

VRMMORPG Eternity

3

Nagawasabi64

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kawaku

The
**UNIMPLEMENTED
OVERLORDS**
I Have Joined the Party!

START: DEATH GAME

Contract: {Boss Mob}

The Six Evil Overlords
and the Dungeon Master





Player:

SHUUTAROU

A middle schooler who suddenly became the master of the six Evil Overlords after using his Create Dungeon skill.

Player:

RAO

Ex-member of Twilight Adventurers who used to be among the top attackers.

Player:

KETTLE

Member of Crest's Party 21. Wizard.

Player:

SHOUKICHI

Member of Crest's Party 21. Swordfighter.

Player:

REILAN


Ex-member of Twilight Adventurers who used to be among the top attackers.

"Look at that. The kid's overwhelming a top fighter."

"No, he's not. She's going easy on him, letting him believe for a moment that he's doing good."

"Don't think so! You can't fake a skill cancel, that's for sure."

The spectators in the gallery were spinning their theories excitedly.



“To
proceed,
you need
to insert
one of
your
eyeballs
into this
hollow.

There’s no
other way
to open
the gate.”

The
**UNIMPLEMENTED
OVERLORDS**
Have Joined the Party!

3

Nagawasabi64

Illustration by Kawaku

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MIJISSO NO LASTBOSS TACHIGA NAKAMA NI NARIMASHITA.

Vol.3

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Player:

Shuutarou

Video game-loving middle
schooler and incidental
master of the six
Evil Overlords

Mob:

Punio

Shuutarou's first summoned
dungeon monster

Boss Mob:

Vampy

The Second Evil Overlord

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The Fourth Evil Overlord



Crest Guild Members



Player:

Wataru

Crest's guild master.



Player:

Alba

Crest's sub-master.



Player:

Flamme

The brains of Crest.



Player:

Misaki

Crest member who was once saved by Shuutarou.

Crest Party 7 Characters



Player:

Barbara

Party leader. Acolyte.



Player:

Shoukichi

Crest member. Swordfighter.



Player:

Kettle

Crest member. Wizard.



Player:

Kyouko

Crest member. Archer.



Player:

Rao

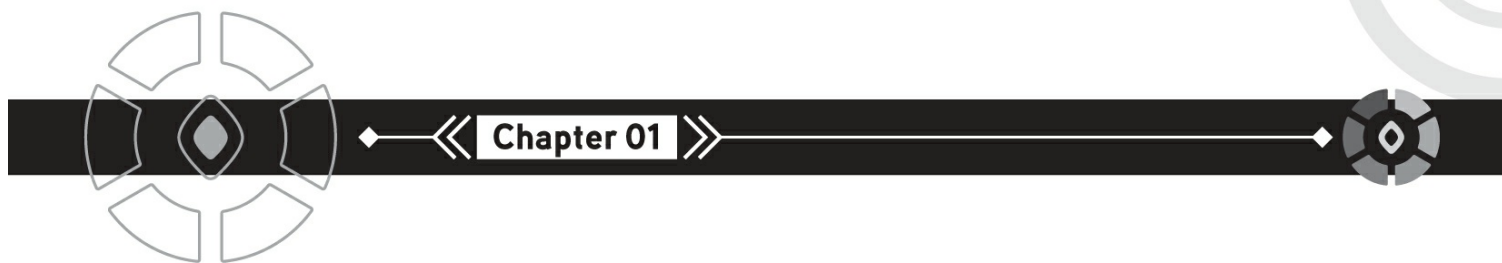
Former Twilight Adventurers member and top player.



Player:

Reilan

Former Twilight Adventurers member and top player.



Shuutarou and company had passed through Ur Sluice and arrived in Emaro, the next town after Allistras where Crest members had settled. Emaro was quite small in comparison with the starting city. It was a rural town with windmills dotting the landscape, which was dominated by grazing fields.

“We’ll make a brief stop here,” said Barbara the acolyte, “to prepare for the rest of the trek to Calloah Castle Town. Ideally, I’d like us to get there today.”

The others nodded in agreement. Emaro was the second town in the game, but it wasn’t anything special—its residents were also largely newbies, although of the slightly more ambitious kind, tired of hunting the same monsters over and over again outside Allistras. The stronger players were based in the next town after it—Calloah Castle Town—so for them, Emaro was just a place to make a pit stop on their travels.

