your praises now."

I nodded. "Just keep this in mind: even if you're a monster to some, always protect what's most important to you. Whether that's your country, wife,

family, whatever it is, take hold of it and never let go. Fight for it until your final breath because, if you give up, a lifeless husk will stand where you once did."

"Yeth... ah, Admiral," Pedol chimed in. "We're veering off-courthe."

"Oh, you're right."

I could now finetune the wind's direction. As Pedol, Padol, and I propelled our pirate ship forward, I noticed five more ships approaching us on my map.

The lookout caught on, too.

"Admiral! Captain! Enemy vessels spotted!" he cried from the top of the mask.

"Beasths musth be heading home to the Empire," Pedol said. He turned to me. "Orders, Admiral?"

We could make a run for it, but I wanted to do as much damage as possible to the Imperial war machine.

"How big are the ships?"

"Damn large! One'th loaded with prithoners."

"I guess it must be a prison transport."

"All five shipths have taken light damage. They were probably in a fight."

Well, at least all the prisoners were stuffed on a single ship.

I turned to the twins. "Can you dodge their attacks?"

"Aye! Our girl's real easy to maneuver," Padol assured me. "I'll steer her myself, while Pedol puts a barrier up to buy us some time."

Pedol grinned. "With the MP potionth and equipment you gave us, my barrier'll be stronger than ever!"

Seemed we'd be all right. I nodded and returned my attention to the crew to issue my orders. "Listen up! We're engaging those ships! I'll need two of you with me. Volunteers?"

Barbarossa and Rohas stepped up.

"We be tha men fer it! We know how ta handle these Imperial dogs!"

“I wouldn’t let my brother face them alone. I’ll join you, Admiral.”

“Got it. Full speed ahead, everyone!”

“Aye, sir, aye!”

Now that everyone had their orders, we sped toward the enemy vessels.

I’d already tested my spells’ range. Now I just had to change my loadout for the fight.

SKILL

Passive

MP Regeneration (Medium) *HP*MP Regeneration (Medium) *Physical Stats Boost (Extra)* Melee Combat Boost (Greater) *Perception Boost (Lesser)* Command Boost (Medium) / Spell Power Boost (Medium)

SKILL

The only skill on the list I hadn’t tested yet was *Command Boost*, but it was a nice little utility skill that increased the attack power of my party as a whole.

SKILL

Active

Surge / Sonic Blade / Jab

SKILL

Three skills with perfect synergy. Sonic Blade released a shockwave with every swing of the weapon, effectively increasing its size. Surge added reach and provided an attack boost. Together, they were a deadly combo, but not a flawless one. The combo used HP as a resource, so players could get ahead of themselves, deplete their own health bars, and faint. It happened pretty often in Brittalia Online. Even so, Surge and Sonic Blade were still the go-to for high-level PvP. In the right hands, they were a real beast. You just had to make your melee attacks right before your healer got a heal down, otherwise you’d be in a pickle.

Finally, Jab allowed me to knock an enemy down to 1 HP instead of killing them, regardless of the power behind my attack. I wanted the choice to keep

my target alive, if I so desired.

I was getting quicker at resetting my skills, but in the couple seconds I spent in menus, the enemy fleet came into my firing range. Normally, they'd still be out of reach, but my gear and skills gave me enough boost to start prepping my attack right away.

I had to clearly imagine both the spell and the desired outcome. I concentrated on a spear piercing the enemy sail: *Flame Javelin*. Once I had a detailed picture of what I wanted to accomplish, I focused my attention on the specific spell I wanted to cast from my repertoire. As I did, a long, thick spear materialized in my hand.

The crew's eyes were glued to me in shock and anticipation.

Honestly, "long" and "thick" were understatements. This thing was the size of a telephone pole. Not that size mattered much if I couldn't hit the target. I couldn't guarantee that the enemy ship would stay still, ready to be pierced.

There was nothing for it but to try. I raised the spear in both my hands and lobbed it toward the middle of the enemy formation. The giant flaming spear soared above the clear, cerulean water like a missile, until it crashed into a ship's mast, blowing the top half off in a spectacular explosion.

Whoops, guess I went a little too far.

The spear continued along its trajectory, and lodged itself in the ship behind my target, setting it ablaze. To my relief, it wasn't the prison transport.

"Oi, that was right mad... with spells like that, ya could blow a town clear off the map if y'ain't careful."

"I'll be sure to avoid using magic in towns, then. Though, I will say that I added a little extra juice to that one. I wanted to stop these guys in their tracks. Anyway, Barbarossa! Rohas! C'mon, we're boarding them."

"Aye, sir, aye!"

They weren't going anywhere, so we might as well board them. I cast Wing and grabbed my astonished volunteers. "The rest of you! Go ahead and sink three of the five from range with your arrows, guns, and spells! Understood?"

“Aye, sir, aye!”

The rest of the crew scattered to their tasks, while my away team winged its way to the enemy vessels. With my Invincibility activated, and Barbarossa and Rohas in hand, the Imperials had no idea what was about to hit them.

◇◆◇

“What just happened?! Our mast is gone!”

“All hands on deck! Fight the fire!”

“Admiral, the rear ship’s in flames! We can’t hold this anymore! Call for reinforcements!”

As the crew went from carefree victory celebration to fighting fires and managing a crippled vessel, panic spread through the Imperial fleet.

“Where did that attack come from?! Get on with the damage report!” The admiral, booze still in hand, rushed up from below deck, where prisoners were likely kept.

“It came from the south! A single pirate vessel, headed our way!”

“Damage report, sir! Mast on the second and third ships destroyed! The fourth ship is in critical condition, it could sink any moment.”

The admiral smashed the porcelain bottle against the deck in blind rage. “Curses! I don’t know what lunatic had the bollocks to attack the Empire, but I’ll make them pay! Listen up, sailors! Crush those damn pirates! Dispose of every last one of them and strip them clean of valuables!”

A nearby sailor got his attention. “B-But, sir, we need to save the fourth—”

“Leave those useless sacks of shit! Annihilate the pirates! Bring me their heads or else! Now! Move!” He punched the sailor nearest to him, and returned to shouting orders at the top of his lungs. Any sailor who dared disagree would likely be tried for treason.

Though it visibly hurt them to do so, the sailors had no choice but to follow orders. If the Empire told them to die, they were expected to walk into the fire with smiles on their faces. With the threat still uncertain, they clung to the faint hope that a quick victory would give them time to save their sinking comrades.

As they began to pick up speed to engage the pirate vessel, they spotted something in the sky: a man. A flying man, carrying two others in his hands. Some sailors instinctively reacted by drawing their wands or bows and firing, but the flying man rolled gracefully to avoid arrows and spells alike. He moved with such fluidity, like an aerial dance. The sailors adapted: realizing that single-target attacks were useless, they resorted to an area-of-effect fire spell. The naval mages constructed a meteoric fireball and launched it at the flying threat.

It exploded right on target, engulfing the men in flames.

“We get ’em?”

The soldiers were ready to celebrate, but brutal reality shortly stepped in, crushing their hopes. The flying man and his companions cut through the explosion spotless and unsinged. As the explosion burned itself out, the three angels of death landed lightly on the deck of the flagship.

◇◆◇

Barbarossa, Rohas, and I headed to the largest of the Imperial ships, my hands tightly gripping each of their collars.

“Barb, we’re flying! Goodness, I could never have imagined!”

“What’re you gigglin’ about? I be pissin’ me pants!”

On our little trip, I learned that Rohas had always dreamed of soaring the skies, and that Barbarossa had some agoraphobia. No matter what happened, I’d hold tightly to the joyful Rohas and trembling Barbarossa. I wouldn’t let them slip from my grasp.

“Admiraaaal! Arrows, spells, cannonballs! Avast!” Barbarossa cried in terror.

Thanks to my Physical Stats boost, I noticed the projectiles the instant they were fired. Dodging them was effortless: I bobbed and wove in maneuver after maneuver, to Barbarossa’s dismay, and his brother’s delight. These guys just loved talking. They were like two bees constantly buzzing around my head.

“Admiral! They’re launching a fireball!”

“Dodge iiiit!”

“We’re flying through!”

I ignored Barbarossa's scream and cast *Gravity Wall* to warp the air around us, blocking all low-ranked attacks for ten seconds. It could even defend against dragon breath. The only downside was its hefty ten minute cooldown. It did turn out to be the perfect spell for the moment, though, as the wall of air sheltered a sizable sphere, providing my companions ample protection. The fireball hit us head-on, but it was powerless before my Gravity Wall. We flew through it without feeling so much as a warm breeze.

I watched the sailors' shocked expressions as we blasted through the explosion untouched. We'd land right in front of them.

"We're dropping, boys! Get ready to fight."

"Aye! I'll cut 'em to pieces!"

"Yeah! We'll tear them up!"

The trip had frightened Barbarossa, but he now gripped his Lightning Sword and gritted his teeth, his weapon sparking with electricity in response. By contrast, Rohas was having the time of his life. Flaming Sword ablaze in one hand, Fire Dragon Shield ready in the other, he was prepared to leap into battle at a moment's notice. Real even keel, that guy.

I began our descent and cast buffs on my companions: *Defense Up*, *Quick Work*, and *Ultimate Hero* to raise their defense, attack speed, and attack power respectively. Buffs cast, I alighted carefully on deck and set them both down.

The sailors were pale with terror, their eyes locked on us. After watching us fly through their rain of attacks, and then their last-ditch AoE, none of them dared so much as raise a weapon against us, let alone take a swing.

"The fuck're you standing around for?! Go! Destroy them! Flood the deck with their blood and guts! Cut their heads off and shove 'em up their asses!"

I'd say this guy was a pig in military dress, but I wouldn't want to insult farm animals like that. The only thing bigger than his ego was his bulging stomach. If Barbarossa hid behind the guy's fat, I'd never see my buddy again. Vile though he may have been, the commander's less-than-kind words shook the sailors awake.

"Here we go. Don't you dare die on me."

“I’ve seen a hundred such skirmishes. They’re not even worth my blade.”

“I reckon this be nothin’ compared to flyin’!”

“Good. Then, let’s do it!”

“Aye!”

The brothers charged into a flanking group of sailors, while I plowed into the main enemy force. As we moved, our opponents took up their arms and attacked, but I didn’t flinch, charging forward with my trusty sword, Seven Arthur. Seven Arthur was a rare that had taken me over a year to lay hands on. Its attack power was low, but it had multistrike, so a single swing did its low damage to an opponent multiple times.

Curious to see how the multistrike worked this world, I swung at a broadsword-brandishing sailor in my path. He managed to block my sweep with his blade, but the four follow-up slashes cut through his plate armor like a thousand degree knife through anything, and sliced into his arms and chest. One arm flew to the other side of the deck, while he collapsed to the ground, chest split wide open, his blood pouring onto the planks.

My passive attack power increase was a stronger combo with Seven Arthur’s ability than I’d imagined.

At the sight of his partner being diced, another sailor charged at me in raw fury, aiming his spear right at me. I flipped around to avoid the thrust, and carried the momentum into a strike straight at his head. It flew off obligingly, while the final two follow-up strikes made mincemeat of his corpse.

Those two gruesome deaths seemed to dissuade the other sailors from close-range combat, and they tried to take me down with a bow and arrow, instead. I spotted the archer on the map and whipped over to look at him, spotting him on the deck’s second level, just as he loosed an arrow at me.

Physical Stats Boost heightened my perception to the point where dodging a speeding arrow posed no challenge. I blocked it with my sword, then activated my deadly combo: Surge and Sonic Blade. I pointed the blade at him and unleashed a powerful shockwave that tore through his body, leaving nothing but a smear of gore behind. Still, my onslaught wasn’t finished. Multistrike

activated in the form of three aftershocks, ripping into the three soldiers nearest the bowman. Two of them were reduced to human paste, while the third “only” lost an arm.

Next, I went to focus my attention on their mages, but it turned out to be unnecessary: they were already on fire. Rohas aimed trail after trail of hellish flame their way. Further on, Babarossa was simply slamming his sword into the deck, unleashing shocks of electricity on his enemies. The sailors in full metal gear never stood a chance. After a series of cracks and pops, they all collapsed, lifeless.

My companions were getting in some good practice with their equipment. I observed their quick, sharp, and intentional movement patterns. Neither brother missed a beat in the heat of battle. I couldn’t be sure if my buffs were to blame, or if I’d just gotten my hands on some extremely talented pirates, but I liked what I was seeing.

It was enjoyable enough that I could have watched for hours, but a spearman rudely interrupted my appreciation, so I hit him with the combo, making sure to unlock Seven Arthur’s full potential this time, and striking him with seven follow-up strikes. His body disintegrated, leaving only a thick vapor of blood carried away on the cool sea breeze, and a gorey smudge suggesting the onetime presence of a person.

As we massacred the flagship’s sailors, the smaller ship beside it began to list with a painful creak, and then sink. The rest of the pirate crew were no less successful. I glanced at the map to assess the overall state of the battle. Not only were all the pirates still alive, they’d begun pulling enemy sailors from the cold waves to save them. I felt pride well up in my chest. Talented pirates, indeed.

Before blasting off again, I left them with an additional request: “Spare those who surrender!”

Killing those who lay down their weapons was unnecessary evil, even a pirate boss could agree with that.

In that moment of respite, I took in the destruction we’d wreaked. We stood in a pool of blood on the flagship deck, surrounded by bodies piled atop still

other bodies. I wanted to shut my eyes and puke, but I couldn't give the enemy troops a chance to slaughter my crew. I stiffened my trembling muscles, shook off the overpowering guilt that I'd become a monster, and focused on the battle at hand.

Though we were surrounded, only a handful of Imperial sailors kept up the fight. Terror at becoming another foothill in our corpse mountain range had begun to overtake them. They were mortified. Some clearly wanted to surrender, but couldn't for fear of the fat, egotist bastard on the second level. Ending him would put the bloodshed to a quick end, too, I guessed.

I just wanted this battle to be done. There was no need for more death. I took to the sky, landed directly in front of his bulging stomach, and swung my sword down at him.

"Eeeeek?!"

Something strange happened. The attack didn't connect. The strikes bounced off him with a series of metallic clanks. Someone had saved him.



Before me stood an apathetic, blue-haired girl in a school uniform. She'd not only managed to block the sword that had carved its way through sailor after sailor, but she did so with her bare hands. The follow-up slices bounced off an invisible vvall.

"Target successfully protected. The barrier has been destroyed. Requesting immediate mending."

"Yeah, sure. Hahhh, come on, man, can you let up? This was supposed to be a nice, relaxing trip home, but then we run into you three nutcases."

I kept my sword leveled at the girl, as I glanced at the source of the voice. It was a stubby young guy with a dumb smile on his face, like the friend who takes thirty seconds to get the most basic pun, but then has to explain the joke to everyone else. His gormless expression sure didn't match his steed, which appeared to be a giant mechanical eagle. The newcomer couldn't be more than a couple years older than me, with dark, shoulder-length hair, streaked with reddish highlights. He wore a black and blue robe and was armed with two longswords and a strange box at his belt.

He reached into the little box, removed a card, and held it out to the girl, where it began to shine.

"*Shield Barrier*," he muttered.

That sounded an awful lot like a skill name. When it left his mouth, the light covered the girl, like a thin coating of armor. He'd likely just cast a defensive buff. I turned my full attention on the man, but without missing a beat, the girl struck at me with her bare hands, moving with astonishing speed.

My Physical Ability Boost allowed me to jump back and avoid the attack. Even with Invincibility on, that chop sent chills down my spine. I obviously could've taken it, but I chose to dodge because I wasn't keen on revealing my invincibility.

The girl kept pushing, chaining one attack into the next. Chops, hooks, leg sweeps—she threw everything she had at me. Her arms and legs seemed to literally cut through the wind. I kept dodging, but she was just too fast, and I had to resort to blocking one of her swings with my sword. The powerful impact

blasted me up against the remaining half of the mast with bone shattering force. Fortunately, Invincibility negated the damage, but the shockwave still ran violently through my body, rattling internal organs. It made me wanna hurl. At least now I knew I was vulnerable to effects that didn't count as "damage."

I pretended to be in great pain, leaning on my sword to rise. Up on the second level, the girl was aiming at me with both of her hands. I had no idea what sort of kickboxing technique she was going to throw at me next, but I didn't have to wait for long to find out.

Ratatatatatata!

An unstoppable torrent of metal bullets shot from her fingers. She turned out to be a robot, or an android, or whatever the right word was. She was an artificial human.

I vaulted to the side to dodge the oncoming hail. The remainder of the mast took the damage in my stead, leaving it in tatters.

"Oi, whaddya think you're doin'? Those repair costs will be deducted from your pay!"

"Gotcha, gotcha. Corona, no more shooting. Instead, *Twin Plasma Blades* activate!" He took another card from his box and threw it at his robot girl, Corona. Once again, the card was enveloped by light. When the light subsided, two double-edged swords were attached to her arms.

"Twin Plasma Blades activated."

"I'll toss her some treats too. You've done well dodging her attacks so far, but what about this?!" He reached into his box for another card, but I wasn't gonna let him give me more trouble.

I cast Wing, launched myself into the air, and charged at the shabby guy, activating Surge. I aimed my sword straight for him, but Corona was between us instantly, blocking my attack with her swords, and unleashing a shower of sparks on us. I kept the pressure up. I'd specifically set up my passives for close-range combat, but she managed to withstand my flurry. I started to wonder how a fragile schoolgirl could put up such a fight, but reminded myself that she was a robot. It made perfect sense for her to be faster and more powerful than

humans. She managed to buy enough time for the guy to get another card out.

“Good girl! I’m gonna hug and kiss you all over after we’re done!” he cheered her on.

“I’d rather you didn’t, My Lord.”

“Hahaha, I wish you’d give me a little sugar occasionally. Anyway, here we go! *Come forth, Beast of Iron! May your roar crumble the forts! Massacre our enemies with your iron fangs! Mechanical Beast Summon - Buster Megalochimera!*” He threw the card in my direction. When it was around halfway to me, a magic circle formed in its place. It expanded slowly, giving rise to the beast within. First, the head of a golden lion with glass eyes, shining red as the blood on the lower deck, then the armored, steel-blue body of a goat, massive metallic talons that could tear any material to tissue paper, and finally a snake for a tail, constructed from a thick bundle of steel wires. I was face-to-face with a mechanical chimera.

“Grwaaaaaaargh! Gwaaaaaaaaaargh!” The chimera’s fierce roar shook the air around me.

I’d seen this beast before. Many times, in fact. A commercial for the online card game, Metallic Monsters, showcased it. In Metallic Monsters, you collected cards which could produce a wide variety of effects, including summoning weapons and shields, applying buffs, and so forth. If Barbarossa was to be believed, magic like this wasn’t native to the world we stood in. I was definitely dealing with another summoned victim.

My only question was whether our meeting would be a blessing or a curse. If he was indeed from Metallic Monsters, then the girl next to him must’ve been...

“Machine Goddess Corona, huh?” A friend of mine had been dying to lay hands on that card. The whole game was marketed with her.

“Hey, where did you learn about Corona?” shabby guy frowned. “Ah, actually... I see how it is. You’re one of us.”

“Yep. I didn’t expect to meet one of my fellows so soon, but since it’s come to this, I have some questions for you. Why don’t we call a truce?” If at all possible, I wouldn’t want to kill the first person I’d run into with whom I shared

this strange fate.

“No luck, buddy. I’m here for a reason. The most I can do is grant you a swift death, but I’d like to hear your name before I take you out.”

So there was no dodging the fight. My opponent seemed indifferent and easygoing, but that was just his front. His hand rested on his card case, ready to throw more at me.

“You first,” I said.

“Ah, right, my bad. I’m Shou. Shou Sasakiyama. A Metallic Beast summoner.” He introduced himself with an exaggerated bow. The theatrical type, I supposed.

“I’m Masaki Toudou. I’m... no, actually, I won’t tell you my job.”

“Huh?! Where’s your courtesy, man?”

I had no reason to tell him. He shouldn’t have revealed more than necessary.

“Hahhh, whatever,” he sighed. “I at least got a name for your headstone. Now I just have to send you to your grave. Die.” His easy going facade disappeared. He pointed a finger at me with a deadly glare. It seemed to be a signal, as both Corona and the chimera blasted at me. Corona was a little faster than the massive beast. She closed the gap between us in a blink, and began to spin her blades, creating a deadly chainsaw.

I tried to halt their movement with my trusty Seven Arthur, but it bounced off of her fan of blades. She transformed the momentum of her spin into pure attack power, making her even deadlier than before. I wouldn’t be surprised if Plasma Blades was a rare and powerful card in the first place, either.

Corona didn’t waste the attack of opportunity from the rebound, immediately lunging in for a horizontal slash. I jumped back to dodge, but the hem of my cloak didn’t move fast enough and was shredded. The momentum also carried her blades into the handrail of the upper deck, cutting through it like a buzzsaw and sending it splashing into the sea. Suffice to say, anybody hit with the brunt of that attack wouldn’t live to tell the tale.

Just as I was getting my bearings back, I noticed missiles roaring my way from

both sides. I had no idea where they'd been launched from, but it wasn't good. I put a hand out and cast a breath-like fire spell to surround and prematurely detonate the missiles. I expanded it to area-of-effect range to make sure it'd catch any missile that might harm me. The series of loud bangs and explosions within the flames created a spectacular fireworks display, one I had no time to enjoy because Corona was blasting at me again.

The chimera supported her with a barrage of missiles and a stream of lasers from its laser gatling gun, as Corona unleashed a lightning fast flurry of relentless attacks. I'd do anything for a moment of rest to get my thoughts together.

"Admiral! I be comin'!" Barbarossa shouted, whacking the machine chimera with his Lightning Sword. A normal sword would've bounced right off its metal armor, leaving Barbarossa defenseless before the beast, but he'd picked some especially powerful items from the options I gave them. Responding to his attack, the chimera lifted its snake tail and whipped it at his head.

Rohas's sword's blaze rose higher as he sliced through the bundle of wires. "I'm not letting you touch Barb!" he yelled as he struck. The tail dropped to the deck and shattered into a million particles of light, to Shou's utter shock.

"W-Wait, what?! How?! Its body should be impermeable, even to steel!"

Sweet summer child. Little did he know that Rohas was brandishing a magic sword. In Brittalia Online, it was a relatively common item, used mainly for elite hunting and grinding, but that didn't change the fact that it could pierce a dragon's scales.

In stark contrast to her master, Corona didn't so much as flinch at the development. Her attacks were as unrelenting as ever, but I noticed that her moveset was a little different from what she was advertised with. They must've trained since arriving in this world.

As soon as I tried to put some distance between us, she switched from her blades to her gatling gun, still rushing at me. I turned my attention to the chimera while fending off her attacks. It was too big to pin. I'd need to destroy it with a single, decisive strike, otherwise it and the remaining sailors could overwhelm Barbarossa and Rohas.

Corona revved her blades up. The chilling sound of them cutting through the wind became even more intense as she went in for a sideways sweep. I raised my blade to fend it off, but she feinted, raising her blades overhead and bringing them down on me. No flesh and blood person could change the direction of her motions that quickly, but her machine body allowed her to surpass human limitations. I wasn't going to be able to block this attack with my sword and dodging would be difficult, but I had a plan in mind.

Instead of trying to block her blades, I could try to catch her arms. I jumped right at her, sheathed my sword to make it vanish into my inventory, and caught her arm before her blades could reach me.

"Nh?!" She showed a glimmer of emotion for the first time since our battle began. Honestly, she was kinda cute.

The weight behind her strike sent waves of pain through my arm, but I managed to catch her before her strike reached full momentum. I could hold it just long enough to push my other hand against her abdomen and activate Surge.

"Gahhh!"

A blade of light extended from my palm and crashed into her stomach. The force sent her flying, giving me an opportunity to push my advantage. I channeled mana into my other hand and cast Flame Javelin, sending it at her l like a missile.

"Not so fast! *Adamas Shield*!"

A golden shield formed from thin air and blocked my javelin. Shou must've used another defensive card, but it seemed only able to block a single attack, as it crumbled to nothing as soon as it ate my spell. Behind the crumbling shield stood Shou, hugging Corona close with one arm. He wore the same aloof smile as before, suggesting that he wasn't out of tricks just yet.

Bzzzt, gwraghhhh!

The smashing sounds of impact interrupted my train of thought, shaking the ship violently. I whipped around, looking for the source, only to see the chimera crash onto the deck, electric discharge sparkling all over its body. After a few

seconds, the crimson light faded from its eyes.

“Hahhh... yeah, that’s right. Ya best stay down.”

“We’d be done for... without the equipment... you gave us...”

Barbarossa and Rohas stood beside the downed beast, leaning on their swords with bruises and cuts all over their bodies. Their battle with the chimera had been hard fought. The machine was covered in scorch marks and a fountain of sparks erupted from some short-circuiting internal mechanism. Apparently flames and electricity could get the job done. This was vital information for both me and the two pirates, as choosing proper equipment could be the difference between life and death.

“Damn you guys aren’t playing, huh?” Shou sighed. “Not many can down my chimera.”

“Now that we’ve established that, why don’t you surrender?” I asked. “I doubt Corona is in any shape to fight, but I’ll be gracious enough to spare your life.”

Corona’s body hung limp in Shou’s arm, unconscious—whatever that even meant for robots. Surge did massive damage, even without a weapon thanks to my passives and GM equipment, so I could imagine that the powerful shock had fried her motherboard or something.

“Hahaha, I appreciate your magnanimity, but I’m not done yet!”

So he *did* have another trick up his sleeve. He still sat atop his giant eagle, keeping as much distance between us as he wanted. I couldn’t stop him from summoning another beast.

“This one is my favorite toy! I’m sure you’ll love it! Come forth, mechanical beast!” He took another card out and tossed it into the sky where it exploded with an eye-searing light much brighter than the light from the chimera. I had to avert my gaze for fear of blindness.

“*Flash Bird*!”

The blinding light slowly took the shape of a bird... more specifically, a penguin. It was adorable, but not adorable enough to distract me from the two

dots suddenly moving on my map at an absurd pace.

They'd played us.

"Adios, boss!"

They ran.

"Hey, get back here!" I shouted. "And who're you calling 'boss,' you're older than me!"

"I got my payment, so I'm not obligated to keep babysitting them. Bye now!"

They were out of my map's immediate range in mere seconds. I wouldn't be able to catch up to them. The chimera and the penguin were gone, too. Not sure where the chimera ended up, but the penguin had likely been a diversion.

"Look at 'em scurryin' off. D'we go after them?"

"There's nothing to gain by pursuing them; not like we'd catch up anyway."

"So should we return to the original plan of seizing the ships?" Rohas asked.

"Yep. Without that Shou guy, it'll be a cakewalk." I took Seven Arthur out, and plunged into the group of sailors who'd silently watched my battle with Shou from a distance. The rest of this was just taking out the trash. After witnessing our battle, most of the sailors threw their weapons down without putting up a fight. Their captain's screams and hissy fits were getting on my nerves. Since he looked like a barrel, I figured he must float, so I tossed him overboard.

The sailors who had surrendered and my crew were both adamant about rescuing the remaining sailors from the flaming ships, so we did just that.

"Admiral, we're done," Pedol reported with a surprisingly sharp salute. "We gathered all the tholdierth on one of the thipth."

"Good. Any casualties on our side?"

"With the equipment you thupplied uth with, we fended them off without taking any cathualtieth. We had some injurieth, but the HP potionth fixed them up."

I was glad that the weak potions I'd created while leveling my crafting skills finally found some use. They got the job done, but there was no comparison

with high-level potions.

I glanced at the sailors. They were a depressing sight. Some were covered in blood-soaked bandages, others still stood shaking from their recent dip in the open sea. It'd be a real shame to see them die now that we'd gone through all the trouble to save them. Additionally, I was gonna cast a healing spell anyway, so I might as well top these guys off, too.

"Listen here, no funny business. I'll use a healing spell to fix you up. If you try to resist, well... I'm sure you know."

The sailors nodded weakly. I could feel the heavy dread in their eyes.

I concentrated on an image of wounds closing up and cast *Mass Heal*. I didn't want to overheal them, so I tried to create a more gradual, less powerful image in my mind. It worked. The sailors' wounds began to close up, and the spell even lent some warmth to those who were shaking. The development surprised them as much as it surprised me. A number of them stared at their own hands, unsure of the source of the heat. With the spell complete, Barbrossa and Rohas shimmied up to me.

"Admiral, they be all herded together, but what now? I ain't big on lettin' 'em stay with us. I don't trust no Imperial dogs."

"We'll let them return to the Empire. That's exactly why we put 'em all on the same ship."

"I'm sorry, but can you enlighten me as to why?" Rohas asked, polite as ever. "Would it not be better to offer them up as prisoners of war to one of the Empire's many enemies?"

I'd considered that option myself, but war costs money. It'd be difficult for one country to accept all these prisoners at once. The care and keeping of prisoners took valuable resources. They had to be fed and watered as well. Better to return these guys to the Empire, let them deal with paying for and feeding their own troops. It seemed unlikely that these men would ever take up arms again after what they'd witnessed here.

My reasoning managed to convince Barbarossa and Rohas and the news overjoyed the sailors. The vice-captain was ready to take his troops home safe

and sound. I threatened them into not attacking us ever again, just for good measure. I was no saint. If they were stupid enough to cross me again, I wouldn't let them off my hook. Fortunately, they seemed to read my message loud and clear.

Now for the prisoners. I glanced at their ship. The situation wasn't much better there than on the flagship. Many of them were severely injured and terrified of us. Not that I could blame them, really. We'd introduced ourselves as pirates, after all. To my relief, it only took a healing spell to mend our relationship—though some of them got a little too excited and tried extra hard to befriend us.

Honestly, it was super awkward. I wasn't used to being showered with compliments. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Barbarossa smirking at my suffering.

All right, I see how it is... you want to fly again, huh?

Once I'd waded through the compliments, I looked for prisoners who could sail, and asked them to return the captives to their countries of origin. We even found an imprisoned military commander to act as the group's de facto leader. Deep in our debt, the prisoners promised to help us find footing in their homelands if we ever found ourselves there.

After exchanging warm handshakes all around, the prison ship set off for the east. Their commander believed he could get some assistance there. For their final destination, they chose a landlocked country, somewhere extremely difficult for the Imperial navy to target. All they had to do was reach the nearest eastern harbor and go into hiding.

I'd need to find a chill country to take a break in soon, too. That'd sure be nice.

With that, we stripped the Imperial sailors of the supplies we could, and once again set off for the north.

When all was said and done we had also found a treasure chest, but it was completely empty. We'd asked the prisoners, only to be informed that Shou had swiped the chest's entire contents.

That bastard just takes whatever he wants, huh?!

I wanted to throw a party in celebration of our victory and my crew's willingness to follow my daring orders. We adjusted our route slightly to sail along the shoreline so we wouldn't be caught out in the open seas if anything happened. Then I cast Room.

In Brittalia Online, you couldn't cast Room outside of town, but that restriction didn't apply here. I could even use my Room as an emergency bunker. The furniture was also locked behind the game's framework. I could sit, lie down, or use the stove to cook something up with my cooking skill, or take a shower for PR purposes, but that was about it. In this world, however, I could use any of the appliances in my Room just as I could use them in the real world. It was no exaggeration to say that the Room was a dream come true in my current situation. I could make coffee, use the fridge, and get clean, fresh drinking water from the tap.

The pirates couldn't believe their eyes when they entered the Room. It was a luxurious suite, free of the sea's rocking hand. What hooked them immediately was the beer tap. Barbarossa loved his booze, so the chance to enjoy fresh, ice-cold beer from the tap truly invigorated him.

"Pfwaaanh! Damn, that be good! Why come nobody never told me beer be so delicious cold?" He was legitimately tearing up.

Rohas, a man who wore an apron even over chainmail, made an unsurprising beeline for the kitchen. He didn't quite understand how the modern oven worked, but he got used to it pretty quick after a brief explanation. His adaptability was nothing to sneeze at.

"Admiral, I'm... I'm speechless. I've never seen most of these spices before, and even the ones I've had experience with... you know how hard it is to get pepper?! This's already made the battle worth it." Rohas was a little less tearful than his older brother, but his appreciation still ran deep.

The rest of the crew enjoyed the squishy sofa, testing its bounciness. Sitting on it was like sitting on the lightest, fluffiest of white clouds. If I gave each crewmember their own personal sofa, none of them might ever stand again. Actually, that wouldn't be a bad trap, enticing the enemy with the promise of

unmatched comfort. I'd just have to be careful not to fall for it myself.

I handed Rohas the meat and veggies I had stored, and the supplies we'd looted from the Empire, then went on to prepare the bath. I had the feeling that readying the bath was outside my list of responsibilities as admiral, but God did I need to bathe now. My scalp'd begun to itch from staying unwashed for so long. The crew could use the bath to their hearts' content, but I had dibs on the first dip.

As I cleaned the bath, my thoughts drifted to my own world. I felt terrible for a coworker there. His parents didn't understand what it meant to work online on the computer, so they assumed he played games all day. The misunderstanding had soured the relationship and, last I'd heard, they weren't talking much.

I hoped my friends were doing well. I'd love to take them on board and help them out if they somehow appeared here, but I couldn't justify going out of my way to somehow get them to me. Jeez, nothing better than living in a peaceful world. If only I'd at least made it to my guild meet-up.

"Admiral! The food is ready!"

"I'll be right there!"

It was odd to think of it that way, but it was time to return to the real world. I wanted to go have a meal with my crew. I had no idea that enacting a massacre would make me work up such an appetite, but damn was I ever starving. Fighting on an empty stomach was plain suicide, even with my invincibility.

"Oooh, it smells good. I can't wait to dig in." The fabulous aroma of freshly cooked food welcomed me into the room. My stomach couldn't hide its excitement, and announced my appetite with a loud growl.

"I used the meat you gave us and the stuff we looted to make a bit of a feast. It was a blast to cook again, it's been a while." Rohas was glowing with happiness and fulfillment as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. I liked cooking fine, but he seemed to love it, and his love showed in the meal he'd prepared for us. It looked absolutely amazing. I was dying to dig in.

"This deserves a cheer. Raise your mugs, everyone!"

We all raised our wooden mugs of cold, fresh beer or, for those who didn't handle alcohol well, orange juice.

"To today's victory and tomorrow's journey, cheers!"

"Cheers!"

We all let out a cheer and took swigs from our mugs. I downed half my beer in one go. I was no lightweight by any means. In fact, I could drink anybody at my company under the table. They'd thrown me a party when I first joined. One of my coworkers wanted to get me drunk, but he was out cold before I was feeling a buzz. I had to drag him back home to his wife. What a night...

Now it was time to dig in. I had asked Rohas for some fried chicken, and he definitely delivered. Apparently this world had an equivalent dish as well, but I craved the beloved chicken of my childhood, so I taught him my recipe. What Rohas served up was a perfect golden, crunchy deep-fried chicken that even the Colonel would envy. It was nothing short of incredible. Rohas, man. What a guy.

They were already familiar with soy sauce, miso, and garlic, which allowed me to whip up a bangin' tartar sauce. I stuffed my face, washing it all down with the other half of my beer.

"Pfwanhhh!"

I'd needed this. I'd needed exactly this. Screw potions. Beer and chicken were the top way to regain health in my book. No contest.

Seeing how much I was enjoying Rohas's offering, the crew swarmed the tray piled high with delicious manna, though not before I could sneak in and grab a couple more pieces. At this rate, I'd become a chicken junkie.

The fries were crunchy and delectable too. In prison, I could get by on bread and soup, but damn, had I missed fast food. Rohas also provided sautéed rabbit, one of the more common meats in this world. It was astonishingly tender; every bite melted in your mouth.

As I was tucking into the tasty meal, Barbarossa, his cheeks already rosy with booze turned to me. "Oi, Admiral, doncha think we be needin' a proper name for our crew?"

“So it’s my job because you up and named me admiral, huh? Well, we slipped through the Empire’s claws, and we’ve for sure formed a bond, but do we actually need a name? Staying random, nameless pirates is good by me, honestly.”

“I reckon I understand, but... nghhh, pfwanhhhh! Give us a name, Admiral!” He bowed so low that he almost bonked his head on the table.

Rohas had told me that the crew’d previously gone by the Barbarossa Buccaneers, which had an admittedly nice ring to it. I had my work cut out for me.

“I’m not very good at names, but I’ll give it some thought.”

I asked another crewmate for a second beer to get my creative juices going. I wasn’t even buzzed yet, so chances were pretty low another beer would get me wasted.

Masaki Pirates? Nah, that’s lame; Barbarossa Buccaneers sounds much better. Maybe I could do Brittalia Buccaneers? No, that’s just a carbon copy of the previous name. I need to come up with something unique and— my Seven Arthur!

“Pirates of the Round Table...” I mumbled to myself. Since The Round Table was the name of my Brittalia Online guild and we were all sitting around a large table, eating and drinking, enjoying ourselves, and blowing off some of the steam that’d built up during our escape and the ensuing fight... I thought it was a pretty nice name. It had a ring to it, and the meaning was on point. A name like that would represent this very moment, reminding us to take care of our crewmates, no matter what life threw at us.

“Pirates of the Round Table... ain’t too shabby. I like it.”

“I like it. It has a sense of camaraderie.”

“An’ it suggests that succeeding the head seat will go smooth when the time comes,” another pirate added.

His remark gave everyone pause. They stopped drinking for a moment and nodded silently. I couldn’t blame the crew for worrying my time with them would be short lived.

I didn’t have any better ideas, so I decided to go with my gut.

“All right, boys! Everybody good with ‘Pirates of the Round Table’?”

They all nodded in agreement.

“Good! From now on, we’ll be known as the Pirates of the Round Table! Raise your mugs, this calls for a toast!”

“Cheers!”

The Pirates of the Round Table poured beers and partied late into the night to celebrate our escape from the Empire and the start of our new lives.

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While the Pirates of the Round Table celebrated, Shou entered a quiet, dilapidated house. He made his way to a splintered old wardrobe and pushed it aside, revealing a hidden door. With Corona slung over one arm, he entered a spartan space with just enough food for a couple days, a single bed, and tons of books scattered about.

Shou carefully lay Corona down on the bed, then scooped up a sake bottle from beside the headrest, ripped the seal off, and took a swig. As he did so, he reached into his little box and pulled a card.

“*Ball of Communication*, activate.”

The card lit up and transformed into a crystal ball. He placed it on the table and muttered something under his breath. After a couple moments of flashing, noisy images, the ball cleared to reveal the image of a young woman.

“Hey there, Princess. Things got a bit complicated, but I have what you asked for.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to have sent you on such a dangerous mission. By the way, what happened to the prisoners? I suppose you didn’t save them. Oh, and is that Corona beside you?”

“I blended in as a soldier. What was I gonna do with prisoners? So, Princess, guess what happened? We got raided by some pirates.”

“Pirates? There are still pirates snooping around the Empire?”

“Apparently. Most of them are under the Empire’s command, but it appears there’s still some resistance. Anyway, a bunch of lowlife pirates should have been easy enough to beat down, but their head turned out to be a summon. He calls himself Masaki, and hot damn, he’s crazy strong. He damaged Corona and offed my Megalochimera.”

“Oh my... how did you find him?”

“If you’re asking if he’s dangerous or not, let me tell you, he shrugged off all my attacks. He’s not particularly aggressive, but one misstep, and he’ll blow your head off. I almost feel sorry for the Empire for enraging this monster because... I mean, damn! He took a ship out with a single strike! He’s no joke, I’m telling you.”

“Intriguing. Any chance of winning him over?”

“I dunno. He probably doesn’t like me too much, but I bugged their ship just in case. They’re going north, probably aiming for Sentrag.”

“Sentrag... Jirou was there, wasn’t he? He could probably handle him.”

“Speaking of which, I found some interesting documents alongside the *Seed* you asked for. Sentrag’s in some deep shit.”

“What?!”

Shou took a document from his inventory and showed it to the crystal ball. His disinterested front dropped and he became deadly serious. He stared into the ball and opened his mouth slowly. “They lost the *Leviathan*.”

“What did you just say?!”

“Deep shit, like I said. We’ll need to ask the Demon Lord to pull his weight, because I sure can’t deal with this alone.”

“All right. I’ll start moving my pieces as well. Shou, you keep your eyes on those pirates and the Leviathan. Worry not, you will be rewarded most handsomely for your efforts.”

“Got it. I owe you one, Princess, and I won’t rest until my debt’s paid in full. But speaking of rewarding the handsome... you and me in bed, once things calm down. What do you say?”

“Haha, how scandalous, even after a grueling mission! You have the gorgeous Corona by your side, yet you come after me... I’m truly flattered. I’ll be waiting for you, Shou.”

“Sweet! A’ight, I’ll take a nap and then get back to work. I’m leaving the Seed at the usual spot.”

“Affirmative. I’ll cut the connection now.”

“Sure, sounds good. Ah, but don’t stay up too late. There’s no reason to ruin your flawless skin.”

The lady in the crystal ball answered with one last tired smile before it went blank. Shou lay beside Corona and stroked her hair.

“I know you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

Corona opened her eyes and tried to get up, but Shou gently pushed her back. Confined to the bed, she gave him an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, My Lord. I failed you.”

“Don’t sweat it; that was an unlucky match-up for you. I mean, they even busted the Megalochimera. Though luckily, I managed to yoink the body before we made our escape, so it’s all good. Bottom line is, we got what we needed, so I consider it a win.”

Shou opened his item box and threw the trinkets he’d stolen from the Imperial fleet onto the table. He’d emerged from the mission with two or three fortune’s worth of loot.

“Don’t you worry about anything; just rest and heal up, hear me? I’ll pin you down on the bed, if that’s what it takes. You’re an irreplaceable part of my life, so I need you in tip-top shape.”

“Understood, My Lord. I’ll enter Sleep Mode now.” She closed her eyes and went into a deep slumber. Shou planted a kiss on her lips then took a swig of sake.

“‘Masaki,’ huh? I have a feeling you’ll turn this world upside-down, brother. This is gonna be fun,” he muttered to himself in the empty room. Only the pale full moon, with its everlasting shine, heard his lonely thoughts.

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“Owwww... Rohas... get me water...”

“Barb, you should’ve listened to the admiral and stopped... here you go.”

The next morning, the newly formed Pirates of the Round Table continued north while looking after the severely hungover Barbarossa.

After I’d finished drinking the previous night, I had gone on to take a long, refreshing bath. The crew had followed my lead, making us the cleanest pirates on land or sea. Except for Barbarossa, who remained his old, stinky self.

The pirates weren’t accustomed to taking hot baths. They usually just wiped themselves down with a damp rag, so the experience was a special pleasure for them.

I had wanted to grab another cold beer after the bath, but not wanting to regret it in the morning, I just went to bed. In hindsight, I had absolutely made the right choice. I would rather not go through Barbarossa’s hell, thank you very much. Sleeping in a magical room instead of the rocking ship was a godsend. After laying Barbarossa down on the sofa, I had climbed into my amazingly comfy bed and let sleep take me.

Morning had eventually come, and I’d started the day with my usual workout routine, but with a twist: the delightful thing was that Physical Stats Boost allowed me to get crazy acrobatic with the exercises.

Rohas was busy nursing Barbarossa, so I took over cooking and made breakfast for everyone. Departing from yesterday’s magnificent feast, I decided to go with ham and egg sandwiches and coffee, with sides of grilled fish and vegetable salad. It was a pretty standard breakfast layout in my world. Thank goodness I’d managed to farm my coffee machine in a collab with a certain convenience store chain. Now I could enjoy fresh, delicious coffee every single day for the price of free. I had no idea how it, or the beer tap replenished themselves, but I’d never complain.

“Oi, this is amazing! I’ve never had such springy bread before!”

“Gimme seconds!”

I didn’t mind handing out seconds, but I expected them to work hard today in return. Cooking for the first time in what felt like forever was actually pretty fun, so I kept food coming until they had all filled their bellies and were ready to start the day. As their boss, feeding them was my responsibility, but I didn’t mind that one bit.

The day passed unremarkably. The preceding couple days had been pretty hectic, so it was nice to get a moment of peace from the insanity. The next days also went by without a hitch. I used the time to better familiarize myself with the magic of my new world.

Pedol and Padol explained the basic theory to me. So far, I had learned how to open the gate to the Material World, and reconstruct one of its several elements within my own body. Apparently, there were numerous Material Worlds, some of which were easy to open, others not so much.

The healing spell I’d used had come from the Material World of Light, whose gate was notoriously difficult to open. Only a few magic practitioners were capable of accessing it, which finally explained the pirates’ awe at my spell.

The basic elements most magic users could access were Fire, Water, Earth, and Wind. Padol was proficient in using Wind and Water magic, while Pedol was great at Earth and Wind magic. They told me that, like the Material Word of Light, the Material World of Darkness utilized by the Demon Lord, was another challenging gate. The twins had never in their lives come across anyone who could access it.

My spells from Brittalia Online didn’t abide by these rules, so how exactly I managed to cast them here was unclear, which was a real shame because the twins were super psyched to learn Wing. For all we knew, it was literally impossible. Imagining the spell was the first step to casting it, but what kind of image should they conjure in their minds? Effortlessly soaring the skies together? There was no harm in trying, so we practiced Wing. It would be nice to increase our aerial power.

I spent the next few weeks image training and generally increasing my spell repertoire. By the end of the training, I could cast a small version of Flame Javelin. Stoked to give it a go, I lobbed it at a fish swimming near the surface of

the water, and watched it sear nicely as it sank to the bottom of the sea. The smaller javelin cost less mana, which was a bonus. MP use could cause mental fatigue, which could pretty quickly leave you too exhausted to move. Running out of mana knocked you out cold. I was no fan of wasting mana, and I sure didn't always need a huge javelin.

To my surprise, Padol and Pedol did eventually manage to learn Wing, but their mana pool couldn't sustain it for long. They could probably only use it as an emergency getaway spell if things took a turn for the worse.

Another day of practicing magic out on deck, I spotted a ship near our location on the map.

"Hmmm, that doesn't look like a warship. What're they doing here?" I could ascertain its size, but that was the limit of what I could gather. It sure wasn't a caravel or a frigate, but it was too small to be a fishing vessel, either.

"I'll climb up and check!" a crewmember offered.

"Thanks!"

I cut my practice short and took a breather to let my MP regenerate. My regen was relatively fast, but practicing and concentrating for hours on end took a lot out of me, and the only way I could replenish my stamina was a good, old-fashioned break.

Meanwhile, my lookout had finished assessing the mystery ship and was shimmying down the mast. "Admiral! It's a slave ship bearing the Empire's crest!"

Interesting. The best play was probably to destroy the ship and maybe shelter the slaves on our own. We had some spare beds below deck, and I could probably house them with Room if it came to that.

"C'mere, Barbarossa."

"Ya called, Admiral?"

"We've spotted an Imperial slave vessel nearby. Get the men ready for battle."

"Aye! At once!"

Barbarossa went below deck and rallied the crew. In minutes, they were all gathered before me—with the exception of one slowpoke who'd gotten a bit too comfy on his personal sofa. I'd need to give him a stern talking to later, but I'd also have to be sure the same fate didn't befall me. Those sofas were dangerously relaxing.

We increased our speed and began battle preparations.

Once done, I addressed the crew. "Hard starboard! We will be boarding the slave vessel! Do *not* lay hand on the slaves!"

"Aye, Admiral, aye!"

We headed for the slave ship at full speed with a well-equipped, well-fed, and battle-ready crew. Prepared though we were, caution was still necessary. Nobody knew what the enemy was capable of.

"P-Piraaates!" the enemy lookout called from the crow's nest. Moments later, soldiers rushed onto deck armed with bows, swords, and wands.

"Sink 'em before they get too close! Fire! Fire!"

They began an onslaught of arrows and various spells, but all were futile. I cast *Storm* in front of the enemy vessel, taking down the projectiles almost as soon as they were loose, and rocking the ship violently, causing the soldiers to lose their footing and the volley to end.

"We need to know where they captured these slaves, so try not to kill the Imperials except as a matter of life and death! I'll go ahead, you guys follow me!"

I blasted myself at the enemy as the twins erected a wind barrier around our ship. I used Jab to mow down the vanguard and Sonic Blade to defend myself against incoming spells. Jab may have prevented Seven Arthur's multi-strike from slicing my opponents to ribbons, but my strikes still hurt. The two soldiers acting as vanguard quickly collapsed, groaning in pain.

My crew caught up. Barbarossa and Rohas jumped into the fray, using their lightning-and fire-enchanted weapons to quickly disarm our foes. There were only a dozen or so soldiers on the ship. We cleaned them up within a minute.

There was one buff fella who tried to act tough like, “Well done getting through the small fry! Now try me, you bas—,” but Barbarossa’s lightning attack cut him short. His hair went full afro, and he collapsed onto the deck with a loud thud.

We went below deck and found around ten slaves in a cell, all huddled up and shaking. They’d heard the lookout, and feared for their lives.

“Don’t worry, we’re enemies of the Empire,” I assured them. “We’ll help you get out of here.”

“You will?!”

“You’ll bring me home to Mommy and Daddy?”

“Yes. We’ll take you home if we can sail there. If not, we can probably ask the guards in a nearby town to help you, okay?”

“Yaaay! Thank you! You’re not scary pirates; you’re good pirates!”

“Good pirates,” huh? I wasn’t sure if it was healthy for little kids to idolize bandits.

“Admiral, this cell is enchanted with magic. It’ll zap the prisoners if they try to escape. We’ll have to beat the keys out of those bastards.” Padol informed me after he finished analyzing the lock.

I wondered if my lockpick would do the trick. I took out the Lockpicking Wires of the Bandit King from my inventory and probed the lock. A couple seconds later, it opened with a satisfying click.

At the sight, the slave ship’s captain went ballistic. “What the—?! I hid the key in my shoe—!”

A good hiding spot for sure, but if I hadn’t created this lockpick, we would’ve had to interrogate him. I could only wonder how long he’d have lasted.

The slaves themselves were all children and women. They weren’t collared, but their hands were tied together with a long rope. Most of them showed signs of physical abuse. It was painful to see defenseless women and children so roughed up. I felt an intense sense of obligation; I just had to help them. I closed my eyes and began to cast Mass Heal.

I'd learned earlier that week that the ability to cast Mass Heal was a rare gift. Sure enough, it garnered some interesting reactions.

The most surprised was a fox girl with a beautiful, golden tail. If I had to guess, she was a spellcaster. I was glad to have healed their scars, but I'd have to be selective about this spell in the future if I wanted to avoid the spotlight.

"Barbarossa, lead the prisoners to our ship. Rohas, you go into the Room and prepare a hot meal and a bath for our guests. Take anyone you need for help. The rest of you stay here and interrogate the soldiers. Do whatever it takes to learn where they captured these people."

My crew nodded at my orders and scattered to their respective posts. In the meantime, I set off for the captain's quarters, hoping to find some intel on the Empire, when suddenly I spotted someone unaccounted for on my map. When I followed my map to the stranger's location, I found myself staring at a solid wooden wall. I glanced back at the captain, who awkwardly averted his gaze. A telltale sign that I was on the right track.

I channeled the black belt karate master deep inside, and slammed my hand against the wall, blasting a huge hole through it. The dust slowly settled, revealing a small room with a tiny cell, barely large enough to hold a single person. The iron bars had a sort of seal woven into them with a series of chains forming a peculiar pattern.

In the cramped room, I found a woman, crucified with several dull silver stakes driven into her body. The room was completely dark, but two things immediately caught my eye: the long, lustrous silver hair hanging down to her waist, and the ample bosom plenty visible even under her breastplate and knight's uniform. Her unparalleled beauty captivated me, but reality dragged me back quickly.



“Aghhh...” Her silver hair trembled as her agonized groan yanked at my heartstrings.

“She’s alive!”

Without hesitation, I reached for the lock.

“Don’t open it! You’ll die!” the golden-tailed fox girl screamed at me.

“I’m sorry, who are you? And what do you mean ‘I’ll die’?”

“I’m Youko, a magic researcher. That cage is enchanted to devour those who step inside. You’ll be torn to shreds if you enter without the unique crest that allows access.”

“Huh... interesting.” So the cage was a mob that stopped unauthorized people from getting inside. Perhaps the captain had the crest. I rounded on him. “Give me the crest right now. I know you have it.”

“Eeeek! I-I don’t! Only the president has it, I swear! I swear on my life!”

“‘President’?”

“Y-Yes, the president of the slaving company that hired us. He’s always at the market in the Imperial capital.”

The president of a slaving company... whoever they were, I didn’t want to mess with them. If they arranged for a cage like this, the silver-haired girl was probably their main target all along. The rest of the slaves were probably just an afterthought. I was getting pretty interested in what made her so special, but the captain seemed to be telling the truth. Since I couldn’t just waltz back to the capital, my only option was to destroy the cage.

“Youko, was it?” I asked the fox girl. “ Does the cage attack the person inside it?” She’d recognized the cage at a glance, so I hoped she knew a thing or two more about it.

“Huh? You’re going to fight it?”

“Yeah. I don’t fancy going back to the Empire.”

“It works on the same principle as a mimic, so it should target the invader first. But be warned, the monster, the Gauge Eater, is solid steel. No standard

attack will dent its body, and most spells will bounce right off. High resistance, you see. I'm sorry, but... frankly, I don't see how you could possibly defeat it."

The crucified woman fixed her ruby-red eyes on us and pleaded, "L-Listen to her... and give up... walk away... I'm not going to die here..." Her voice was frail and shook with pain. Her limbs, shoulders, and torso were all pierced with stakes. In overwhelming, unimaginable agony, she did everything in her power to stop us.

I couldn't see her well in the dark, but she looked like an ordinary girl to me. The situation didn't sit well with me. "A normal person would probably throw their hands up at these odds. Unfortunately for you, miss, I'm far from normal."

I switched Invincibility on, and entered the cell. When the door opened, the steel beams began to twist and bend, shaping themselves into monstrous steel jaws on the floor and ceiling. The Gauge Eater bit down on me to no effect. Its teeth bounced off me with an uncomfortable metallic clank, and began to tremble.

With my arms and legs captured by the monster, I conjured a Flame Javelin in my palm and set it against the monster's palate. The javelin pierced its steel interior, killing the monster instantly, and exploding it into a shower of miniscule, twinkling lights.

"He destroyed a Gauge Eater with a single attack... just... who is this man?" Youko mumbled to herself, dumbstruck.

I couldn't wait to see her reaction when I showed her the Room, complete with a modern coffee maker and beer tap from my world. Those amenities must seem futuristic to the denizens of this world.

"All right, I'm taking these stakes out. It's going to hurt, but bear with it. I'll heal you once we've got you down."

"Potions and healing spells don't... work on me... I'm a vampire..."

Between the silver and the crucifixion, I'd been wondering if she might be.

"So, please..."

"Please just turn around and leave you? Nah, I'm strong enough to help

people, and I want to put that strength to good use."

"Strong and gallant... hah... maybe I could've helped them too... had I been a little stronger..." The vampire girl bit down on her lip in frustration, haunted by the pain of failing to protect what she held dear.

"You'll have time to worry about that later. These are coming out now." I didn't want to prolong her suffering by slowly easing each silver stake out, so I decided to just yank all ten of them free as quickly as I could. I held her in one hand and removed the stakes with the other. I popped them in my inventory once they were loose. I could probably melt them down for currency later.

With the girl free, we could now return to our own ship. However, that had its challenges, too.

"We'll take you to our ship, but should we cover you with something first?"

As far as I knew, all vampires shared a common weakness: sunlight. It was around midday, so the sun was at its highest. It would probably be wise to toss a sheet over her or something. Maybe we could salvage some fabric from the slave ship.

"I'm going to be... okay..."

"Huh? How? Vampires are supposed to burn to ash in the sun." Youko was asking before I had a chance to speak.

If vampires in this world were weak to sunlight too, I couldn't understand how the girl could be so nonchalant.

"I'm a... True Blood..."

"A True Blood Vampire?! Those are just stories... I think they—"

"Let's get back to this later, Youko. I'm sure you're exhausted from being locked in that cell for god-knows-how-long." I turned to our newest addition. "By the way, Miss True Blood, what's your name?"

"I'm Adelheid... Adelheid Bernstein."

"Adelheid, got it. I know you're in a lot of pain, but hang in there."

I scooped Adelheid into a princess carry and headed for the upper deck. I

knew this was the safest way to carry someone with ten gaping holes in their body, but I took extra care to be as gentle as possible. I didn't want to accidentally rip any of her wounds wider.

"You're strange... aren't you frightened of me? I'm a True Blood Vampire."

"You haven't done anything, so why would I be scared? I'm way more frightened of the humans who did this to you."

"Hahaha... you're an odd duck..."

She closed her eyes and drifted instantly to sleep. I didn't imagine she'd rested well with those stakes shoved into her. Honestly, it was a miracle she survived. It was probably best to set her up in my bed instead of a hammock or sofa on the ship. Avoiding worsening her injuries was vital.

After that, we bound all the slavers, and took the slaves into the Room, where Rohas had already finished cooking a hot meal.

He'd made a quick mashed potato soup. Warm, easy to eat, and relatively light, it was the perfect meal for the exhausted slaves. Fortunately, they seemed to like Rohas's flavors, as all the slaves gorged themselves on the soup and complimentary light, fluffy bread.

Meanwhile, Barbarossa served coffee to the adults, while Pedol and Padol busied themselves making sweet café au lait for the children. It was probably better for them to handle the kids than the burly, smelly former pirate captain. I had the milk and sugar ready in the coffee machine. With the number of cups we made, I should've had to refill it at least once, but the supply seemed infinite. I decided not to question it, and just accept the boon.

"Welcome back, Admiral. We're running out of bread; would you be so kind as to make more?" Rohas was worried about our bread reserves, but Improve Quality would solve that issue in a blink. I'd recently learned that every once in a while, it'd even proc yakisoba bread.

"Sure. I can process some brown and burnt bread if we run out," I said, relaxed.

While everyone was busy in the dining room, I took Adelheid to my bedroom. Doing so felt a little risque, but I had no intention of making a move on a

severely injured girl. Seeing her suffering was painful. I just wanted to help.

Since she was a vampire, normal means wouldn't heal her. We were lucky sunlight didn't bother her, or the situation would've been even more complicated. If I wanted to help her, my best bet was probably to ask Youko if she had any ideas.

I watched Adelheid for a moment, as she let out a shaky groan, before returning to the dining room to find our resident magic expert. She'd tucked into three portions of soup, and was now enjoying a refreshing cup of coffee.

"Oh, Admiral, what a strange one you are. I've never known anyone to use that kind of magic, nor to have access to magic tools such as these. I'm itching to disassemble everything to see how it ticks! May I?"

"You may not. Anyway, you're supposed to be a researcher, right? So you must know plenty about magic and magical beings."

"My primary areas of focus are alchemy, magical tools, and golems, but I also have some light healing as well. I presume, however, that you're most curious about Adelheid."

"You're pretty direct, huh? Exactly. So, what can you tell me?"

"I think we can help her, but it'll involve casualties." She set her cup on the table and lowered her voice.

Our refugees stood about chatting, examining the Room, and generally enjoying its comforts with full bellies.

"Any way to avoid that?"

"She'll probably heal naturally in around a year... though, no. Now that I think about it, with her injuries, it'll probably be more like three."

"Three years, huh? So what'll it take to top her off a little quicker?"

"She needs blood. That's the fastest way to heal a vampire."

"Then we have a solution."

"Except! Whoever she bites becomes either a Lesser or a True Blood Vampire. The lucky ones become True Bloods with the same qualities as Adelheid. If

you're less lucky, though, an afternoon walk in the sunshine will turn you to cinders. You've proven yourself powerful beyond a doubt, but I don't imagine that's a drawback you could handle."

Admittedly, becoming a vampire wasn't at the top of my to do list. A normal person would find her a safehouse and let her heal with time, but I was far from normal. If anyone in this world could bear the risks of becoming a vampire, it was me—for the simple reason that, for me, there were no risks. My GM skill, Resist All Debuffs, would prevent the transformation from taking hold. Brittalia Online had a vampire mechanic, as well. Players had to visit a church and take part in a ceremony to shed the effect.

"Nah, it should be fine."

"F-Fine?! You're gonna throw your humanity away just like that?! Become a denizen of the night?! Go up in flames if you look out the window at the wrong time?! Don't even think about going through with this insanity!" she clutched at my shoulders, knocking her coffee over in the process.

Barbarossa reached out and collapsed her arm. "Youko, were it? Don' ye worry yer pretty li'l head none. Our Admiral be strong as the sea 'erself. If he say it be all right, it be all right. Bless yer heart fer lookin' out for him, but trust 'im."

She released me reluctantly, and Barbarossa poured her another cup of coffee. "Caring" isn't the word that'd jump into your head if you saw Barbarossa strutting down the street, but I knew he was a good guy. I'd seen him bring coffee to the lookouts on night duty, and carry passed out, overworked crewmates to their beds. He cared for those close to him as though they were his own family.

Unfortunately, not everyone was so understanding.

"Ummm, I couldn't help but overhear... you're talking about a vampire, aren't you? Why would you help her?"

"Huh?" I whipped around to find the source of the voice. It turned out to be one of the slaves we'd saved, decked out in standard adventurer's gear. The first thing Adelheid had asked was whether I was afraid of her. I was all right, but apparently not everyone felt the same way about vampires. At a glance,

some of the other refugees were nodding in agreement with the adventurer's question. Youko just shook her head at me, looking defeated.

"That's the reality for vampires," she said. "Sentrag's the only place vampires coexist with other races. Everywhere else, they're feared as monsters."

"Do you think she's a monster, too?" I asked.

"Me? No, not at all. We stood on the same battlefield. But remember, she's a vampire from time immemorial, commanding mana beyond my wildest imaginations, able to soar the sky, and recover from mortal wounds with only the aid of a single vampire minion. There aren't many who can befriend such a being. There aren't many... but I want you to help her." Youko gazed at me, her desire to save Adelheid plain on her face. I was glad to know Adelheid had an ally amongst the refugees.

But, my bliss only lasted for a moment. The woman who'd spoken before got between us again.

"Are you serious?" she demanded. "Look, you're trying to help a monster. A monster! Are you out of your mind?! If you're dead set on keeping her alive, make her your slave or something, dammit!" She just kept throwing the worst things at Adelheid. "Don't help her," "she's a monster," "enslave her." It wasn't that I couldn't understand her thought process, but I definitely didn't agree with it.

"I'm not going to enslave her. I don't care if she's a vampire, a human, Beastman, or whatever. I want to help her, so I'm gonna help her. That's all there is to it."

The adventurer wanted to keep arguing, but my furious glare intimidated her enough that she fell on her butt.

"Leave this ta me, Admiral. That vampire girl be needin' your help."

"Ah... thanks, Barbarossa."

"Don't mention it none. After ya saved me, this be the least a man c'n do." I left the dining room for Barbarossa to deal with and returned to my bedroom where Adelheid slept. She still seemed to be in tremendous pain. I could only hope that she'd heal quickly. I disabled Invincibility and HP/MP Regeneration

(Medium) to stop my wounds from healing instantly, and cut my arm with a knife. The cut burned.

I gently shook her until she opened her eyes and looked up at me.

“Adelheid, I’ll give you blood. Drink up.”

“D-Do you understand the repercussions? You’ll turn into a vampire... Why are you so eager to throw your humanity away?”

“Youko, um, the fox-tailed girl said the same thing, but don’t worry about it. I’m no ordinary human, so you go head and drink up. I don’t wanna waste all this blood.”

“But...”

This girl was way too stubborn. I had to resort to force.

“Just drink, dammit!” It was almost like trying to get a shy coworker to have a beer. I held her head in one hand and pressed my arm to her mouth. I felt her teeth against my skin, but kept my arm steady, letting the blood flow into her. It only took one gulp for her vampire instincts to kick in. She gripped my arm tightly to her mouth and started to drink my blood. After a while, I started to feel a little light-headed.

Damn, she’s going at it. Is this what losing HP is like?

I downed a potion from my inventory, making me feel much better. To avoid getting into that dangerous territory again, I activated HP Regeneration (Lesser)—so I could regenerate HP without the wound healing over immediately—and Max HP Boost (Medium).

After a couple more health potions, the holes in Adelheid’s body began to close. Her complexion improved, even glowing with a gentle blush, like a normal girl’s. With her wounds fully healed, all she needed to regain her stamina was a good night’s sleep.

With one final lap, she released my arm. I cast a low-level healing spell on myself, regaining the health I’d lost during the procedure, as well as healing the bite marks. Unfortunately, however, the spell didn’t magically generate a bunch of red blood cells, so I’d need a rest as well. Once I finished with all that, I

reactivated Invincibility.

“Who—no, *what* are you? No human could possibly res— No, I’m sorry. I must apologize for how I’ve conducted myself. Please accept my sincerest gratitude for saving me from that cage and healing my injuries.” She rose from the bed and then sank to one knee before me, in the deep bow of a knight swearing fealty to the crown. It made sense, considering her knightly attire.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy as long as I’m stepping on Imperial toes. Anyway, I’m Masaki. They call me ‘Admiral’ around here, but please stick with ‘Masaki.’”

“I see. Lord Masaki, then. Please, call me Adel. It’s easier, and it’s what my friends call me.”

I wasn’t against the whole “Admiral” thing, but being called by my name was the best. I’d let my crew call me “Admiral,” but I’d really rather everyone else just call me by name.

“Then I’ll do exactly that, Adel. Well, your injuries are all healed up, but I’m sure you’ll need some time before you’re completely recovered. I appreciate your attitude, but please. Rest.”

“But—”

“Look, you need to realize that you can’t do anything in your state. From your outfit, I assume you’re in service to some country, but this isn’t the time to jump back into work. I’m sure your liege would understand that you need to rest every once in a while.”

“I’m... thank you. Allow me to take you up on your generous offer.” She retired to the bed and climbed in. I was glad she took my advice to heart, because otherwise I’d have had to pin her down to tuck her in. She needed sleep, and I was gonna make sure she got some.

“Speaking of which, where are you from? We’re letting the refugees off at the nearest port, so you could go with them if you wanted.”

Adel’s expression darkened. “I don’t have a home anymore. The Empire destroyed my country and slew my king. I have nowhere to return to. I took up arms with a handful of adventurers to fight the Imperial army and buy some

time for the civilians to escape, but... You see how that turned out. I don't know what happened to my friends, but I can guess." She couldn't say it outright, but they'd most likely been imprisoned or killed. From what I gathered, the Empire wasn't a country that allowed their enemies to surrender with dignity.

"I see. So, what's next for you? I'm thinking of going all the way to Sentrag and seeking asylum as runaway pirates, but from what I hear, they're already at war with the Empire. Our paths are bound to cross again, and we'll fight them when we do. If you want to look for your friends, your best bet is to disembark with everyone else."

"May I come with you?"

"To take revenge on the Empire?"

"I'd be lying if I said revenge wasn't a motivating factor. I despise them as much as you do. But if hatred took me over, I couldn't meet the eyes of my departed friends in the afterlife."

"So why do you want to come with us?"

"You're going to fight the Empire, are you not? If I lend you my sword, I'll have the chance to lessen the destruction they wreak on the world. I want to save those I can reach. Not to mention, Lord Masaki, I'm curious if you have any connections in Sentrag."

"Not at all," I told her honestly.

I'd played with the idea of taking some Imperial soldiers prisoner and offering them to Sentrag in exchange for an alliance, but the frigates we'd fought previously had had more prisoners and soldiers than I'd expected. Taking all of them would've been difficult, so we just sent them home. I'd been thinking my best bet was to offer some of my rare equipment and high elixirs, but I had no way to make more, so those resources were extremely precious.

"I do, meaning I'm of clear use to you. Not merely because of my connection, mind, but also in battle. I'm aware I may sound boastful, but do you know how powerful a vampire who can fight under the sun is?"

This was an offer I simply couldn't refuse. She was right about her connections, and I had no doubts about her fighting abilities. She'd survived

being nailed to a cross with ten huge silver stakes. No way in hell was she a weakling. Last, but definitely not least in my consideration, was her jaw dropping beauty. It didn't directly affect anything, but I still felt the need to mention it. Anyway, my crew could definitely use the firepower.

Pedol and Padol were great mages, and worked together beautifully as a combo. In our first battle, they had sunk a ship by themselves by creating a devastating mudslide on the water with earth and water magic. It blew the hull right open. Rohas was a talented swordsman who'd mastered his Flaming Sword. He could barbeque his enemies without accidentally burning his allies, which was no mean feat. His brother, Barbarossa, needed only to be let loose in order to wreak havoc in the enemy ranks with his Lightning Sword.

Then, of course, there was me.

The five of us could stand toe-to-toe with Imperial forces, but the rest of the crew wasn't much use in battle. Even with their relatively rare, high-quality equipment, their combat power probably couldn't top an average soldier with average arms and armor. Even so, they were important members of my crew. I wasn't sure if we could steer the ship without them.

"Your connections are invaluable, so it is my honor to invite you into our ranks. Would you please join us, Adel?"

"With pleasure, Lord Masaki. Or, now that I've joined you, should I say 'Admiral'?"

"Please don't. Just stick with Masaki."

"Very well, Lord Masaki. I'm looking forward to this."

"Me too."

With a firm handshake, I officially welcomed our first new member into the Pirates of the Round Table: Adelheid Bernstein, a True Blood Vampire.

"Ah, I'll also be joining you! This sofa is... anhhh, it's like I'm sitting on a cloud. And the cold beer... I'm living the dream!" Captivated by the comforts of a sofa and slamming down beer after beer, Youko Izanagi also joined our ranks. I wasn't sure how to feel about her motives for joining us, but I let it slide. She seemed like a good person.

3.

The Pirates of the Round Table gained two new members.

One was the True Blood Vampire Knight Adelheid Bernstein.

She could soar through the sky like any vampire of legend, but she could also solidify her mana into a javelin or sword, which seemed to be an ability unique to True Blood Vampires. Her spellcasting and melee capabilities were outstanding, and her perception was peerless. Able to walk under the sun, she passed as a normal human. No one would suspect her of being a vampire unless she admitted it.

Our other recruit was Youko Izanagi. She couldn't resist the lure of the Room's unique appliances and furnishings and decided to stay. She also expressed a desire to learn everything about me, inside and out, which sounded quite a bit more menacing than she probably meant.

She was a practitioner of a peculiar magic school which used cards to produce effects. When I asked her how it worked, she was more than happy to demonstrate. She gathered a mound of dirt together, set a card on it, and summoned a small dirt golem. She could summon a variety of golems of different materials. For example, a heap of stones would turn into a stone golem, and scraps of iron would give birth to an iron golem.

She could command an army of around fifty mini golems, but her mana could only support a couple person-sized ones. If any were destroyed, it'd take her days to recover enough to create another. A major upside of the mini golems in comparison was her drastically shorter recovery time. She'd come in clutch when we needed a boost in manpower.

Apart from her golem creation, she was a pretty average spellcaster. Healing spells were off the table, but she could create potions with water spells. She did also know a tremendous amount about magic items, so I'd be able to rely on her if I happened to find one. A skillset like hers was certainly nice to have on board.

Born in the faraway Yamato, she first arrived on this continent as an adventurer, only to be captured by the Empire almost immediately. She had shiny, golden-blonde hair, and a pretty average chest. She'd been wearing a scholarly robe when we first met her, but now that she was decked out in adventuring gear, she looked more like a sorcerer.

Truly, she was gorgeous. The perfect beauty any man would want... until she opened her mouth. Especially when she'd been drinking. That killed any lingering interest I had in her as anything but an ally, but at least I knew that I could count on her.

The rest of the refugees were children and fairly ordinary women, so we didn't recruit them.

Slavery was perfectly legal in this world, but most countries besides the Empire outlawed the abduction of children for slavery. Honestly, I didn't really have qualms about slavery either. If someone wanted to sell themselves into slavery, that was their prerogative, and I didn't see anything wrong with working for a family in exchange for food and shelter. I liked the idea of using slavery as a punishment, too.

Tales of extremely impoverished families selling themselves into slavery for survival were common in old Japan. Historically speaking, it was only after emancipation that greedy lords could work their people to the bone for low wages, starving entire families to death. I'd read of people who'd even wished they could return to being slaves. Emancipation had led to numerous societal problems. Cheap labor suddenly flooded the market, pushing out established master craftsmen, and driving the costs of labor into the ground.

Even today, there were places that had you work twenty hours a day, 365 days a year. Vacation? Forget it. Workers at abusive firms like that had it worse than slaves back in the day, I swear.

Feeding both the crew and the refugees took more resources than we originally anticipated, so we changed course to resupply in the small town of Schutzbalt close to the Sentrag border.

I decided to leave the ship in Barbarossa's care and take this time doing a little studying.

“Master Masaki, let’s begin the test!” Youko chirped from where she enjoyed a cup of coffee on the couch.

“Don’t go easy on me.”

“You’re starting with the alphabet. Do your best!”

“You know, that’s not especially encouraging coming from someone halfway melted into a couch,” I replied. She’d tried to get smashed first thing in the morning, so I stowed the tap away in my item box. She was clearly distraught upon discovering I’d put her revelry to an end, but I could scarcely have cared less.

How long had it been since I last took a test? My school years were far behind me, both in terms of time and distance. The reason for my return to cramming from textbooks was pretty simple, though: I needed to be able to read and count by the time we arrived in town.

Between being summoned and thrown into prison, escaping that hellhole, destroying an enemy fleet, and partying with the refugees, I hadn’t exactly had time to go shopping in this world yet, but I was sure it’d come with its own challenges. We had the recent slave ship trail behind us with its former crew locked in their own cells and sailed quietly and without interruption. It was as good a time as any to free myself from the shackles of illiteracy.

I’d tried to spend the days between exploding the frigates and the slave ship incident studying, but the crew wasn’t up to the task. Even Rohas could only barely read numbers, and he’d only picked them up so merchants had a harder time scamming him. Luckily, I had Youko and Adel to rely on now.

I’d approached them with the request shortly after they’d joined the crew. Youko was a researcher, so she was an obvious choice, and Adel must’ve had some education in life to become a knight. They’d both been kind enough to agree, so I’d been studying with them.

This world’s alphabet was blocky, with lots of straight lines and barely any curves. At first, I’d had some trouble reading it, but it wasn’t as bad as, say, the cyrillic alphabet of my own world. Their number system was a combination of Roman and Arabic numerals, so it was pretty easy to pick up. I struggled with some of the letters, but I got them down in a couple days, so now we were

holding a sort of graduation ceremony.

“All right, I double-checked everything. I’m turning this in.”

With the listening portion of the test over, I handed the wooden board we used as a paper substitute to Adel. When she started to grade my test, Youko got curious and leaned over to take a peek, but she leaned too far and rolled off the sofa. She managed to somehow stabilize the cup mid-fall, saving it from spilling everywhere. Thank goodness. Not much is as difficult as getting a coffee stain out of a sofa.

“I’m speechless, Lord Masaki. It’s perfect. Have you ever studied the alphabet before?”

“Where I come from, everyone learns the alphabet and their numbers when they’re around seven. These numbers are actually pretty much the same as the ones I already know, so they were easy enough. I found some similarities in the letters, too, so it was more about adapting than learning.”

I’d already told them I’d been summoned from another world. It turned out to be common knowledge that people from other words occasionally appeared here with all manner of mysterious powers. Shou, for example, was much stronger than your average soldier. I wouldn’t want to face him without Invincibility. I’d decided to keep that particular power a secret, however. I could imagine telling some of my closest allies about it someday, but I didn’t want to be everyone’s meat shield. Better to play it off as strong natural defense.

“Owwie... I see. Now I understand why you got all the numbers right after your first read,” Youko noted, trying to hoist herself back onto the couch.

“So I should be good for shopping now?”

“Perfectly. Your writing is beautiful and easy to read. Any ruler would be happy to have you as a scribe.”

This world didn’t have a high literacy rate. Like Rohas, many learned numbers to some extent, but your average Joe couldn’t read a word. Of course, nobles and aristocrats had access to learning institutions if they so chose, and knights were sponsored by their kingdoms to learn how to read and do basic math.

“The prettier the better,” I said with a shrug. “There’s no real point in rushing

your letters if you end up with illegible scribbles."

"My thoughts exactly," Youko said, sounding satisfied. "I wish some castle staff understood that as well. I've seen documents that read like a cipher."

I also had a coworker whose handwriting needed the full attention of the top handwriting experts in the world to read. We basically stood no chance of understanding any notes that guy left us. Reminiscing about my office life, I tucked into the cookies I'd made earlier. Each of the girls also took one and nibbled on it happily.

Everything I made with my normal cooking skill tasted very... generic. It wasn't bad at all, you'd be okay eating it any day of the week, but it lacked that extra something that made homemade food special. This problem was beautifully solved by The Soul of Food supplementary skill, which was the highest-level cooking skill accessible to players. I'd thought it simply allowed users to create more complicated dishes, not to enhance the flavors of their cooking. I was clearly wrong.

Cookies were easy enough, and I didn't mind doing some cooking on occasion, but I'd be on the line if I kept producing amazing food with this skill, so I decided to keep it on the down low.

Deep into my quiet break time, our lookout knocked on the door. "Admiral, the town is in sight! We're approaching Schutzbalt!"

I acknowledged his report with a nod. So, I was gonna have my first experience in a town. I was dying to know what sort of place Schutzbalt was, so I asked Adel.

"Hmmm, it's a fishing and merchant town on the coastline under Sentrag's direct supervision. Their soldiers help maintain order, so it's one of the safer places around."

"Are they going to allow pirates inside their walls?" We hadn't stopped anywhere yet, so I wasn't quite sure what Schutzbalt's—or any other coastal town's—disposition was toward pirates. I decided to let Barbarossa deal with all the entry procedures. I never asked to become their admiral, so they owed me that much.

“They won’t bat you an eye as long as you don’t start a ruckus,” Youko said.

“The pirates in town often team up with the soldiers to beat down the more unsavory folks. It’s one of the few towns where pirates can rest, so they made sure to maintain a good relationship with the locals.” While supplementing Youko’s comment, Adel snatched the last cookie from the tray from her.

“Ah!”

“Too slow.”

She sure was savage, for a knight.

“Then I’m not worried. We can hand over the refugees and the Imperial crew. They can deal with them however they see fit,” I said.

“Sounds good to me. They’ll get to boast about freeing slaves, capturing the crew of an enemy ship, yada, yada, while we walk away with a handsome bounty and lose some dead weight,” Youko said with a grin.

“Money is great, until you have too much. It tends to put a mark on your back.” Adel was more thoughtful.

“Good luck shaking Masaki down. He’d turn the tables on the muggers and walk away with a nice bonus. I only caught a glance of his sword, but it’s more powerful than any artifacts I’m aware of.”

Impressive. Youko recognized my sword’s potential at a glance, and her assessment was exactly on point. Every neckbeard worth their salt wanted Seven Arthur. Not that I could talk, since I actually had the sword. I almost felt sorry for the boss that dropped it. Campers waited for it 24/7 and it was consistently pummeled just seconds after spawning. I’d had to camp for twelve hours to finally get my hands on Seven Arthur, and my wait was on the short end.

“I’m sure you understand this, but please don’t go telling the whole town about it,” I told Youko.

“Yeah, I know. Other scholars and some blacksmiths will probably recognize its abilities at a glance, but they all know that loose lips sink ships. Blabbing is a no-go, they’d be ostracized by their respective communities.”

“That’s reassuring.” I’d prefer not to be attacked for my weapon. I could probably turn the tables on an assailant, but the less trouble the better.

We left the Room to survey the town at a distance. It had a large port, full of anchored merchant ships bearing all sorts of different markings. Judging by the size of the ships, a few select merchants had it pretty good. Further down floated a dozen or so large military ships. From the size and shape, I guessed they were galleons. Each had a dragon emblazoned on its sail. In terms of military technology, galleons were a full century behind frigates. The Empire was pretty far ahead in terms of naval technology. No wonder they dominated in their wars. A difference like this could easily make or break a battle.

As I gazed out at the dock, I noticed a small ship making its way toward us, filled with soldiers. When he saw it, Rohas stepped forward to engage the soldiers and talk to them in hushed tones.

“What’re they talking about?”

“They probably noticed the slave ship behind us. It’s not a common sight around these parts.”

Rohas showed the soldiers to the pirate ship. Pedol and Padol followed behind. They detached the ship and halted it until they could work out the details. The twins were directed to usher the ship quickly into the dock. We continued without them and eventually arrived at an empty space at the docks, where a troop of soldiers were already waiting for us.

A lightly armored soldier, clad only in a plate chestpiece and shield, decorated with red ornaments and the dragon symbol we’d seen on the sails approached us. I was getting an inkling that the dragon symbology was associated with Sentrag. “Are you the pirates that freed those slaves?”

“Yep, that would be us. I assume you’ll take care of them from here on out.”

“But, of course. We’ll send those with personal identifications back to their hometowns. Our kingdom will take any orphans under our wing. I swear they’ll be well cared for.”

They’d do light agricultural work at the orphanage, and eventually be taken in by foster parents. There were plenty of families in the area looking to adopt, so

there was a decent chance the orphans would be taken in. There were also some underdeveloped areas in Sentrag where some of the kids could end up making a living once they were old enough.