Crest took efforts to ensure a comfortable standard of living for the town’s residents. They provided financial support and paid for accommodation for players in Allistras, Emaro, and Calloah regardless of whether they were members of the guild.

Rao, a red-haired woman with an ax almost as tall as her strapped to her back, looked this way and that.

“Sorry,” she said. “Someone we know lives here. We’d like to go and say hi, if you think we have time.”

“Of course,” Barbara readily agreed. “Would you like me to come with you? Maybe they want to see who you’re in a party with now?”

For a moment, a shadow crossed Rao's face, but she soon smiled, shaking her head. "Nah, we'll just quickly drop by and check in on her. No need to come with."

Rao's friend Reilan, who carried a cross-shaped greatsword on her back, smiled almost imperceptibly and nodded.

"All right. Let's meet here in an hour?" Barbara suggested, and it was settled.

Rao and Reilan walked off in a hurry. The other members of Party 7 and Shuutarou looked at one another.

"Monsters don't spawn on the way from here to Calloah, but we should stock up on potions while we're in Emaro. Shuutarou, will you come with us, or do you want to do something else?" Barbara asked.

Shuutarou beamed. "I have friends here, too, so I'd like to have a walk around and see if I can find them!"

The friends he was thinking of were members of the by-then-disbanded Party 38—Taneda the warrior, and the two temporary members, Kiichi the archer and Yoshino the acolyte. After the incident with Iron killing its summoner, Rivir, the surviving members of her party said they'd move to Emaro and find work within the town to make a living. Shuutarou had a lot he wanted to talk to them about, such as that he'd become a summoner and gotten a pretty silver-wolf summon, and that he was on his way to Calloah.

Barbara waved at Shuutarou, reminding him to be at the meeting place in an hour.

* * * *

Shuutarou was sitting on a bench dejectedly.

"That was a big oversight..."

He'd forgotten to register Taneda, Kiichi, and Yoshino as friends, which meant he couldn't contact them or check their location. The best he could do was try to stumble on them in the town, but the chances of finding them that way were hopelessly low.

'Master, would you like me to find those people for you?' Sylvia, the fourth-

ranked Evil Overlord, asked him telepathically.

Shuutarou could tell she was eager to please him.

'But how? You've never met them,' he replied.

'Oh... That...that's a problem...'

Sylvia had been so keen to prove herself to be of use after the last fiasco—showing her true strength in front of witnesses—that she hadn't thought this through. Shuutarou's on-point remark deflated her again.

"Oh well," said Shuutarou. "Let's have a walk around town and see the sights."

Emaro was refreshingly different from Allistras. The vast stretches of green pasture looked like something out of an Irish postcard, and the windmills added to the relaxed country-life vibe. Players who had moved to Emaro rated it highly for making them forget they were trapped in a deadly game.

'Master! Master! What's that?'

'That looks like a grilled-meat stall.'

'Can we go there? Can we go there?!'

'Heh-heh! Okay, let's check it out.'

Shuutarou and Sylvia walked around the town market, having a good time. Suddenly, Shuutarou stopped in his tracks.

"It's them..."

He caught sight of Rao and Reilan. The next thing he knew, Shuutarou had positioned himself so that he wouldn't be noticed, then watched them.

Maybe the friend they came to see runs this shop...?

The dilapidated building appeared to be both a workshop and an equipment shop. Maybe it had been abandoned; Shuutarou couldn't see anyone inside other than Rao and Reilan.

"...?"

The two women said something to each other and pressed their hands

together as if in prayer, looking sad. A tear rolled down Rao's cheek. Reilan shut her eyes tight.

A wave of guilt washed over Shuutarou as he realized with embarrassment that he'd been effectively spying on the women, and he turned to sneakily walk away... Alas!

"I saw you! You stalker!"

"Eep! Rao, I swear, I wasn't stalking you!"

Rao and Reilan had finished their silent prayer and caught him. Shuutarou had to apologize profusely before they let him off the hook. When the two women were placated enough, he looked up at the shop front curiously.

"It belonged to our friend," Reilan told him.

Rao forced a smile.

"She died?" Shuutarou guessed.

"Yes. Suicide," Reilan said with a sorrowful smile.

Suicide methods weren't quite the same here as in the real world, but the most common was jumping from a great height. The higher a player's level, the more difficult they were to kill, but a serious fall reduced a player's LP to one regardless of level. If, during the fall, the player was under a status ailment that gradually reduced their LP, such as Poison or Curse, they'd die almost immediately after hitting the ground.