A couple of the teens were big on becoming adventurers and making names for themselves, but they'd need to give up on Sentrag's protection if they decided to go down that route. Sentrag couldn't possibly take responsibility for kids roaming the open world.

"All right. Give us a moment until we get them down."

"Anyone injured or sick on board?"

"No, everyone is fine. We treated the light injuries ourselves."

"That's good to hear."

Now that I was aware how rare the magic I wielded was, I had no desire to reveal exactly how we'd treated those injuries. Good to know restoring lost limbs was abnormal.

I offered a small pouch to each of the refugees before they got off the ship. It contained the recipe for my cookies. I made doodles of the whole process so the recipe could be followed by someone who couldn't read. Sentrag would surely support them in many ways, but I also wanted to do a little something for them before we said our goodbyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Admiral!"

"Don't forget to open your pouches later when things calmed down. Ah, and promise not to sell or steal each other's pouches."

"Promise!" The children thanked us cheerfully, and the adults expressed their gratitude with deep bows.

We watched them make their way off our ship and into town, while Rohas and the twins returned with a soldier in full plate. He was probably some kind of commander, judging by the way the soldiers who'd been helping with the refugees straightened up when he arrived. I was feeling pretty nervous, but I had to play it cool. I didn't want them to take me for a wimp.

"Are you Masaki, the leader of these pirates?"

“Yes, I’m Admiral Masaki. Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“I’m Aran Mark, leader of the Sentrag Knights. Let me convey my sincere gratitude for apprehending the slavers and freeing the slaves.”

The leader of the knights came to meet me in person, huh? He probably had to be pretty far up the ranks.

“Don’t mention it. I have a bone to pick with the Empire myself.”

“Even so, this is a great deed and it deserves recognition. Truth be told, I made my assumptions when I received the report that we were dealing with pirates, but it seems I was sorely mistaken. I don’t mean to be rude, but you don’t strike me as a hardened sailor. If anything, you seem *alien* to the waters.”

Impressive guy. He was onto me even though we’d barely exchanged words.

“He’s no normal pirate, I can attest to that much, Lord Aran. Master Masaki saved me from my chains and offered his flesh and blood to heal my injuries.” Adel boasted, joining us on the dock.

“Adelheid?! Thank goodness you’re all right! I prepared for the worst when I first heard that the Valentine Empire fell to Gran Fang.”

I’d guessed he was pretty high in the ranks, but he actually turned out to be a count. Apparently Adel had some friends in high places.

I half expected Aran to lead us to a wonderful, sparkling mansion, but he took us to one of the knights’ outposts. He seemed like a guy who appreciated practicality over glitter. Still, his furniture was apparently high quality. Barbarossa’s shaky whisper informed me that all the pieces had been crafted by a famous master, unobtainable even by the crème de la crème.

I couldn’t blame him for his nerves; it’s not like pirates were well-known for spending their days surrounded by luxury. They probably used this room to woo visiting big guns. Even in this world, it appeared you sometimes had to invest in shallow glamor to please snob lords.

“Please accept my heartfelt gratitude for saving Lady Adelheid Bernstein of the Valentine Empire, a precious ally of ours.”

I wasn’t exactly sure why they’d brought us here. At the end of the day, we

were just a bunch of pirates, accompanied by Adel, who turned out to be a viscountess, albeit of a ruined country. On that note, I hadn't really questioned her position as a knight, since I'd seen some female soldiers outside my cell, but her title caught me off guard. Heck, it wasn't just me. Barbarossa's and Rohas's mouths were both hanging open. At the other end of the spectrum, Youko was giggling to herself.

"You know, anyone could become nobility in Valentine as long as they were strong."

"You could've mentioned that earlier."

"Having you find out about it this way was more fun." Youko was still giggling. She'd spent plenty of time with Adel since they'd come on board, and the knight had certainly warmed up to her.

I wasn't sure if the experiences they'd shared in the belly of the ship had created a bond between them, or if they just enjoyed each other's company, but they seemed to have become best friends since being freed. One thing I could tell for sure was that Adel enjoyed Youko not being all careful and proper around her. A True Blood Vampire probably didn't get to be treated like a normal girl very often.

"Lord Aran, my father has died, and my country is in ruins. I'm no viscountess anymore. I'm Adelheid Bernstein, a vampire knight of a ruined country, and a member of the Pirates of the Round Table."

"Oh... I'm sorry for your loss. What happened to His Majesty?"

"He spearheaded our assault against the Empire, in order to buy time for our civilians to escape, but his forces were destroyed at daybreak. I'm afraid I'm the last living vampire."

"I'm glad you're safe, and I'm sure my lord king will be delighted to hear it, too." Aran was full of smiles. My first impression of him was as a chivalrous, strict soldier, but when Adel stepped out, he couldn't hide his happiness. And Adel was apparently an acquaintance of the king himself! We'd really lucked into rescuing a key individual in both her own country, and Sentrag.

After he finished his discussion with Adel, Aran turned to me. I almost felt his

gaze pierce through me, but I stood strong and looked back at him.

“I have a favor to ask you, Pirates of the Round Table.”

“Huh? Um, I mean, yes?”

“I heard you managed to escape the iron grasp of the Empire, so please tell us everything you’ve seen or learned. We have a number of spies working within the Empire itself, but any piece of information can be the difference between life and death in these trying times.”

“Of course. I’ll tell you everything I know.” I had no qualms about being totally transparent with a friend of Adel’s. With my whole crew in the room, though, I was too nervous to come clean about everything. Since the whole story would take plenty of time to tell, I sent my boys out for errands. Only Barbarossa, Youko, Adel, and myself stayed with Aran.

I told him everything I knew. That I’d been summoned here, that the Imperial prison had an anti-magic zone erected around it, their exact number of warships, the large number of Beastmen I’d seen being led in chains, and that I’d destroyed most of their anchored fleet during my escape.

That final piece of information shook Aran to his core.

“I’m sorry, my ears must be playing tricks on me. Did you just say that you destroyed a hundred of their large warships?”

“I can’t tell you the exact number, but if I recall, I blew up around a hundred twenty of the large ships. I assume you mean the frigates? I also got some of the smaller ones—the caravels—around forty. I attached the bombs underwater, so I could have missed a couple, but the explosions were loud and intense enough to lead me to the conclusion that most of their docked fleet was, in fact, either completely destroyed or suffered critical, irreparable damage.”

“Admiral, ya be fergettin’ about the ships we came across,” Barbarossa reminded me. He was right! I’d completely forgotten about them!

“Right, on our way to Sentrag, we ran into a fleet of five ships and sank three of them. Of the remaining two, we gave one to the war prisoners we’d managed to release. They headed east, if I recall correctly. We left the final ship

more or less intact, and gave it to the Imperial soldiers so they could return home. They know we were making our way to Sentrag, but I warned them that I wouldn't be so gracious if I ran into them again. I think they got the message."

Aran and Adel listened to my report in pure shock.

"I had no idea it was possible to sink ships of that size..."

"Those ships destroyed my country, yet you managed to..."

They both muttered to themselves.

"I'm inclined to say that my method of attack is confidential, but I feel that would undermine our cooperation. I have access to a skill that creates an organism which acts like a bomb. I rigged those to the hulls, set a timer, and watched the fireworks from afar."

Aran, who'd been keeping record of my recount, jotted this down as well. "I see. There are no guards under water, so you could realistically pull this stunt off if you could hold your breath for an extended period. How did you surface to breathe?"

"Oh, I didn't need to. I used wind magic to create a bubble of air around myself. It's a surprisingly easy technique." That wasn't a lie. The twins had told me that you could create such a bubble. My Underwater Breathing took care of my need for air, but I could've gone the bubble route if I'd wanted to.

"You can cast spells, too... though, I suppose that's to be expected from someone who can soar the skies."

If I had to guess, I figured Aran considered my Time Bomb skill one of those things unique to those who'd been summoned here. It was nicely in line with Shou's monster summoning abilities.

"Back to the prisoners of war you encountered in the capital, where were they from?" he asked.

"I only saw them from my cell, so I'm not sure. There was a guy who looked an awful lot like a wolf, a girl sporting a cat tail, and a bunch of other kinds of Beastmen."

"Huh... probably southerners, then."

Aran informed me that the southern shoreline was populated with Beastmen. Considering the number of prisoners they'd collected, the Empire had likely trampled the Beastmen's country. When I was finished, everyone took turns telling Aran everything they knew.

Barbarossa told him about the fight and the eventual defeat of the pirates in the south. Following that overwhelming defeat, some of the pirates had joined up with the Empire to save their hides, while others switched to life in the mountains.

Adel talked about the war between Valentine and the Gran Fang Empire and her time as a prisoner of war. During her turn, Youko talked about her brief experiences as an adventurer in the Valentire Empire before being taken captive by Gran Fang. Servants came and went to refill our tea and snacks as we recalled the events leading up to the meeting. I'd rarely had black tea, but this was incredibly delicious. The snacks were great too, but the cookies I'd made with The Soul of Food were leagues better. Skills and magic really made all the difference even in the tiniest parts of life.

By the time we'd completed our reports, the sun had begun its descent below the horizon.

"Thank you for telling me all this today," Aran said, glancing over his notes. "I'll try to compile everything we talked about by the end of tonight and make my way back to His Majesty tomorrow morning. Would you be so kind to accompany me?"

"It would be my pleasure. Accompanying you will make entering the Kingdom much easier." I gave him a respectful bow. Proper manners and etiquette were deeply important in my world, so I mastered them as much as I could. Those expectations wouldn't ordinarily extend to pirates, but I couldn't act like a savage beast of the sea in front of nobility.

"I have arranged lodgings for you. Please, have a good night's rest, and get ready for tomorrow. Ah, and lastly, Sentrag is rather chilly, so I went ahead and prepared some warm clothing for you."

"Thank you for your kindness."

"Please, I should be the one expressing gratitude. Not only have we bolstered

our naval force by allying with you, but you've already aided our war effort immensely by thinning the Empire's forces. What I arranged for you today is mere spare change compared to what you've accomplished. Once our report has reached the king, I'm sure he'll reward you handsomely."

Having officially gained Aran's support, we made our way to the luxury inn he'd arranged for us. Twenty or so minutes after we settled into the comforts of our room at the top floor of the inn, the rest of the crew returned from their errand. Confused as to whether pirates were allowed to enter such a high-class facility, the crew loitered around the entrance for a while, which raised some eyebrows. Fortunately Adel quickly dispelled the misunderstanding and led them inside. Even in this world, it seemed that beautiful women had an easier time getting their point across.

Once everyone had gathered, I explained what had happened and informed them that, if everything went well, we'd have the chance to work directly under his Majesty of Sentrag.

"Wouldn't it be better to assimilate into their naval force?" Rohas asked.

"Nay, brother. Join the navy an' ye be playin' by their rules, shackled by the chain of command. Anywise, can't imagine any navy wants a buncha pirates joinin' all o' a sudden. The Count gets it. Pirates we be and pirates we ourghtta stay," Barbarossa replied. He was right, too. We wanted to maintain the right to fight how we saw fit. Sentrag's own forces could defend Sentrag. Shadow would eventually give way to light.

"All right boys, it's time to sleep!"

"Aye!"

We skipped the revelry for tonight. I didn't mind if the boys had a pint, except for Barbarossa. Rohas had noticed that his brother didn't stop drinking once he started, so I was ready to knock him out if necessary. Luckily, it didn't come to that. I needed everyone, including myself, in tip-top shape for tomorrow's visit to the capital, so I ordered everyone to bed and they dutifully obeyed. Soon, sleep took every member of the Pirates of the Round Table in their luxury room in the port town of Schutzbalt.

Morning came after a night of refreshing sleep. We got up and had breakfast.

I washed my face and stepped outside for my morning workout. There, I spotted Adel swinging her sword in an empty lot next to the inn. She could shift it into any weapon appropriate to the situation. If, say, the enemy expected the thrust of a spear, she could change her spear into a sword at a moment's notice and catch them off guard. I watched as her sword became a scythe, and then an axe—all in a matter of seconds.

I sure wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of her rage. There were many adventurers, and obviously soldiers as well, who studied the blade and used traditional fighting styles. Adel's unique way of handling combat would dismantle standard defenses in a blink.

"Good morning, Lord Masaki," she greeted me.

We'd met on deck in the early hours of the morning too, and working out together had become a bit of a routine for us. I usually stepped in as her sparring partner to practice both my weapon mastery and hand-to-hand combat.

"I'll skip sparring for today and go for a run. How about you?"

"I'll join you. A morning run is always so refreshing."

My heart skipped a beat at her dazzling smile in the morning sun. Its feminine mystique drew me in, as a feeling I'd almost forgotten about began to well up deep inside. I used the rush to propel myself forward and started running.

"Let's go then! Last one back makes the coffee," I called back to her, dashing forward and trying to stifle my sudden feelings.

"Ah, wait!"

On our morning run through town, we passed locals either cleaning the streets and prepping to open up shop, or lying passed out on the street with empty bottles of booze nearby. I was reassured to see that Schutzbalt was safe enough for them to sleep outside, but I couldn't exactly commend the gentlemen for failing to hold their liquor. Eventually, we made our way back to the inn. A small jog like this was a breeze for Adel, a True Blood Vampire, and I wouldn't have felt it either if I'd activated Physical Stats Boost (Extra). Without it, however, the morning haze dissipated from my body as my circulation sped

up. It felt amazing—even though the race ended in my defeat.

I returned to my bedroom, cast Room, and prepared a cup of coffee for Adel. As she sat at the table, enjoying the sublime flavor with a couple chocolate chip cookies I'd made, there was a sudden knock at the door.

"Come in."

I expected one of my crewmembers, but to my surprise, it was Aran.

"Excuse me... oh, what a pleasant aroma. What is that room over there? I don't recall it being among the amenities offered by the inn."

Shoot. Well, cat's out of the bag. At least an ally discovered it, not a rando off the street.

"I used a spell to create a gateway to a special space where I have access to fresh water, cooking appliances, a bathtub, and a bunch of other things. It's a pretty convenient little trick, maybe a bit too convenient for this world, so I decided to keep it a secret between me, my crew, and those under our wings. You don't have a reason to cover for my careless reveal, but maybe this'll sway your decision." I offered him the cup of coffee I'd made for myself.

"I must admit, it's a magnificent piece of magic. I've never seen so many magic items in one place before, and the majority appear completely unique," Aran said, taking the Room in. "Most nobles would be unashamed to use all means at their disposal to acquire this spell. I wouldn't want to bring that trouble to your door. My lips are sealed."

He considered my coffee maker and collab items "magic items," but I didn't mind. It was easier than explaining how they worked.

"Hmmm... what a deep and refined taste."

"Try the cookies Lord Masaki made too. They're much better than the sweets the capital's master chefs whip up." Adel offered him the cookies she was enjoying. They must've turned out even better than I'd imagined.

"Let me see... oh, wow. Now I understand why you looked so displeased last night. It would be blasphemy to call what we offered 'delicious' after tasting this."

Huh, he even noticed that. Sharp guy.

“Such high praise, Lord Aran. It’s an honor,” I said politely. “So, if I may ask, what brings you here at this early hour? I believe we still have plenty of time before our trek to the capital.”

“You’re right, but we received a report this morning.”

“What report?”

“A single Imperial ship is headed this way. We suspected their intent was to surrender, but their mage, proficient in wind magic, dodged all of our arrest attempts.”

“A single ship... that’s suspicious.”

I was under the impression that the Empire’s go-to strategy was overwhelming their opponent with their superior warforce, making the approach of a single ship all the more suspicious. I could only hope surrender was their plan, but I had a bad feeling about that lone vessel.

“This smells fishy. We should leave immediately,” I decided.

“I agree, but unfortunately, our forces are not yet ready to depart,” Aran replied with a frown.

I wasn’t concerned. “We restocked our supplies yesterday, so we can leave right away.”

“Then please allow some of our soldiers to accompany you, just in case.”

“Sure.”

I downed my coffee and gathered up my breakfasting crew. Time was of the essence, so I had them scarf their food, grab the supplies, and head to the ship. I wanted to join them, but someone was missing. Youko was still asleep.

“Hahhh... I’ll bring her. You go with the count, Lord Masaki,” Adel offered.

“Thank you, and sorry for wasting your time. I can’t just waltz into a girl’s room, after all.”

I left Youko to Adel and returned to the ship with the crew. Soon after, Adel appeared, with a sleepy Youko on her back.

“Just five more minutes...”

“Get yourself together!”

Note to self: don’t do anything important in the morning involving Youko ever again.

“I’m taking away your sofa if you don’t wake up right now,” I warned her.

“I’m awake! Yep! Fully awake! Good morning!”

She was alarmingly easy to buy. Regardless, we had everyone and were ready to depart. Aran had kindly covered our docking fee, so I gave Pedol and Padol the green light to get us into open waters ASAP.

My map showed a large number of fish icons: nearby fishing vessels. The map assigned symbols automatically to numerous constructs and living organisms. Even if a fishing vessel were disguised by physical or magical means, my map would attach a fish icon to it, followed by a question mark.

Sailing normally would get you from Schutzbalt to the capital in about half a day, but using wind spells, you could cut that down to two hours. I handed the twins a pile of MP potions to ensure smooth sailing. They’d have to push themselves this morning.

In the meantime, I arranged my skills for combat, adding some defensive measures to my usual loadout in case I needed to help my convoy.

SKILL

Passive

MP Regeneration (Medium) *HP*MP Regeneration (Medium) *Physical Stats Boost (Extra)* Melee Combat Boost (Greater) *Perception Boost (Greater)* Command Boost (Medium)

Active

Surge *Sonic Blade* Grand Armor / Levitate

Grand Armor would increase the defenses of those I cast it on, and *Levitate* (as the name suggested) would make them levitate. You couldn't soar through the sky with it like with Wing, but you could float a couple feet off the ground. It'd come in handy for rescue measures if any ships in our convoy were destroyed.

Once I finished arranging my skills, I heard a voice in my head.

"Everything in the immediate vicinity seems ordinary. I'll continue my patrol as you make your way to the capital." It was Adel, using *Telepathy* to report her findings.

Youko had offered to set up a telepathic link between us before Adel took to the skies to patrol our vicinity. All we had to do was hold hands for a sec to mix our mana, opening the gateway to telepathic communication. It was simple for us, but in this world, only mages could do it. The sudden ring of her voice in my head caught me off guard, but even more thrilling was the fact that my console managed to log her communication.

Brittalia Online had a chatlog feature, which was built into my console as well. It had a number of different channels like "whisper," "say," and "party chat." Adel's telepathic communication registered as a "whisper" in the log. Realizing that I could talk in the party chat, allowing only a group of friends to hear my message, I tried it out.

Sure enough, my crew received my message loud and clear. The only issue was that they couldn't respond in a similarly secretive way. Luckily, the connection between me and Adel was a two-way link, so I could respond to her silently and effortlessly.

There was one last channel, "yell," which would make my voice travel much further than normal. That was probably the easiest to test out of all.

"Roger. Come back if you sense any danger," I said mentally to Adel, before turning back to the sea and opening my map once more.

The map was technically a three dimensional image of the surrounding area, which allowed me to see anything underwater or underground. Nothing could

escape my gaze. I zoomed out to the maximum distance and scanned the map for any threat, remote or nearby.

“Once we pass that cliff, we’re in Sentrag’s territory. The capital should come into view soon,” Aran noted.

“Sentrag sure didn’t skimp on cannons. The clifftop is practically lined with them, not to mention the fort itself. No wonder the Empire is having trouble rushing the Kingdom.”

On the map, it looked like Sentrag sat at the top of a steep peninsula, which inclined deeply into the land beyond. Cradled by the peninsula was a military harbor, connected to Sentrag’s pride, its famous lake with two canals. One canal for the military, the other for civilian use. On top of the precipice sat cannons and archers at the ready. They were well-prepped for an invasion, yet, for some reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible was about to go down.

Moments later, I understood why.

“Nh?!”

“Lord Masaki, we have a problem! The Leviathan, Lord of the Seas is laying siege to the capital! He’s now locked in a battle en route to the city!” Adel messaged me the moment a gigantic shadow appeared on my map.

“I see him. I’m headed there now. Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Understood!”

Aran, sharp as ever, noticed the tension in the air and turned to me.

“Did something happen?”

“Adel just told me that some Leviathan, Lord of the Seas or whatever, is on its way to attack the capital.”

“What did you just say?! Where did the Leviathan come from?!”

“I don’t know, and right now, it doesn’t even matter. The battle has already begun. I’ll go ahead and see what I can do. Pedol, Padol, full steam ahead! Barbarossa, you’re in charge while I’m gone!”

“Aye, sir, aye!”

I cast Defense Up, Quick Work, Ultimate Hero, Grand Armor, and Levitate on everyone. All that casting took a bunch of my resources, so I quickly chugged a HP and MP potion. I had to wait a couple seconds until they topped me off, stealing precious time from the battle.

“Masaki. I’m counting on you,” Aran said gravely.

“I’ll do what I can,” I promised. Then I cast Wing and blasted off toward the Leviathan.

Beyond the cliff was a rampaging dragon, massive even in comparison to a frigate. Even from a distance, I could feel its pure fury. Truly a creature deserving of the name “Lord of the Seas.”

◇◆◇

Adel was flying over the docks while the Leviathan and its spawn were locked in a battle with the warships. Sentrag’s forces tried to defend against the titanic dragon, but nothing could pierce the sheet of water surrounding its body. As their spells and arrows bounced off its shield, the Leviathan unleashed its devastating water breath, destroying one ship after another.

Meanwhile, its spawn—long, deadly sea serpents—swarmed Sentrag’s forces. A single snake could occupy a platoon of Sentrag’s most elite forces. Without aid, this was their battle to lose.

Seeing the devastation. Adel immediately shot a telepathic message to Masaki, her savior. No less, perhaps even more, perceptive than Adel herself, he could also sense the monstrosity’s rampage.

“I see him. I’m headed there now. Don’t do anything stupid!”

“Understood!”

After that brief exchange, Adel made her way to a sea serpent attacking an innocent fishing boat. She molded her mana into a spear and threw it at the beast, piercing its head and instantly killing it.

“I-I’m alive?! What in the world is going on in this port?!”

“Think about it later! Get out of here for now!” she shouted.

“W-Were you the one who saved me? Ah, may your name be blessed!”

“I said get out of here!”

“R-Right!” The man quickly started paddling his boat toward the waterways, where the monsters hadn’t yet reached.

Adel continued attacking the sea serpents. She picked isolated snakes off with her spear, and created a sharp, deadly ring to deal with larger groups. She cut them down, severing heads, and slicing bellies, but there were simply too many.

The serpents, in turn, noticed that Adel was a real threat to them and began to swarm her. She dodged the first blasts of water breath aimed at her, but quickly became overwhelmed.

“Don’t do anything stupid!”

Masaki’s warning reverberated in her mind as she assessed the situation. If she fell back now, Sentrag’s forces would be done for. The sea serpents would turn their focus back to the ships instantly and that’d be it.

He told me not to do anything stupid, but... I think the only stupid decision here would be to sacrifice the lives in front of me! He’ll come and save me again. I know it.

Adel was momentarily distracted by her thoughts. However, that short lapse in focus was a grave mistake. A single sea serpent spotted the break in her fluid movements and shot its high-pressure water breath right at Adel. She had just enough time to avoid instant death, but that blunder cost Adel her arm: the blast mangled it beyond repair.

“Aghhh!”

Adel could walk under the sun, but she wasn’t immune to the vampire’s fate. Sunlight was not her natural domain, and it weakened her. With her natural self-healing abilities locked off by the rays of the sun, she’d have to bear this injury—at least until tonight.

The sea serpents redoubled their efforts, forcing the crippled Adel to focus entirely on the incoming geysers. Still, she danced gracefully through the air, ensuring the sanctity of the rest of her body. Discouraged, the beasts

abandoned Adel, returning their attention to Sentrag's forces.

"Oh, no! No, no, no!"

It was Adel's duty to distract the serpents and she'd failed. Now the lives of many were at risk again.

Jets lanced toward a ship, but Adel blasted to intercept, erecting a wall of pure, solid mana before they could pierce the hull. The serpents reared their heads in fury. Nearly thirty mouths spread wide, preparing to attack. This was the end for Adel. Even with all her mana poured into defense, Adel couldn't hope to block them all.

"Masaki!" The proud vampire knight cried out for her life like a damsel in distress.

And a gigantic flame javelin came whizzing by her before crashing into the waters nearby, instantly incinerating the serpents in range.

"Phew, I made it. Are you okay, Adel?!"

Behind her was the man she so eagerly awaited, Masaki.

◇◆◇

Jeez, that was close! I almost didn't make it.

It took longer to fly from the ship to the edge of my map than I'd expected. I finally arrived at the siege. Adel was protecting the Sentrag forces from the countless sea serpents spawned by the Leviathan and their deadly breath attacks.

Saving others was an admirable act, for sure, but you can take all that admiration and shove it if you die in the process. Luckily, Adel got away with an arm injury.

I conjured the image in my mind of a gigantic flame javelin splitting into thirty separate pieces, each piercing the head of a sea serpent. The javelin materialized in my hands, so I hucked it at the serpents. At the apex of its arc, the javelin split, and the smaller sections lanced every enemy I'd envisioned.

Two weeks ago, I couldn't have launched this attack. My output training with the twins had boosted my spell control tremendously. And, honestly? Pulling off

such a complicated spell felt amazing.

But I had no time to sit on my laurels. I had to heal Adel. I couldn't have her flying around with a minced arm.

"You're injured. Drink some of my blood."

I disabled Invincibility, cut my arm with my Mythril Knife, and threw up a Gravity Wall, in case of breath attacks.

"Sorry. I did something stupid..."

"Don't feel bad. You did it to protect everyone. I'm proud of you."

I gently pet her head while she sucked my blood.

Unfortunately, the enemy wasn't so kind as to let us bond on the battlefield. The remaining serpents turned on us and opened their mouths, prepared to fire. With one hand, I stroked Adel's silver hair. With the other, I summoned a Flame Javelin and hurled it at my foes.

Pfwahahaha, they were so incredibly weak. But, I couldn't let it get to my head.

Maybe it was the thrill of battle, but there was something erotic about Adel sucking at my arm. I stifled my lust as quickly as she'd stirred it. I had to keep my head in the game, as it were. A moment later, she pulled her teeth out of my arm. Her injury completely recovered, I also downed an HP potion to make up for the health she'd drained.

"Sorry to trouble you."

"You wanna make it up to me? Don't get tilted. Go teach those serpents what a True Blood Vampire is capable of. I'll handle the big one, okay? Don't do anything stupid. I mean it!"

"I won't make the same mistake twice."

"Good. Then, let's go!"

We parted ways, but while I blasted off toward the big daddy, I cast Flame Javelin again. Adel had enough on her plate already. Before long, I was in the Leviathan's range. I cast a high-power Flame Javelin, about as stupid huge as

the one I'd lodged at the Imperial frigate, and took aim at the monstrosity.

My aim was true: the javelin exploded against its body in a magnificent ball of flame. The beast, however, was unfazed. A spell that had taken an entire ship down didn't even scratch this big boy. Heck, there wasn't so much as a smudge on its scales. Its water veil must've absorbed the attack completely.

"So fire's a no, I guess."

Having taken my explosive hit, the Leviathan turned its attention on me.



Goal number one accomplished. Now I just had to keep it too busy to attack the ships.

The Leviathan opened its cavern of a mouth and shot a gigantic lance of water breath at me. Compared to the tsunami of Leviathan's breath, the sea serpents had been squirt guns. Still, Invincibility did its job and nullified the beam. Since it was, apparently, a spell, the attack didn't even push me back. I stayed on course, as though nothing happened.

For a moment, I saw confusion in the Leviathan's eyes. Couldn't blame the monster; it probably wasn't used to people shrugging off its almighty breath weapon. But it was my turn to shine. It wasn't often I had such a big target to play with. I had to use this chance to test all kinds of things.

Vortex Burst, one of the highest level Wind spells came with an infusion of electricity. Its MP cost was massive, unlike Flame Javelin, but my GM items knocked the cost down by a third, so I could maintain flight without trouble. When I cast it, my hands crackled with electricity and glowed with a pale blue light as I imagined holding a powerful ball of energy in my grasp.

I thrust both hands out, launching a laser beam of lightning at the Leviathan. In game, this spell looked like the signature attack of a certain electro-master, but in real life it reminded me more of a charged particle cannon.

The beam fizzled into nothing before it could make contact with the Leviathan. The water veil sucked away all my spell's electricity. The plasma did manage to evaporate some of the water, but nowhere near enough to actually do damage. You could say I wasted a ton of mana on the Vortex Burst, but at least I'd learned that electricity was no good, either. Plus, I accomplished the most important thing: I kept the monster's attention.

The Leviathan was in the same boat. Having just learned that its breath weapon couldn't harm me, it conjured a towering tornado of water—a waterspout—and flung his whole huge bulk at me.

It was all futile. Invincibility absorbed the spell, and the physical damage of the tackle as well. The force, however, did carry through. With nothing to brace myself on, it tossed me away. All this bouncing around was starting to give me motion sickness.

“Are you okay, Lord Masaki?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. How about you?”

Adel must’ve been terrified to see the Leviathan’s blow send me flying, but I was totally unharmed. I told her I’d managed to cast a defensive buff in the nick of time. This dispelled her worries completely while keeping her in the dark about Invincibility.

“The navy and I have more or less cleaned the spawn up. The Round Table is currently tending to the injured.”

“Okay. I see an isolated ship to the northwest of my position. When you have a sec, can you check it out?”

“Of course.”

The lone ship was totally stationary, making it all the more suspicious. I’d love to check it out myself, but Leviathan kept my hands full. I tried *Wind Scythe* and *Rock Missile*, but nothing. I figured water spells wouldn’t work either way, so I didn’t even try.

Since magic obviously wasn’t very effective, I decided to switch to my trusty Surge/Sonic Blade combo and slashed at the beast with Seven Arthur. The shockwave slashed through its water shield and cut into its scales. I could probably do some hurt if I hit the right spot.

Being hurt enraged Leviathan. It let out an earth-shattering roar and swung its tail at me. The strike blasted me back. I skipped on the water like a stone, bouncing several times before I managed to come to a halt. I thought the violent jostling would have me on the verge of puking, but with Resist All Debuffs it wasn’t so bad.

The Leviathan continued its rampage, assuming the strike had left me reeling. I rose in time to dodge the strike, but its tail still clipped me. The monster’s persistence was starting to annoy me, but I had a plan in mind to shut him down. The regenerating water shield was the big issue. It sapped nearly all the power from my attacks and spells, so getting rid of it was the first step. With the shield down, I should be able to get some clean hits in.

I readjusted myself and flew up high into the air before taking a nosedive right

at Leviathan. I passed under its chin, out of its line of sight, and started scanning its abdomen for possible weaknesses. Once I settled on a target, I cast a full-power Flame Javelin at point-blank range. A cloud of white steam exploded into my face as the flames evaporated the water shield.

This time, my strike was powerful enough to burn its scales. I knew in a flash that this was my in. I activated Sonic Blade before the shield could reform, and slashed into its body. Seven Arthur's ability added three more slices. Between those, my attack power, and my buffs, I was strong enough to cut its belly wide open. Blood began to pour from the creature, rapidly painting the surrounding waters red.

"Grwaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The Leviathan's agonized roar rang over the sea, proving that even the Lord of the Seas could feel pain. Now I stood a chance at bringing it down. The shield had already regenerated, but all I had to do was repeat my javelin-and-sword plan until the beast couldn't take any more.

Throwing a full power Flame Javelin after the costly Vortex Burst had almost totally depleted my mana, so I chugged down an MP potion just as Youko contacted me telepathically.

"Don't kill him!"

"Huh?! What do you mean? Youko, are you out of your mind?!"

If I didn't kill it, Sentrag was done.

"Listen to me, and listen carefully. The Leviathan controls all the monsters lurking beneath the sea. If it dies, the chains that bind the monster hordes shatter. If that happens, it's only a matter of time before they overrun the coast."

"Then what are we supposed to do?! I'm keeping it occupied right now, but I can't keep it up forever!"

"The Leviathan is a peaceful creature. It usually stays in its own domain. Recently, it only sent its spawn out to attack Imperial vessels, so there must be some reason it's actually come to the front line."

“So we need to find that reason and handle it, huh?”

Groping around in the dark for some clue in the midst of an actual battle was suboptimal, to say the least, but I couldn’t stay locked in an endless fight. Eventually, I was bound to lose focus or Leviathan would lose interest and return to the siege of Sentrag. And apparently I couldn’t just kill it, because it’d release a pile of monsters. The deck was stacked high against me.

“Exactly. I know it’s gonna be hard, but good luck!”

“Oh yeah, real easy to send me off from the comfort of your sofa, isn’t it? But whatever, I’ll see it done.”

Our brief conversation done, I shifted my focus back to the Leviathan. I’d been busy avoiding it until now, but I had to calm down and observe the beast—while whizzing through its flurry of attacks. Thankfully, I had just the skill to tell me anything I needed to know: *Appraise*, which could analyze any enemy or unidentified item.

I switched Sonic Blade out for Appraise and used it on the Leviathan.

STATUS

Leviathan, Lord of the Seas

Race: High Ancient Dragon

HP: ????????/????????

MP: ??????/??????

Debuffs: Subjugation (max)

STATUS

Holy smokes, how much HP and MP must it have if even Appraise can’t measure it? Even more concerning, however, was its debuff.

“‘Subjugation (max),’ huh?”

I couldn’t imagine a traditional mind control spell working on such a huge, powerful creature, and I bet even the Empire didn’t have a collar big enough to fit around that neck. I needed to find a clue to know where to look.

I used Surge as I dodged to keep the beast’s focus. I wanted to assess its

entire body, but it was just too large. At least the tail was above water, but still. Judging from the map, Leviathan must've been something like six miles long. No way they could collar it. But, then, where did the debuff come from? I was just about to give up when Adel contacted me telepathically.

"Lord Masaki, don't kill him! He's being controlled!"

"I know, but I can't find what's controlling him!"

"It's the Imperial ship you sent me to! I had to use some forceful persuasion to get them to talk, but it seems the spell comes from a sort of spear."

"I'm pretty sure I've flown all around it and I didn't—"

I'm so stupid. Of course I wouldn't see a spear stuck between its scales. The beast's armor wasn't so easily pierced. If it wasn't on the outside, it had to be inside. The Empire had somehow gotten the spear that controlled the Leviathan into its body. There was no other explanation.

"Are you there?" came Adel's voice in my mind.

"The Leviathan is protected by a water shield, so it has to be on the inside."

"On the inside?! We're doomed..."

"No, we're not. It's easy; I'll have it swallow me up and look around inside."

"Are you out of your mind?! That's ridiculous!"

"It's our best bet."

"Wait! Stop!"

I cut the telepathy and swung my blade at the Leviathan's nose. The shield took most of the damage, but I did scratch the tip of its nose, causing it to open its mouth wide in pain and rage. If a monster like this had a gnat flying around its head, its next instinct would be to swallow it—which was exactly what I was waiting for. The beast sounded a loud roar as I disappeared into its mouth.

First stage cleared. The interior of the dragon turned out to be dark as hell, but at least Invincibility had kept me alive. I cast *Wisp* to make some light, but regretted it instantly. The guts were disgusting. I obviously didn't expect a living, breathing creature's insides to be lined in sparkling marble, but still.

I opened my map just for the heck of it, but to my surprise, it displayed a detailed view of the Leviathan's interior, as if I were exploring a traditional dungeon. Now that I could see, I noticed I was standing in a pool of acid. The hem of the Azure Dragon Cloak disguising me had begun to melt away, so I quickly tossed it back into my inventory. Without my disguise, my GM items lit me up like a Christmas tree. I shone so bright, I could just cancel Wisp. The GM items themselves took the acid without issue, not melting, or sizzling, or anything.

I carefully walked through the beast's insides. Even with Invincibility activated, I was a little scared of what awaited me. I moved forward until I was attacked by some white, lizard-like creature. It was probably part of Leviathan's immune system, perhaps its version of a white blood cell. The monster was much slower than its parent organism, so dispatching it was trivial. I used Surge and, unlike the sea serpents which left corpses behind, the white monster fizzled into smoke.

I cut my way through more of the lizard things until I discovered a skeleton laying next to a rod which emitted a strange, ominous light. On further inspection, I saw that it came to a point, giving it the appearance of a spear. Between that and the weird glow, it was clear that this was the source of the nasty debuff. To judge by the scraps of clothing near the skeleton, I guessed it was a slave they'd sent in as a sacrifice. A familiar collar was bolted around the skeleton's neck, the very one the Empire had tried to force me into. The Empire had offered this slave to Leviathan and, after being swallowed up by the monster, the slave had shoved the spear into the bowels of the beast with their final breath.

Poor soul. Probably didn't deserve any of this.

I picked up the remains and noticed that my system treated them as an item, which gave me a bright idea. It'd be cruel to let this person rot in the belly of the beast for all eternity, so I'd give them a proper burial one day. As I went to transfer the skeleton to my inventory, a small seashell necklace, twinkling with lovely rainbow hues, fell from it. It was probably the slave's only keepsake. I might be able to get info out of it later, so I stowed it away along with the remains.

With that handled, I turned my attention to the spear. I tried to slam into it, but the Leviathan's water shield blocked my attack.

"All right, then. Guess I have no choice."

Fortunately, my battle with Leviathan had prepared me for this. I used a full-power Flame Javelin to disperse the shield, painting the shaft of the spear coal black. I hoped a single spell would take out both the spear and the shield, but I didn't get that lucky. I followed the Javelin up with Surge before the shield could regenerate. That and the seven additional attacks from Seven Arthur were enough to shatter it into tiny bits. I wanted to recover it for further analysis, but the pieces went up in purple smoke before I could grab any.

"Disposing of the evidence, huh?"

I sheathed my sword and the Leviathan's insides began to convulse, pushing me deeper and deeper inside. To avoid being swallowed up for good, I made a break for it with Wing. I flew back the way I came and, soon enough, the beast's fangs and tongue came into view. I increased my speed and zipped out while its mouth was wide.

The dazzling sun shone down on me. I was finally outside. I never wanted to do anything like that again, but it was over and that's what mattered. I re-equipped my disguise just as a loud voice boomed in my head.

"Have Our gratitude, Visitor. You have done a great deed by breaking the chains that shackled Us."

I looked around in panic, but it was just me and the monster. Leviathan addressed me directly. Shocked, I didn't know what to make of it.

"Sorry for getting you caught up in our mess. Oh, and sorry for all the cuts and scorch marks, too."

"Muhahaha! Our mind may have been taken, but that is not to belittle your accomplishments. Know that not many can stand up to Us, Visitor. It has been millenia since We last felt pain."

A real old-timer, huh?

"Props to you too. You really pushed me in that fight. I was at my wit's end,

and only learned that you were controlled after I sliced your stomach open. I'm, once again, genuinely sorry for hurting you."

"No need to seek Our apology, Visitor. On the contrary, your actions shall be rewarded. You've released Us from the grasp of the Empire and given Us the gift of the battle of a lifetime! We couldn't have lived so long if a single scar crushed us, could We? Hahahaha!"

What a hearty chuckle. I'm glad that at least one of us had fun. Without Invincibility, I wouldn't have lasted two seconds in that fight.

"What sort of reward are you thinking, because, sorry to say, but I'm not interested in immortality or anything like that."

"We are not able to provide you with the gift of eternal life, but hopefully, you'll find this useful."

A glowing orb appeared before me. Certainly it was my reward, so I reached for it. The light faded, revealing a gorgeous blue bracelet of master craftsmanship. It didn't twinkle like my GM items, which already was a positive.

"This is a powerful, and rather nice-looking bracelet, if We might say so Ourselves."

My thoughts exactly.

"Regardless of Our own feelings about how it looks, We're happy to see you've taken a liking to it. We're certain it will serve you well. It conveys the right to call upon Our spawn and can summon a Water Dragon. We trust you'll put it to good use."

Did it just say that I could summon a Water Dragon? The best Brittalia Online's summoners could do was a dragon knight, but a glance at my spell list told me it was true.

ITEM

Leviathan Bracelet

A bracelet of gratitude by Leviathan, Lord of the Seas. The holder of this bracelet is granted permission to call upon the forces of the sea.

Unique Ability: Summon Water Dragon

Rarity: EX”

I’d never in my life seen an “EX” rarity. GM items didn’t have a rarity ranking, and the highest ranking in-game rarity was SR. *Summon Water Dragon* had the highest MP cost of any spell in my arsenal, but I could cast it once per battle thanks to my equipment.

“Wow, this is absolutely incredible. Thank you. What’re you going to do now? Take your revenge on the Empire?”