Other common suicide methods were jumping into instant-death traps or killing NPCs to trigger retaliation. There were lots of creative ways to take one's own life in *Eternity*, tried and tested during the turbulent period before Crest assured decent living standards and safety within towns for the noncombatants.

Rao and Reilan didn't know exactly how their friend died, but they knew the death was a suicide—they'd received a "farewell letter" before it happened. Some people preferred to take their own life rather than continue living in a world with bloodthirsty monsters and no guarantee they'd ever get out.



“Can you tell me a little about your friend?” Shuutarou asked gently.

Hearing the compassion in his voice, Rao decided to answer:

“During the beta, she was super into progression, but she didn’t end up going to the front lines. She wanted to help newbies, so she stayed in Emaro and made equipment for rookies passing through the town who looked like they might not make it. She didn’t charge them a penny.”

Reilan nodded silently. Shuutarou was very saddened by what he’d heard. Even the kindest of people were dying in this world. As days went by, there were fewer and fewer surviving players.

“She had an incurable disease but never once complained, focusing on supporting others despite her condition. I just...can’t process it. It’s wrong that she’s no longer with us...”

The bells of the town monastery rang. When they stopped, Rao placed her hand delicately on Shuutarou’s head.

“Time to go,” she said.

Shuutarou followed the women back to the meeting point, his eyes downcast.

* * * *

Calloah Castle Town was a town of stone houses built around the giant Calloah Castle, which was on top of a rocky mountain with precipitous cliffs. A sturdy stone wall encircled the town. Smaller than Allistras, the town nevertheless boasted excellent defense, making it seem like an unassailable fortress.

The part of town closest to the castle was known as the warriors’ quarters. The houses with the more intricate decorative elements belonged to warriors of high rank. Townspeople lived farther down, close to the outer walls. That district was as busy as the streets of Allistras, with shopkeepers advertising their wares and many NPCs milling around.

As for the great castle, its master hadn’t yet made an appearance, which led to hopeful rumors among players that castellan-related quests would offer hefty rewards once they got unlocked.

The players who settled in Calloah might not be ready for the front lines of battle, but they were proficient fighters.

“First, let’s check in with the local Crest branch. After that, use your time as you like for the rest of the day. I imagine everyone’s quite tired,” said Barbara, glancing at Rao.

Rao didn’t say anything, but she nodded. The party headed into town, until they found a building with CREST GUILD—CALLOAH BRANCH written on the signboard. The local Crest headquarters blended in with the surrounding buildings, looking quite unassuming, but many people were going in and out the door.

* * * *

“Hello.”

“Greetings. Ah, Party 7, yes? We’ve been expecting you. Welcome to Calloah.”

The guild receptionist at this branch was an affable young man with sharp features but the softest of smiles, which made you think he wasn’t made for battles. Yet he was dressed in armor that showed heavy signs of wear, and at his waist was a very fine sword.

“I’m Barbara, Party 7’s leader. And this is Shuutarou, a summoner teamed up with us.”

“Hi. I’m K, the receptionist, as you can see. I’ve been champing at the bit waiting to see this genius who Candy’s been completely bowled over by.”

K shook everyone’s hands, giving Shuutarou’s hand an extra-firm squeeze.

“We’ll be staying here for some time, so I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other often,” said Barbara.

K nodded with a big grin on his face.

“Happy to have you guys around! Since you’re here... Galbo! Gaaalbo! There, he heard me now. Just so happens our strongest party is taking a break here at the moment. They’re Party 6.”

Barbara and company felt a bit tense at the thought of meeting the party one rank above them. Six bored-looking men got up from a table at the back and walked over to the reception desk. The biggest of them stepped forward. He sported a lush beard, was armed with a greatsword, and seemed very friendly. Judging from his heavy armor, he was a tank. His greatsword had a long hilt and a handle like a super-thin chef's knife. The other members of his party also had top-grade equipment. Even at a glance, you could tell they were no ordinary players.

"Hi, y'all. I'm Galbo. Me and my boys are Party 6."

"We're Party 7. I'm Barbara, the party leader."

Everyone exchanged handshakes, after which Galbo looked at Barbara and her friends with curiosity, stroking his beard.

"I heard on the grapevine about your party bagging an instant promotion to rank seven for nipping a monster invasion in the bud all by yourselves. That right?"

It was actually just Shuutarou—or his minion Sylvia, to be precise—who'd accomplished that. Shoukichi and Kettle shifted uneasily, but Party 6 didn't notice the change in the air.

"And on top of that, two ace players who used to be in Twilight Adventurers have joined you now? At this rate, you're gonna overshoot us in no time."

Galbo's eyes were on Rao and Reilan. Their former guild, Twilight Adventurers, was one of the four biggest guilds working toward clearing the game. Kiichi and Yoshino, whom Shuutarou had met through another party, also used to be in that guild.

"Hey, boss man. Weren't we gonna train about now?"

"Right, thanks for keeping the time. Okay, folks. We'll see you around!"

Party 6 walked out a door leading farther into the guild grounds. After they were gone, K turned to Barbara's party once again.

"They train at our very own training grounds. Same as you know from Allistras. We've got a restaurant, an inn, and equipment shops, too, so all your

basic needs are covered.”

Barbara smiled.

“That’s very reassuring. We’d like to check in at the inn today. It’s free of charge, isn’t it?” she asked with an emphasis on *free of charge*.

K scratched his head. “Will you be going there now?”

Barbara glanced at her team. “No, we’ll have a look around town first.”

“I see, I see. Let me know if you have trouble finding anything. I’ll be happy to help you get your bearings.”

The party said good-bye to K and left the reception area.

“Shuutarou! Let’s check out the weapon shop!” Shoukichi said excitedly.

“Okay! Let’s go!”

Kettle sighed. “You don’t have to go along with everything he says...”

The three of them headed off together. Barbara followed them with her eyes until they were gone. Then she looked at Reilan.

“Reilan, could I ask you to secretly be their guardian angel?”

At first, Reilan made a face as if she was the last person Barbara should’ve asked that, but then she nodded resignedly.

“Ha! You do that, Reilan! Get over your anxiety about being around kids!” Rao teased.

Reilan shot her a defiant look. “I’m perfectly fine with kids! I’ll have you know that my cousin who’s ten years younger likes playing with me!”

With a sigh, she followed the youngsters.

* * * *

Shuutarou was checking out the swords on sale, thinking the selection was way better than in Allistras. The recommended level for hunting monsters around Allistras was 3 to 15, while the areas near Calloah were for players level 20 to 30. Consequently, it was much easier here to get materials for high-level equipment.

“Welcome! What are you looking for today?” asked the elderly shopkeeper, an NPC with a white beard.

Shoukichi and Kettle immediately stuck their hands out, showing him some items they’d brought.

“Can you make me a one-handed sword out of this?!”

“Can you use this to make me a staff?!”

The items were drops from the level-37 Negrus boss. When the NPC saw what they had, he beamed at the children.

“My, my! You’ve brought me very fine materials indeed. To forge a sword, I will need ingots of a matching grade, and for the staff, I will need lumber of a matching grade, too. If you don’t have those materials on you, you can purchase them from me.”

“I’ll buy them!” Kettle and Shoukichi exclaimed in unison.

“Excellent, excellent! This time, I will give you a special discount. The price will be only four hundred gold.”

“Are you trying to rip us off, you old fart?!”

“Kettle! Don’t be rude!”

While his two friends haggled with the shopkeeper, Shuutarou killed time browsing equipment on sale. Everything in the shop was pretty decent, but it couldn’t compare with the kit Theodore had crafted for him.

“Nothing you want to order, Shuutarou?”

Shuutarou spun around, surprised to see Reilan behind him. He couldn’t get over the mismatch between her petite build and the giant cross-shaped greatsword on her back.

Reilan was looking at some point on the floor next to Shuutarou instead of at him directly. It made him wonder if she was feeling nervous about talking to a kid.

“Not at the moment! This isn’t like the other weapon store I’ve been to. Here, you can have gear made to order by an NPC, right?”

He turned his head toward Shoukichi and Kettle, who'd just handed over materials to the elderly NPC shopkeeper. Reilan pressed her lips into a smile.

"If you have money but not enough materials to craft what you want, it's best to pay an NPC to make the equipment for you. Player crafters can create superior items depending on their skill, but they need all the required materials for each piece."

"I learned something new! Thanks!"

Shuutarou's eyes sparkled with excitement. He turned to watch Kettle and Shoukichi deal with the NPC again.

Reilan began to stress out over the prolonged silence between them, desperately trying to think of a topic for conversation, but Shuutarou was quicker.

"So you used to be in Twilight Adventurers?" He smiled. "I have two friends who used to be in that guild, too!"