“Our oath forbids Us from aggression to humans. Once We engaged in battle, Our oath would shatter, cursing Us to rampage until every soul, innocent and sinful alike, found a resting place at the bottom of the sea. We seek no destruction, and We trust this issue will be resolved without Our involvement. We trust you to bring judgement to those who sinned.”

Fair enough, its breath weapon would indiscriminately kill anyone in the general vicinity, including any pets or livestock. I had to hand it to Leviathan: it was quite considerate of the power it held.

“If We’re honest, revenge is kind of a pain. We just want to get some grub and sleep. We’re tired. Dead tired!”

“Oh, you lazy bum!”

Lord of the Seas, more like Lord of the NEETS.

“Amusing Visitor, We shall take our leave. Our presence only disturbs the lives of humans. However, heed Our warning, and convey it to other Visitors you come across: your might may well throw the world’s balance into disorder. We can only wish that you exercise caution.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Make sure you don’t eat another spear.”

“We’ve learned our lesson. We will make sure to demand edible offerings from our priests.” The monster had learned from its mistakes, and that deserved a reward.

“Glad to hear it. Here, take this as a gift. They probably won’t fill you up, but I

hope you'll like them."

I took my handmade cookies from my inventory and offered them to Leviathan. The item flashed with bright light and floated to the dragon.

"We appreciate your offering. We'll return to the sea now. You shall make your way back as well."

"Yeah. Have a good rest and don't worry about anything. I'll crush the Empire myself."

With that, the cyclopean dragon known as the Leviathan quietly sank into the sea without leaving as much as a ripple on the surface. It had been fun talking to the guy, so I hoped we'd see each other again. For now, though, it was time to head back.

I started flying back to my crew, and then something crashed into me—quite gently—from below.

"Aghhh!"

The sudden impact pushed me up. Baffled, I glanced down, only to see a quaking Adel clutching me in her arms.



“Th-Thank... hic... thank goodness you’re alive... I thought... hic... you were —!”

Damn. I’d forgotten she was a knight who’d failed to protect the ones she loved. Her parents and king massacred, her people distraught and separated, she’d been carrying a huge weight ever since the Empire attacked her country. And now I’d made her worry she’d lost me as well... dammit.

I couldn’t see her face, but I could tell from the tiny shivers of her body that she was crying. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and pet her head.

“I’m okay. I wouldn’t have gone into his mouth if I wasn’t sure that I could survive.”

“You could’ve... hic... told me at least!”

“There was no time. I had to stop the Leviathan before it destroyed Sentrag.” It was wrong of me to not give her a heads up, but time really was of the essence.

“Sorry to butt into your romantic reunion, but everyone’s watching you two.”

“Ah...”

Youko’s telepathy brought me back to my senses. This was the exact focal point of the battle, the very place where the legendary Leviathan rose above the seas. Anyone following the battle watched Adel tackle me in midair, and saw me gently stroking her hair. Every one of Sentrag’s soldiers and every member of the Pirates of the Round Table was watching us.

Aran watched us with a cheeky smile.

I was afraid. Terrified, even. Who even knew if Resist All Debuffs and Invincibility could counter death from embarrassment?

4.

After overcoming my intense embarrassment, I decided to return to our ship. Adel, feeling just as embarrassed, flew behind me. On deck, the sea of Sentrag soldiers we'd saved were enjoying some warm soup Rohas had made. He was at the top of his game. Who else could whip something up so quickly in the midst of a battle?

Aran approached us as we landed. He'd gotten through the battle scot-free, probably thanks to the buffs I'd cast.

"Masaki, good work saving Sentrag. I never expected Leviathan to be mind controlled."

"The Leviathan gave me the impression that this wouldn't happen again. Lesson learned."

"Excuse me?! You conversed with Leviathan?!"

"Yeah, Leviathan's pretty friendly. I like 'im. Oh, and I also got this." I showed him the bracelet Leviathan had given me. Since it didn't overlap with any of my item slots, I could just slip it right on.

"How exquisite..."

"That bracelet is crazy powerful..." Youko muttered in pure amazement as she shimmied up to us.

"After gifting me this bracelet, Leviathan told me that we humans were responsible for the Empire. Leviathan is too powerful and would inevitably take many innocent lives if he went after them." I wouldn't want to destroy Leviathan's mystique by revealing that the Lord of the Seas was a couch potato.

"I see... Okay, let's make our way to the castle. His Majesty needs to hear about everything."

"What about us?" I asked.

"I want you, Masaki, head of the pirates and summoned combatant from

another world, and Adelheid to accompany me.”

Probably the best choice. I couldn’t imagine my crew parading themselves into the castle. With telepathy users back on the ship, ready to report if anything happened, this was the perfect opportunity to give my crew some free time. We could meet up later at an inn or something.

“Understood.” We gave our assent and headed into the battle-scared port.

“Admiral, we’ll do thome thitetheeing around the thity once we’re checked in,” Pedol informed me.

“All right. Reach out with telepathy if you need to.”

Adel and I got off at the naval port and sent the others down the waterways. They’d stop at Sentrag’s famous lake.

“The castle is just ahead,” Aran told us. “The town’s already buzzing with talk of your feats. ‘The Azure Hero and Crimson Princess Knight beat back the Leviathan!’”

“‘Azure Hero,’ huh? I wonder what’d happen if they learned I’m a pirate...”

“I’m not a princess...”

Like me, Adel didn’t really enjoy attention. I was a little salty that our battle with Leviathan had ended up being so dramatic, but there was nothing for it. Being sung as a hero put you on a podium. Everyone would want to come rushing up to express their gratitude or ask for something. We’d both rather blend into the crowd. Regardless, we followed Aran up the lamplit stairway leading to the castle grounds.

As we climbed the slope, stone houses were replaced with marble mansions. We’d clearly entered the noble quarter, nestled close to the castle. Soon enough, the twinkling road to the castle proper came into view. The road itself was garnished with decorations, and a series of reliefs were carved into the castle walls. The whole vibe was like a medieval castle you’d see on TV and in history books.

We proceeded down the spectacle of a street until a couple soldiers jogged up to Aran. They had a brief exchange and Aran handed over a bundle of

papers. The soldiers gave him a deep bow and left. What was that about?

“It seems like His Majesty is expecting you both. He watched your battle through his telescope.”

Wait, hold up? Does that mean he saw my moment with Adel? Screw that! Screw that so hard! Even so, I couldn’t just bail on my meeting with the king. I had to man up and deal with it.

“An audience with the King, huh?” I said, with a worried frown. “Gotta be honest, I don’t really know how to act around royalty.”

“Follow my lead. Fortunately, His Majesty doesn’t care all that much for proper etiquette.” Adel came to my rescue.

“Thanks, that’s reassuring.” Mimicking her couldn’t be too complicated. Surely, I could pull it off.

“I wanted to introduce you to His Majesty myself, but he already had his eyes on you. Either way, please follow me.”

Aran had wanted us to wait in the antechamber while he explained the situation to His Majesty, but now we were going directly to him. As she slowed and took her surroundings in, I noticed a nostalgic glint in Adel’s eyes. She’d mentioned being friends with the king, so this probably wasn’t her first time here.

Before long, we’d arrived at the throne room. A long, crimson carpet ran down the center of the sparkling marble floor all the way up to the throne itself, where His Majesty sat in his thick scarlet mantle and a heavy golden crown. A row of guards lined the walls leading to the king’s seat, and more were stationed beside him. Clad in more impressive armor than even the count himself, they were likely the royal guard.

As I was finishing my scan of the room, I noticed Adel dropping to one knee, so I followed suit and bowed before the king.

“Raise your heads.”

I was way too nervous and concerned I’d come off weird if I stared at the king too much, so I only caught a glance as we raised our heads. His pure white hair

and elderly features drew my notice. He must've been well into his sixties.

"Aran, you have done well to find such strong allies in this dire time of need. You have my utmost gratitude."

"It's an honor to serve you, my king."

The elderly king watched as Aran bowed, then shifted his gaze to us. My nerves had me quaking all over. I wished Resist All Debuffs extended to psychological states too.

"I'm Rolan El Sentrag. You have done a great deed by ending the rampage of Leviathan, Lord of the Seas. I declared you dead when you disappeared into Leviathan's mouth, so to see you emerge victorious was a true catharsis."

Yep, he saw everything.

"You're truly the hero our people sing you to be. Allow me to express the gratitude of our kingdom."

"Your kind words flatter me, Your Majesty. I only did what seemed right at the time."

"There's no need for modesty. It's not an exaggeration to say that you have saved our kingdom."

"I agree with Father. Even in legends, no hero emerges from a confrontation with Leviathan unscathed," added a knight next to the king. "You deserve to be proud. Your name will be immortalized in history."

He must've been a prince. No wonder his armor was so pimped out. He had dark hair and great bone structure. Though he was thin, he gave the impression of great strength.

"Thank you. I'll try and live up to the status you've bequeathed to me," I said with a bow that delighted them both. I was learning!

"It's good to see you again, Adelheid. I deeply regret being unable to come to your aid at the Battle of Valentine."

"I appreciate your kind words, but please, expunge your guilt. The distance between Sentrag and Valentine makes rendering emergency aid a challenge. I shall take revenge for my fallen brethren."

“How long has it been since I saw you last, Adelheid?” the king asked fondly. “I remember the day my youngest brother brought you before me. You were such an adorable little girl, full of smiles and energy. You dashed all over the palace, trying to explore its every nook and cranny.”

“P-Please, Your Majesty, don’t bring up tales from my childhood. So much time has passed since then; I’ve changed completely by now.” Adel’s face was flushing darker and darker beside me. She wanted to reject her old self, but she was still an adorable girl.

Anyway, the king had mentioned an interesting tidbit I just had to confirm.

“Is Adel the daughter of His Majesty’s brother?” I asked Aran in a hushed tone.

“Yes. You didn’t know?”

“She never told me.”

“Sounds just like her. She doesn’t like using her father’s status to get special treatment.”

Tossing a prince’s name out there would definitely affect her relationships. That’s probably why she never told me or my crew, either. I could respect that, and I had no intention of treating her like a princess anytime soon. To be fair, though, I didn’t actually know how to treat a vampire knight either.

“Oh, and how gracefully you have changed.” His Majesty was obviously delighted. “Your dramatic embrace in the air was worthy of the greatest stage.”

“I would advise commissioning our kingdom’s greatest playwright to create such a thing, Father.”

“Y-Your Majesty! Prince Leon! Nhhhhh!”

So the prince was called Leon. He and his father were having a ball, but remembering that moment only made me flush as deeply as Adel. I could only hope they wouldn’t actually go through with the whole play thing. If they did, I might as well dig myself a hole and go live in it forever. I glanced at Adel. She was still just as flustered as me.

“Now, I think it’s high time to address your reward,” the King said, finally

getting serious. “First, Aran. For your key role in saving our kingdom, I shall grant you the county of Andora.”

“Thank you!”

Aran ended up with another territory under his belt. The additional taxes he could now collect were sure to line his pockets, and he might even be able to access larger building projects now. Not that it really mattered to me.

“Next, Masaki Toudou. I shall grant you a medal for your heroic display during the battle of Sentrag. From today onward, you shall bear the title of baronet and be known as Sir Masaki Toudou, the Azure Hero. Furthermore, you shall be rewarded a million Fran for weakening the Imperial navy.”

Whoo, I get a medal and a noble rank! Not to mention, I’m a certified hero! The only strange thing was my monetary reward. Specifically, the fact that the king knew about the Empire’s ships being scuttled in the harbor. It hadn’t been long enough for him to verify that.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty, but I haven’t been able to confirm Masaki’s report on the destroyed ships yet,” Aran interjected politely.

“Our spy verified it,” the King replied. “Incidentally, Masaki, I think you know him.”

“Huh? Khhhm, I mean, I’m sorry?”

“Enter!”

A man, clad in a knight’s armor, entered the throne room. I was supposed to know him, but nothing about him rang a bell. He just looked like your average Joe. Average height, average build, average features for a man in his fifties. I had a pretty good memory, but I couldn’t pinpoint ever meeting the guy. He’d left no strong impression on me, so I might as well never have met him, to be honest.

Something must’ve been up. My bafflement seemed to amuse the king thoroughly.

“Hahaha! You seem deeply confused, Masaki.”

“Your Majesty, you’ve given Masaki an impossible task,” the nondescript man

said. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m the soldier who brought breakfast to you every morning you spent in that musty cell. I’m also a proud spy of Sentrag. Thank you for your advice on your second day in the Empire. I did manage to lose some weight.”

“Ah! That was you!”

We’d talked every morning. Our conversations were always rather short-lived, but they helped keep my spirits up.

“I’m Jirou Tanaka, the royal spy of Sentrag, formerly known as the head of ninjas in the historical MMO Sengoku Wars. I was summoned into this world, just like you.”

“Wait, what?!”

“Allow me to congratulate you on destroying the fleet. It was an incredible feat to witness. I planned to spring you before the execution, but your premature escape and the subsequent chaos you sowed gave me an opportunity to slip between the cracks and escape the Empire undetected. So, thank you.”

I’d never been clear on why the morning guard was so amiable with me, but I finally understood. Escaping had to be much easier with someone who liked you.

“I’m sure you have a lot to discuss, but please, leave it for later,” the King said. “Jirou. Bring the medal.”

“At once!”

Jirou disappeared for a split second before reappearing right in front of me, a small box in hand. I had no idea what proper etiquette for receiving a medal was, but fortunately, Adel came in clutch.

“Stand up and make sure His Majesty can easily reach the left side of your chest.” Her telepathic instructions saved me from some embarrassment.

I stood up and let him stick the medal on the front of my cloak.

“Historically, achievements of this scale would be deserving of territory as well, but...”

“Father, I believe that would only burden the Baronet. I would recommend granting him a mansion, instead. I believe we should have one suitable for our hero.”

That would be great. In my own world, a home in a convenient spot would wipe out even substantial savings—and then some! Not to mention, being granted territory would be problematic. I had no clue how to govern an area.

“Oh, I know the estate you have in mind. Very well. With Adelheid by his side, it only makes sense. He’ll be awarded his own territory if he continues to be a useful asset of our kingdom.”

“I’m sure the other nobles and knights will find it easier to accept this alternative,” the prince nodded.

So I’d get some land sooner or later, huh? I didn’t want land. It’s not like I was a reclusive bum like our resident Lord of the Seas, but hearing that made me want to just chill in my mansion and close my doors to the rest of the world.

“Last but not least, Adelheid Bernstein. Your display against the spawn of Leviathan was nothing short of awe-inspiring. I shall pronounce you my knight. I hoped you’d serve directly under me at the palace. However, I see you’ve already found yourself a lord already.”

“Yes! Lord Masaki has saved my life not once, but twice. As he has been pronounced a Baronet, I would like to pledge myself to his service.”

“Father, I’m sure you’re aware that a number of our nobles would love to use Adel to further their own goals. I think it would be for the best if we left her with Masaki.”

“Very well. I expect great things from you three.”

Apparently Adel wasn’t in the line of succession, but at least we both got noble titles in Sentrag. I wasn’t surprised to hear that nobles were after Adel. People directly connected to the royal family were valuable assets, so better to keep her sheltered from all that.

The king and I went on to discuss whether the Pirates of the Round Table could retain their autonomy, to which he agreed. Later, Leon told me his father had long wanted troops that were unbound by Sentrag military structure and

code. He was a great guy, kind and open-hearted. I liked him a lot.

And now we were Sentrag nobles. I worried about the potential complications of being established nobility in the kingdom, but if we were gonna defeat the Empire, it was a necessary evil.

I also made a mental note to chat with Jirou in the near future. I hadn't had the chance to talk to Shou, and I was eager to hear from someone who'd been summoned before me. Besides me, Jirou, and Shou, there had to be others who'd been transported here. If these were really the players who'd vanished between moments, then there was a good chance I could build a friendship of some kind with them. I knew one thing for sure: I didn't want them as enemies. Some of them might pose a bigger threat than Leviathan. I left the throne room thinking about my future in this world.

The following couple days were pretty rough.

I arrived at our inn, which had a bar downstairs, to find my crew daydrinking like there was no tomorrow. Soldiers threw their arms around my boys, celebrating our victory at sea. I later learned that it was the soldiers who'd suggested the party, wanting to express their gratitude to the Pirates of the Round Table for saving them.

Once we told everyone about our new titles and the small fortune we'd received, the party got even livelier.

Then, to make matters worse, the moment the inn's owner spotted me, he was all, "I had no idea the Azure Hero himself would pay us a visit! Close up shop! This is now a private feast for the Hero and his friends! Bring out our best booze and grub, you layabouts!"

As the day went on, the soldiers eventually learned that the "Azure Hero" was none other than the leader of a pirate group, but they didn't seem to mind. Heck, they even approached, one by one, to shake hands and hug me.

"Huh, are you now? I thought pirates were all good-for-nothing wimps, but it seems there are some proper men among them. Gotta say, I'm happy to have you on my side!"

"Aye! Ne'er thought I'd see tha day a pirate'd become gentry, but it just goes

t’ show nothin’ be impossible for our admiral! Brother, I’ll hope we be sailin’ tha high seas fer years t’ come!”

Barbarossa and a Sentrag military commander celebrated our great victory, each with one arm thrown around the other and mugs of grog in hand. They may have come from radically different walks of life, but the wolves of the sea were enjoying each other’s company.

The next day came, and so did the terrible hangover. For the better part of the day, we all nursed the alcohol’s bite.

Aran came by to show me to my new mansion. It was a breathtaking villa with a massive garden and beautiful fountain, all nestled in a corner of the noble district.

“Damn, it feels like I won the lottery.”

I’d expected it to be a bit more modest. Maybe a house with one floor and a little garden, similar to where I lived in Japan. This, however, was one of those unnecessarily gaudy mansions, where you’d feel inclined to welcome your guests with “I’m Masaki Toudou. Welcome to my crib.”

“This was once a mansion of His Majesty’s youngest brother... Adelheid’s father.”

“Th-This is Father’s—”

Aran told me he expected the chatter amongst the nobles to be that my etiquette was terrible for a newcomer to nobility, despite my living in a luxurious mansion, which is why he’d decided to gift me with a property once belonging to Adel’s father. With my accomplishments at sea, and Adel, the daughter of the mansion’s late owner in my care, the nobles would have nothing to complain about.

Aran also found a nice, big house near the sea for my crew, so I had them lodge there. My crew had a fantastic time, bonding with the friends they’d made in the Sentrag navy, drinking at the bars which dotted the shoreline, and training.

We all spent the next couple days moving in, cleaning the mansion and, frankly, just chilling. Me, Youko, and Adel could finally take a breather in my

new mansion, the Toudou Estate. It did mean that I was, indeed, living under the same roof with two women, but I had a good reason for it: The very first day I arrived at the mansion, a bunch of people, including another noble from the area and a merchant boss, showed up offering up their sisters and daughters for marriage.

I wasn't big on building a harem, but it was still awkward having to turn down multiple marriage proposals every day. Apparently everyone wanted a piece of the Masaki cake because I was a noble in my twenties. In this world, I was a late bloomer.

I asked Aran for advice, and he suggested I keep Adel and Youko around. When he made the proposal, I almost spit my coffee onto him. I managed to hold it back, but maybe a bit too well, because I did almost choke.

In this world, polygamy was commonplace, I learned. In fact, Aran himself had four wives.

For the first couple days, I went ahead and ignored the incoming marriage proposals, but that spawned some pretty unsavory rumors. People theorized that I was a cougar hunter, or was much more interested in the other end of the age spectrum. So they proceeded to send me everyone from women aged fifty plus to girls ten and below. It was bad.

The straw that broke the camel's back was the rumor that I might swing the other way. At that point, I asked Youko and Adel to stay with me.

"I honestly don't want to get married yet, but everyone's pushing me into putting a ring on someone."

"Should we take this as a marriage proposal?"

"Kind of but not really. I just need you guys to act like my wives."

We'd only known each other for a couple weeks. It would be too soon to start dating, and marriage was way out of the picture.

They spent a couple moments in intense thought, then both raised their heads and looked at me.

"I, ummm... I wouldn't mind..." Adel said.

“So, you’ll act like my wife?”

“No. I wouldn’t mind, ummm, *becoming* your wife.” Her face flushed as she confirmed her stance and gave a little nod.

I could marry Adel, huh?

“You were talking about being bullied into marriage, so why not? I wouldn’t mind being your second wife. Ah! On that note! My parents are nobles in Yamato, so you don’t have to worry about the rumors that marrying a commoner would stir up,” Youko chimed in.

“Even you, Brutus?” I groaned.

“Who’s ‘Brutus’?”

“Forget about it. You’re seriously a noble?”

“Yep,” Youko confirmed. “All the duties and obligations that come with my pedigree started to wear on me. I figured I could get some calluses in the outside world and return to my family when I was ready.”

“Huh...”

Yamato was an island nation and, until recently, it had been completely closed. I’d heard they were a naval power to be reckoned with.

Either way, they somehow both agreed to my proposal. Two gorgeous women were going to be bound to me in marriage, but for some reason, it felt faintly anticlimactic. Maybe it’d sink in with time. Since I’d started working back home, I hadn’t been interested in anyone. It was high time to fix that and secure a bright future for all three of us.

For a moment, I daydreamed about our delightful married life, but reality needed me.

“Khhhm, thank you. Sincerely. For now, let’s call you my fiancées until, you know, the war is over at least. Once peace is achieved, we can have a ceremony.”

“Hmmm... you’re right. I support that idea,” Adel said thoughtfully.

Youko’s response was flippant: “We get married either way, so sure. Works

for me.”

Putting the wedding off until the end of the war felt like procrastination, but I needed the extra time to settle my thoughts. Not just for myself, but so I could provide both of them the best life possible.

The proposals would probably die down as soon as the engagement was announced, and I could just keep turning down the military’s recruitment attempts. I had a pirate crew on my hands. Ain’t nobody got time to command a squadron on top of that. With my title and overwhelming military might, I could live in luxury with Adel and Youko now, but the lives of gentry had their own rules.

Sailing the high seas and doing whatever the hell I wanted had been pretty great, but those days were behind us. I needed to understand that I could only achieve so much by myself. I had to rely on Sentrag if I was going to deal with another nation, whether through diplomacy or otherwise. I made sure to station Rohas on a navy ship. His cooking would deepen our relationship with the navy. An army marches on its stomach and the fastest way to a man’s heart is through there, too.

Those couple days had been relatively quiet and relaxing, but I couldn’t lose track of the big picture. We were at war. If an operation needed our unique abilities, we’d be off. The call to arms could come at any moment.

A lot of my crew was currently out patrolling the waters.

Though I was now technically nobility, I kept in touch with my roots. Every day, without fail, I communicated with my crew, and monitored their progress. I was there in the morning to see them off, and I was there in the evening to welcome them home.

I wasn’t going to abandon my duties as an admiral.

A couple days after our mutual agreement, I announced that I’d proposed to Adel and Youko. A couple other merchants and nobles tried their luck anyway, but flanking my front door with the crew solved that problem pretty quick. They were kitted out with the magic items I’d given them earlier, and I also went out of my way to give them black-and-white helmets to add an extra intimidation factor. They were later dubbed “The Black and White Gatekeepers.” If only

those nobles knew my guardians were mere pirates.

The helmets themselves were surprisingly useful. Not only did they provide camouflage to mask overpowered magic items, but they were massively popular as fashion items. They inherited the armor class and value of your real helmet, rather than overwriting its stats.

My crew thought they were magic items. Technically incorrect, but close enough. When I showed the helmets to the magic item guild, they were all over it. They asked for a couple samples, hoping they could mass produce them. If the guild was successful, they'd give me a percentage of the profits as royalties. If people could actually look sick while throwing down, it seemed like they'd take the opportunity.

A couple days later, I decided to finally organize my item box. With the help of Rohas, Adel, and Youko, I went through the whole list, filling the Room with several hundred different costumes and varieties of equipment. I'd whaled about as hard as I could, so we had our work cut out for us.

When I pulled out a school swimsuit, however, I tried to stuff it back into the box immediately. Nobody needed to see that. Youko, however, jumped in and pulled the swimsuit right back out.

"You really have all sorts of things tucked in here, huh?"

"I won it in a kind of lottery. Not sure if you were looking forward to wearing it, but it's not really my thing."

"I figured you'd go for things you like, but anyway... it's unbelievable you even have a swimsuit in there."

Adel stared at the swimsuit curiously. I was closing in on thirty, but I was still a healthy, normal guy. To see someone as delicate and gorgeous in that thing might just make me lose control.

We dragged out every piece of clothing in the box. Ladies clothes, menswear, armor, suits, everything. The costumes came in all varieties, from modern fashion of the East and West, Chinese and European armor, all the way to the panda onesie. The Room started to look like the costume closet at a theater.

Youko picked an item off the ground and stood in front of the mirror,

measuring it against her height. It was a pretty white sundress with dainty lace at the hem of its skirt. I'd never wear the thing, obviously, but it'd fetch a pretty penny if I decided to sell it.

"D'awww, I love this. Say, why don't we dress up and go out for a walk? We've taken all the clothes out already anyway!" Youko suggested.

"Hmmm... I guess this *would* be the perfect time for a stroll."

I'd visited the castle and a couple stores, but I hadn't gotten the chance to take a relaxing, leisurely stroll around the city. The weather was fantastic. Might as well take the opportunity.

"Please, go ahead. I'll take care of the rest," Rohas offered. "I'm good at organizing things neatly, and I love looking through all the different clothes and armor you've stored up."

"Oh... Sorry to dump all the work on you. Ummm, Adel?"

Adel hadn't said a word for a while, so I glanced around only to discover her standing in front of a mirror, twirling merrily, a gothic dress in hand. As a knight, she'd probably have spent most of her time in the formal garb of her profession. I imagine she hadn't had many chances to wear fancy dresses. The innocent, sweet smile on her face, and her adorable little twirls melted my heart.

"Adeeeel!"

"Eeeep! Wh-What?!"

Thank you, Adel, for that blessed squeal. She'd probably been too deep in her own mind to hear us, but I guess we knew what she was planning to wear.

"We're going out. I know you'll be wearing that, but what about you, Youko?"

"Huh? C-Can you explain what's going on?" Adel asked in confusion.

"Hmmm... yeah, I'll wear this." Youko was more decisive.

"Good, then for myself... ah, this will be perfect." I picked out a brown suit and pants, completed with a brown, striped necktie.

"C-Can someone please explain to me what's happening?"

“Put that on because we’re going out for a walk,” I told Adel. “Choose any accessories you want from the box. Everything should be neatly organized in there. Let’s leave in an hour. I hope that’s enough to put your outfit together.”

“I-I-I’m sorry?! I’m wearing this and I have to choose accessories? I haven’t done that since I was a kid...”

“I only wear light make-up, so I’m more or less good to go,” Youko chirped. “Don’t worry about anything, Adel, I’ll pretty you up! Come, follow me!”

“Huh? What? Wait, You—!”

Youko ignored Adel’s pleas and dragged her into another room. She reached out to me for help, but the door closed with a thud before I could even react. Youko locked the door tight, closing me out. The Room was now reserved for girls only. No boys allowed. It seemed a little pointless because they were only defending against me and Rohas—and Rohas was way too nice to barge in on them. I thought I’d seen Youko excited before, but this was something else. She probably loved dressing other girls up.

“Ummm, I’ll continue organizing the items,” Rohas said.

“Thank you. Can you put all the recovery items into a separate box? You can use Spectacles to make your job easier. They’re a special pair of glasses enchanted with Appraise.”

“Of course.”

I was honestly looking forward to our little outing. I hadn’t had a chance yet to test my literacy, and I’d always loved going out for walks to do shopping or whatever. I hadn’t really touched my reward money at all, so I felt like boosting the city’s economy a little bit today.

Damn, it’d been a minute since I wore a suit. I’d wear them to work every day, but the one I’d arrived in had gotten pretty badly torn up in jail. It’d be good to find a tailor and get that sorted.

I peeked at my console for the time, confirming that just about forty minutes had passed. I went downstairs to the entrance and waited for the girls to arrive. Since I had my inventory, we wouldn’t need baskets or backpacks or anything. That was one less thing to worry about.

A couple minutes later, a door on the second floor opened, and the girls processed down to the entrance. First came Adel in her black gothic dress, completed by a gold necklace sporting a deep azure gem. Youko followed immediately behind in the white sundress she'd chosen earlier. She'd also put a cute ribbon in her hair. Both were extremely adorable.

"Ummm... p-please don't stare... it's embarrassing," Adel said nervously.

"Yeah," Youko agreed. "I didn't expect to be ogled this much."

Ah, shoot! I didn't mean to stare.

They stopped in front of me, fidgeting with nerves as I felt my cheeks light up. I hadn't done much dating back home. Having my first date in a very, very long time with not one, but two, gorgeous girls definitely wasn't good for my heart.

"Ummm... do you have something in mind? Sentrag is too large to explore in a single day."

"Hmmm..." I considered. "I haven't been past the inn nearby, so I want to go on a walk and explore a little further. That work for you?"

"It works for me," Adel nodded. "I would like to take a nice day off in the city."

"I'm down too," Youko said with her usual enthusiasm. "Ah, I'd love to visit a nice café or patisserie on the way."

"I was planning to have lunch outside, so we can combine the two."

Sentrag was absolutely breathtaking with its antique, but well-preserved buildings. The city was filled to the brim with restaurants and cafes. We didn't need to worry about it until later, but finding a place to eat wasn't going to be a problem. For now, it was still early, around 9 a.m.

We decided to start our walk on Main Street. Carriages were forbidden in this party of the city. Good call. I'd only seen the Empire from the little window in my cell, but I could recall a couple near-misses where someone almost got trampled by horses. Our pleasant and completely safe stroll began on this nice, clean, completely horse-free street.

"This is totally like a pedestrian zone," I mused.

“What’s that?”

“A part of the city where cars—or I guess, that would be carts here—are forbidden to enter between set periods of time.”

“About that... When I was little, carts were very common on city streets and caused lots of accidents. Jirou was the first to propose that carts should be banned from the city during the day to reduce the number of accidents. His proposal was eventually cemented into law,” Adel explained.

Turning bustling streets into pedestrian zones was definitely something I could see Jirou championing. According to Adel, the nobility had been afraid that the change would affect their supply chains, delaying the arrival of important goods, and losing them money, so it hadn’t been easy to get the proposal into the books as a law. Because of this, the system was first implemented for a single month as a test. During that month, there were no street accidents, and zero delivery delays. The proposal had been a great success.

As I looked around, I noticed that commerce seemed to have switched to a system of hand-pushed trolleys for emergency daytime deliveries. Definitely way safer than having horses trampling up and down the streets. I asked about emergency protocols for natural disasters or wars. Apparently, a bell would alert the citizens to clear the streets to make way for the horses.

“So basically, this was all implemented once all of the nobles’ complaints were eliminated?”

“Yes. Before then, we had apprentice butlers and maids being badly hurt by horses or carriages during their errands on nearly a weekly basis. Once we’d proved the nobility’s concerns unfounded and demonstrated that the measure did, indeed, make the streets much safer, they even went so far as to fund it.”

I’d wager some of the nobles just wanted to brag that, “this street was funded by *me* and *me* alone!” Having said that, boosting some noble’s ego was a small price to pay for a safer city.

“I’m glad the streets here are so safe. It wouldn’t really matter if I got hit, but not everybody’s as sturdy as I am.”

“Two horses and a carriage would mess anybody up! You’re the only exception!” the girls yelled at me in unison. They were right. Invincibility would completely block any damage from a stray carriage, an ambush, or even a bullet, if that’s what it came to.

As we strolled, I started to feel more and more eyes on us. We weren’t dressed in our usual warlike attire, so I don’t think the stares were because of the whole Azure Hero thingy. Actually, most of the gazes were directed at Adel and Youko. The only looks I got were those of envy. I’d get the occasional stink eye from behind, which gave me the chills. I had to constantly worry that things would get ugly.

“Hm... I feel eyes on us,” I said.

“Really? That’s odd. I don’t feel I’m getting more looks than usual,” Adel said thoughtfully.

I think she was already used to being stared at, but the death glares I was getting pierced my heart. Luckily, they began to die down after a couple more minutes. I didn’t know why, but I sure wasn’t gonna argue.

“Ah, Adel! Do you know a tailor nearby? I need some clothes fixed.”

“I would recommend Dave’s Tailoring down this alleyway,” Adel replied. “He’s phenomenal with thread. Hopefully, he’s still working...”

I glanced down the alley and immediately spotted a weathered signboard bearing a dress and the legend “Dave’s Tailoring.” Numerous clothes were displayed in front of the store, so it seemed to be open.

“Ah, is that it? The signboard has seen better days, but it’s open.”

Hoping that Dave would be able to fix my suit, we entered the shop.

“I’m happy it’s still here,” Adel said. “The owner’s definitely gotten older, but he seems to be doing well.”

An old man welcomed us into his tidy, well-organized tailor’s shop. As soon as he spotted Adel, he smiled.

“Look at you, Heidi!” he said, looking her up and down. “You’ve grown to be such a fine, beautiful young lady!”

Heidi had apparently been a childhood nickname. Once she'd become a knight, she'd insisted on being called Adel, instead, finding Heidi too cutesy and childish.

"Can I call you 'Heidi' too?" I asked.

Adel went beet red. "P-Please, don't... it's embarrassing."

I wasn't really disappointed. I'd already gotten used to calling her "Adel," so there wasn't much need to change my ways. Still, there might come a time when calling her "Heidi" would be just right. Rest assured, I'd most definitely take that chance as soon as I saw it.

"I'm glad he agreed to repair your suit. It's important to you, isn't it?" Adel asked.

"Yeah, it's a sentimental piece. I probably won't get to wear it much here, but I still want it fixed up."

The repair wouldn't happen in a matter of minutes, so we decided to take lunch a little early. Suits from my world weren't remotely common around here, so finding someone willing to work on it had been a real stroke of luck. Dave even asked if he could study the pattern and attempt to recreate it. I agreed. Adel had insisted that he was one of the best tailors in the city, so why not? Maybe after a couple years, suits would become popular in this world, especially with nobles. Everyone would end up wearing them... Hahhh, what a world that would be!

Strolling the streets of Sentrag with Adel and Youko at my sides, our noses began to pick up a mouthwatering aroma. Following the trail, we began to hear the sound of meat sizzling. Unbeknownst to me, we'd reached the outer cusp of the dining district. The first thing I noticed was that this district of the city was oddly reminiscent of Japan. There were stalls bursting with chicken and fries, and I even spotted one selling frankfurters.

Resisting my urge to lose myself in the street food of Sentrag, I wondered why this place so resembled my home. With two beauties in tow, I couldn't justify eating—though I saw Youko eying the fried chicken, as well. In the end, I decided to find a sit-down restaurant nearby and settle there for lunch.

The restaurant we selected had surprisingly modern interior design. The clientele was a mixture of nobles and commoners, leading me to believe we'd found a restaurant that was both affordable and delicious. I ordered a Hamburg steak, Adel chose wine and white fish with meuniére sauce, and Youko went for the deep-fried platter. We decided to get some bread as well. Youko kept going on about getting some beer when our waiter returned, but I shot her down. This was no time to get smashed, especially for her.

After one bite, I understood why the place was so busy. I asked our waiter to tell me more about the area's food culture. Once again, it turned out that Jirou had been giving Sentrag ideas behind the scenes. Jirou'd wanted some good food, so he used his personal funds to train a handful of chefs over a couple years, and then helped them settle into this district of the city. His standards spread quickly, and the rest was history.

Jirou, Jirou... I love you, man.

Apparently, I wasn't alone in that sentiment. Merchants, chefs, livestock breeders, and even farmers, were all thankful for the innovative ideas he'd brought to help their businesses boom. It was apparently right around then that he'd fallen head-over-heels for a noble lady and married her.

"Phew... that was divine," I said, once my stomach was full.

"Almost as good as what you make. We should visit here again sometime," Adel added.

"Just don't cut me off next time, okay?"

Don't ruin this memory for us, Youko. I totally understood her affection for beer, but that was more appropriate for the stalls. Either way, I'd heard that ramen was available, so I was sure to revisit this district some evening. Ramen was one thing I'd been sure I wouldn't find in Sentrag, but that crazy bastard Jirou made it happen. My heart was full of love for him.

"Thank you for your patronage!"

We found a crepe stall, so we munched them as we wandered the city aimlessly. The soldiers we frequently ran into on the street reminded us of the grueling war we were currently waging, but it didn't stop us from enjoying our

day to the fullest.

“Nmnhhh...” Youko groaned. “Eating while walking is considered rude where I come from, but...”

“It’s too good to resist, isn’t it? ♪” was Adel’s singsong reply.

“It’s not exactly the way I remember it, but yeah. It’s good.”

The fresh fruit and cream were a heavenly combo. I wasn’t familiar with the specific fruit they’d used, but I couldn’t care less about names as long as it was tasty. I’d heard about a park nearby, so we headed over there once we were done eating. Some clowns tried to start something with us on our way there, but I made quick work of them with some aikido moves I’d once seen on TV. Eventually, guards dragged them away.

My high stats in this world allowed me to clearly see each and every twitch of our assailants’ bodies during the fight. It might be a good idea to do some practice and add these moves to my repertoire.

After the fight, we arrived safely in the park. It was massive, and pristinely maintained. Some kids played in the shallow lake at the center of the park, while their parents enjoyed nice picnics in the sun. I even spotted a guard napping off to the side, in some shade. He may have been slacking, but he looked beat, so I left him to his slumber.

I took a blanket from my inventory and laid it out on the emerald green lawn so all three of us could take a nice little rest after lunch.

“Hmmm... I like lazing around at home, but nothing beats relaxing under the sky,” I mused. “The air is so nice and clean here, I could get used to it.”

“Was the air not as clean in your own world?”

“Well, let’s see, the exhaust fumes... no, never mind. Forget it. My world has no magic, so we developed a completely different culture. Doors open with the push of a button, we have boxes that heat up our meals, stuff like that. Appliances like the ones in my Room are everyday items where I come from.”

That wasn’t completely true, I supposed. I still had no idea how the coffee maker and beer tap refilled themselves endlessly, but that would all have taken

way too much time to explain. Not to mention, I'd single-handedly destroy the coffee and beer markets if word of my boundless fonts got out. Better to keep quiet about it.

"All that convenience came with a price, though. We polluted nature to the point where simply breathing has a non-zero chance of causing serious conditions."

"I suppose that's not unlike the magic accidents we occasionally get here. When all's said and done, all worlds are the same," Youko said thoughtfully.

"I don't know much about magic accidents, but you're probably right," I continued. "People eventually caught on to the destruction and set up a governing body that aimed to clean the waters and the air, and let nature reclaim some of its lost territory."

Some countries didn't care and continued to wreak havoc with their radical industrialization, but that wasn't important enough to share with the girls.

"Masaki... do you want to go back to your own world?" Adel asked.

"Hmmm, I don't know. I honestly don't."

"You don't know?"

"I don't. I do have friends and family back there, so it's not like I have no desire to return, but I've already made some very dear and important friends here. I owe some of them a great deal. Plus, I don't even know how to go back. I don't think I'll be able to make a decision unless a time comes when I can actually go back."

"I see..." Adel said.

"And, y'know... we're engaged now. It'd be fine if I could take you along, but leaving you two here would be irresponsible. Actually, I have a question now that we're talking about this: Why did you accept my proposal?"

I'd wanted to ask that question for a while. This wasn't an issue I could ignore forever, especially in context with what had happened to me back home. I'd dated this girl for years during school. I had been on the cusp of proposing to her when she'd called me out of nowhere, wanting to break up. She'd said she

couldn’t see a future for us, telling me that she supported my dream of working in the game industry, but she couldn’t marry anyone who wouldn’t do anything besides play MMOs all day. She’d just dated me for the heck of it.

I could sorta see her perspective. At the time, I’d been hooked on MMOs to an unhealthy degree. I just wished we could have talked more about us. If we had, maybe that initial spark of love could have survived. I didn’t want to make that mistake again. I wanted to know why they agreed to become my fiancées.

“Hmmm, well...” Adel said. “You offered me your blood and looked out for me, even after my injuries healed. You, His Majesty, and Aran are the only ones who treat me like a normal person, even though I’m a vampire. I really appreciate that. Then, when we fought the Leviathan, I realized that... that I love you... nhhhhh!” By the time she was finished, her face was completely red. Listening, I found myself a little flushed, too. Still, I was glad each of us felt something for the other.

“O-Oh... thank you.” I muttered.

“Frankly, I don’t have a reason like Adel does,” Youko said, matter-of-factly. “I’ve never fallen in love before, so I’m not even sure what it’s supposed to feel like. But, I can tell you I love spending time with you. Your presence is so calming and fun, and I feel this squeezing sensation in my chest whenever you’re away. I can’t be sure, but maybe this is what love feels like? Sorry I can’t give you a straight answer.”