"Oh, really? Who?"

"Kiichi and Yoshino."

Reilan was silent for a moment, trying to remember if she knew them.

"Hmm... Sorry. Twilight isn't as huge as Crest, but it used to have a lot of members, too..."

"No worries."

Shuutarou dropped his gaze, disappointed. The conversation really wasn't flowing. Reilan was agonizing over letting it die, but Shuutarou didn't seem bothered.

Shuutarou began to examine the maces on display.

"The next location, Kiren Graveyard, was the farthest area explored during the beta, right? I read that the boss there, Dullahan, has high resistance to attacks because it's an undead, and it has its special boss resistance, too. If it's wearing armor, does it mean blunt weapons work better on it than swords? Or do they also not work well on undead?"

Reilan was astonished that a boy barely in his teens would be strategizing like this before even visiting the next area. She'd been past the graveyard, though, so she could give him an answer.

"This was a much-debated topic, in fact. But the Dullahan's armor is empty, so blunt weapons turned out not to be more effective than anything else you might try. The current advice is to use whichever weapon has the highest attack power. Better yet if you can get it enchanted with the Fire or Holy element, of course."

"Noted!" Shuutarou's eyes sparkled with curiosity again. "I read that the safest way to halve Dullahan's LP is to use a spearfighter's jump ability to get inside the monster's armor through the neck hole and keep spamming Dragon's Roar!"

Reilan blinked a few times. Then she burst out laughing, much to Shuutarou's confusion.

"Let me guess: you read it on Yoritsura's blog?" she asked, stifling a giggle.

Shuutarou stumbled as if he'd just suffered a critical hit. "Whaaat? Don't tell me it's fake info! I've studied every post on that blog so many times before playing, believing every word!"

"Eighty percent of what he wrote is true, but the rest is made-up or colored to make it sound more fun. To Yoritsura, keeping his followers entertained is higher priority than sharing accurate information. Because of that silly post, toward the end of the beta, there were always some spearfighters trying to jump at Dullahan, which was, of course, entirely pointless."

Once Reilan and Shuutarou got talking about the beta days of the game, there was not a moment of silence.

"Uh-oh! Sorry to intrude on your heated debate!" Shoukichi made fun of them when he and Kettle returned with their new weapons.

Reilan's cheeks felt hot, flushed.

"Heh-heh!" Shoukichi giggled. "Anyway, I'm all set to become the most powerful dual blade ever! Where to next?"

“Um, but do you even know what else there is to do in this town?” asked Kettle. “I think we should go back to K and ask him what’s hot.”

“Or we could ask Reilan to show us to her favorite spots!” Shuutarou jumped in with a suggestion. “She was a beta tester, so she knows the town! What do you say, Reilan?”

“You were a beta tester, Reilan?!” said Shoukichi. “Woow! You were in the lucky hundred?!”

“I want to get some accessories next. Can you take us to an accessory shop?” Kettle asked.

Suddenly the center of the kids’ attention, Reilan seemed overwhelmed for a moment.

“Sure,” she said after a pause. “I’ll take you anywhere you like.”

Reilan smiled at the children and led them out onto the streets of Calloah Castle Town as the sun began to descend toward the horizon.

* * * *

Reilan brought the children to an accessory shop, an armor shop, a throwing-practice stall, and a fortune teller. By the time they left the fortune-teller’s booth, Kettle was practically hanging off Reilan’s arm.

“What’s that supposed to mean, ‘unlucky with men’?” Shoukichi whined.

“If I’m not mistaken, it’s to do with low quest-trigger rates from male NPCs, or male NPCs overcharging you in stores.”

“No way! That sucks!!!”

Reilan giggled.

“By the way, the effects of the fortune you got don’t wear off until you draw another one.”

“Okay, you guys wait here. I’ll be right back!”

“You have to wait at least twenty-four hours before you can get a new fortune...”

“Aaargh!”

Shoukichi hung his head in an exaggerated gesture of despair, and the others laughed.

“My fortune was ‘Good fortune will come your way’! Everyone gets what they deserve, I guess!” said Kettle.

“Being in a party with you is plenty bad luck for me already. Why’d I get more?!”

“To balance it out, so now men will find you as annoying as girls do? And if you don’t like being in a party with me, go back to Allistras, where noobs like you belong!”

“Who are you calling a noob? You scored the lowest in throwing!”

“I scored only one point lower than you! You up for a rematch, to prove who’s better once and for all?!”

“It’s on!”

Kettle and Shoukichi headed off to the throwing-practice stall again, bickering good-naturedly. Reilan and Shoukichi found free seats on a deck outside a nearby building and sat down.

“That went better than I’d hoped... They now seem to be okay with me being in the party. I was worried, you know. I’ve been told people find me unapproachable,” Reilan confessed, observing Kettle and Shoukichi at the stall.

“Who told you that? You’re fun to talk to. They like you, too.”

“I hope so...”

Reilan was swinging her armor-protected legs, looking down at the ground and feeling shy. Shuutarou was quiet for a while, but then he asked the questions that had been on his mind since he’d met her.

“What’s the frontier like? Why did you return to Allistras?”

Reilan didn’t seem to mind his bluntness.

“The farthest I’ve been to is Ciola Tower. Exploration was going well until we missed a major scripted-event trigger, and many of our guild members died.”

Reilan's eyes unfocused and filled with sorrow as she began to recount her story. "Including the healer Rao and I had been partied with long-term. That's why we left."

Slowly, haltingly, Reilan told Shuutarou about the healer. Telia was her name. Her enthusiasm had been infectious, and she'd had the sweetest smile.

"Not long after, Haru Kanata—the girl who ran that shop we stopped by earlier—took her own life. Losing two out of our five closest friends in the game hurt us very deeply."

She had to pause, the grief she'd felt then coming back to her.

"Rao and another of my friends felt responsible for those deaths, and the guilt broke them. That other friend stayed on the front lines but refused to have any contact with people. Rao was acting out of her mind because of her grief. It wasn't safe for her to be on the front lines anymore. So we left..."

Shuutarou was rapt with attention. A gentle breeze brushed against him and Reilan as he waited for her to continue.

"On the way back, Rao was in a state, but when we reached Allistras, her sense of duty awoke again, and she became determined to find a new party. We like your party a lot, and we're both glad we got to join you. Rao still hasn't recovered from what happened, though."

Reilan smiled sorrowfully and shared with Shuutarou her doubts as to whether Rao would be able to return to the front lines. She then drew the sword she carried on her back and stroked the blade gently with her fingertips. Now that it was unsheathed, Shuutarou could see that a name had been engraved on it.

"It was crafted by Haru Kanata?" he asked.

"Yes. It's my cherished memento of her... Sorry, that was a depressing story, wasn't it...?" Reilan wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and forced herself to smile again. "What about you, Shuutarou? Why did you team up with this party? How do you guys know each other?"

"Where do I start...?"

Now it was Shuutarou's turn to talk. He told Reilan how he first met Party 7 before they were Party 7. Then he asked Reilan about something else, and she later moved the topic back to him, and so forth.

The next morning, Party 7 met up in front of Crest's Calloah office.

Barbara smiled when Kettle and Reilan arrived hand in hand.

"Morning. Oh...? Have I missed something? Looks like you two got on like a house on fire!"

"When Rao said Reilan was anxious around kids, I thought it would impact our teamwork, so I decided to cure her through exposure," said Kettle.

Reilan shot a quick glance at Shuutarou. "It seems to have worked. I'm glad to have made new friends."

She opened her arms and pulled Kettle, Shuutarou, and Shoukichi into a cuddle. They laughed bashfully. It was only then that Rao appeared, a little late. She yawned.

"Mornin'! I feel refreshed today. I see Reilan's best buddies with everyone now, huh? Good, good!" she said, stretching her back.

It didn't escape the grown-ups' notice that despite what she said, Rao looked as if she'd had a rough night—her hair was in disarray, her complexion was ashen, and there were dark bags under her eyes.

Kyouko saw that Kettle and Shoukichi had new weapons.

"Hey, you got new gear? Congrats!"

"Cool, huh? The stats are as awesome as the looks! Cost a lot to make, though!"

Kyouko was ready to take on new challenges, too, having upgraded to a better bow and armor.

"Our party's battle ability must have increased by a fair bit. I'm sure you can't wait to test out your new weapons, and Rao and Reilan would probably like to get a measure of our strength. Why don't we have a mock battle at the training

grounds after I speak with the receptionist?" Barbara proposed.

"It's on!!!"

The party enthusiastically headed into the guild building.

* * * *

After exchanging greetings with the receptionist, Barbara informed him of her party's future plans.