“No, you don’t need to apologize,” I told her quickly. “At the end of the day, I’m the one who proposed to you out of the blue. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t find either of you attractive or pleasant to spend time with, but I feel terrible for asking both of you to marry me when I hadn’t fallen in love with either of you yet. These last couple days we’ve spent together as fiancées have really changed things, though, and... ummm... anyway, what I’m trying to say is that, ummm, I’d be happy if you stayed by my side.”

My face was probably burning, but I manned up and looked them straight in the eyes as I spoke. If I hadn’t, the confession wouldn’t have seemed sincere.

“I will,” Adel said.

“Yeah, of course,” Youko agreed. “If you’re uncertain, I think it’s best to stick

together and just see where things go. At the very least, I don't plan on running away."

"M-Me neither!" Adel added.

They were so adorable. I swear, I didn't even deserve them. On my back, I could feel the death stare of an incel, but I was too happy to care. We spent the rest of the day lying there under the blue sky until we eventually dozed off. By the time we woke up, the sun had disappeared behind the horizon. We might have wasted the day, but Adel's lap pillow was too cozy, and the gorgeous, warm weather and gentle breeze soon lulled me to sleep. Youko drifted off leaning against me, but that wasn't anything out of the ordinary. She often took naps during the day.

We tried to wake her up with no success, so I gave her a piggyback-ride back home. I wanted to buy something to commemorate the day, but Adel shot me down, telling me we were carrying enough today and should come back some other time. Wishing we could have another day like this after the war ended, I shifted Youko on my back. She'd been about to fall off, and my jostling prompted an adorable, sleepy little groan. Adel and I shared a smile as my gate guards with their black and white helmets came into view.

5.

A few days later, after the marriage proposals finally died down, we sat awaiting a guest in the Toudou Estate.

“Coffee is ready. I have to say, this coffee maker—or whatever it’s called—is very convenient,” Adel commented as she served us three cups of coffee.

“I honestly didn’t think it’d be this convenient,” I replied.

“You can get coffee anywhere in Sentrag, but cold beer?” Youkou chimed in. “Forget about that! The beer tap is a real godsend.”

“The prince’s coming, so no drinking now!” I scolded. A palace butler had visited us the previous night to inform us of Prince Leon’s visit today.

Youkou was, as always, looking out for every opportunity to get smashed.

“I know,” she sighed.

“I wonder what he wants to talk about.”

“The Prince enjoys standing on the frontlines, so I assume it’s going to be something about the Empire,” Adel offered.

Youkou nodded along. “You finished their navy off, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he came with a plan to crush their land troops.”

From what I’d heard, the situation at sea had improved significantly since I’d culled their numbers. Now the surrounding countries stood a chance against the Empire’s tyranny. I supposed setting those fireworks off on my way out of the country had been a good idea.

On my map, I noticed two people approaching my front door. I looked out the front window to check and it was Leon and... Jirou? Jirou, the professional ninja who’d blended into the Imperial army as a soldier? His face was nondescript and unremarkable. It didn’t leave much of an impression. He was one of those people you could swear you’ve seen somewhere, but could never recall where or when. Aran told me he was spartan in all aspects of life. He didn’t enjoy

being in the spotlight, and got by with minimal necessities.

After confirming their arrival, we went down to the front door to welcome them. “Prince Leon, Jirou, welcome. Please, come in.”

“I’m happy to see you’re well,” Leon said. “Dealing with all those nobles’ and merchants’ advances must’ve been a challenge.”

“I took the palace’s advice and proposed to these two ladies,” I said. “After that, they calmed down. We’ll have the wedding after the war has concluded.”

“A wise choice. I’m sure peace will return to our country once the Empire is dealt with,” the prince said with a nod. “Speaking of which, I’d like to discuss that with you today.”

I’d assumed as much, though I was eager to discuss the topic. The sooner we put an end to this war, the better.

“Of course,” I said. “Please, follow me to the lounge.”

Adel treated Leon as something of a brother. She trusted him completely. With no reason to doubt him, I decided to tell him about the Room. Once I had, he insisted on having our meeting in there.

“So this is what the inside of the Room looks like... incredible,” Leon said, looking around.

“This coffee... I thought I’d never taste this flavor again.” Jirou was enjoying a cup of coffee from his original world for the first time since he’d arrived here.

“I’d be happy to have you as a guest any time. I also have a beer tap that serves cold beer.”

“Whoa! That’s everything I’ve ever wanted!” Jirou leaned onto the table excitedly at the promise of cold beer. You could only get lukewarm beer here, but me and Jirou both knew that beer was best served cold.

“Is cold beer really that tasty?” Leon asked.

“Tasty is an understatement!” Jirou enthused. “After you’ve gotten a taste of the good stuff, you’ll never drink lukewarm beer again.”

“Is that so? Well, I’d love to give it a try... after we’ve finished what we came

for. Is that acceptable to you, Jirou?”

“My apologies...” Jirou replied. “It seems I got a bit too excited.”

I figured I should treat them to some fried chicken and fish. That devilish combo’d surely win Leon over in a heartbeat. After the talks, though.

“Let’s cut to the chase then, shall we?” the prince said. “Masaki, we’re launching an operation to recapture one of our forts from the enemy. I’d like you to participate.”

“So we’re recapturing a fort... what would my task be?”

“The Empire has stationed a certain, highly problematic individual there. I’d like you to keep her entertained. Keep her eyes on you and off us. I believe this should be a simple matter for someone who emerged from his scuffle with Leviathan unscathed. What do you say?”

“Being bait is probably what I’m best at, so I’m definitely interested. However, before we set off, I’d like more information on your so-called ‘problematic individual.’” Different kinds of combatants required drastically different measures, so I wanted to get a good feel for what we were up against before the fact.

“Allow me to take that part over,” Jirou spoke up. “I have something important to tell you, Masaki. Or should I say Masaki Toudou, Game Master of Brittalia Online?”

“Wha—?!” the bombshell he dropped shook me to my core. I’d never told anyone which game I played, nor that I’d been occupied as game master. Yet Jirou had read me like an open book. The only way he could have gained that knowledge was if he’d managed to discern the true source of the GM skills I used sparingly. Suffice it to say, I regretted letting my guard down around the single man I should’ve been most wary of.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy. Leon, Youko, and Adel seemed almost afraid to do so much as take a breath until Jirou finally broke the silence.

“Please, don’t look so distraught. I don’t plan to reveal this information to anyone else. Hmmm... maybe this will help me regain your trust.” He took out a dark brown notebook, weathered with time, and handed it to me.

I opened the notebook to see a golden emblem at the bottom, and a note under a vinyl cover reading, “Jirou Tanaka, Chief of Welfare and Missing Persons Bureau, National Police Agency.”

Jirou looked at me. “That’s who I was in my previous life, Mr. Toudou, reported missing on the seventh of March, 2020.”

“That’s... that’s when I was summoned to this world!” The seventh of March, 2020. That was a date I’d never forget. I took a break from work and was headed to a ramen joint nearby when I was summoned to this world. Jirou’s notebook contained the exact date and circumstances of my disappearance. Not only that, but it also revealed that my disappearance had occurred twenty years ago.

“Where should I start?” Jirou said. “Let’s see... as you can see, I was a police officer. I was investigating disappearances linked to playing games online. As a GM, I’m sure rumors of people vanishing from in front of their computers reached you.”

“Y-Yeah... many of my colleagues and I received tickets to look into players who disappeared.”

“Meanwhile, I was also getting plenty of reports, including from before your disappearance. However, the number of cases seems to have really accelerated around the time I was summoned here, five years later. No one in our department knew anything about MMOs, so I picked up Sengoku Wars to familiarize myself with the genre.

“Ultimately, it didn’t prove to be useful for the investigation, but I kept playing. I was playing one night and all the lights in my room suddenly went out. Before I knew it, I was here, in the body of my character, and with all my skills intact. That was February 2025. By this world’s calendar, it’s been twenty years since then.”

“Wait, am I getting this right? You were summoned five years *after* me, but you arrived here twenty years *before* I did?”

“Yes. I think ‘Resurgence of the Wicked Star’ had just come out.”

Resurgence of the Wicked Star? The Brittalia Online expansion that was going

into development when I got abducted? I know they were planning to add some new classes, HP/MP Regeneration (Greater), and a bunch of other stuff.

I frowned. “That’s weird, though. I’m sure we weren’t supposed to arrive twenty years apart.”

“Weird indeed. From what I’ve gathered, their spell completely disregards the time and date back in Japan. Speaking technically, the magic transcends spacetime—at least, according to a friend of mine.”

He took a big gulp of air before jumping right back in:

“The country that summoned me was defeated by the Empire a while back. When my summoners first tried to conscript me into their ranks, I used my ninja skills to vanish in a puff of smoke. Then I snuck into a carriage and, ultimately, wound up here. When I arrived, I was half-starved and terribly weak.”

“That’s when Father found Jirou, and decided to take him in,” Leon added.

“Exactly,” Jirou said, nodding. “I went on to fight at His Majesty’s side through all his battles, and helped to put him on the throne.”

Leon was following our conversation just fine. I had to assume Jirou had already shared the details of his previous life with the prince. By contrast, Adel and Youko were totally lost.

“Youko, do you understand what we’re talking about?” I asked her.

She shook her head, making her fox ears wiggle. “Not one bit.”

I felt bad leaving them out of the conversation, but explaining everything would’ve taken forever. At this point, I wasn’t even sure it was worth the effort.

“When your case landed on my desk, I did some investigating,” Jirou continued. “Your parents went into agricultural research, cultivating various vegetables under vinyl tents.”

I nodded. “How did my coworkers take my disappearance?”

“Of course, they were worried you’d been in an accident. I guess they were half right.”

“I see,” I said with a frown. I couldn’t help but feel for them. This really was a

pretty serious accident, wasn't it? I got knocked into another world entirely.

"I brought this up for a reason. That 'problematic individual' Prince Leon mentioned is one of us; she comes from Japan."

"From back home..." Just like Shou. As allies, these individuals were invaluable, I mused, looking Jirou over. As enemies, though, they were frankly terrifying.

Shou hadn't even been pushing himself when we fought. A guy like that was bound to have a whole deck of cards up his sleeve, just waiting for the right play. What he'd been doing at sea, I couldn't even begin to fathom. I supposed he'd completed his mission and decided to cut and run before he pushed me too far.

Jirou interrupted my musings. "We have no name or description, but she's called the 'Sniper Queen.' Intel says she's armed with a knife, a handgun, a machine gun, a rifle, and a rocket launcher. Of course, she only brings that out against the most formidable foes. If I had to guess she's from—"

"Commando City," I interrupted. "That VR urban FPS."

I'd tried the game. Its marketing claimed to put you in the shoes of a soldier fighting through a massive city.

"Yes. She's stationed at the top of that fort," he said, gesturing in the fort's direction.

"Is she so threatening?" Adel asked Jirou. "I'm certain they call her Sniper Queen for a reason, but surely magic should block attacks coming from any distance."

I considered. In this world, the longest-range spells could travel 1,300 feet. If I really put the pedal to the metal, I could probably do about 2k, but not without taking a brutal hit to my accuracy.

"One point nine miles," Jirou said flatly.

Those words made my pulse skyrocket, and my palms sweat, but Adel and Youko seemed unaffected. They must not understand what made the Sniper Queen a monster.

“What?” Adel asked innocently.

“Her firing range is one 1.9 miles,” Jirou clarified. “She’ll shoot anyone who comes in range, and the injuries are debilitating. We’re talking manglings, limb loss. The unluckiest victims lose more than one. Her bullets pierce even the highest-grade mythril armor.”

“What?!” Youko squeaked.

“That’s—! We’re done for!” Adel was somehow even paler. “No spell or bow can reach that far.”

Jirou’s bombshell shocked us all. Even I hadn’t expected such an extreme range. She must have had skills to increase her accuracy, making that insane range all the more frightening. I’d sometimes watch let’s plays for kicks, and I found myself remembering seeing somebody in Commando City snipe a fighter jet out of the air.

This was a foe with maximum accuracy, and ultimate range.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, I’ll do it. Not like anybody else can. Most attacks are ineffective against me, so I should be okay.”

The kinetic force from her bullets would doubtless knock me around, but it couldn’t be as bad as a strike from Leviathan.

“Thank you.”

“No need,” I said. “Now that I’m a noble, defending Sentrag is my duty.”

“I’m glad you take your position so seriously,” Leon said, giving me a brief squeeze to the shoulder. “It’s unfortunate that your first mission is such a dangerous one, but I relish the chance to fight beside you, Masaki.”

I frowned. “You’re planning to accompany us?” I couldn’t imagine who’d put the crown prince on the frontline.

“But, of course,” he replied. “If the brass sits pretty while soldiers are fighting for their lives, it destroys morale. I may be a prince, but I’ll be there for my troops!”

Jirou turned to the prince. “I advise you not to take the frontlines. If you get shot, the mission is pointless.”

I was starting to get the feeling our prince was a bit of a musclehead. Thank goodness Jirou was there to be the voice of reason.

“Should I go in solo, or can I take a team in?” I asked.

After a moment of consideration, Jirou replied, “I think taking an elite squad is the best choice. We’ll be flying in, so bringing two people with you seems right.”

“And you, Prince Leon?” I asked. “I can fly you there, but dangling for hours isn’t going to be easy on you.”

“Worry not. You may not be aware, but I’m a dragoneer,” he said, grinning. “I’ll fly in on my dragon. We can take three more people with us.”

Cool. A bunch of my concerns suddenly flew out the window. If Leon’s dragon hadn’t been able to play taxi, I had some skills that could make the journey less strenuous. This was just as well, though. Better to keep the full extent of my abilities hidden for as long as possible.

“Then I’ll take Adel and,” I paused for consideration. “Youko, I guess? Barbarossa hates heights and Rohas is looking after my crew, so they’re both out.”

As crew chef, Rohas had his hands full. He’d jerry-rigged the flame sword I gave him into a makeshift stove. Recently, he’d even started doing deliveries. If it could talk, I was certain that rare sword would curse his name to oblivion, but I had to applaud his resourcefulness.

Youko tilted her head from one side to the other, thinking. “Hmmm, sure. I’ll go with you. I can make shields from my golems, or overrun the enemy with an army of the little ones.”

“Good,” I said. “Youko, you’ll ride with me and Jirou. We depart at sunrise, two days from now. Make sure you’re fully prepared by then.”

“Of course,” Jirou said with apparent confidence. “I promise we’ll succeed.”

We nodded and began preparing for the operation straightaway.

The next day, I informed the crew that we’d be gone for a little while. Initially, Barbarossa was raring to go, but he backed down fast when he heard how we were getting there. Flying with me seemed to have scarred him for life.

“Leave lookin’ after the sea to us, Admiral,” Barbarossa growled. “Git out there an’ crush those Imperial dogs!”

After that brief discussion, I returned to the mansion to continue preparing for our mission. My crew came outside to see me off, staying until I’d fully disappeared behind a building.

Such good guys. I had to be victorious for them.

The chances that I’d die were pretty low in the first place, but eliminating this Sniper Queen would reduce the odds of one of my boys catching a bullet.

SKILL

Passive

MP Regeneration (Medium) *HP*MP Regeneration (Medium) *Physical Stats Boost (Extra)* Melee Combat Boost (Greater) *Perception Boost (Greater)* Trap Detection Boost (Greater) / Knockback Immunity

SKILL

My battle with Leviathan taught me how vital Knockback Immunity could be, so I made sure it was in my kit before leaving. Sure, I wouldn’t be killed, but getting knocked about wasn’t exactly what I’d call a good time. Since knockback wasn’t considered a debuff in Brittalia Online, they’d made a skill specifically to counter it.

I chose Trap Detection Boost because I figured the enemy had to be expecting an attack sooner or later. The chances that they’d laid some trap for their would-be attackers seemed pretty high. Anyway, I wasn’t keen on the idea of tripping a C4 charge and blowing the whole fort to kingdom come.

Overall, I wanted to go with less-than-lethal options so we could capture defeated Imperial soldiers. To that end, I decided on the active skills Stun Bolt, Silent Attack, and Jab.

Stun Bolt caused paralysis on strike. It synergized beautifully with Jab and Silent Attack, transforming each of my attacks into silent, but (figuratively) deadly strikes.

The day before we set out, I decided to craft some items to help me in the upcoming battle. I kept High Potions and High MP Potions tucked away in my item box, but, since arriving, I'd had to down a couple of the precious draughts.

Fortunately, even the medicinal herbs required to craft them could be found in any general store in Sentrag. I made ninety-nine of each type, plenty enough to hand a couple off to Adel and Youko.

"You're a savant... you can cook, brew potions, do anything. I feel useless by your side," Adel sighed.

"You know," Youko said slyly, "there's one thing only you can do for him, hihihihi♪"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

Youko leaned in and cheerfully whispered something in Adel's ear, making Adel flush bright red. Still, she responded to Youko's mysterious suggestion with a little nod.

I had the sneaking suspicion that I knew what they were whispering about, but I held out hope that I was wrong. Adel and Youko were my fiancées, and though I did catch myself lusting after them every once in a while, we stood on the cusp of a key battle. I simply didn't have time to flirt with the girls.

To my relief, they both seemed to understand the gravity of the situation. Neither of them tried anything funny. But even if I couldn't indulge them now, I didn't want to leave them unsatisfied, either. So I screwed up my nerve and planted a kiss on each of their lips before we set out. Both of them went bright red, and so did I, feeling like a teenager all over again.

In most games and anime, kissing your loved ones before an epic battle would be a death flag for sure. However, I was armed with Invincibility. I had zero concerns I was courting doom.

I went with my usual equipment: my GM items, plus a camouflage layer. The girls' loadouts needed some overhauling, so I picked out defense-focused items for each of them.

I specifically selected the Light Armor of the Crimson Fairy set for Adel. It increased her defense, MP reserves, and movement speed.

Youko got the Seimei set, which raised her spell power, resistance to physical damage, and gave her MP Regeneration (Lesser). I wanted to be sure to capture her scholar-spellcaster vibe, so the Seimei set fit the bill perfectly.

Finally, I gave each of them a bracelet enchanted with HP Regeneration and Defense Boost, so they could keep up the fight in the event of a drawn-out battle.

After selecting our skills and equipment, all we needed to be ready for the siege was a good night's rest.

The next morning, we rose before the sun returned to rule the sky, so we could meet Leon and Jirou at the base closest to the fort we planned to raid. Jirou gently helped the half-asleep Youko mount Leon's dragon, and then added a couple failsafes so she wouldn't fall as Adel and I soared effortlessly through the sky.

Speaking of Jirou, when I noticed his standard military gear, I frowned. "Is that gonna be enough?"

"Oh, don't worry. This is all an illusion." He canceled the spell to reveal his jet black ninja costume. Apparently, it was one of the highest-tier armor options for ninjas in Sengoku Wars.

As a ninja, Jirou could disguise himself much more easily than I could. I *did* have Invisibility, but I'd heard stories of sneaky Commando City players activating Invisibility, and being shot dead anyway. It was safe to assume Sniper Queen had access to similar skills.

We beelined it to the military base, only resting once the sun began its descent below the horizon. We spent the night in my Room.

"This spell is incredible," Prince Leon enthused. "There's no need to take watch and we have all the food and water we could ever need. Um, Miss Youko, may I try that?"

"Nope," came Youko's reply. "I don't care if you're a prince or the one true god of this world, I'm not giving up my comfort!"

The irresistible allure of the sofa had captured Leon as well, but my future second wife safeguarded the couch, lounging across its cushions. She sank into

the pillows and just enjoyed herself.

The dragon didn't fit in the Room, so I gave him some raw buffalo meat to munch on while we rested. We ate a filling dinner, got a good night's sleep, and set off for the fort first thing the next morning.

That night, we arrived at the base. Almost every Sentrag soldier stationed at the base came out to welcome us, likely alerted to our arrival by the loud beating of the dragon's wings. A decorated soldier, clad in full plate, stepped forward from among them.

"Welcome to my base, Prince Leon, Master Jirou. And I assume you must be the entourage I was telepathically informed of. Sir Toudou, the Azure Hero, Adelheid, the Crimson Princess Knight, and Mr. Toudou's second wife, Miss Youko. Welcome."

"Indeed, but let's not waste time with formalities. Your report, please."

"At once!" he replied with a sharp salute.

Telepathy's range was dependent on the caster's power. An expert spellcaster could reach across much greater distances than a novice, however this military base was too far from the capital for even Sentrag's most powerful casters to reach. To make up for it, Sentrag had expert magic users stationed in towns and cities between this base and the capital. With this network of casters, there was now a line for emergency communication between the capital, us, and the base. Not that this system was unique to us, or even to Senrag. Apparently, it was a pretty common setup for military comms.

I glanced over the soldiers who'd come to greet us. Most sported bandages.

"It seems their healers can't keep up with the number of injured, and their potion reserves are running low." Leon summarized the report with a tired sigh.

A base with no potions in reserve was bound to falter in any future battle, so I figured it'd probably be a good idea for me to step in. I decided to offer aid in the form of a healing spell. Just like the base, I wanted to preserve my potion stash.

"How many injured are we talking?" I asked.

“Eighty, serious and light injuries combined,” the decorated soldier replied. “Luckily, we didn’t suffer many battlefield casualties, but tetanus has taken a few lives after the fact.”

“I see. Please take me to the infirmary; I’ll heal them.”

“Very well. Follow me.”

As soon as I pulled back the flap on the hospital tent, the thick, foul smells of blood, sweat, and god-knew-what-else hit me like a physical force. I gagged, barely containing my urge to puke. I’d been in a bloodbath just a couple weeks earlier, so I’d developed some tolerance for the sight and smell of gore.

The bedridden soldiers all turned their eyes to me when I entered. Some were missing limbs, others had bandages wrapped around their chests or stomachs.

I silently walked to the middle of the tent and cast Mass Heal. With such grave injuries, I had no choice but to go all out. I imagined my magic stitching their open wounds together and growing their lost arms and legs back.

“Ah... my wound—!”

“My arm! My arm is back! Look, you got a leg!”

“Wow... I can move it! I can walk!”

As the soldiers celebrated their miraculous recoveries, I collapsed onto my knees. I’d used too much mana. I could barely focus.

“Aghhh...”

“Masaki! Is everything okay?!” Adel rushed to my side, face full of concern.

“Adel... High MP Potion... now...”

“Of course!”

As soon as Adel handed me the potion, I downed it. Instantly, my mind began to clear. Not a good result. Worse than I’d expected. I hadn’t guessed that the spell would surpass my passive regen and knock my MP down to almost zero. It was no wonder healing magic was so rare in this world. If I was going to do a lot of healing, I’d need to add some magic support skills and items to my loadout.

“Hahhhh... thank you...” I sighed.

“I had no idea you could use healing magic,” came Leon’s awestruck response. “I’m glad we decided to bring you along for this operation. Truly.”

“It’s an intense mana drain, so I prefer not to. In any case, I’m sure this’ll help out with the upcoming battle.” I was still feeling a bit light-headed, so Adel helped me up. Youko, ears flat with worry, ran up to us. I sure felt guilty for worrying my girls, but feeling cared for felt really nice.

Glancing around the tent again, something caught my attention. “I expected more casualties.”

“I did too, but... I believe the Sniper Queen has purposefully missed their vitals.”

I could think of a thousand reasons why she’d want to do that, but one of the most logical ones was that she might have been attempting to drain Sentrag’s resources. The army only had so much access to healing potions and medical resources. If the Sniper Queen forced them to rapidly deplete their stores, sooner or later, the Sentrag base would be overrun with the injured.

With so many sick soldiers, the base could become a cesspool of nasty, contagious disease, eventually becoming a health hazard beyond saving. Had that happened, nothing could be done. Sentrag would have to bite the bullet, abandon the base, and raze it to the ground.

On the other hand, soldiers themselves were also a finite resource. Given how many she’d injured, lethal shots would have had the same ultimate effect: Sentrag would be forced to abandon post.

On still another hand, it was possible that she simply didn’t want to kill. If her duty was to protect the fort, killing was optional. It was even possible that she’d been trapped in a slave collar, unable to escape as I had. If so, she’d have no choice but to carry out the Empire’s demands. If she resisted, it’d probably be the end for her.

According to Jirou, the slave collars debilitated the wearer with sharp pain if they tried to defy orders or escape, but it wasn’t lethal. In that case, I might be able to remove the collar with my special lockpicks, and convert Sniper Queen to our side.

“...aki!”

It was definitely worth a shot.

“Masaki! Is everything okay? Are you thinking about something?” Adel was staring me right in the face. I must’ve gone blank as I ruminated.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “We’ll talk about it later. Leon, can we manage a little privacy?”

“That can be arranged,” the prince agreed. “Let’s go to the meeting room. We can talk there.”

“Great. Let’s head.”

We entered the meeting room and cleared it of its occupants. Then I presented my plan.

Almost an hour later, I was infiltrating the Imperial fort through its rooftop, using Wing and Invisibility to effortlessly creep inside.

I opened my map to see the countless people stationed at the fort, going about their days none the wiser. My map, unfortunately, couldn’t distinguish between ordinary soldiers and people who’d been summoned, so I had to scan the building room-by-room to find her myself.

To explain why, exactly, I was making my way there, we’ll have to go back in time for some clarification.

“All right. Let me get this straight,” Leon said. “Your plan is to engage the Sniper Queen *before* we commence the operation?”

“Yes. Look, she didn’t kill any of our troops. This might be naive, but I’m thinking she may not want to do more harm than she absolutely has to.”

“It certainly is strange that a marksman her caliber is yet to kill anyone.”

“Exactly. The fact that she’s not popping heads lends plausibility to Masaki’s theory,” Jirou added. “I tried to approach her in my Concealing Cloak, but I was found out instantly.”

“I can use Invisibility, a skill that counters any form of detection,” I told him. “Using it in conjunction with Wing should give me easy access to the fort.” Technically, Invisibility wasn’t a skill. Technically, it was a GM-restricted setting. But, technically, they didn’t need to know that.

“That’s certainly an option...”

While Leon and Jirou were nodding at my proposal, the color was draining from Adel and Youko’s faces.

“It is an option—one that’s way too dangerous!” Adel protested.

“Sure, Invisibility sounds great, but what if they catch you?!” came Youko’s objection. “Think for just one second about what you’re trying to pull!”

I hadn’t told them about Invincibility, so it was no wonder they were worried. Jirou might be the only one who knew about it, but even that was uncertain. He probably didn’t look into specific GM skills during his research.

“The less we sacrifice the better,” I said firmly. “That’s not to say I’m going in planning to get caught, but if she’s being controlled like I think she is, I want to help her. I nearly went through that hell myself, so I can imagine how she feels.”

With that, I finally managed to convince them. We went outside, I launched myself into the air, and activated my Invisibility.

“Wow, he disappeared!” Leon cried. “Jirou, I remember you being able to track people. Can you see him now?”

“No, he’s vanished completely,” Jirou replied, eyes on the empty sky. “He might actually stand a chance, especially since he’ll be alright, even if he’s shot.”

Once they’d confirmed the usefulness of Invisibility, I flew off toward the fort. As I enjoyed the calming evening breeze, a loud *boom* suddenly sounded. A gunshot.

The bullet whizzed right past me. How was that possible? No way anyone could spot me at this distance while I had Invisibility activated.

“Gwaaaargh!”

I whipped around at the sound of the screech, only to hear a wild gryphon crash out of the sky. So *that* was the Sniper Queen’s target, huh? I had to hand

it to her: not many could pull off a shot like that.

I sped faster to eventually touch down on the Imperial fort's roof. And that's how I got to snoop around in the fort.

The Imperial base was designed for maximum defensibility, I noted as I studied the map. It had numerous doors that could form choke points. Almost every single wooden window, however, was wide open. They must not have expected an intruder from above. There were rooms with closed windows, all of them filled with little red dots, some of whom were prone. Bedrooms and break rooms, if I had to guess.

The fort's highest walls were ideal for the placement of archers—and the Sniper Queen herself. From the ramparts, they could freely attack invaders from range. By contrast, anyone below would have a hell of a time reaching their attackers above.

As I was passing by a doorway, a series of clanks sounded from behind. A troop of armored soldiers was approaching. To avoid running into them, I flew up to the ceiling to trail them from above. I could hear every word they said.

"Hahhh, I swear that girl's driving me insane. Why can't she just kill 'em?!" One complained.

"Don't be too hard on her; she's just a kid," his companion replied. "Though, her aim is pretty scary for her age."

"But maaaan, she's hot," the other continued. "I wanna have a taste of that cute little bum one day, if you catch my drift."

"You better give up on that. Remember that idiot who went after her? She cut him up real good."

"We got the Farmer now, at least," came the brash reply. "With the Farmer locked up, the girl's got to do what we say. You might be able to pull something without punishment. Then again, I don't know about you, but I'd rather tap the Farmer."

"Ah, yeah, I was thinking about that too. Good lord, those boobs. I wish I got to guard her every once in a while."

“How comes you’re the only one of us who gets to watch her? Lucky bastard,” another soldier cut in.

“I want to hear her curse me out of this world...”

“I wish she’d whip me.”

“Imagine a threesome with the sisters. Holy shit, I’ll nut just thinking about it.”

“I sure hope we’ll get our piece of the fun once they’re done with their tasks,” a soldier fantasized.

I’d planned to just let most of their chatter slide and stop following them. Instead, I went over the information they’d inadvertently provided me.

Okay, so it’s safe to assume this “Farmer” is Sniper Queen’s sister, and a fellow visitor from Japan. From what they said, it sounds like she’s being held hostage. With a name like that, her skill set probably isn’t suited for battle, but saving her could be a trump card when it comes to getting Sniper Queen on our side.

Though, I wonder. What MMORPG has a “farmer” class? Maybe she was summoned from a different time than me, because I sure can’t recall anything of the sort. Either way, I have to find their so-called “Farmer.”

The intel was nice, but the fort was massive. It might take me all night to find anything if I kept wandering aimlessly. I needed a plan...

A nearby door busted open as a familiar soldier dashed out, yelling, “Uhhhh, I have to piss like a racehorse!” I recognized him as the one who’d occasionally guarded the Farmer.

There was the way out I’d been looking for. All I had to do was ask him where she was being held. More specifically, I simply needed to shuffle through his memories until I saw the location for myself. I hadn’t had an opportunity to test this skill out yet, so I was pretty excited to see it through.

I followed the guard to the toilet and confirmed the room was empty. Then, I crept up behind the man and knocked him out with my Silent Attack/Jab/Stun Bolt triple combo. The aggressive act broke my Invisibility, but a glance at my map confirmed that no soldiers were headed my way.

I dragged the man's limp body into a stall, closed the door, and activated the GM skill *Access Logs*. Access Logs allowed me to read past conversations between players in-game.

It had no effect on the non-living, like the bones I'd discovered in Leviathan's belly. I'd tried to use it on the shell pendant, too, but had no luck. I also performed a test on a cat I found sleeping in my estate's garden and was granted access to its memories. They played in the form of a video on my console. I could pause, jump back or forward, and even choose specific timestamps to view.

I flipped through the man's memories and quickly located a well-endowed girl wearing a straw hat. Straw hats weren't part of a prisoner's typical uniform, so it was safe to assume the hat was a piece of her equipment. It probably boosted her stats in one way or another.

After a little fast forwarding, I discovered her exact location. They were keeping her in a cell on the other side of the fort. I glanced at the area on my map and discovered two guards stationed by the door.

Having finished everything I'd come for, I slipped out of a window, flew up into the air, and found my way to the lamplit room across the fort. It was an odd place to position a command center, but I was pretty sure I had it right. In any case, I didn't have time to criticize the positioning of strategically important locations.

Once again, I slipped into the fort and, once again, used Silent Attack, Jab, and Stun Bolt together to take a guard out. As I expected, the attack dispelled my Invisibility, alerting the second guard.

"Hey, are you all ri— wait who are—?!"

I used the same combo to soundlessly take him out. Thanks to Stun Bolt's paralysis, neither of them could so much as scream. I used some rope to bind and gag them, then I laid them out on the floor. After that, I opened the door to the Farmer's room.

The first thing I noticed about the room was that it defied my expectations of what a "farmer's" abode would be equipped with. It looked more like a research lab than anything else, filled with beakers and vials. When I took a

closer look, however, I noticed numerous potted plants, along with fruits and vegetables, like apples and sugarcane.

“Wow, this is something else,” I blurted. The girl finally turned my way.

“Oh, a new guest? Welcome, welcome! Hmmm... I see you’re not of the Empire... maybe a thief?” Her tone was calm and carefree.

Her skin was white and her hair reddish-brown. Her chest, though, was more than well-endowed. It was even bigger than the soldier had recalled, and her rear wasn’t anything to scoff at, either. No wonder the men were losing their marbles over her. Even decked out in farmer-like cotton gloves and rubber boots, she was something to behold.

“Ummm... I suppose you could say that,” I replied. “I don’t really know how to start this conversation, but um... all right, let’s start from the beginning: Hi, I’m a thief and I’m here to kidnap you. Can I call you ‘Farmer’?” I’d heard a similar line in a movie, but damn! It was embarrassing to actually say out loud.

Not like I knew what to say, anyway. The only people who’d visit her were likely soldiers or thieves, and I sure wasn’t the former.

“Mm-hmm, I’m a farmer by trade. Are you hitting on me? Oh, no, what should I dooo?”

We didn’t have time to fool around, we had to get out of here before we were discovered. “Are you aware that your sister is being forced to shoot people?” I asked bluntly.

“Oh, yes. Of course I’m aware. I have been taken hostage, and she feels responsible for it.”

“Why’s that?”

“Mhhhm, let’s see. I noticed something dark and terrifying trying to take her, so I reached out. Before I knew it, we were here in this world. Hmmm, what a bummer. I missed the new episode of my favorite show.”

Given her situation, she was terrifyingly nonchalant. She was a hostage, and her sister had been conscripted into popping people off left and right, and she was worried about TV shows? Well, at least now I understood what was going

on.

Basically, she'd caught her sister just as the Empire was summoning her here, and got sucked in as well. And now here she was, a hostage.

"Sorry about your show. Can't really do much about that, but I can at least help you get out of here," I told her. "Of course, we'll be taking your sister, too."

"D'awww, that would be lovely, but you see... this collar won't let us get too far. I hear it gets *reallllly* tight around your neck if you try."

"Then I'll take it off. Hold still for a sec."

"Oh, will you? Should I close my eyes?"

"No, it's fine."

Holy smokes, this girl's calm as a cucumber. I wonder how the Sniper Queen deals with her?

I checked the collar over and confirmed it was the same kind the Empire had tried to force me into. I took my lockpicks out and easily popped the lock open. It took me maybe three seconds.

"Oh wow, you actually got it off. Thank you, ummm..."

"Masaki. Masaki Toudou. We're going to your sister now. Do you know where she is?"

"Masaki, Masaki, Masaki... I'm Haruka Kisaragi," the Farmer introduced herself. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My sister is Akiha. Akiha Kisaragi. She's on the top floor. I wish you luck in your search."

Are you kidding me?! I just came down from there.

"All right, let's— What are you doing?"

"Hihihi, I need the poisonous seeds and leaves I've been researching during my stay. Bad boys who hurt my sister need to be thoroughly punished." Her mild smile made the sentence ten times scarier than it ought to have been.

"Oh... all right. Anyway, take my hand." I offered a hand to her.

"There we... go! I'm ready! Please, lead me to my sister."

“But, of course.”

I took her hand and cast Invisibility and Wing.

“Oh wow, we’re flying! Won’t this drain your mana?”

“We don’t have time to waste.”

I’d left the two guards just lying there outside, so the whole fort would quickly realize something was awry the moment there was a shift change. We needed to save Sniper Queen before the Empire either transported her somewhere else entirely, or increased her guard detail. Time was of the essence.

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The girl dropped her sniper rifle and let out a tired sigh. After hours of intense concentration, she took a moment to enjoy the cool evening breeze.

Guess I pushed myself a little hard. I thought I felt a presence, but it was just a wild gryphon, huh?

She returned her firearm to her weapon slot, just as someone called out to her.

“I heard a shot, is everything all right?” A guard on patrol poked his head into the room to investigate the sound.

“There was a wild gryphon, so I shot it down,” the girl informed him.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really.”

The guard didn’t bother coming into the room and just let her be. The girl had already been attacked by soldiers she’d let inside. Since then, she’d made it a point to only allow people into her room when absolutely necessary. They feared and respected her skills as the Sniper Queen, so the soldiers obliged, leaving the girl by herself to stare into the wide night sky in her lonely room.

As she gazed out of her window, the girl reflected on how things had ended up like this.

She had been playing Commando City like any other day. She had dropped down to number three in the rankings, but still felt satisfied with her

performance. During that session, she'd hunted down a good number of soldiers and some rares.

The girl had intended to take her headset off and lie on her bed for a break, but found herself unable to move, as her body and mind were dragged into a strange space together.

In and of itself, that would've been all right, but it just so happened that her sister had come into the room. Seeing the unusual phenomenon, her sister took hold of her hand, and was drawn into the same fate.

After that, her memories were spotty. She had fuzzy recollections of being fitted with a collar and of having her skills assessed.

It turned out that she'd inherited the physical capabilities of her Commando City character. Focusing her will, she could reach her inventory and character sheet, giving her access to everything she carried in that game. She'd acquired the skill set of a veteran, battle-hardened sniper and could shoot birds down from a distance of half a mile.

Her sister, however, was a different story. She had been deeply embedded in Farmer Island, a game that granted you an island on which to grow vegetables, keep livestock, and live a quiet life. She'd reached a pretty high level in the game and could grow high-quality rice, plant sugarcane in her bedroom, and collect eggs in previously unforeseen numbers.

Right under the combat-oriented girl's nose, her sister had become a bit of a celebrity in her agrarian game. Her skills weren't exactly what the Empire wanted for its war effort, but they made use of her the best they could. The plan was for her to produce food for the Imperial war effort, while her little sister would bolster their military strength.

Sniper Queen originally declined their offer and tried to make a break for it, but with her older sister held hostage, she had no choice but to give in. She was bound to shoot any target the Empire so much as gestured at, so they gave her an item to aid her in battle.

It was a magic earring enchanted with Farsight. The girl's ears had never been pierced, but she had to tough it out and equip the earring.

She hated shooting people. The thought of picking up her rifle and really taking someone's life terrified her. That must've been why she most commonly demonstrated disobedience by aiming for targets' limbs, rather than their vitals.

Occasionally, she came up against a powerful, well-equipped soldier with bullet-repellant armor, but her anti-materiel rifle did the trick. In fact, with Farsight and her scope, she could see exactly how much damage each shot did. Every bone splintered, every drop of blood spilled, every limb mangled.

The anti-materiel rifle was powerful enough to tear a target's limbs off. It was disgusting. The girl couldn't always keep it together, and threw up many, many times. Though she pointedly avoided hitting their vitals, she was quietly aware that her targets could die of blood loss or infection at any time.

However, the Empire's enemies weren't her only foes. Once, her own captors had attacked her in her sleep. Her assailants had far outnumbered her, but her exceptional knife skills had turned the tables. That was the first time she'd taken a life up-close, and with her own hands.

Since then, she often dreamed of washing the blood from her hands that night, but to no avail. The trauma she'd suffered since being transported to this world gave her panic attacks.

Still, she had no chance to rest. The Empire gave her no time off and forced her to spend her days continuously using her detection skills, and reacting to everything she so much as picked up on.

She could only trust herself, until one day...

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I soared through the sky with the Farmer, Haruka.

"Do you know where they're keeping your sister?" I asked.

"Hmmmm, right in the middle of the top floooor, I think? That's the best sniping spot."

"You're allowed to talk to her, right?"

"Mm-hmm. Once a weeek."

Keeping them apart served multiple purposes. It kept the Sniper Queen

distressed, and safeguarded the soldiers in case something happened to Haruka. Doubtless, the moment Haruka was harmed or killed, the Sniper Queen would unleash hell on the fort.

“I guess she should be around here.”

“Hmmmm... ah, it’s that room right there,” Haruka pointed. “The window is slightly ajar, so let’s say helloooo from there!”

“We can just waltz in through the door, y’know, but whatever. Let’s just do it quick.”

Dealing with Haruka’s casual attitude took plenty of my mental energy, but we still flew up to Akiha’s room.

“Go and check on her,” I told Haruka. “I wouldn’t want to bust in while she’s changing or something.”

“You can walk in on her; she’s really cute and squishy. I’d know.”

“Yeah, that’s you and not me! Just take a look at her!”

I had no desire to hear Haruka’s tales of sexual harassment while I floated right in front of her sister’s window, yet there we were.

I was starting to feel sorry for Akiha. With a tired sigh, I checked on Haruka.

I can only hope her sister wasn’t cha— huh?! Did she just cancel Invisibility?!

“Heyho, Akiha! Let me iiin!”

She just knocked on the window and canceled Invisibility! Why?!

“H-Haruka?! Wh-What’re you— you’re flying?!” came a voice from inside.

“Sorry, we’ll have to talk about that later. We don’t want the Empire to find us, so try to stay quiet.”

“Who are you?! Okay, nevermind. Haruka, make sure you keep it down too.”

“Oookieee!”

I wiped the cold sweat from my forehead and entered the room.

Hahhh, this girl. She doesn’t care for a thing in the world, does she?

“I thought I was dreaming when I first saw you floating outside.”

“D’awww, that’s very sweet of you,” Haruka gushed. “It makes me all kinds of warm and comfy.”

“I’m sure it does.” Akiha turned to me. “Anyway, who are you? I don’t know of any spell that lets you fly.”



Seeing that Akiha also found Haruka a handful reassured me. Still, she was much better at shutting Haruka down quickly than I'd been so far.

"We're pressed for time, so I'll just tell what you need to know, and we'll talk more later. I want to take you to the Sentrag military camp nearby. I hope that sounds better than being enslaved by the Empire."

"It does, but do you know about this thing?" Akiha asked, pointing to her neck. "You have to do something about the collar first. Also, I'm sure you're aware that I've been shooting at Sentrag's forces for... who knows how long? Am I supposed to just waltz in and expect they won't execute me or ambush me in the night?"

"Don't worry, I can deal with the collar," I reassured her. "As far as your safety goes, here. I talked with the prince, and he gave me this note. Go ahead, give it a read."

The sisters examined the note together.

"Ummm, is this real? What do you say, Haruka?"

"It's the real deaaal. I memorized every book I've read here, and that is undoubtedly Sentrag's seal! Everything is going to be just fiiine!♪"

Wait, she'd memorized all the books she read here? Maybe Haruka wasn't as dumb as I'd first thought.

"I trust your memory, but you should show at least a hint of doubt," Akiha sighed.

"I don't know how you deal with her," I said to Akiha. "She's crazy casual about the gravest things."

"You don't have to tell me that," Akiha agreed. "Anyway, are you here to help us? If you made it all the way here undetected, I'm sure you could level the whole fort."

"Well, we're in the same boat. The Empire summoned me here, and then put me up for execution, so I have a bone to pick with them," I told her. "Though, honestly, do I really need a reason to save two cute girls?"

Surely any man would try to help these sisters. Plus, now that I was going to

have two wives, I should start practicing compassion for women.

“I-I’m not cute...” Akiha objected.

“Oh my, look at you blush. ♪”

“H-Haruka!”

“All right, one half of the cute sisters,” I said. “Let’s get that thing off your neck.”

“I-I’m telling you...” Akiha continued to protest. Her face was turning darker, and darker shades of red.

Personally, I’d never really cared what people called me, unless they were being rude. Not that I had time to ponder the intricacies of smalltalk. I needed to get her out of that collar, quick.

“It’s... off my neck. I’m... free!”

“That you are,” I smiled. “You’re also technically rescued civilians. Sentrag won’t treat you like the Empire has. The prince and I can both promise that.”

“Now we just have to escape, hmmmm?”

Oh, no, I thought to myself after a glance at my map. Tons of soldiers were headed this way. Among them, I saw the two soldiers I’d marked after tying them up. They were coming, too.

Immediately after I made that realization, Akiha caught my eye, a serious expression on her face. She had the look of a battle-hardened soldier. She’d become the Sniper Queen, an expert long-range sniper, able to bring down supersonic planes from the sky with a single shot.

“Impressive. You noticed them faster than me,” she said.

“I have a pretty crazy skill to help me with that. Grab my hand, we’re leaving.”

“Whoo!”

With that cry, Haruka jumped on my back. A pair of squishy pillows pushed up against me.

“That’s my back,” I objected.

“What’re you doing?!” Akiha squeaked.

“It’s fine, you can hop in his arms.” Haruka was as casual as always.

“What do you mean?!”

“Just take my hand already!” I snapped. I grabbed her hand and cast Wing, activating Invisibility at the same time. Just then, the soldiers burst into the room. We’d slipped away by a hair’s breadth.

“Wh-Where did they go?! I just heard their voices!”

“The window! Look out the window!”

“What, you think they just took a hundred-foot dive? Dumbass.”

The soldiers were baffled, but that had come way too close for comfort. Thank goodness we’d gotten out in time.

“Wow! Wow! I’m flying!”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? Do a barrel roll!”

“We aren’t doing this for fun! We’re going straight back to the base!” I scolded.

“Awww...” the sisters complained.

“Don’t ‘awww’ me!”

Akiha seemed to be having a blast too. Some things must be common between sisters. Unfortunately, I couldn’t grant her request, not with Haruka clinging to my back.

We chatted a bit during our flight back to the base. I told them about the other Japanese person I knew, Jirou. Both girls were completely flabbergasted that someone who’d been in their same situation just a few weeks prior had come to rescue them. They were astounded, but also giddy with happiness, and that’s all that mattered.

Making people happy made me happy in return.

We eventually arrived at the base. I took the sisters into the Room to take a break. That’s where I planned to do introductions.

Leon, the crown prince of Sentrag, was in a pretty good mood. He welcomed us with a “’Sup?”

The reason for his casual demeanor was written on his face. More precisely, over his lips in the form of a moustache of beer foam. Jirou was sporting one as well. Our raid was two days from now, so I hadn’t exactly expected to find them hanging around getting sloshed. Still, here we were.

“Leon, I’ve successfully recovered the Sniper Queen, and her sister, who was kept as a hostage.”

“Well done,” the prince congratulated me. “I didn’t expect the legendary ‘Sniper Queen’ to be so cute. And her sister— Khhhm!”

The moment Leon glanced at Haruka, he leapt up from the sofa, wiped his face, and tried to look dignified.

“Oh, how rude of me. I am Leon El Sentrag, the crown prince of Sentrag. May I ask your names?”

“I’m Haruka Kisaragi. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Prince Leoooon.”

“Th-The pleasure is mine, Miss Haruka.”

I wasn’t sure if Leon’s blush was from the alcohol, or if he’d just found his one and only. I leaned over to ask Jirou, because I just had to know.

“Is he single, or...” I asked in a hushed tone.

“Yes, he is. Ummm, he once told me that big-breasted, carefree girls were his thing. Everyone in Sentrag is too strong-willed for his tastes, including my wife.”

Disregarding the sad tone that crept into the last part of his sentence, I didn’t expect Leon to be a breast man. In his defense, Haruka’s were big and soft. I knew that much. Though, in hindsight, I wished I’d never learned. Youko’s and Adel’s gazes pierced right through me.

“Masaki, I hope you didn’t cheat,” Adel said primly.

“We might not be married yet, but that doesn’t mean you’re free to go around and feel up other girls, hear me?” Youko said with narrowed eyes.

“I didn’t do anything!”

The conversation was derailing faster than a wagon on the Oregon Trail. I'd forgotten I had two extremely strong-willed spouses.

"Ummm... may I also introduce myself? I'm Akiha Kisaragi, the 'Sniper Queen' you've all been talking about. Thank you for saving me and my sister from captivity!"

"Please, I couldn't leave someone from my own world in the Empire's hands. I'm going to help out wherever I can."

"Cool. So, ummm... what's going to happen now?" Akiha asked, glancing around the room. She was clearly still concerned about what was coming next, but considering Leon's earlier reaction, I had the feeling the Kisaragi sisters would be treated like princesses.

"Worry not. I, Leon El Sentrag, will protect you to my last breath!"

"Please don't do that," Jirou told him. "Sentrag needs you to succeed the throne."

Damn, our prince was paddling hard. I couldn't believe he'd been chilling on the couch, sipping on beer just minutes ago.

"Oh, ummm, I'm looking forward to our future together, my prince."

"Haruka, don't say that, he'll get the wrong idea! Ah, I mean, thank you for your kindness!"

We'd managed to bring Akiha Kisaragi, the "Sniper Queen," and Haruka Kisaragi, the "Farmer," under Sentrag's wings. After that, Jirou and I cleaned up all the traps between our encampment and the Imperial fort. With Akiha's help, we recaptured the fort for Sentrag.

Haruka played her own part in the siege. We took the easy-to-inhale, and difficult-to-detect sleeping powder she'd made from local plants around the fort, and used it to knock out a large percentage of the Imperial forces.

Adel and Youko had taken a back seat for most of our operation, but during the siege, they could finally have their share of the fun. Both of them went on a rampage. Adel went off with her vampire knight abilities, and Youko threw down with her golems. I was glad that they had the opportunity to enjoy

themselves, but I was left in the lurch. I wanted to have some fun too, but I'd have to wait a couple days for my own chance to blow off some steam.

6.

Sentrag, a few days after Masaki and the others recaptured the fort.

King Rolan, Prime Minister Albert, and a strange boy wearing a white shirt, a school blazer, and matching, baggy school pants were all gathered in the throne room. The young man was Hayato Kiryuu, one-time leader of a group of school delinquents.

“Good work on your northern expedition, Hayato. I apologize for calling for you on your holiday.”

“It’s all good. I know why you called me here, and I’m pretty excited to be part of this conversation.”

Despite his looks, he was no stranger to etiquette and bowed before His Majesty. Hayato had been the leader of a large delinquent gang in the school setting VRMMO School Gangs.

Hayato had crushed all of his enemies, managed a massive group of players, and before he’d realized, found himself the leader of one of the game’s major towns. Unsurprisingly, he had been extremely powerful and able to take plenty of pain before so much as groaning. Baseball bats bounced right off his body, and he could stand unscathed after being hit by a truck. His power had commanded the fear of his enemies and the respect of his allies.

School Gangs players could spec into arm strength, leg strength, stamina, and numerous other skill trees. Hayato had chosen speed and stamina, transforming him into an agile, specialized tank. He had a unique ability to keep up the fight for extended periods, and could lead others by word and deed.

Once, an in-game assault event had dragged on for forty hours due to a bug. Hayato had managed to hold the horde on his own without his character ever being knocked out and without falling asleep. At some point, another gang leader had joined the fray. Hayato had been able to command him to enact a master plan and keep his own turf safe.

After that stunt, Hayato had taken a full day off. While offline, people had started calling him “The Robot” for his physiology-defying stamina.

And then, one day, he’d vanished.

For Hayato’s underlings, his disappearance had struck like a bolt from the blue, some of them even going so far as to seek him out in real life. After tracking down Hayato’s friends and relatives, they’d learned he’d well and truly disappeared. That had put an end to their futile search.

Hayato’s disappearance had been the original trigger for the widespread rumors of people vanishing from in front of their computers. Little did anyone know that he’d been summoned into this world and had eventually gone on to become one of Sentrag’s generals.

“The reason I called you here is to discuss Masaki,” the King told Hayato.

Masaki was generally considered a hero by the general populace, but not everyone in the capital shared the common man’s opinion. Much of the upper class was dissatisfied with the rise of a new hero. Some were displeased by the stratospheric ascension of a newcomer, others threw their efforts into cozying up to him for their own personal gain.

Regardless, Masaki’s new status was nothing to scoff at. “The Azure Hero and the Crimson Princess Knight” became the biggest attraction in the capital’s theatres. Masaki had initially been against his story coming to the stage, but he was swayed by the people’s need for entertainment during wartime, and ultimately reluctantly agreed.

“According to Jirou’s report, Masaki was able to save the Sniper Queen and her sister by becoming invisible and soaring the skies.”

“Does that mean he was able to get the collars off them?”

Rolan nodded his response to Hayato’s query.

The Imperial slave collar required a specific, magic key to open. Picked or smashed open, the collar would instantly kill the wearer.

“He holds the Lockpicking Wires of the Bandit King,” Rolan continued, “a magic item that, for all we know, can open any lock. I doubt he would’ve been

able to pull this off if not for that item.”

“Wait...” Hayato frowned.

“It’s exactly as you think, Hayato. None of the other soldiers summoned into the Imperial army have been able to remove their collars.”

“Your Majesty, it’s clear that Masaki commands incredible power. He managed to stand against the Leviathan, after all. Is it possible to win him over to our side permanently, to ensure he never turns on us?” Albert asked in a shaking voice once he’d heard Rolan and Hayato’s exchange.

His fears weren’t unfounded. By the standards of his world, every person summoned from another world possessed nearly unrivaled power. Still, none thus far of them had displayed the raw power Masaki had. He had wounded the Leviathan, a creature capable of sinking an entire continent into the sea. Ensuring that such power never turned against Sentrag was of paramount import.

“Worry not, Albert,” the King replied. “That’s precisely why I granted him a noble rank and asked Aran to plant the idea of marrying Adelheid, the daughter of my late brother, in his mind. Lucky for us, Adelheid already had her eye on him.”

“Aah. Adelheid will inevitably tie him to the throne, making it challenging for him to ally with other nations,” Albert said appreciatively. “A truly magnificent idea. Not that I’d expect anything less of your cunning, Your Majesty.” Hayato grinned at the content Rolan.

Ruling a country was no job for a goody two-shoes. Sometimes rulers had to pull some strings in the shadows in order to secure an edge over their enemies, especially in times of war. That’s why Rolan shamelessly pushed forward with his plan to use Adelheid for national benefit. If Adelheid hadn’t accepted Masaki’s proposal, Rolan had been fully prepared to offer up his own daughter, Princess Hildegard, once she turned twelve.

“Masaki originally made his way here to negotiate an alliance with us,” Rolan explained. “He has the power to bring a nation down single-handed, but he’s no ruthless murderer. He’s not looking to sow suffering across the land. There’s no reason to believe that he’ll turn on us, unless we do something truly heinous.”

“Poor little Empire. They thought they’d caught a sheep, but he turned out to be a werewolf on steroids. They let him slip through their fingers, and went on to lose countless ships and men. All because they misjudged one man’s abilities.” Hayato paused. “That was sarcasm, by the way. I can’t feel sorry for the Empire after all they’ve done.”

Rolan and Albert nodded.

It was unfortunate that the Empire had failed to understand Masaki’s true potential, but they’d had that coming. They were ruthless aggressors who viewed people as tools for their goals, which resulted in them turning a beast like Masaki against them.

“I wonder, are we going for the Grand Plains now that we’ve managed to recapture the fort?” Hayato asked.

“Indeed, we are,” the King confirmed. “My intel says the Empire is moving large numbers of troops into the area. They seem to have ascertained the next step in our plan. The Sniper Queen’s sister has also informed us that Ralf, a small town on the edge of the Grand Plains produces forty percent of the Empire’s rations.”

“Forty percent?!” Albert sputtered in disbelief. “How can a single town contribute that much?!”

Armies generally stockpiled their rations from all the towns and villages nearby. Getting forty percent from a single spot was unheard of.

The King nodded. “Apparently, the Sniper Queen’s sister, the ‘Farmer,’ has an ability which allows any plant to produce fruit, vegetables, and wheat within a month of planting. Saving her, Masaki did us yet another great service. She’ll be an invaluable asset to us, and her loss will decimate the Empire’s supply line.”

“The Empire lost two trump cards in one fell swoop. They’re going to get desperate.”

“How will we proceed, Your Majesty?”

“We’re seizing total control of Ralf. Hayato, my apologies for working you so much—especially at your age—but you’ll have to postpone your holiday. I need you to prepare to dispatch as soon as possible.”

“I have a debt to repay, Your Majesty,” Hayato replied. “You saved my life and I won’t ever forget that. Not to mention, I like it here, and I want to see peace as much as anyone else in my squadron.”

The young man answered Rolan’s request with a reassuring smile, but those who accompanied him to the battle knew that he reserved his kind demeanor only for his allies. Once the horns of battle roared, he’d transform into a bloodthirsty beast.

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The Empire, at the same time.

The Emperor, his ministers, and his generals were gathered in the heavy meeting room when someone knocked on the door.

“Come.”

A soldier entered, shaking from the palpable pressure in the room. He opened his mouth and began to speak, his voice quaking. “Your Majesty... we have confirmed that the fort to the north of Ralf has fallen. The Sniper Queen and the Farmer are missing. We are currently unsure whether they were killed or captured.”

The Emperor answered with a deep, disappointed sigh. “Get out,” he said simply.

“At once!” The soldier turned on his heel and practically sprinted from the room. He didn’t want to stay another moment, for fear of being crushed by the intense pressure.

“Dammit!” Commander Barry slammed his fist against the long table, screaming in pure rage. “How dare those northern worms rise against our might?! I’ll crush them under the sole of my boots!”

Barry had been the power-tripping soldier in decorated armor who’d visited Masaki in his cell every once in a while.

“Talk as big as you like, but don’t take your eyes off the reality of the situation,” the Emperor warned. “The fort is lost, and we have no idea how they did it. They found an improbable possibility and went through with it... just like

that time.”

“It’s exactly like the escape of that strange prisoner. Remember, the one we couldn’t put into a collar? We have yet to discover how he escaped. He was there one day and gone the next. Then, suddenly, BAM. He devastated our entire fleet, leaving us running around like chickens with their heads chopped off. Just like now.”

“I told you we shoulda killed that bastard!” Barry shouted. “Why we gotta babysit useless summons for a week?!”

“You’d better take a deep breath and show your colleagues some respect, especially since you’re the one who dragged all of us into this mess!” the High Warlord warned.

“Shut your mouth!”

“I’m a count as of yesterday, *Viscount* Barry. Know your place.”

“I swear—!”

“Quiet.” A general with a massive spear on his back glared down at Barry until he went quiet.

“This is no time for petty arguments. We must move, otherwise Ralf will be next.”

“If Ralf falls, our supply line is doomed! We must protect it at all costs!” a concerned minister interjected.

“We’ve sent all our nearby forces to the village, High Warlord Tatsuma.”

“We have fifty thousand in Ralf, two hundred thousand moving in from the north, five hundred thousand from the south, and another hundred thousand from the west. The western force is currently caught up in a battle, however. We’re unsure if they’ll make it to Ralf. Last I heard, they were struggling with the Demonkind. We may be able to offer a temporary truce. Other than that, we could request the High Admiral to ship us another hundred thousand prisoners to aid in battle. I know he’s busy training new captains and crew at present, but this is an emergency.” High Warlord Tatsuma Shidou rattled the figures off without so much as a glance at his notes.

The High Warlord believed that the Empire held unrivaled military power, but he disapproved of going into battle against the Demonkind.

Barry, however, had been arrogant and defied the High Warlord's advice. Hoping to bring glory home with him, he'd rallied the support of the nobility and pushed on with his attack.

"Just wait," Barry grumbled. "Those damn demons'll get what's coming for them once I get down to business—"

"Enough! I don't care how the battle played out in that tiny brain of yours! You failed. Dare not do it again, or you can say goodbye to your head. Get out of here." Enraged by his excuses, the Emperor sent Barry scurrying from the room.

"A-At once!" the commander cried. If he took one thing from the meeting, it was that he was dead if he failed again.

"See to it that prisoners and a portion of the loot are returned in exchange for the truce," the Emperor ordered.

"Negotiate first," Tatsuma said, boldly contradicting the Emperor. "Don't go there with a gift basket stacked to the brim only to be shooed away."

Tatsuma didn't give a fig for rank when he dished out orders. He had the strength and experience to back his assertive demeanor. That strength was exactly what had propelled him all the way to the rank of count. Despite his lack of etiquette and his crude way with words, the Emperor greatly appreciated his skills.

"Very well," the Emperor concluded. "Either way, we'll have to come up with a plan to defend Ralf. We'll be up against the Delinquent, the Ninja, and possibly the Sniper Queen and the Farmer as well. Not to mention the greatest threat, our runaway prisoner. We can only hope he won't unleash his full power in a town.

"I'll ponder on the plan myself. Tatsuma, take the messenger, the Hunter, and Superalloy, then make your way to Ralf."

"Understood. Send the civilians from Ralf my way." Tatsuma stood and gave the Emperor a wave as he left the room.

Tatsuma brought terrifying power to the battlefield, but was no expert strategist. Still, he'd stood toe-to-toe with entire platoons of Sentrag's army, and once even crushed the entire knighthood of a small nation all alone.

With Tatsuma gone, the Emperor began the strategy meeting.

On the other side of the castle, stripped of his honor, rank, and cornered a life or death situation, Barry threw a fit of rage in his quarters.

"Screw this! Screw everything! I was supposed to marry the princess and become the next Emperor, and now I have nothing! This is all... this is all because of those useless sacks of shit we keep summoning!"

Furious, Barry crushed a nearby table. He could feel the cold hands of death slowly, ever so slowly, creeping up his neck.

"What do I do now..."

Barry needed some scheme to get back into the Emperor's favor. It was in this moment of great peril that someone appeared before him.

"I can help you."

"Who're you?!"

When he'd arrived, the room had been empty. And yet, before Barry stood a figure, hooded and robed. Their face was hidden, and their voice echoed through the room. Barry didn't recognize them and convinced himself it was simply too dark to see. His brain refused entirely the idea that the form before him simply couldn't be perceived.

"Let's not bore ourselves with introductions. You want power. Isn't that right?"

"Damn right, I do! I want to sweep the floor with those dumbass summons!"

"You wish for power that exceeds that of those summoned by your court?"

"Why're you asking? Can you give me power like that?"

"Indeed, I can. Power to rival that of gods... Let's call this the 'Godmaker,' shall we? Use it, and everything will be yours."

Barry didn't recognize the voice, its neutral pitch dancing on the line between

masculine and feminine, but he ecstatically accepted the package the figure offered him.

“Ooooh! With this, I can—!”

“Worry not, I’ll set the stage for you. Wait for my orders, for I’ll make you a hero.”

“Hero... haha... that’s right... I will be a hero!”

“That, you will be. I’ll contact you when the time is right, Legendary Hero Barry.”

“Hahaha! I’ll be waiting! Hahhahahaha!”

His eyes focused on the drug he’d been given, Barry didn’t even notice the hooded figure vanish into nothingness. With the door and window still shut fast, Barry lay back on the sofa of his spartan room and laughed like a madman, drunk on the promise of power and fame.

One houseplant gently swayed as if to mock him.

“I can’t wait for the Seed to bloom a beautiful flower in this fool. Entertain me, Barry,” a figure whispered, in the infinite distance.

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A few days after recapturing the fort north of Ralf.

Akiha Kisaragi, the Sniper Queen, was positioned at the base as a guest commander. Her shots had taken many a limb and some lives as well, so Sentrag soldiers wouldn’t typically take kindly to receiving orders from her.

The soldiers stationed here, however, had never heard of the “Sniper Queen,” giving Jirou and I a chance to invent a story, essentially masking her identity. We claimed to have found a certain “Heire Gorn,” in the sniper’s nest, a soldier the Empire had summoned from another world. After a long, grueling battle, I had managed to put an end to the almighty gunman.

Leon took Haruka Kisaragi, the Farmer, under his wing, treating her as a guest of honor. She was just as nonchalant about literally everything as she’d been when I first met her. It was almost scary to see.

As an example, when she heard whispers of a food shortage, her response was simply, “Oh, no, that’s terrible. I’ll make some.”

“M-Make some of what?” came the soldier’s confused reply.

“Food.” She pulled a single seed from her pocket and planted it. “*Shining Harvest*.”

She pointed her skill at the ground. The soldiers watched in shock as the tiny seed sprouted into a healthy tree, which then produced an abundance of fruit.

As incredible as that display was already, Haruka wasn’t finished.

“Believe me, it’s very yummy,” she assured the soldiers. “Akihaaa! You know what to do!”

“Sure, but... ummm, please, stand back. I’m going to shoot.”

A baffled soldier stood under the tree. Akiha took out her weapon and used *Quick Draw* to shoot the base of the tree, causing the fruit to tumble down. The soldiers began to gather the fruit, expecting them to be light. To their surprise, the fruit was dense and heavy.

“Ummm... what’s this?”

“Curry! ♪” Haruka sang.

She sliced one of the fruits open, and sure enough, there was cold, thick, and fully cooked curry. In the blink of an eye, she’d grown a tree that bore curry-filled fruit.

Carrying the fruit to the center of camp for roasting, we left a trail of curry smell behind us. Since we had no rice, I made naan bread out of wheat flour. I demonstrated the technique for the cooks, too. I sure wasn’t going to make enough for the entire base all alone.

“Did you make stuff like this for the Empire too?” I asked Haruka.

“Mm-hmm! They loved it! These seeds won’t grow unless I use my skills on them, but they stockpiled some giant fruit, rich rice, and wheat plants.”

I don’t think she realized just how powerful she was. The ability to effortlessly feed an army would be an invaluable asset to any country’s military.

And damn, her curry was good. I had been worried when I saw it pouring out of a fruit, but it carried the perfect kick of spice. Divine.

“Miss Haruka, may I have another portion?”

Go! Go! Leon! Get those seconds!

“Of course! You need to eat well to have the energy to lead us. ♪”

She spooned him another serving of curry with a warm, motherly smile. Aaand, he blushed. That smile burned your cheeks, huh?

“Leon found someone truly incredibly this time around,” Adel said merrily, watching Leon fumble around Haruka. She was glad he’d finally found someone.

“Yeah... though it’s too spicy... I need water,” Youko coughed, focused entirely on her struggle with the curry.

“Water will make it worse. Have this milk instead.” I offered her a glass. I’d prepared milk for exactly this reason.

“Really? Okay, thanks.”

We took a nice, relaxing lunch outside the fort. The soldiers gratefully devoured the curry, thoroughly enjoying the afternoon. It was the first time in a while that they could fill their bellies.

After lunch, I met with Leon in the Room to discuss his future plans.

“What’s going to happen to the Kisaragi sisters?”

We’d only just saved them and were treating them as guests, so it’d be strange to put them on the frontline right out of the gate. Alternately, they’d be safe in the Room, but that wouldn’t amount to much more than house arrest.

“Hmmm... I would like to make sure they reach Sentrag.”

“I would advise against that,” Jirou said with his typical calm. “I was informed that Hayato, the Delinquent, is headed here with his squad. We also requested further tropos for our invasion of Ralf, so sending two people back to Sentrag with a convoy seems backward to me. It would hinder our combat capabilities unnecessarily. Not to mention, if we went ahead and dropped them off in the capital, the nobility would likely make moves on them immediately. We should

all go back together so we can protect them from any atrocities.”

“If anyone dares harm Miss Haruka, I’ll—!”

“Calm down, Leon. Jirou was just talking hypotheticals.”

Leon already had his hand on his sword. I wouldn’t want to trifle with him where Haruka was concerned. Still, it was pretty funny seeing Leon El Sentrag, the crown prince, not even trying to hide his feelings for Haruka. Meanwhile, Haruka herself was just as nonchalant about Leon as anything else. Akiha, however, was starting to get a little jealous at all the attention lavished on her sister.

“Akiha is just as cute as her sister,” Jirou said firmly. “It’s not just nobles we’d have to worry about, it’s possible that some soldiers could make moves on them, so I’m against sending the Kisaragis to the capital at this point. Akiha may be the Sniper Queen, but that doesn’t mean much when shooting someone will just land her in jail.”

“You’re right. Not every soldier is a stout defender of the law.”

“The same goes for the Empire,” I added. “They have good people there too. I saw a soldier help a little girl escape once.”

Adel and Youko nodded in agreement.

I glanced over at Akiha and saw her blushing. I wondered why.

“I suppose letting them stay in the Room would be the safest bet,” I said. Nobody would be attacking the Room, nor would anyone be able to coerce the sisters into anything they didn’t want there.

“Hmmm, it’ll be boring, but there’s food, so it’s nice.”

I had some flower pots Haruka could grow anything she wanted in, so there were even more meal options than usual. Just as I thought that things were settled, Akiha raised her hand.

“Ummm... Haruka and I actually talked about this, so...”

“Oh? And what did you come up with?”

“Ummm... we’d like to join you.”

“Yep, we dooo! We talked about it all night! ♪”

I’d love for them to come along, but...

“Are you sure?” I asked. “We’ll cross paths with the Empire sooner or later.”

“I know, but don’t think for a second I feel for those bastards. Not after they took Haruka hostage and forced me to maim people.”

“Not to mention... I’m realllly mad they dared force my cute little sister to shoot people against her will. They deserve to be punished. ♪ Don’t you think so, my prince?”

“Of course!”

“Prince Leon, please. Calm down, and think this through,” Jirou said. “And Miss Haruka, would you be so kind to give the prince some personal space?”

Haruka had snuggled up to Leon and was looking up at him with puppy eyes. She may have been as casual as they come, but she sure knew how to use her looks as a weapon.

“Haruka... hmpf!” Akiha peeled her sister off Leon and practically threw her down into the chair beside hers. With a sister like that, she had her work cut out for her.

There was nothing else to be done. They were going to join us in battle.

“All right, I respect how you feel. I think it’d be best if you worked under me,” I suggested. “Having you two join Leon’s platoon all of a sudden would raise some eyebrows, no question.”

“Oh... I suppose that makes sense.” Leon’s agreement was obviously reluctant and came with a dejected nod. For a prince, he was being awfully selfish about this whole thing, but at least he went through with it.

“Is this acceptable to you?” I asked the sisters.

“Sure,” Akiha said. “I want to repay you for saving me, and it would be reassuring to fight alongside another person from my world.”

“Oh, how wonderful!” Haruka enthused. “I swear to stay by your side in sickness and health, in—”

“You stop that right now!”

Thank you, Akiha. Leon’s death stare had already pierced through me.

“I was kidding. Hahhh, you have no sense of humor.”

“I swear...”

“I’m looking forward to working with youuu!”

“R-Right... me too.” I couldn’t help being taken aback by Haruka’s effusiveness.

“Haha, I love how you’re dealing with her,” Akiha told me. “This is going to be fun, I’m looking forward to it.”

They both gave us a bow, and officially joined my group. After that, we moved to the fort’s command room.

Truth to be told, I’d never expected four of my closest underlings to be beautiful women. Hopefully, Leon would have time to keep Haruka busy once the war ended. That would take some weight off Akiha’s shoulders, too.

“Prince Leon! Hayato has arrived!” a soldier reported, saluting smartly. “He’s brought two hundred thousand troops.”

“Good. You can go.”

“Of course!”

I was reassured by the arrival of our backup, but I honestly wasn’t sure how we were going to feed them. Haruka’s power had proven to be wildly useful, pulling us out of our food shortage and into surplus, but not 200,000 troops’ worth.

We’d recently begun hunting the local fauna. Lizards, some cow-looking monsters, that sort of thing. The meat spiced up our men’s menu, boosting their morale.

“Excuse me. Hayato, the Delinquent, reporting for duty.”

“Thank you for coming here on such a short notice, Hayato. Allow me to introduce you. This is Masaki, the Azure Hero.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” I said with a smile. “They call me a hero, but as

you can see, I'm just a dude. Anyway, I'm Masaki Toudou. These are my trusted subordinates and fiancées, Adel and Youko."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Adel curtsied.

"Hi there." Youko just gave a little wave.

"I'm Akiha Kisaragi, the Sniper Queen. The Empire had me captive until recently, but Masaki saved me. Since then, my sister and I have joined his group."

"I'm Haruka Kisaragi, the Farmer. I can grow crops and make delicious food. It's lovely meeting you, Mr. Delinquent."

"I'm happy to meet you all too." He was pretty polite for someone called the "Delinquent," though the red smears on his wooden sword suggested that he was a fierce warrior.

Now that backup had arrived, we had half a million soldiers. Stationed near the fort, there were 200,000 soldiers, Hayato had brought another 200,000, and we had 100,000 auxiliary troops, mostly adventurers and soldiers sent by Sentrag's allies.

The military commander we'd saved from the Empire way back when was actually one such a soldier. Once he'd heard we were planning to fight the Empire in his area, he'd insisted on joining our ranks. The adventurers had come at the direction of the Adventurers' Guild.

I took a glance at my map and saw a blue mark dashing toward us at breakneck speed. Blue meant friendly, so there was no need for panic. To judge by the speed, it was Jirou, so I went ahead and added a name to his mark.

"I came to report my findings from my reconnaissance mission," the ninja said. "The Empire is ready to face us. They're amassing a huge number of troops. Luckily, their backup from the west is currently locked in a battle with the Demonkind. They haven't been able to join the main army yet."

"I heard they sent an offer for a temporary truce. I assume they couldn't reach an agreement?"

"Indeed. From what I gathered, their offer was, for lack of a better word, too

dumb to consider. If the Demonkind agreed, the Empire promised to release their prisoners. However, if they refused, the Empire threatened to target women and children in future battles."

"I think 'dumb' is the perfect word to describe that."

"On a second thought, I have to agree. Their offer only enraged the Demonkind. If they can destroy the Empire's western army in time, the Demonkind are willing to join us."

Apparently the Empire had its own share of dumbasses; a natural consequence of fighting twenty different wars at the same time.

They controlled the south with their overwhelming naval strength, but would never be able to reroute their entire navy here on such a short notice. With the threat of Sentrag's attack looming over them, they had no choice but to divert troops from their siege on the surrounding nations, giving those nations the opportunity to bolster our military strength with their troops.

On top of that, they'd somehow managed to enrage the Demonkind to the west. Hopefully, we'd be able to dismantle the Empire with one decisive battle.

"They still have around seven hundred thousand troops, though," Jirou warned. "Not only do they have numbers on us, but according to reports, they have also dispatched the High Warlord, the Hunter, and Superalloy. Unlike the Kisaragi sisters, they joined the Empire of their free will, so I doubt we'll be able to pull the conversion stunt on them. We've crossed paths with them a number of times before."

It would've been nice to have them on our side, but I couldn't expect everything to go my way. We were going to go up against three combatants from my world. I imagined that the High Warlord and the Hunter were frontline fighters, but I had no idea what this "Superalloy" was.

"Ummm... can you tell me what Superalloy is capable of?"

"Well... I think it's safe to assume he's from a mecha MMO."

"A what now?!" I spluttered. A mecha MMO of all things?! I'd say that was way too overpowered, but then here I was.

“Ummm, Masaki, what’s a ‘mecha’?” Adel asked.

“Ah, right... how should I put this... imagine it like a metal golem that you can climb into and control it from the inside. Jirou, is the mech Superalloy is piloting like that?”

“Yes, it is. It’s about thirty feet tall, can devastate dozens of people with a single strike, and shoots beams that incinerate anything they come in contact with.”

“Damn, it’s like a walking castle,” I sighed. “It’s gonna be a pain to deal with.”

It may not have been three hundred feet tall like an actual castle, but I’d wager it could take about as many hits.

Speaking of robots, I wondered where Shou would be. I recalled him calling himself a Metallic Beast Summoner.

“Say, what about Shou, the Metallic Beast Summoner?” I asked. “I fought him on an Imperial vessel before we arrived in Sentrag.”

“Oh, you’ve already run into him?” Jirou nodded. “He’s a mercenary; he won’t participate in this battle. If he joined the Imperial forces here, the battle would be truly grueling. His beasts can decimate entire armies.”

Huh, he must’ve held back a lot against me.

“I can make iron golems too, you know,” Youko boasted. “The biggest I can make is a Giant Golem, towering at twenty feet tall. Its insides are enhanced with Giant bones. They’re super sturdy, so it could probably stand up to the steel one.”

“Huh, it’s good to know that you have this trump card, but are you sure you want to take on Superalloy all on your own?”

“I’m glad you’re worried for me, but this is no issue of wants,” Youko said firmly. “I need to live up to my future husband’s name. Moreover, there’s something I wanna try.”

“Okay, just make sure you stay safe.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t mess up again.”

She'd better not. Losing a fiancée in battle right before the wedding would be some soap opera–tier plot action. I was well aware that lives would be lost in this battle, but I wanted to ensure that the people closest to me, Adel, Youko, and the Kisaragi sisters, survived.

In the end, we decided to let Youko handle Superalloy, Hayato pair up with the High Warlord, and Jirou face the Hunter. Adel and I were to take to the sky and bombard the enemy forces with spells, hoping to drastically reduce their numbers. Akiha would be stationed on top of an extra-tall golem Youko would create specifically as a vantage point. Her targets were the enemy commanders. Without their commanders, the armies would fall apart. Removing exposed commanders was a common war tactic. Last but not least, Haruka was tasked with protecting Leon... which would inevitably result in a role reversal.

I asked Akiha if she was worried about her sister accompanying Leon to the frontlines.

"Hm? What about it? She might not look it, but she can be pretty brutal."

I didn't want to know what she meant by that. Hopefully Leon could calm Haruka down if things got out of hand. I started to feel a little bad about the force we'd arranged against the Empire, but then I remembered all the horrible things they'd done. They had this coming.

Constructing a proper strategy, choosing formations, and setting the role of each division took quite a while, but preparation was half the battle. Charging in without a plan, we'd be like a bunch of drunks who'd stumbled onto a battlefield.

Luckily, between the long, grueling training our soldiers had gone through under Sentrag's banner and the modern Japanese close quarters combat techniques Jirou had taught them, even with inferior numbers, every single one of our soldiers could take on at least one enemy—and a half.

The adventurers' strength varied widely, but they brought a good number of mages to the table. We managed to set up some strong parties we could dispatch for mobile tactics.

I also went ahead and crafted a truckload of potions to sustain our troops. I handed them out to the commanders to distribute as they saw fit. I couldn't

make high potions from the random weeds covering the plains, but Haruka came to the rescue. She cultivated high-quality herbs in a large field. They were the perfect ingredients.

I was crafting potions after our strategy meeting when Hayato approached me.

“Excuse me. Are you Masaki, the Azure Hero?”

“I’m not much of a hero, but yes, that’s me. Sorry, I’m in the middle of crafting potions. Incidentally, I’ve noticed you’re awfully polite for someone called the ‘Delinquent.’”

He flashed me a smile. “Haha, I get that a lot. ‘Delinquent’ kind of stuck to me before I realized.”

“We’re in the same shoes, huh?”

“I hear you’re from Brittalia Online, but I’ve been wondering, what was your class? With all that crafting, I’m betting on Alchemist.”

“Ummm... I can’t really go into detail, so just know that I’m a swordsman, and a hero in the eyes of the people, I suppose.”

My story was playing in theatres now, so at this point there was no use fighting it. I’d need to change up my disguise the next time I strolled through Sentrag. Actually, I wasn’t the only one who’d need to change. Adel would, too. I could buy them some clothes. Youko would look great in Japanese-style clothes.

“Fair enough. I guess they made a play out of it and everything.”

“Yeah. So, what brought you here?” I’d been pretty productive in my potion making since the meeting ended, so I did have a second to talk to him. Not that I could make many more anyway. I was running out of good herbs.

“As you expected, I did come here with a reason. From my understanding, you aren’t actively looking for a way back to Japan. Why is that?”

“I didn’t have time to worry about that while I was rotting away in the Empire’s cell, and I kind of gave up on going back after my talk with Jirou.”

“Don’t you want to go back?”

It wasn’t even about that. I had my fair share of attachments to my home. My coworkers who I’d stressed out with my disappearance, my friends, and family. I would’ve loved to see them again. I would’ve, but...

“No, I do, but... we don’t even know if it’s possible to go back yet. If we did, I’m sure Jirou would’ve told us. Heck, not just us, it’d be the ultimate bargaining chip against the Empire. The man has been here for twenty years already; there’s no way he’s never tried anything.”

I’d never heard of anyone returning home. Not from Jirou, not from the Empire. If there were a way, the Empire wouldn’t have needed to put me on the chopping block. Unless they stood to gain something by killing me, they could’ve just sent me back.

“Not to mention,” I continued, “during my short time here, I’ve already forged some deeply important relationships. At this point, I’d only go back home if there were a way to effortlessly hop between the two worlds.”

“Fair enough,” the Delinquent said. “You’re right, we’re yet to find a method of return, but... I haven’t given up yet. I have a life to go back to.”

That made perfect sense. I supposed most people would feel like Hayato if they were suddenly summoned to another world. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Kisaragi sisters were of the same opinion. I’d help them with all the resources at my disposal—though Leon wasn’t likely to appreciate that. In any case, wanting to return was probably the most logical position in this situation. I had to wonder why I didn’t feel the need to return to my own world.

“I see...” I said, frowning in thought. “Well, I’ll help if you need me; just say the word. Though, not right now, obviously.”

“Obviously. We must reign in the Empire and put a stop to the needless bloodshed.”

“Exactly. Here, these are the high potions for your division. Hand them out to your generals.”

“Thank you. See you on the battlefield.”

“Indeed. May Fortuna be on our side.”

We were at war. A war that would decide the fate of this continent. I had to do everything in my power to contribute to our victory.

The next morning, our scouts finally brought the news: the Empire was preparing to move out. It was time for me to set up the skills I'd planned to bring to the fight.

I was going up against an entire army, so I needed as many AoE spells as I could possibly equip.

SKILL

Passive

MP Regeneration (Medium) *HP*MP Regeneration (Medium) *Physical Stats Boost (Extra)* Melee Combat Boost (Greater) *Perception Boost (Greater)* Splash Damage (Lesser)

Active

Surge, Spirit Zone *Thousand Blades of Nirvana* Multicast

SKILL

My passives were pretty much my normal loadout, but I added some spicy stuff to my active skills. Spirit Zone created a blood-red zone with a 1,600-foot diameter. Killing an enemy within the zone would restore some health and mana. This was the first time I'd used a support skill for my own needs, but given the scale of the battle, it felt warranted.

Thousand Blades of Nirvana summoned dozens, if not hundreds of piercing weapons, and shot them out in a straight line, one after another. Think swords, spears, and the like. It was similar to a signature ability of a certain shiny king who owned all treasures of the world, except my skill was much easier to dodge since the weapons flew in a straight line. That being said, unless the Empire's army had mastered sidestepping high-velocity spears, it should decimate their armies, one rank at a time. Thousand Blades of Nirvana didn't work well with Surge, but both skills were often used in large-scale PvP regardless.

Lastly, Multicast allowed me to cast two spells at once. I could use it to create

fused spells, a special kind of magic typically requiring two or more casters. Fused spells cost tons of mana, though, so I'd need to stay mindful of that.

7.

The battle was drawing near. Our troops, consisting of Sentrag's forces, the combined military of a number of the surrounding small countries, adventurers, and 50,000 Demonkind soldiers who'd arrived in the nick of time as reinforcements, began to line up on the field in front of the fort. Our numbers totaled 550,000.

The commander-in-chief, Leon, stood in front of the army beside the commander of the allied forces and the Demonkind commander, ready to address the masses. The alliance's commander was the same man we'd rescued from the Imperial ship, and the Demonkind commander was a dignified-looking woman.

"This is the battle to decide the fate of this continent!" Leon called. "The Empire has spread pain and suffering through these lands! They have destroyed countless countries, taken countless lives, enslaved countless innocents! It is time to make them pay for their sins! Defeat is not an option! Today, troops from numerous small nations and the mighty Demonkind stand with us on the battlefield to fight off an era of unparalleled injustice. Work with our allies and cast light over the shadow of the Empire!"

The allied commander spoke next. "The Empire invaded our homes, destroyed our countries, and slew or enslaved our people. I only stand you on this day because Masaki, the Azure Hero saved me from captivity. This is our chance to pay the Empire back for all the torment we've endured! Let the abuse you've suffered drive you! Take revenge for the loss of Valentine and every other nation ravaged by these beasts!"

"We've suffered the same atrocities as everyone else here," the Demonkind commander said solemnly. "We despise the Empire with every inch of our bodies. They've kidnapped our people, innocent civilians, and enslaved them. I'd like to take this chance to thank the allied forces of our surrounding countries for requesting our aid and allowing us to join their ranks. We promise

to fight with everything we have and bring peace to our lands!”

The three generals’ remarks were answered by the roar of 550,000 soldiers. It shook the ground beneath us and blasted through the plains.

Their addresses had been great, but I wish I’d been left out of it. Not that I was really in a position to complain. My name was well-received and raised the troops’ morale. At the end of the day, that’s what mattered most.

I caught a couple of the men scanning the area, searching for me. Their quest was futile. At that moment, I was floating above the Imperial army, using Invisibility, Invincibility, and Wing to observe their movements. I’d use the telepathic link the mages set up to communicate with the other commanders and key individuals.

My goal was to thin out the Imperial forces and sabotage their effectiveness in battle. Looking through their ranks, though, a good 20% of them were slaves. I promised myself I’d spare those who were forced to slay their brethren. Some would inevitably fall to my AoEs, but there wasn’t much I could do about that. Of course, I’d show the same mercy to those surrendering. There was no reason to hurt them.

Finished with my initial reconnaissance, I reported back to command. *“Their ranks are packed with slaves, just as we expected. They’re planning to sacrifice their vanguard. I’ll split them up and create some chaos, you go as we planned.”*

“Understood! Let us know if they start moving.”

“Of course. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

I flew right past the Imperial cavalry, mounted on gryphons and wyverns. Thanks to Invisibility, they were none the wiser. I could snoop out their formation, the exact composition of their army, and the location of their headquarters.

The Empire had evacuated the village of Ralf and claimed it as their command center. Continuing my recon, I found myself staring down not one, but four dragon-like creatures. They weren’t as big as Leviathan, but four gigantic, limbless dragons with massive wings stationed right in front of Imperial headquarters was certainly an intimidating sight. However, they were

overshadowed by an even bigger threat: a thirty-foot-tall robot. It towered over their armies like a silver castle.

It must've been the Superalloy I'd heard so much about. I wondered what kind of person sat inside it.

After making that discovery and finishing up my reconnaissance, I contacted command to report on the state of the Imperial army. My intel could be the difference between victory and defeat, and transmitting it was a job only I could do.

Now I simply had to stay in the air and wait for the Empire to make a move. The key to our strategy was sabotaging their initiative. We'd let them move first.

Twenty minutes into my wait, drums began to sound. The first division, consisting exclusively of slaves, began marching forward, followed by the mages. Their hope was to slow our forces down with the slaves while the mages lobbed spells at us, destroying our troops.

"The Empire is on the march! We're starting!"

"Understood! May you find luck on the battlefield!"

"You too!"

Just as we planned, I let the slaves pass under me and waited for the perfect moment. When that moment came, it was my job to unleash hell on them.

"Thousand Blades of Nirvana!"

I cast the spell from aloft, unleashing a hurtling torrent of weapons at the enemy mages. I caught dozens of mages in my attack, mincing their bodies and killing them instantly.

I wasn't holding back. This was war.

The deluge of weapons kicked up a dust cloud that surrounded the army, temporarily reducing their lines of sight to the bare minimum. Unable to continue, the mages came to a halt, blocking the path of the rest of the army.

Meanwhile, the slave division was heading for our army. Hunted if they ran, killed in combat if they lost, and put out as sacrificial pawns for the glory of the

Empire, they were on a death march.

Thankfully, we already had a plan in place to put that death march to a halt. It revolved around three of my trusted allies: Jirou, Haruka, and Youko. I handled my job, which was to watch the slaves march, and inform the others once they crossed a specific point.

"*Earth Style: Quicksand*!"

"*Horizontal Pitfall*! ♪"

Jirou transformed a wide area into quicksand while Haruka created a pitfall trap right beside it. I'd learned that this skill existed in-game to handle the monsters that occasionally tried to raid her farm.

The quicksand dragged people into the pit like a recently cleaned and polished playground slide. The pit itself was around ten feet deep. The drop might sprain some ankles, but it hopefully wouldn't kill anyone. We'd basically created a giant canal that crippled the vanguard of the Empire's army, and the rest of them didn't even know about it yet since they were still blinded by the dust cloud I created. By the time the dust cloud settled, the vanguard would appear to have vanished from the battlefield entirely.

Now it was Youko's turn to contribute.

"Use my golems as a bridge, and make sure you don't fall!"

Her worm golems made an improvised bridge for our troops. Golems were typically restricted to humanoid forms, but Youko, with her unique skill, could shape her golems into a plethora of forms. Her strongest was apparently a dragon.

Our troops had to cross over the slaves, and they hadn't taken kindly to being dropped into a hole. Those able to move shot arrows up at the soldiers passing overhead.

That's where Haruka came into the picture. She'd equipped our frontline soldiers with little pouches to throw into the pit. Once tossed,

the pouches opened up, filling the pit with pollen, and causing the agitated slaves to collapse one by one.

The coma-inducing flower pollen was strong enough to send a medium-sized monster into deep sleep. The slaves had no chance to resist the effects. The powder was considerably stronger than the pollen Haruka'd used at the fort. Since the pollen stayed in the pit, the soldiers passing above were unaffected.

At first, we'd considered releasing the pollen into the wind, but ultimately discarded it for the sake of our troops.

Based on her nickname, I hadn't expected much of Haruka, but she proved herself one of my most useful allies. The versatility of her skillset was second to none.

"Good night, sweeties! My prince, it's time to get started!" Haruka cried from her position behind Leon on his dragon. Even in battle, she was casual as ever.

"R-Right... khhhm, attack!"

The first stage of our plan had been a success. Now, I just needed to keep the pressure up and create as much chaos as possible. The enemy targeted me with countless spells, arrows, and cannonballs, bet every attempt on my life was utterly nullified by Invincibility. The only thing the barrage actually accomplished was kicking up another dust cloud, which shrouded me from their eyes.

"Did we get him?!" I heard from below.

Nah. You didn't. I'd heard this line before, but it never ended well for my opponents in this world.

"I'll create a gap in the enemy's ranks! Use it to run them over!" I telepathically told the mages.

"Got it!"

I left the mages to relay the information to the troops and began to focus my mana. I'd canceled Wing a while back so I could go ham with my spells.

"Spirit Zone!" I erected my Spirit Zone so every enemy I defeated would siphon HP and MP to me.

As the dust cloud began to clear, I called, "Leviathan, I need your help! Summon Water Dragon!"

The expressions on the Imperial troops' faces went from surprise to horror as they spotted me, completely unscathed, standing beside a water dragon that had appeared out of nowhere.

At my mental command, the dragon trampled through the field, mowing soldiers down, and leaving havoc in its wake. It appeared to be a scaled-up version of the sea serpents we'd fought, except that its body was made entirely of water. Enemy soldiers tried to slash and stab at it, but their weapons were instead drawn into the dragon's body, leaving them defenseless on the battlefield.

I directed the dragon to the highest point on the field and had it slam its tail and arms into the ground, unleashing a small tsunami. The wave knocked dozens of soldiers down, hindering their allies.

Next I went for the cavalry, intending to open a line for our troops. The mounted soldiers couldn't dodge my water dragon's relentless rampage. It thrashed about, sending whole squadrons of soldiers flying. It was fun to watch, but I couldn't stick around. It was time for me to get my hands dirty.

I leapt into a large pack of soldiers and planted my foot right on the stomach of the most decorated man.

"C-Commander!" someone cried.

A commander, huh? That worked out. The moment my foot made contact with his belly, I took out my trusty Seven Arthur and activated Surge.

"Aaaaaaaaaaah!"

I put my back into it and slashed downward with the ten-foot-long blade of blueish-white light. The commander and the allies behind him tried to block with their shields and swords, but it was futile. Between my passive-boosted attack power and the mighty sword in my hand, I cut through them like butter. Scraps of steel and leather flew into the air as I sliced their equipment straight in half. And then Seven Arthur's unique ability activated, leaving nothing but a crimson cloud in its wake.

The mist of blood was even larger than I was used to since I had Splash Damage (Lesser), and my attack had caught numerous targets all at once.

Every last Imperial soldier fell to the ground, screaming in agonizing pain, but I couldn't spare even a thought for them. I had to focus on the battle at hand, and keep slashing away with my sword.

Perception Boost (Greater) allowed me to instinctively feel any attack launched at me from all directions. Due to my high physical stats, bending my body and sidestepping to avoid strikes was a trivial matter. I swung my sword at an enemy right in front of me, bisecting him in a straight line. His innards spilled onto the ground, and he collapsed without as much as a groan.

After finishing the group I'd hopped into, I glanced at my map. My immediate vicinity was devoid of foes, but the plains were filled with red dots surrounding me. Now that I'd basically immersed myself in enemies, it was hard to tell which direction they were headed in. I had to be careful, especially with Thousand Blades of Nirvana. I had no desire to mow down my own troops.

I waited for my HP and MP to regenerate a bit, then I spread my arms wide and activated Multicast. I cast Summon Water Dragon with both hands, giving birth to two additional beasts that immediately began trampling Imperial troops. Their watery bodies turned from blue to a bloody scarlet. They looked more like blood dragons than anything.

I looked back at my map to check the enemy position and noticed a circle of red dots vanish. I raised my eyes skyward and immediately realized what was happening.

Adel was throwing the grenades Akiha'd given her right into the middle of the enemy formation. Akiha's *Ammo Replenishment* skill restocked her ammo and grenades to a certain cap. She was reluctant to give any of us a gun, but once we'd explained our basic strategy, as well as the gravity of the battle, she agreed to equip Adel with grenades.

Our hope was to finish the fight as soon as possible, ideally before everyone ran out of mana. Akiha's grenades were considerably more destructive than, say, molotov cocktails, so they came in super handy.

The wyvern and gryphon riders attempted to intercept Adel, but she disposed of them easily with her mana spear. The beasts and their riders fell to earth, crushing any unfortunate soul they happened to land on.

I made nice work of the beasts with my bloody water dragon buddies, trying to get as many soldiers into the brawl as I could to rack up my killcount.

“Dammit, what’re y’all doing! Look at him, he’s unchecked all alone in the middle of the battlefield! Go and kill hi—”

The man’s head was blown off before he could finish the sentence. Half a second later, I saw his pal beside him get the same treatment.

“Ewww!” My hand was sticky with squishy brain specks and blood. It was nasty as hell.

At the sight of the gore, the nearby soldiers recoiled in panic. Must’ve been Akiha’s handiwork. At present, she was 0.6 miles away from me, riding on her custom-made golem. That she could effortlessly pop those guys from such a distance was insane. Plus, the golem she rode on was, in fact, moving.

Akiha had mentioned that she could shoot in motion, so we had the golem stay a set distance from the battlefield. Akiha shifted from one target to the next, exploding heads and transforming people into mincemeat when she switched to the anti-materiel rifle.

The sheer brutality of the scene could drive a man insane. Gore splashed all around the battlefield, turning the plain into a hellish landscape.

Meanwhile, I continued to direct my dragons to take the enemy down.

“Wraaaaaaagh!”

“Rocket Punch!”

A spear pierced my left hand dragon from head to tail, while a giant metal fist pulverized the dragon on my right. Both dragons dissipated. I was now facing the High Warlord, Superalloy, and Hunter.



My mind and body lit up with warning signs. I raised my sword instantly to block the incoming attack. The next moment, a brutal shockwave threw me back. Of course, I didn't have to block; Invincibility would take care of that, but my body moved on reflex to protect itself.

Still, I needed to remember to block consciously. There was a non-zero chance some kind of attack could pierce Invincibility. Standing there like some big, dumb guy taking a hit only to be blown to smithereens was not how I wanted to go out.

"You blocked it? Not bad!"

Before me stood a man in sunglasses and a black suit with swept-back hair. He must've been the Hunter. His punch carried insane power, leading me to believe that his power was boosted by skills. I sure wouldn't want to take one of those punches without Invincibility.

He quickstepped behind me and unleashed a blinding, blue-white light from his hand. When it faded, a bazooka had materialized in one of his hands and a machine gun in the other.

For a second I thought he was from Commando City like Akiha, but his clothes were completely different, and hand-to-hand combat wasn't a thing in that game. If I had to guess, he'd come from Mars Impact, an MMO where you fought aliens. It was possible that he was carrying even more firepower than Akiha.

I blocked the bullets and dodged the explosion so I wouldn't get thrown back. Then, I moved in for a slash, but the Hunter dodged it effortlessly with his astonishing speed.

As I was fighting, Youko reached out to me.

"Everyone's on you because you got too reckless!"

"Sorry, I couldn't really go any easier on them!"

I'd attracted all three of the big guys because I'd made too much noise. Fortunately, a glance at my map showed three of my allies moving in to help me.

“Well, at least you drew them out. This might actually work out in our favor.”

“Yeah, but make sure you stay safe. Superalloy pulverized one of my dragons with a single punch. He’s no joke.”

“Don’t worry. You just watch and be amazed!”

Youko was up to something, but I had no time to ponder it. I was still locked in my fight with Hunter. He threw a grenade at me. As I was calculating the best way to dodge it, a throwing star whizzed past my head and hit the grenade mid-flight, exploding it in the air. Jirou had arrived.

The explosion kicked up a dust cloud, under which I switched positions with Jirou, allowing me to proceed to my next objective: taking down some wyverns. Behind me, a volatile symphony of gunshots and blades clashed. The battle between Hunter and Ninja had begun.

As I ran, I spotted a man in blue armor, holding a Cao Wei flag. The High Warlord glared straight at me until someone caught his attention. He turned to look at the distraction and his mouth immediately curled into the sadistic smile of a hunter with eyes on his prey.

Before him stood Hayato, wearing a similar smile: that of a wolf who’d found a worthy opponent. I’d never seen that smile before. He was elated at the opportunity. He unsheathed his bloodied wooden training sword and slid into a fighting stance.

Behind him stood a group of fighters all wearing biker jackets. One holding a flag reading “From heaven through earth, I alone am the honored one. Susanoo.” I was starting to feel like I was in ’80s Tokyo at the height of biker gang culture, not a fantasy world.

“Whatcha starin’ at, huh?! Get him, boys!”

“Waaaaaaargh!”

On Hayato’s mark, the Susanoo gang and the High Warlord’s armies clashed.

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Hayato Kiryuu, a combatant summoned from the game School Gangs. He’d crushed the country that summoned him and was now under Sentrag’s wing,

where he'd attained the rank of commander at the young age of nineteen.

He was a powerful, charismatic person, said to have overcome basic human needs. With stamina beyond monstrous, and strength formidable even in this world of magic and mythological creatures, he was a fiercer combatant by far than the average adult.

This very Hayato was shocked at Masaki's unparalleled strength. Shocked, but excited. He was convinced that Masaki alone could finish this war in minutes. Yet, in the face of that strength, Hayato wanted nothing more than to fight him.

Hayato was a gentle man, but once he smelled the scent of blood, he transformed into an unstoppable, ferocious beast. His gang from School Gangs, and his troops in this world all knew that once the battle began, he would not stop until every last enemy was defeated.

Hayato somehow managed to keep his seething bloodlust for Masaki in check, and turned it against the actual enemy they were facing.

The pure excitement and rage he felt materialized as a red aura around his body and wooden sword. A slight breeze passed through the battlefield, fluttering his now dark-crimson jacket.

"Hey, Tatsuma. It's been a while."

"It has. I must thank the Azure Hero. He set up the most suitable stage to finally settle our score."

Tatsuma answered, pointing his spear at Hayato. The two had a history of combat, with many wins, losses, and draws between them. They were rivals. Tatsuma was a bit older than Hayato, but neither of them cared for such superfluous things. The only thing that mattered was their power in battle.

Both had been summoned by the same nation. Unlike the Empire, however, that nation had had no way to bind their summons to their will. Soon enough, the summoners were made to regret that oversight. Their measly army was easily dispatched by the summoned soldiers, and the country was left in ruins.

"Siding with the Empire was the wrong choice, buddy. We'll crush you!"

"Bring it on! I'm High Warlord Tatsuma, and this is where your battle ends!"

The clash of their weapons unleashed a shockwave.

Their troops ran at each other, keeping their distance and dodging the two battling giants, as it would be the end of them if they were caught up in Hayato and Tatsuma's battle.

"Archers, fire!"

"Vanguard, shields up! Rear guard, prepare the molotovs!"

Hayato's and Tatsuma's aides issued orders in place of the battle-locked commanders. Since both men enjoyed getting their hands dirty in battle, their aides often helped with commands. Each combatant wanted to limit the casualties on his side, while cutting down as many enemies as their stamina allowed.

Hayato's vanguard blocked the volley of arrows, allowing Tatsuma's troops to counter their defensive tactic by bringing spears out. Some did tear through the defenses, only to have their early advances punished by a rain of molotov cocktails, setting Tatsuma's men aflame.

"Mages! Get those fires out! Archers, intercept the bottles! Split into two and prepare for a pincer attack!"

"Form a circle, the pincer is coming! Protect the molotovs!"

Hayato didn't command many mages, so his troops used molotov cocktails and other tools to make up for the lost firepower. It turned out to be extremely useful. The Imperial army was accustomed to fighting magic, not rudimentary tools, so Hayato's strategy threw opponents off guard more often than not. Unfortunately, Hayato and Tatsuma's forces knew each other intimately. Each came prepared for the other's weak spots, common strategies, and everything else, and that went for the generals themselves, too.

"Tatsumaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Hayatooooooooooo!"

No one could approach their fierce one-on-one fight, and the sounds of their weapons clashing carried over the battlefield.

Hayato dodged Tatsuma's supersonic thrust at a hair's breadth, and moved in

for a sword strike. Tatsuma dropped his spear and caught Hayato's wooden sword with his bare hand, intending to follow it up with a punch. Hayato copied him, releasing his sword, and throwing a punch of his own. Their fists flew past each other and planted themselves right in their respective opponent's face.



“Agh!”

“Pfwnhh!”

Blood dripping from the corners of their mouths, they abandoned their weapons and went in for a brawl.

“I only need my fists to beat some delinquent back into line. You have no right to call me a savage, Hayato. The moment you threw that sword away, you came down to my level!”

They were trashtalking each other right in the middle of a pitched battle, and loving every moment of it. Tatsuma wore the smile of a fierce dragon, while Hayato resembled a bloodthirsty wolf.

“Waaaaargh!”

“Aaaaargh!”

With their fists tightly clenched, they jumped for each other, resuming the fight of titans.

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“*Thunder Booooooolt*!”

The robot’s voice echoed across the battlefield as a lightning bolt struck from a section of its shoulder, bringing annihilation down with it.

“Aaaaaah!”

A Sentrag soldier prepared for his death as the bolt struck toward him, but a sudden shadow passed over him, shielding him from the attack.

“Wait... huh? I’m alive?”

“Hahhh, what’s up with this damn robot? How can it use magic?”

It was Youko’s golem. A normal golem stood around fourteen feet tall, but this was Youko’s trump card, the largest golem she could create. It stood nearly twenty feet tall.

“Here, take these potions. Take the injured away while I hold it back, and hurry up... you don’t want to get caught up in what’s about to go down,” Youko

said. She took hold of a bone on the golem's shoulder and began piloting it.

She could control it at a distance, but not without some input lag. Direct touch allowed her to fully control the golem in real time. In creating this golem, Youko had used a technique avoided by golem summoners everywhere.

Her courage and bravery were what had allowed her to survive this long, and she wasn't going to give in during the most important battle in recent memory.

Reading Youko's feelings, the golem moved in and flung its boney fist against the robot. Caught off guard by the golem's speed, Superalloy failed to dodge and the mecha took the strike straight to the chest.

"Dammit, you damn cheater! No golem should be able to move that fast!"

"This is simply how my spell works."

"Yeah, I don't care. You just sit there and wait for death. I'll pulverize the men, but don't worry... I'll spare you, and any other girls in your party, to serve as my personal playthings." Tadashi Iiyama, the pilot, teased Youko via his voice coms.

While Youko couldn't see his face, she clearly felt Tadashi's dirty, lecherous gaze on her body.

"Sorry, but I'm already taken. Plus, I'm not into letting pigs have their way with me." After shooting him down metaphorically, she gave her golem the next order, ready to take Tadashi down literally as well. The golem raised its left leg at wild speeds for a golem of its size and aimed a kick at Superalloy, which blocked it with its left arm shield.

A massive thud blasted across the battlefield. Any normal stone golem's leg would have shattered on impact, but Youko's Giant Golem contained a giant's bones, making it as sturdy as steel.

"Yeah, you'd like to think that, wouldn't you? This is my game, bitch! You damn NPCs have no say in what happens next!"

When Tadashi was summoned and put in the slave collar, he figured his new world was just another game. It was the perfect place to live out his every fantasy. Even if he went on a murder spree, no one dared to face him.

Unopposed, Tadashi became a monster who'd kill if someone looked at him funny, and rape any girl he took a liking to.

Unlike the other summons, he considered the world his own personal sandbox. In the game he'd come from, Tadashi had been a notoriously toxic player. His fellow players had hated him and the mods had banned him numerous times over his disorderly conduct, but none of that had ever stopped him. Here, there were no mods to ban him. Here, he ran free, doing whatever he pleased. It was his right as the mightiest person.

"What a load of crap," Youko sighed. "I feel bad for any robot stuck with such a delusional pilot. Giant Golem, let's release him from his suffering."

There was no convincing him. More talk would only waste time. Youko stroked the Giant Golem's shoulder, and the construct nodded. It dropped its hips low and swung its boney fist at the robot.

The machine raised its shield to block again, but Youko had put considerably more strength into this strike. The impact pushed the mech back, giving Youko a chance to press forward. She had the golem swing from the left, landing a clean hit on the robot, and blasting it back.

"Gwaaaaargh!" Tadashi's scream echoed across the field.

The surrounding area was already clear. The soldiers had retreated so as to avoid the clash of literal giants. Youko shouldn't have needed to worry about additional casualties. She shouldn't have.

"You damn bitch! Die! *Burning Beaaaaaam*!"

The robot's upper body snapped into position as it released a burning beam of light from its eyes. Tadashi recklessly allowed it to bounce all over the place. He wasn't aiming at Youko, or even at anyone in particular. The beam struck a group of Imperial soldiers behind Youko, and their bodies dissolved into a cloud of crimson vapor.

"What're you doing?! At least try not to hit your allies!"

"Shut up, who cares! They're just NPCs! There's enough of them to go around!"

“They’re people, you sick bastard!”

Youko had seen countless people die fighting for freedom, their lives, or simply fighting because they’d been ordered to in the Empire’s all-consuming war. To see someone treat those lives like a kid treats an anthill enraged her beyond anything she’d felt before.

“Giant Golem... get ready to crush him.”

The golem answered Youko’s cold, rage-filled command with a deep nod and moved in to block Tadashi from evaporating any more soldiers.

“The only one getting crushed here is you! Imma kill you!” Tadashi rushed in with a scream, ready to take the fight head-on.

What came next was an earth-shattering *crash!* that shook the very battlefield.

Tadashi’s mech had ten feet of height on Youko’s golem, but the golem was made of particularly heavy material. Tadashi was betting on being able to crush the golem by pressing his height advantage. Both combatants’ feet sank into the ground as Superalloy overwhelmed the golem, forcing it to its knees.

“Hold, my golem! You can do it!” Youko cheered.

“Just give up and accept death!” Tadashi jeered.

Youko tried to lend her golem some extra strength by pumping more mana into it, but Tadashi didn’t let the opening slip by. He headbutted the golem with his mech’s horn, tearing a huge chunk of material from the golem’s head.

“Nghhhh!” Youko held fast to the golem’s shoulder and managed to stay on, but Tadashi didn’t let up. He headbutted the golem until he’d torn half its face off.

“And that’s all she wrote!” he yelled.

Youko turned to the giant iron fist, powerless before of its might. With a mean laugh, Tadashi lifted her frail body with his gigantic robotic hand.

“Nghhh! No!” Youko cried.

“Hahahaha! Finally it’s time to have some fun in this battle! Show us what

you’re hiding under those robes!”

The robot, surprisingly nimble for its size, pinched her clothes and pulled on them. At that moment, Youko’s body became mud and dry earth, and crumbled between Tadashi’s metallic fingers.

“What?! Wait, no way, is this—?!” he screamed.

“Heyho, I’m right here! It took me a while to wrap my head around this thing. Though, I did expect to struggle with things from beyond my world.” Her voice came from the center of the Giant Golem where its core, the thing that gave it life, lay.

A powerful magical barrier and a number of sturdy giant bones protected the core, however it was not impenetrable. A couple powerful, focused attacks could destroy it, ending the golem’s and Youko’s lives in the same moment. Youko had made a dummy golem that looked just like her to draw attention from the core.

“What do you mean it took some time?! Hey... wait, why can’t I move?!”

“He was crying to me, you know. He was made to uphold peace, not to slaughter innocents.” She finally revealed herself, nestled in the golem, stroking the motionless robot’s head. She was kitted out with special equipment, a robe called *Arbiter* which boosted her abilities. There was one more notable difference from her usual appearance: she was currently sprouting three tails instead of one.

During the battle, she’d extended her mana into Superalloy’s mech, attempting to find a way to take control. A proficient spellcaster could’ve detected the mana strings as she attempted her takeover. Tadashi, however, was by no means a studied mage. Only able to see through cameras, he had no chance to catch Youko’s plan until it was too late.



“Crying? Don’t give me that bull! It’s just a damn robot, a tool for me to use as I see fit!”

“Maybe that’s all he is to you, but he has a heart. A heart he gave to me. Isn’t that right, Exmeiser?”

“H-How do you know his name?!”

“He told me.”

When she spoke his true name, Exmeiser’s eyes flashed. The creaks it made trying to move sounded almost like a sorrowful cry.

“Aaaargh!” Tadashi screamed. “Move! Move, you damn scrap heap! You’re mine! Obey me!”

“He’s not yours anymore. He’s my friend and ally,” Youko said sweetly. She took a seal from her pocket and placed it on Exmeiser’s forehead.

“Rin. Pyou. Tou. Sha. Kai.”

Unlike the seal magic common to the region, the techniques developed in Yamato required her to place her hand horizontally and wave it five times in a specific manner while reciting the chant. Exmeiser’s eyes flashed with every word spoken, as its essence weakened.

“Wh-What is this?! What are you doing?! Stop that! Stop that right now!” Tadashi shouted.

“Jin. Retsu. Zai. Zen.” With those final words calmly enunciated,

Youko’s chant was complete. Exmeiser’s eyes flashed with blinding brightness as she pushed the cards into its body.

“Divination: Exmeiser... contract complete.”

Exmeiser, the thirty-foot-tall robot which had towered over the battlefield, vanished into nothingness. Tadashi, the Superalloy, wearing his pilot suit and helmet, fell to the ground, defenseless. It took a moment for Tadashi to understand what had happened, but as soon as he did, he leapt to his feet in burning rage.

“You bitch! How dare you take my precious Exmeiser! Damn cheater! Thief!

Give it back! Give it baaack!”

“Shut up already.” With a glare cold enough to freeze embers, Youko took another card, focused her magic on it, and summoned a bell-shaped golem around Tadashi, trapping him inside. His voice could be heard no more.

“Don’t worry, it magically circulates oxygen. Why am I even saying that? He can’t hear me. Giant Golem... you did well. Sorry I let you get damaged.” Her cold stare warmed, and she pet the golem’s head with a gentle smile. “However, our battle isn’t done. Please, lend me a hand to put this tyranny to an end.”

The golem creaked as if in affirmation. With only half a face, it stood and returned to the fray, leaving the enclosed Tadashi behind.

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Jirou was dashing through a torrent of machine gun fire, but the bullets could only catch his afterimage. He lobbed a javelin at the machine gun. Hunter brushed it aside and switched to his bazooka.

He took aim at Jirou and fired, unleashing a huge explosion which took out all the soldiers nearby. Without a soul in sight, Hunter took out his beam saber and spun around, seemingly for no reason, until Jirou appeared right there, countering Hunter’s blade with his own.

There was a loud clash and sparks flew between the men as they stared each other down. A normal weapon would melt under the heat of the Hunter’s beam saber, but Jirou’s sword was a rare weapon from Sengoku Wars infused with *Nin*, one of the game’s core elements.

Sengoku Wars’s endgame content took place in a special area, an underworld called the Ghostlands. The area’s end boss dropped *Darkness,* the best sword in the game, though the drop chance was absurdly low.

Darkness had the highest damage in the game, could not be destroyed by any means, and ignored the armor values of every single enemy, except for bosses. It was feather light, lending it an extremely fast attack speed in the right hands. Simply put, this weapon was broken beyond belief.

Now that very sword was clashing with the Hunter’s beam saber.

“You managed to block. I’m impressed,” Jirou said.

“I won’t be cut down by the likes of you.”

They both wore poker faces, but put all their weight behind their weapons, trying to gain an edge. It was Jirou who broke the tension. He used the staredown as an opportunity to unleash one of his ninja arts.

“*Fire Style: Flame Pillar*!”

The moment he said the words, the ground the Hunter stood on lit up briefly, before a towering pillar of flame came forth, enveloping him in flames.

However, it was not the Hunter who had to go on the defensive. Jirou jumped back only for a bullet to strike the ground where he’d stood. He turned his gaze to the sky, where he spotted the Hunter, who’d jumped above the massive pillar of flame.

Only a very few could dodge Jirou’s attacks, let alone his ninja arts. Yet, the Hunter read his moves, and avoided the pillar with almost perfect precision. His shoes were a little singed, but that was the only damage he sustained.

Still in the air, the Hunter swung his blade sideways at Jirou, sending a wave of light at him. Jirou managed to dodge the strike, but the blade of light made a sharp turn and chased him.

Unable to shake it off, Jirou struck at it, destroying its momentum entirely. Taking that as a cue, the Hunter blasted in Jirou’s direction, aiming for his arm.

“I don’t like my moves being read so easily,” Jirou complained.

“And I don’t like to think, yet here I am trying to come up with a way to surprise you.”

No one could so much as approach their supersonic battle, as a blink at the wrong time could spell their doom. This piece of the battlefield was theirs alone. The clangs of their swords clashing at near-impossible frequencies created a symphony of death.

They weren’t the only ones fighting the battle, however. Both Jirou and the Hunter’s allies were locked in life-or-death struggles of their own, but neither man could spare a moment to help.

Toe to toe, they'd both suffered a handful of grazes, sending droplets of blood through the air and onto the ground, but neither would back down. Each man was waiting for the perfect opportunity to make a decisive strike and get ahead. After a series of back and forths, they both jumped back at the same time.

Glaring at each other, they clutched their swords, panting. The sounds of the war, screams, explosions, swords clashing, and bodies hitting the ground raged on, but didn't reach their ears. The only battle before them was the one they were engaged in.

It was like a Mexican standoff. Until the Hunter broke it. He dropped all his defenses and adopted a reckless fighting style. His sword transformed to match the change, becoming much stronger, and somehow, much faster as well.

He charged Jirou and slashed at him relentlessly.

Jirou had no opportunity to so much as think as he dodged the Hunter's bestial fury. He tried to move behind the Hunter for an attack, but before he could even raise his arm, the Hunter's beam saber flashed into his field of vision and cut a deep gash in his shoulder.

Jirou tried to jump back before the next strike, but he was too late. The Hunter turned up his weapon's power even further, and kept the pressure steady so Jirou couldn't recover from the previous strike.

Jirou defended against the onslaught as best as he could, all the while waiting patiently for the precise moment for his trump card. His blood splattered a painting on the grass of the plains. Jirou was near collapse.

Past his prime and weak from loss of blood, Jirou staggered to his knees.

"This is the end."

The Hunter raised his sword high and swung down at the weakened Jirou, exactly as Jirou had planned. He leapt into the blade, allowing his body to be cut apart.

"What?!"

Even the stone cold Hunter couldn't believe his eyes. When he realized something was wrong, it was too late. Jirou—or more precisely, the Shadow

Clone Hunter had been fooled by—thudded to the ground. A blazing, burning light shone violently from his wounds.

“Tch!” The Hunter only managed to click his tongue before the body exploded, leaving a crater behind.

To achieve this effect, Jirou combined two of his skills: Shadow Clone and Atomsplitter. The former created a decoy clone of the user for bait, and the latter dealt lethal damage to near anything at the cost of the user’s body. In Sengoku Wars, these skills couldn’t be combined. The combo would have destroyed the game balance. But this was no game.

After years of experimentation and training, he learned to create clones with genuine bodies of flesh and blood. While they *were* drastically weaker than Jirou himself, they had full access to his skills.

Atomsplitter’s damage was proportional to its user’s remaining health, so though the clones had a mere 30% of Jirou’s total HP, they were capable of considerable harm.

The blinding blast forced the Hunter’s sword aside. He dropped it and attempted to dodge the eruption, but he just couldn’t. The explosion hit him full force.

Jirou panted, watching from nearby.

Some Imperial soldiers noticed him approaching the crater, but he delivered each of them a roundhouse kick to the head without so much as a glance. Even in this enfeebled, drained state, his power was still immense. The soldiers couldn’t possibly oppose him, so the rest of them just watched as he continued his walk.

The cloud of dust and smoke the explosion left in its wake enveloped the Hunter, driven to his knees, and clutching the malfunctioning beam saber. Blood gushed from him, more than from Jirou’s clone.

“Crazy bastard... you gave your clone part of your stamina...”

“To become a ninja, one must sacrifice some sanity.” Jirou strode soundlessly to the gravely wounded Hunter and took his head off in a single, definitive swoop.

At the gruesome decapitation of their commander, the Hunter's troops dropped their weapons and surrendered on the spot. Jirou's men moved in, disarmed them, and led the surrendered troops to an impromptu jail.

Meanwhile, the victorious ninja gazed down at Hunter's body and let out an exasperated sigh. The body was no more, only his black suit remained which melted into an equally black puddle and disappeared into the ground.

"He got away... I didn't expect us to both use identical tactics. That being said, I don't remember him being this strong." He stood straight. "No time to worry about that now."

"Jirou calling in. Tell Masaki that Hunter has retreated. Open the way to the headquarters."

"At once!"

After reporting to the mages, Jirou headed off for the headquarters, mulling over the sudden increase in his rival's power.

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"Message from Jirou. Hunter has made his retreat. Open HQ for him."

"Got it. I'm done with the wyverns, so I'll start working on it."

"Understood."

I answered the message from my position atop the flaming corpse of a wyvern. I cast a Flame Javelin to destroy the last one. The beast let out an ear-piercing scream and perished. The wyverns could be a handful with their strong passive regen, but I'd discovered that fire countered it. Even if the wyverns revived, the flames continued to eat away at their bodies.

Youko had managed to steal Superalloy's mech, and Jirou had the Hunter on the run. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't in play, either. That was the important thing. Hayato was still locked in his contest against the High Warlord, and was holding their advance back. I happened to know, however, that his personal goal was to take down the greatest possible number of foes. I'd heard his fierce battle cries even from my distant location.

Stalling them, defeating them, in terms of results, the outcomes were

identical. All in all, now was the perfect opportunity to raid the Imperial HQ.

After watching me slaughter the wyverns, I doubted the soldiers around here had the will to face me. I was curious about their reactions, though, so I took a step forward.

“Eeeep!” a soldier shrieked, leaping out of my way, and his fellows followed suit.

I certainly didn’t mind. Really, not having to fight was my ideal outcome.

I needed them all to stand down and clear my path. The battlefield, however, was considerably too large even for Yell. For me, Yell was another of the chat channels, but in this world it manifested as a far-reaching shout. Using it would feel great, my voice booming over the plain, but using a System Message to notify the entire area was clearly the better choice. With a System Message, I could even set the recipient, so it’d be way easier to reach the entire army.

“Drop your weapons and let us through, if you consider your life precious,”

I said in my deepest, most intimidating voice.

It struck panic in the Imperial soldiers. Many simply dropped their weapons and ran.

“I-I’m hearing voices!”

Oh. I hadn’t realized System Messages would be transmitted directly into their minds. I hadn’t meant to freak them out that bad.

“Pick up your arms, fools! You call yourself soldiers of the Empire?! Have you no shame?! Keep up the fight, and bring glory to our Emperor!”

The final Imperial commander resisted my intimidation.

To his distress, his horse had not been so stalwart. It turned tail and sprinted from the battlefield. Animals had better senses for danger than humans. Interesting to see that fact illustrated before my eyes. I walked up to the commander, took his head, and continued to Imperial headquarters.

After thinking about it for a second, I realized our intel had reported one more wyvern, one I hadn’t remembered killing. I opened my map to find it, only to see a massive red dot, right in the middle of Ralf. I thought my map had

bugged out, but the arrival of the dot was soon followed by a thunderous, earthshaking roar.

“Wh-What’s happening?!”

“Did Sentrag’s forces do something?”

“Hurry back and check what’s going on!”

The surrounding soldiers babbled in confusion. I was getting a bad feeling. My neck was burning, just like when the Leviathan appeared.

As one soldier scrambled toward Ralf to see what had happened, another flew over the town wall, screaming.

He might know something.

I cast Wing and rose to catch him, killing all his momentum. Whatever had launched him from Ralf must’ve been packing serious power. His breastplate bore an obvious dent. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a few broken ribs.

“Aaaa... huh? I’m alive?” the man blinked.

“Yeah.”

“Eeeep! N-No! Don’t!” he screamed, trying to wriggle from my grasp. “Don’t kill me! Please, please don’t kill me!”

“I know it’s hard, but please chill out. I’m not going to kill you. Now tell me, what happened?”

“Ah, ummm! Right! Barry! Barry transformed into a monster!”

“Monster?”

“Yes! We locked him in a cell, but then we heard these ungodly screams. Barry snapped his bonds and burst through the cell door! Then, then... oh lord, then he just started eating the soldiers that rushed in to stop him!”

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Barry’s transformation had begun just before Masaki arrived at Imperial HQ, while he was still dispatching the wyverns. Barry had been locked in a solitary cell, barred from joining the fray. Though stripped of his title, handcuffed, and imprisoned, his eyes sparkled with hope.

“This is fine. Perfectly fine. I sacrificed myself, just as I was instructed,” he muttered.

Barry had taken responsibility for the disastrous Demonkind war and volunteered to serve a mediator and attempt to reach a temporary truce. Under the circumstances, the council should never have accepted his proposal, but mysteriously, likely thanks to his mysterious benefactor, they’d unanimously agreed.

Barry’s goal had been to botch the meeting, goading the enraged Demonkind into waging a ruthless campaign against the Empire. Thousands of soldiers had been lost and Barry had been sent to this wet, dark cell.

“I did well, right? Now it’s your turn to make me a hero.”

Barry stood and glanced at the shadowy corner of his prison.

There stood a hooded figure, watching his every move.

“You did well, indeed. Now, take your gift, and slaughter every last commoner, soldier, and prince of this land. Then, and only then, you shall be sung as a hero.” The figure flashed Barry a crooked smile as their quiet, androgynous voice echoed in the room. It was a voice to corrupt a man’s soul.

“A hero... haha, that’s right. I’ll be a hero!” He took the Seed he was given and downed it with a gulp of water.

Barry’s heart began to thrash against his ribcage, but he didn’t feel sick. On the contrary, the power seeping through his body thrilled him.

“This power! This power! Ahahahahaha!”

“This is the power of a hero. However, to reach your full potential, you must present a sacrifice. Now, go, my champion. Become the hero these lands so crave!”

“Sacrifice? I’ll give you sacrifice! Muhahaha! Muhahahahaha!” Barry let out a monstrous cackle, casually snapped the cuffs from his wrists, and stalked to the door.

“What’s happening?!”

At the sound of Barry’s demented laugh, the soldiers rushed in only to be

greeted with an ear-piercing roar as the former commander blasted the bars out into the corridor.

“Wow... so this is the power of a hero... incredible! Truly magnificent!” The raw might intoxicated Barry, driving him to seek even higher highs.

“What the hell are you doing, Barry? Get back in your cell, right now! You’re a pri—AGHH!” The soldier couldn’t even finish his sentence before Barry launched himself at the man and bashed his head against the wall. His crushed skull left only a large, red smear on the wall, as if it’d been pelted with tomatoes.

Vile though it was, that was only the beginning of his Barry’s rampage.

He swung his arm into the wall, crushing through it with a single punch. The din and commotion drew even more soldiers. When they arrived, Barry rained brutality on them without hesitation, destroying both their bodies and the building itself.

One brave soldier weathered the storm and charged Barry, but the monster sent him flying through a wall with a kick to the gut.

“I’m hungry...” Barry, famished, took hold of a nearby survivor and started to eat him, starting with the head.

“Aaaaarh! Aaaaaaaah! Stop! It hurts, hurts, huuurts! Stooo—!”

Bones crunched between Barry’s teeth as he devoured the soldier. At this, the remaining survivors fled.

“I’m growing stronger... muhahaha... more... I want more!” Barry turned to the corpses littering the prison and began his macabre feast. He slurped, gnashed, and gnawed, consuming body after body, amassing power. With every bite taken, every soldier massacred, Barry drifted further away from anything that could be called a hero. As he was enmeshed in his feast, a large shadow fell on him from behind.

“GALALALALA!”

“Shut up, worm.”

“GA?”

The wyvern, realizing that something was amiss, rushed Barry, but was immediately eradicated. The beast couldn't hold a candle to the monster.

"Even wyverns can't stand against me, huh...? But I need more... I need more power!" Surrendering to madness, Barry set off for the one place he'd sworn to protect, the one building where all his allies and commanders were huddled: the evacuation shelter.

"Fight! Display your strength as a proud subject of the Empire and stop that beast!"

At their commander's expert order, the remaining soldiers returned to their senses, shaking off the terror they'd witnessed, but it mattered not.

The unstoppable power transformed Barry's body into a giant mass of flesh, driven only by hunger. He ate and grew and ate and grew, until each and every person in the Imperial headquarters had been massacred.

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He started eating people? Yep, that's a monster, all right. The soldier I'd rescued was still shaking in my arms. Though his ribs were broken, sheer terror must've overshadowed all his pain.

Something ghastly must've happened in the HQ.

Another shuddering roar blasted across the battlefield.

I glanced at Ralf. Smoke rose from the town. There was something flying above—a wyvern? Really, flying was an overstatement. Its skin and muscles hung from its body, as it desperately flapped its boney wings with the scraps of remaining muscle. Its skull was caved in. Even with wyvern regeneration, it was as good as dead.

"L-Let me! Let me go! Please! He's gonna kill me! Barry's gonna come and kill me!"

The soldier struggled against my hold, disregarding his broken arm. And then there was another roar, so loud it seemed to shake the sky. Everyone on the battlefield froze, their eyes drawn to Ralf.

I shoved a healing potion in the hand of the wriggling soldier, and patted

another nearby man on the back.

“Make him drink that and run.”

“Huh?”

“Just do as I say! Something ferocious is coming; you all have to run!” They must’ve felt the urgency in my voice, as everyone close to the HQ started to run.

My Perception Boost had been going bonkers for a while now, lifting the hairs on the back of my neck, even with Invincibility active. The battle between Sentrag and the Empire had been a mere prelude to what was coming, and it needed to end immediately—for everyone’s sake.

I used System Message and addressed everyone in the area.

“Notifying all combat personnel! Emergency situation in Ralf! I repeat! Notifying all combat personnel! Emergency situation in Ralf! All commanders and summoned soldiers are to report at the gates!”

Adel, Jirou, Youko, riding her giant golem, and Leon on his dragon reached Ralf first. Akiha came a bit after, riding a tiger-shaped golem. After her, Hayato, and the High Warlord arrived with their respective troops. The sudden disaster had all of us, even the hardened veterans shocked to our cores.

“Damn, I’m getting goosebumps. Was that notification you, Azure Hero of Sentrag?” the High Warlord asked. “Tell us what happened.”

“Something’s been unleashed on Ralf, and it’s no joke. Just look at that poor wyvern.” I gestured at the skeletal remains of the battered wyvern.

One glance was enough for everyone gathered to understand the sheer terror of whatever ran rampant in Ralf. Akiha put her hands to her mouth and looked away. Haruka wrapped her arms around her sister and soothed her slowly.

“It seems some Barry guy’s gone full monster. He’s been eating people.”

“Did you just say ‘Barry’?!” The High Warlord’s shocked yelp was overpowered by the beast’s mighty roar. We all looked to Ralf and watched as one of the walls crumbled to nothingness.

In the dust stood a single man, emanating an ominous red aura. In his hand,

he grasped another man, whose once-ornate clothes had been reduced to tatters. The gashes and tears mangling his body revealed bones and internal organs.

“Prince Alfred?! What happened?!”

The man at death’s doorstep turned out to be the Emperor’s son. To commit such butchery, Barry must’ve lost it entirely.

Barry’s ominous aura overpowered Akiha. Haruka and Leon fell back to console her.

“Barry... is that you? Do you have any idea what you’re doing?!” Tatsuma demanded of his former colleague.

“What, Tatsuma? I just killed a worthless prince. That’s all. At least he’ll be useful in death, right? A necessary sacrifice to birth a hero!”

“What?! Wait, don’t tell me... did you—?!”

“Oh, yes, I did. Look,” Barry spread his arms, displaying his handiwork. “What a beautiful hill of human sacrifices.”

I’d originally thought it was a pile of rubble, but no. He was gesturing at bodies, mounds of human bodies. And they weren’t just soldiers, either; civilians were stacked and jumbled in the mass, too. Little children, couples grasping each other’s hands as they perished.

It was... abhorrent. Barry was out of his mind. Utterly mad.

“Sacrifices?! Those are human beings, you bastard!”

“So what? I’m more than human,” came Barry’s laughing reply. “This filth should be honored to be stepping stones to my greatness... to this power! I suppose I’ll start with you, Tatsuma. I never liked you.” Barry crushed the prince’s skull in with his bare hand, tossed him aside, and charged Tatsuma with a mighty roar.

“Aaaaargh!”

Barry was so much faster than I’d anticipated. He closed the distance between himself and Tatsuma in an instant. His claws drew a crimson arc in the air, describing his swing.

Tatsuma raised his spear to block, but the sheer force of the attack sent him crashing to the ground. The average soldier would have died on the spot, but Tatsuma bore the damage from the initial shock.

Barry's onslaught, however, was far from over. He kept forcing his claws up against Tatsuma's spear.

"Die!"

He raised his other hand, aiming to slice Tatsuma's belly wide open. I had to act, or he was done for—but someone else was there before I could move, shielding him from the lethal strike.

It was Hayato, the person Tatsuma most despised.

"Waaaaargh!"

Even with Hayato's monstrous strength, just holding Barry's talons back took everything the Delinquent had. Deflecting the claws and striking back was out of the question. Barry was simply too powerful.

"Muhahaha! Incredible! I can stand toe to toe with these summoned sacks of shit!" Barry was elated. "Truly incredible! This is what a hero is like! Wielding this power is my birthright!"

As summons, Hayato and Tatsuma's power and equipment should've been unrivaled by the denizens of this world, but even with their combined might, they struggled to stave off a brutal death.

Without me, they'd be overpowered. I launched myself at Barry with all the speed I could muster and activated Surge.

"Tch. You think you can stand before me, the true hero of the land? You're just an impostor, a fake!"

Barry's sharp senses allowed him to dodge the brunt of my strike, but Surge clipped his arm, confirming that he didn't have Invincibility like me. Speaking of things he lacked, I wished he also lacked a tongue. Calling yourself a hero? Cringe, cringe, cringe.

"Look, I really don't care for this whole hero thing," I said, already becoming annoyed. "Hayato, Tatsuma. Let me take care of this guy."

“What?!” the High Warlord demanded.

“You guys must realize he’s way on one end of the bell curve. I’ll handle him. You guys look for survivors in Ralf. Please.”

“How dare you—?!”

I was well aware of the selfishness of my request, but if these guys stayed, all they’d do is get caught up in the crossfire. My concern for them wasn’t my only motivation, though. I wanted to face Barry alone. He murdered innocents. He murdered defenseless civilians, children, and women in a war. I couldn’t forgive that.

“Tatsuma, listen to Masaki,” Hayato urged his rival. “I know you want to save those who can be saved.”

“Not only that, I know jack about Ralf,” I added. “As a general, I’m sure you’re much more knowledgeable about the town and the surrounding areas.”

“Tch!”

Hayato and I finally persuaded Tatsuma, and the two of them set off for Ralf. I could only hope some survivors remained, but I had to handle this monstrosity before I could see for myself.

“I’m not letting you go!” Barry roared.

“That’s my line, you self-proclaimed hero.”

Sword in hand, I intercepted Barry before he could catch up to Tatsuma. If I couldn’t keep him at bay, this situation would only get uglier.

“Arghhh, dammit! All right, fine, if you want to die so fast, I’ll kill you right now, Mr. Hero of Sentrag!”

“Just so you know, I never asked to be a hero.”

Barry slashed at me with both taloned hands. I had to dodge, because if Barry realized I was invulnerable to his attacks, he might decide I wasn’t worth it and head back for Ralf. I needed to be patient. I needed to be focused. I needed to find an opening.

His movements were inelegant, but his speed and sheer power more than

made up for his lack of technique. It felt like I was fighting a rabid beast. If Tatsuma and Hayato had time to adjust to Barry's blinding speed, they could probably take him in an extended battle, but a single strike could easily end either of them. This wasn't the fight for them.

Powerful though it may be, overwhelming though it may be, his moveset was truly boring. It was time to insult him.

"Your moves are really boring for someone who calls himself a 'hero,'" I jeered. "Come at me like you mean it."

"How dare you! Bastard! I will not tolerate such insolence! Prepare to die!"

He just ate it up, fell for it completely. Now that I'd stoked his wrath, I didn't expect him to rest until I was out. I dodged his razor claws, took hold of his arm, and threw him to the ground, slamming him with all the force at my disposal.

"Aghhh!"

My strength surprised me. Barry's impact with the ground left a shallow, Barry-shaped impression in the dirt. It hurt him more than I thought. I pushed my advantage before he could recover.

I raised my sword and slashed at his chest. Seven Arthur's ability activated, producing three additional attacks. I watched as the four ragged rents in his chest knitted back together near instantaneously. So he had a powerful regenerative ability, like the wyverns. I was sure he was going to be a real pain to handle.

He was no target dummy, that was sure. Barry shaped his seething, scarlet aura into horns on his legs and kicked at me with them. I hopped back, avoiding the attack neatly.

"Dammit! Stop dodging!"

"Are you listening to yourself?"

Even though I didn't precisely *have* to dodge, it's hard to stand in one place with a foot coming at your face. Barry stood and charged me again. His enhanced claws and legs brushed against my cloak, but Invincibility protected me from any damage.

As the fight went on, I got some hits in here and there, but his boiling aura drastically reduced the damage of my slashes, and any scratch I made on his body healed over immediately. I could probably do some real hurt with a spell, but Barry didn't leave openings for me to cast anything.

We were in a war of attrition now. I had to steadily, patiently chip away at his stamina until he surrendered. Barry kept up his flurry of blows, but my eyes had grown accustomed to his speed, making dodging trivial.

"Hahhh, hahhh... why?! Why can't I hit you?!"

His bloodshot eyes glared hatefully into me for a moment before he launched himself at me once more. He seemed slower than before, I noticed. I supposed he must have lost too much blood. His regen probably worked the same way healing spells did, so it wouldn't generate new blood cells. The superficial damage would be repaired, but Barry would still bleed out slowly from all the cuts and bruises he'd suffered.

Even with all that blood loss, he was still a real danger. By no means was our fight a walk in the park. The surrounding area was covered in the craters his attacks left in their wake.

"Oh... oh! That's right!" Barry suddenly cried. "I'm so stupid... I'm not a hero... not a complete one, anyways! I need more... I need to eat more!" He dashed off toward the soldiers, reaching speeds I hadn't yet seen.

I had to catch up to him.

"Aaaaaargh!"

"Give me blood! Give me your flesh!"

The drooling Barry was just about to chomp into the soldier he'd caught when the sharp sound of a gunshot reverberated across the battlefield. Barry went flying back. Once he caught ground, thick spears of pure mana pinned him down.

Akiha and Adel had made it. They'd been coordinating the evacuation, but had returned in the nick of time.

"I'm glad you're here," I said, relieved.

“Yep, thank goodness we came prepared.” Akiha turned to the soldiers. “Listen up, everyone! Run before he gets up!”

“R-Right! Thank you!” The Imperial soldiers thanked the girls and began their exodus from the battlefield.

It was pretty heartwarming to see our enemies being so trusting and appreciative of our efforts, but I couldn’t get distracted by my fuzzy feelings. Barry lay there, his stomach punctured by the mana spear, looking like a hyena’s prey: weakened, injured, and completely broken. It seemed like we could finally celebrate our victory, but something was off. I had this tingle, this sensation, that things were going to take a turn for the worse.

Sure enough, after a moment, violent convulsions overtook Barry’s body and his red aura darkened to black. The sheer pressure of his very bloodlust, his might was suffocating.

“Meat... meat... I hunger... blood... lifeblood... power... give me poweeeeer!”

The next second, his body began to inflate, transforming Barry into a towering mass of muscle and flesh. His body stretched to reach thirty feet into the air, as tall as Superalloy’s mech. His muscles, which had originally seemed human, hardened, becoming like tree bark both in color and in texture.

This was no longer Barry. He’d used and abused others in his zealous quest for heroism, and now it had finally killed him, and turned him into this hulking grotesque. He took hold of Adel’s mana spears and shattered them, as if they were mere twigs.

A viscous, vile blob of drool flew from his mouth as he turned to Adel. I cast Wing on the spot, darted into his face, and used Surge to slash away at him before he could do anything to Adel.

“You’re not getting anywhere near her!”

I put all my power behind the slash. The vegetation encasing his muscles proved sturdier than even the Leviathan’s scales, and regenerated with alarming speed. I didn’t deal any damage, but at least I’d gotten his attention.

“Gwaaaaagh!”

He swung his titanic arm at me, letting loose a deafening roar. His new form wasn't exactly built for speed, so dodging his attacks was even easier than before. He was, however, built for destruction. The raw force of his swing created enough wind pressure to brew a storm. I would be blasted out of the atmosphere if he got a solid hit in.

"Gwaaaaaaaargh!"

After another frenzied bellow, tendrils began sprouting from his back. And then they started to come for me. I was so done. I just wanted the whole thing to be over with already, so I struck down at the tendrils with my sword. The seven secondary attacks minced them instantly, but the tendrils regenerated as quickly as I'd eliminated them. I tried to burn them off, but without a second to gather my mana, all I could achieve was a nice sear on their surface.

"I hate this."

I considered pausing for long enough to take a hit from his giant fists so I could summon mana and blast him with a strong spell. I'd take no damage, but I was sure the impact and its pushback would throw my focus. As a last ditch effort, I attempted to focus my mana while in flight and dodging. Then, suddenly, the tendrils were blown off before my eyes.

"Can you hear me? Adel and I will try to support you!" I heard Akiha whisper in my mind.

She was firing away at the tendrils with her anti-materiel rifle, while Adel conjured a ring-shaped blade for some extreme gardening. Their aid gave me a little breathing room, so I landed on the ground and began to concentrate.

Flame Javelin could dish out serious damage, but it paled in comparison to the spell I prepared to cast. It was one of the highest damage spells in Britallia Online, mainly used in large-scale guild PvP situations. I'd been wary to test it out because of its sheer destructive power, but I had absolutely no sympathy for the beast before me. None at all.

Scarlet energy lit my hands as my spell preparations came to their end.

"Die, you bastard! *Crimson Nova!*"

A molten laser shot from both my hands, struck Barry, and set him ablaze,

consuming his outer shell. Crimson Nova could evaporate castle gates, so I was eager to see him try to regenerate faster than the fire could devour him.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarg—!" His shriek of agony came to a strangled end as his vocal cords burned away. For a moment, I felt dizzy, on the edge of passing out, but a High MP Potion solved that right quick. With that handled, I began to realize that Crimson Nova wouldn't be enough to take Barry out for good.

For the longest time, I'd been wanting to experiment with something. When was I gonna have a better opportunity? In this world, the power you imagined your spells had was the power they'd have when you cast them. I hypothesized that this property would also extend to skills.

As it so happened, I had a spell similar to Adel's unique ability, which allowed me to harden my mana. The aptly named *Solidify Mana* allowed me to shape my pure, crystallized magic juice into weapons. Adel had told me she could amplify her weapons' power by envisioning a stronger version of them. I figured the chances were pretty good that it'd work for me, too.

As I'd mentioned, Surge and Thousand Blades of Nirvana didn't play particularly nice together. Unlike Surge, which released one gigantic blast, Thousand Blades of Nirvana discharged multiple weapons to decimate foes. So what if I imagined a single, gargantuan weapon, constructed from all the smaller weapons the skill created? What if I imagined a blade to pierce heaven?

Skill Synthesis: Gigasurge learned.

That message popped into my head, notifying me that I'd successfully created a new skill. It was very, very strange for one reason:

I didn't remember having that ability. I gave my skill list a quick scroll and, sure enough, there was a new entry. The tooltip read, *"Skill obtained by combining two specific skills."* Not particularly informative, but whatever. I swapped Multicast out for Gigasurge.

I raised my beloved Seven Arthur to the sky and activated Gigasurge. My health and focus drained away, as Gigasurge absorbed my HP and MP both. I grit my teeth and bore it. Glowing images of spears, katanas, shortswords, polearms, arrows, and lances flashed around my sword before congealing into a

sparkling aura. When it dimmed, Seven Arthur had transformed into a katana.

My body instinctively moved to activate Gigasurge. After a fragment of a moment, a fraction of a second, the potent energy wave had already passed through Barry, slicing him in twain, even cutting the flames.



“Nwrhhhhh...” Bisected diagonally, his singed body collapsed on itself. I watched him writhe in torment as the fires fizzled, leaving behind only Barry’s blackened, lonely body.

“Aghh... awhhh... ahhh...”

He was still alive. Insane. The unbridled power crackling through his body probably let him hang on for a little longer. Perfect. I wanted to have a conversation with the guy.

“Where did you get all this power?”

“Aghhh... power... give... power... hero... I’m hero... owww... it hurts... power... I’m a hero... the king... of all... heroes...”

Or not. He wouldn’t be chatting with anyone anytime soon. Barry’s mind was shattered, broken beyond repair. Any useful information would have to come from his memories.

I had to hurry. I couldn’t be sure when his body would give out. I used Access Logs on him and started to sift through his recollections. In them, a mysterious person and Barry were talking. Actually, I couldn’t be sure it was a person. Their face was completely covered in a mosaic. “Strange” would be putting it mildly.

I scrolled further back, watched Barry botch the treaty meeting and take responsibility for the war. Then... I found it. The hooded, mosaic-faced figure offered Barry a drug. I tried to figure out what it was, but my screen got all noisy and I couldn’t make it out.

I closed the window and watched as Barry’s body broke down into fine grains of sand, which the wind picked up and carried away. The Battle of the Grand Plains was over. The Empire lost, suffering immense casualties, including Prince Alfred, their commander-in-chief.

I wanted to be happy but the cloaked being who’d probably puppeteered Barry had planted in me a growing seed of worry. I walked to Ralf quietly and was greeted by cheers of welcome from my allies and some of the evacuated soldiers.

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While Masaki and his companions were all gathered in Ralf, Tadashi remained trapped inside Youko's bell-shaped golem.

"That damn bitch... she must've been hacking," he ranted. "Oh, but you just wait. I'll make you give birth to my child once I get out. Devs! C'mon already! Fix this shit!"

He still firmly believed he was stuck in a game and could just replay the battle. Of course, even if he could, nothing would change. Tadashi would still have acted like a god, doing exactly as he pleased. Locked in the golem, he screamed and screamed for the devs, but they would never come.

By luck, fate, or a miracle, someone on the abandoned battlefield actually heard his irate babble.

"Wow, this is pathetic. Come, I'm here to recover our war assets."

The Hunter used a sturdy drill to puncture the golem, covering his stylish, black suit with mud. He looked inside.

"Shut up..." he scoffed at his savior. "Let me retry, I'll crush that bitch the next time!" Tadashi glared at Hunter as though he were nothing more than trash. "Whatever. Just get me out of here so we can strike back. It's time for the hero to rise from his ashes!"

"That's not going to happen," Hunter replied flatly.

"What? Are you stupid? Of course it is!"

"Hahhh, weren't you listening?" he sighed. "I said I'm here to recover our war assets."

Hunter jumped at Tadashi and thrust his arm through Tadashi's ribs and lungs. His hands burst out from Tadashi's back, bloodied.

"Gahhhh! Wh-What the... fuck... are you... we're... allies, you—" Tadashi gasped.

"You're no ally of mine," Hunter said casually. "You never were. But, credit where credit is due, you *were* a useful shield."

Seeming relaxed, Hunter drew his arm back and cleaned the gore from his hand leaving only a tiny, shining seed in his palm.

“Mission complete. You’re completely worthless without Exmeiser, so I’m taking this back to fuel our next summon.”

“N-No... help... I can’t—! I can’t brea—!” Tadashi sucked as much air into his ruptured lungs as he could, further fracturing his broken ribs. His in-game character was remarkably durable, so once Tadashi inherited his stats, he could stand his ground in this world of wars and magic. In his final moments, however, that power only prolonged his suffering.

Hunter broke down the bell-shaped golem with his bare hands and disappeared. He was not one to watch his prey suffer.

Tadashi slowly, agonizingly suffocated as foam built up in his lungs.

With no one to watch, no one to grieve, he died a lonely death in an alien world.

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News of the Empire’s disastrous defeat and the death of the crown prince spread through the Imperial capital, stirring unrest. Some nobles evacuated the city, while others hired private armies, formed a resistance, and protested in front of the palace.

Emperor Aldebaran didn’t even have time to lament the misfortune of his position. Beating back the resistance kept his hands full.

He managed to crush the general who led the resistance, ordered the capital closed, and called for the return of the soldiers who’d been sent to Ralf and the surrounding areas. They’d have to reorganize their ranks, but a direct road connected Ralf to the Imperial capital. The route took two days on horseback and five on foot.

He just had to hold out for those five days.

Where his summons were concerned, Tatsuma, the High Warlord, had been taken prisoner, Tadashi, the Superalloy, had died on the battlefield, and the Hunter had vanished completely. The Emperor could now rely only on the High Admiral, who’d been dispatched to distant seas. Even if the Emperor contacted him, he’d never be back in time.

“Dammit! If only I had a Seed...” he complained to himself in his room.

Before the Emperor had gone to war, a certain mage had visited the Empire and offered him both the ritual to summon combatants from other worlds, and the collar to control them. With the mage’s aid, the Emperor had conquered the south, laid waste to the mighty Valentine Empire, and brought Leviathan under his control. It would’ve only been a matter of time before he achieved complete dominion of the south, and only Sentrag had still defied him in the north.

But then, disaster had struck and the Emperor lost control of the Leviathan. He’d gone on to lose the most important battle in recent history, and his enemies were practically knocking down his door. Without the High Admiral, the Emperor was powerless. His only choice was to hole up and weather the storm.

To summon further combatants, he required a Seed, but he had none. Though he’d put years into researching the Seeds to determine their origin or composition, the Emperor had nothing to show for it.

“Grandfather...”

His treasured, beloved granddaughter entered his room. She was the dearest memento his son had left him. When her parents died, the Emperor and Alfred, her brother, had taken it upon themselves to raise her together, lavishing her with all the love and care in the world. The wars they waged were kept secret from the little girl.

“I heard Alfred passed away... is that true?”

“Ummm... yes, it is. He fought valiantly, but unfortunately he passed away. He died a heroic death.”

Of course he lied, but he couldn’t tell his granddaughter her brother had been senselessly slain. The Emperor wanted her to believe, at the very least, that Alfred had brought honor to his name. Merciless reality was too cruel for a little girl to handle. He told her Alfred had died fighting to protect the Empire, that he’d ordered the nobility to join his cause, and executed those that defied him.

“A heroic death... he went to the same place Mommy and Daddy went...” she

murmured, her small hands quaking with the effort of holding back her tears. She was only fifteen, no one would blame her if she broke down upon hearing the dreadful news. But, she was a princess. She knew that, as the granddaughter of the Emperor, she couldn't let her feelings overwhelm her.

"Filia, the Empire has no future," her grandfather told her gravely. "I can arrange your escape, escorted by my most trusted knights, if you so wish."

"Grandfather?"

With fewer than 100,000 troops at his disposal, Aldebaran understood that the capital was lost. He couldn't defend the city, but he wanted to ensure the safety of his precious granddaughter. He'd never shown Filia a hint of weakness before, but he didn't regret this moment. He was old and time was coming for him. Little Filia, though, had her whole life in front of her.

"No... no... if I take those knights and run, then—"

A knock at the door interrupted Filia's protest.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty. Pavalia wishes to see you."

"Say that again, Prime Minister Iiro! Pavalia is here?! Don't just stand there, let them in!"

"Understood!"

Aldebaran couldn't hide his smile when he heard the name "Pavalia." In that moment, his expression of despair transformed into hope. Her grandfather's sudden attitude change took Filia aback. The twinkle in his eyes gave her a bad premonition.

Moments and another knock later, Iiro opened the door to admit the guest. A cloaked someone entered, and Iiro closed the door behind them.

Pavalia's gender and ethnicity were unclear, they were notoriously mysterious and elusive; it was never certain when they'd appear again. Despite that, the Emperor treasured and respected Pavalia tremendously. After all, it was Pavalia who had provided the Empire with the most wondrous gift: the ability to summon combatants from other worlds.

"It's been long since we last talked, Your Majesty. I see you find yourself in

great peril.”

“That is certainly true. We lost a key battle and my Empire is on the brink of collapse,” he leapt from his chair like an excited child, knocking it over behind him. He fell to his knees before the figure. “Please, I’m begging you... give me another Seed! I’ll pay whatever it takes!”

“G-Grandfather... who’s that?” Filia asked, more nervous by the moment.

“Ummm... this person saved us before in times of great need.”

“I-Is that so? I’m sorry, but... they frighten me.” Fillia felt something innately inhuman emanating from the figure. It filled her with an icy fear. Her legs began to shake, and she broke out in a cold sweat. Iiro had to rush in to catch her before she collapsed to the ground.

His touch repulsed her, but Iiro didn’t seem to have noticed the momentary flash of Filia’s true feelings. He simply held her up, making sure the princess was well.

“Raise your head. I have something much better than a Seed for you. With this in hand, the entire continent will bow before the overwhelming might of the Empire.”

“I-Is that true! That’s marvellous!” came the Emperor’s excitable reply.

Until now, ruling the entire continent had merely been a fantasy, so the pure glee in his voice was palpable. He’d been offered the opportunity to turn his dreams to reality and was elated.

His elation didn’t extend to Filia. She was mired in total horror. Having lived a life sheltered from war, the overwhelming power this person offered her grandfather shook her to the foundation.

“Ummm... I-I don’t think I belong here, Grandfather. I’ll humbly return to my room.” Taken by terror, she dashed for the exit. She’d thrown pleasantries and etiquette to the wind, Filia simply couldn’t bear to spend another moment with that hooded figure and Iiro.

“Don’t go anywhere. You need to... bloom.”

“My apologies, Princess Filia.”

Iiro's arms melted into tentacles and lashed out at Filia. They pierced her small body with effortless speed and retracted just as quickly, leaving a single seed behind.

He didn't give Filia time to understand what had happened. She only felt a sharp pain in her chest before the seed sprouted into a mass of twisting, thorny vines that coiled around her body.

"Filiaaaaaa! Iiro, you bastard!" Aldebaran took an ornate sword, one of the Empire's treasures, from the wall and charged at Iiro.

His speed and the power behind his swing were extraordinary for an old man. They were echoes of his golden days, when he'd clashed with King Rolan on the battlefield, fighting for his life.

Impressive as his display may have been, the hooded figure casually raised one finger, halting the Emperor's blade. His heroic charge hadn't even inconvenienced Pavalia, let alone threatened them.

"I wish you'd listened to what I said. I'm one to always keep my promises, Emperor Aldebaran. The continent will bow before the Empire's might. This flower will birth life and devour the continent in a twinkling. The only difference, Emperor, is that you won't be there to see it. Iiro will take your role."

"Don't worry, Emperor... or should I say, ex-Emperor," Iiro said mockingly, "I will marry your granddaughter and keep your bloodline alive."

"Fuck you! Release Filia this instant!"

"Sadly, we cannot. But take pride, Aldebaran, for your ashes will feed the birth of a new Empire. Emperor Iiro. Dispose of the ex-Emperor."

"At once. It's been a pleasure, Your Majesty." Dozens of thorny tentacles sprouted from Iiro's back and pierced Aldebaran's body.

"Gwaghhh! I-Iiro... you... basta—"

The thorny branches enveloped the old man and began to digest. They twitched and pulsed with disgusting squelches as they consumed him. Aldebaran's sword fell to the ground with a loud clank as the thorny ball slowly

opened like a flower, revealing nothing. The Emperor's body had entirely dissolved.

"Well done. That was much more stable than Barry's."

"Please, it's only thanks to your boon. Either way, Aldebaran is no more. I am now the true Emperor of these lands." Iiro sat with a cackle, prompting a smile from the hooded menace.

"Hahhh, y'know, I really don't think you're fit for the throne," a high-pitched voice called to Iiro. "Let me exempt you from the responsibilities that come with the position. *Prism Missile!*"

A rain of sparkling shells pierced through the ceiling, aiming for him.

The hooded figure raised their left hand, erecting a thorny barrier in front of Iiro. The shells exploded on impact, leaving Iiro unscathed, and redirecting the explosion to the rest of the room.

"Wh-Wh-What's going on?!"

The hooded figure sighed at Iiro's complete confusion. They pointed at the ceiling, sending a black spear of spiked vines into it. The spear penetrated the stone, but was met with a bright flash that destroyed it completely, taking another chunk of the ceiling with it.

From the hole descended a blue-haired girl wearing a uniform unlike any clothing in this world. Shining blade in one hand, Corona entered the room.

"My Lord, it seems we were late. Emperor Aldebaran has perished, and Princess Filia is entrapped in vegetation."

"Hahhh, dammit. Curse my luck," Corona's "Lord," Shou said, as he descended behind her, black and blue robe fluttering. "I felt some strange monster lurking below us, so I'm not exactly surprised to see you here, *Faceless One*."

The battle left his clothes torn and singed, but he'd made it without serious injury.

"I must commend your ability to perform a summon in such a tight space, but I'd much rather you packed up and went away. Please understand that we're awfully busy here, Shou."

“Tch, stop acting all high and mighty,” Shou said, annoyed. “Or what? You *expected* me to come ruin your party?” He glanced at the trapped princess with a heavy sigh. “How many times have I told you that you have to treat ladies right, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Emperor?”

Shou glared at Iiro and unsheathed the black sword at his hip. A dark aura enveloped his unique weapon, *Demon Blade Gram*.

Though the sight was certainly terrifying, Iiro didn’t so much as flinch. He sat casually in his chair. “Haha, don’t worry, I took your advice to heart,” he said with a broad smile. “She’s suffering now, but this a necessary evil she must endure so she can blossom into a gorgeous flower, worthy of becoming my wife.”

“Hah! If you want to fuck the girl of your dreams so bad, then just commission a fuckdoll, for goodness’ sake. Corona! How long will it take to save the princess?”

“Five minutes, including analyzing the prison entrapping her.”

“Got it. Try to speed it up, I’ll reward you if you get in under five.”

“No, thank you.”

“Tch, you’re no fun.”

“That’s a nice plan you have there. It’d be a real shame if someone stopped it.”

The Faceless One raised their dangling sleeve. More than a hundred thorned and gnarled branches shot at Shou. A loud *shwup* blasted through the room as the sea of greenery simply vanished.

Shou stood across the Faceless One. Behind him appeared a Buster Megalochimera, a huge robotic beast with smoke rising from the gun fort on its back. Its unique skill canceled a single attack entirely, destroying the branches.

As the attack meant to end the battle instantly failed, the Faceless One flashed an excited smile.

“Hoho, impressive. Not many can face that attack and live to tell the tale. You’re more of a handful than I originally thought. Emperor Iiro. Join us.”

“At once!” A multitude of tentacles shining with light the color of lead sprouted from his back.

Shou simply stood there, calm and cheeky as ever, and took a card from his pocket. Its flash summoned a Giga Cerberos, Chainsaw Mantis, a Gear Lich, and a plethora of other titanic, mechanical beasts, which crowded the room.

Thorny vines overran the palace. Inside, Shou’s mechanical horde battled the vegetation. The impacts and explosions from their combat shook the entire building. Still, no one outside could fathom the battle being waged within, a battle to decide the Empire’s future.

Epilogue: Adel

I'm Adelheid Bernstein, the sole daughter of Duke Bernstein, and a viscountess of the Valentine Empire.

Or at least, I was.

The country I served had been destroyed by the Empire's unbeatable fleet. When they ravaged my lands, I was captured and locked in a cage carefully prepared to hold a vampire.

Silver stakes, ten of them, pierced my body. I could but watch in despair as our castle was razed to the ground. Having failed to protect the ones I loved, and entrapped in a magical cage for so long I lost count of the days, I'd go on to live out the rest of my life as a slave, or to be subjected to vile, inhumane experiments.

And then, as I was being transported to my dreadful destiny, the Imperial slave ship fell under attack. I feared I'd simply trade hands, from slavers to pirates. Though how they'd enter my sturdy, enchanted cell I couldn't guess.

Firmly believing escape from this hell to be impossible, I hopelessly waited for the attack to blow over. My injuries were deep. To heal, I'd need an offering of fresh human blood. I knew no human would be so foolish as to trade their soul to save a single girl, let alone a vampire.

While I, a True Blood, could walk under the sun and behave like any normal person, most people from other countries felt a profound terror when they learned of my true nature. Of course they would. It was only common sense.

But the azure-cloaked man that appeared before me shattered common sense along with my cell. Only the greatest mages could break into such a cell, but he cracked it open as easily as a nut.

However, that was but the start of his incredible display.

Next, he took me to the "Room." A magical space that could not be infiltrated. I'd never even heard of a space like that, let alone seen one with my own eyes.

Youko, a magic researcher also held captive on the slave ship, told him I could only be healed by an offering of his blood. She warned him that doing so would damn him, transforming him into a being of the night.

Yet, he slit his wrist of his own volition and pushed it against my mouth. I sank my teeth into his supple flesh and filled my mouth with his sweet, thick blood.

The moment his blood touched my tongue, my vampiric nature took control. I kept drinking even long after my most serious injuries had healed. I glanced up at him. Instead of the look of pure shock and disgust I expected, he looked back with a warm smile and gently patted my head. That was the very moment he captured my heart, even if I didn't yet understand what the rush of heat and the tingling all over my body meant.

I took my fangs from him, and just looked up at him. He drank a potion to heal the bite marks, which was a bit disappointing. I licked his wrist clean of any remaining specks of blood. It only made my heart race faster.

He was known as Masaki. A truly strange man.

He was the leader of a pirate group, which I joined. He could soar the skies, which only vampires, harpies, and those gifted with wings were capable of. If ridden by a person, dragons could be added to that list as well. I learned that Masaki could cast Wing, a spell I'd never heard of. He wanted to train, so I offered to accompany him.

During our practice, he revealed the true extent of his flight to me. I was fast, but Masaki, using principles of aerodynamics—a word I wasn't familiar with—could fly even faster.

Being defeated by a human would make most vampires bitter, but his abilities left me in total awe. They extended far beyond his mighty spellcasting. His swordsmanship was remarkable, his hunger for information about our world was admirable, and his reflexes and strength were second to none. As one of the best swordsmen among the knights of Valentine, I was honored by the opportunity to spar such a talented individual.

As I learned more and more about him, I realized one thing. He was hiding something. Something scary.

Everyone has baggage they'd rather not reveal to the world, but I had the suspicion that Masaki had more than most. I wanted to know his secret, but I feared that once I gleaned it, I could never see him again.

That fear made me realize that I never wanted to leave his side. That I always wanted to be with him. That... I loved him.

As I was gently rocked by the waves, and confused by the powerful, overwhelming feelings brought on by the first love of my life, we arrived at the port of Schutzbalt. There, I met my old friend, Aran, a trusted ally I'd known since childhood. We'd been kids together, playing games and learning.

While I got the sense that Youko wasn't the right person to confide about my feelings to, the idea of talking with Aran made me feel secure. I told him how I felt, told him I wanted to throw my noble title away just to be with Masaki, told him that I... I wanted to become Masaki's spouse.

I knew my face glowed red, but Masaki was busy taking Schutzbalt in and didn't notice. Even a glance at him made my heart race. I wanted to support him, and aid him in any way I could. I fervently wished to stay beside him until my final breath, even if society cast him out for his otherworldy powers.

As I walked under the shining rays of a vampire's natural enemy, the sun, I decided to give my heart and soul to this man.

Afterword

Welcome, I'm Akatsuki.

Hahhh, y'know, I never thought all the time I spent playing and studying online games would make me an author, yet here we are.

When I first got the news that my web novel would be serialized, I honestly thought I was dreaming. Then I realized it was all thanks to your comments and ratings.

Funny, I always dreamed of releasing a book. I didn't care if it was self-published or had a legitimate publisher, I just wanted to do it.

And thanks to you, that dream came true.

This book features all kinds of players from all kinds of different games. Each and every one of these summoned players has enough power and unique abilities to be the main character of this light novel, but one of them happens to be a cut above the rest: Masaki, the game master of Brittalia Online.

The idea came to me as I was thinking about what kind of skill or power could possibly distinguish a main character from the rest of the cast in a story like this. I noticed that no one else had used a game master as their main character, so I ran with it.

One of the characters appearing in this light novel, Shou, the card user summoned from the online card game Metallic Monsters, is not in the original web novel, neither is his partner, Corona. Of course, this means the light novel and web novel versions are different. I meant him to be kind of a rival to the main character, but he's more like a secondary main character.

The illustrations were drawn by merontomari and yuui, two incredible artists capable of drawing both badass mechas and cute girls. When I saw Exmeiser for the first time, my jaw dropped. Deep down, though, Akiha is my favorite of them all.

The illustrations of her gave me all the power and motivation I needed to

finish this book on time.

I would like to express my gratitude to my editor-in-chief, Mr. I, to the company GC Novels, my wonderful illustrators merontomari and yuui, and to everyone who bought and read this book.

I would also like to thank all of my web novel readers for making my dream come true. We did it. We wrote a book.

Thank you.

THE GM GAME MASTER HAS LOGGED IN TO ANOTHER WORLD

01



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