"We'll be staying here for some time. Once we're confident it's time to move on, we'll progress to the next area. Joining the front lines isn't in our schedule as of yet."

She looked at Rao out of the corner of her eye.

K smiled. "Okay, got it! I'll do what I can to help you reach your goals."

"Thank you."

Barbara's party had decided on an immediate and a longer-term objective that suited them for the time being.

"So are you off to Kiren Graveyard? If you tell me yes, I'll have to do the whole 'Oh, don't be so hasty' spiel, though!" K said jokingly.

"No. We're going to the training grounds first to get a handle on one another's strengths and abilities. Some of our members have upgraded their gear."

"Good thinking! You'll find the training grounds just past that door at the back. Knock yourselves out, heh!"

K was secretly relieved that Barbara turned out to be a very sensible party leader who wouldn't just rush into things.

The party said bye to K and walked out the door to the training grounds.

They have more space here than I expected, Kyouko thought, looking around with surprise.

The training grounds weren't as massive as in Allistras, but they were nonetheless spacious. Players were moving between different training zones,

and while it wasn't busy, the facility was certainly not underutilized.

Party 7 found a vacant training zone.

"We can do PvP, too, but let's start with PvE," Barbara said, selecting the room settings.

The others sensed she was waiting for someone to put their hand up to go first.

"Me first!" Shoukichi exclaimed right away.

The room scenery changed to a simulated battlefield with eight skeletons and five blue player silhouettes. Experienced users of the training grounds would immediately recognize them as NPC allies, designed to test the player's ability to work in a team.

"All right, bring it on!"

Shoukichi held the sword made with Negrus materials with both hands, ready to engage the enemies. He sounded like an overexcited kid impatient to test his new toy, but his eyes were calm and his head was cool as he concentrated on the battle.

* * * *

After Shoukichi, Kettle and Kyouko had their mock battles with monsters, too. Then Barbara had a go. She was just wrapping it up.

"Whoops, Barbara! They have Confusion attacks, too, not just Poison," said Rao. "If they're circling above, they're gonna go with Poison, so use Cure, but if they start to screech, cast Soundproof to block the Confusion effect. If you use Cure—"

"Oh, of course! Confusion would make the party members attack one another before I could heal them. My mistake!"

Barbara shot a frustrated look at the bat monsters she'd been pitted against and stepped out of the battle zone.

Practice battles simulating fighting as a party were more about testing the ability to play a certain role in the party than just about wiping out the

monsters.

In Party 7, Rao was the tank, and her responsibilities were keeping monsters off the rest of the party, taking damage instead of the others, and carrying out simple attacks.

Barbara was the healer, and her job was to facilitate the other party members' attacks, healing them as needed and buffing them to increase the chance of success in battle.

Both the tank and healer needed to have a good understanding of the monsters they might encounter—what sort of attacks they possessed, their properties and effects.

As for attackers, there were different categories thereof, but basically, their job was to deal as much damage as possible.

Next, it was Reilan versus a group of skeletons. Kyouko and Kettle were transfixed by her graceful movements.

“Wow... She's incredible.”

“Her fighting style's beautiful...!”

The fluidity of Reilan's attacks was terrifyingly fast and precise. She shattered three skeletons with a single blow, swinging her sword back away from them to behead two more behind her. The battle was over in the blink of an eye. Reilan returned her cross greatsword to the scabbard on her back and rejoined the others by the room entrance.

Barbara rubbed her arms, which were covered in goose bumps.

“I knew, of course, that you'd be very strong, as a former frontline fighter... but your combat abilities really are next-level! There's not a single redundant movement between each of your skill executions. Even when you were faced with so many skeletons at once, they were the ones at a disadvantage.”

Meanwhile, Shoukichi was speechless, his mouth hanging open.

“Heh-heh-heh! Across the three frontline progression guilds, Reilan's damage against bosses and regular monsters is ranked within the top three!” Rao said proudly, puffing her chest out.

“Are you her mom or something?” Kettle asked snappily.

The monsters they selected for practice were from the lowest-level area adjacent to the town, Kiren Graveyard. To Reilan, they were no challenge at all.

After Party 7 finished their mock monster battles, Rao turned to Shuutarou, who’d only been spectating with his little silver wolf in his arms.

“Don’t you want some action? Practice teamwork with your summon?”

Shuutarou nodded, thinking he and Sylvia indeed needed some practice—to teach Sylvia how not to draw attention to herself by being totally overpowered.

I don’t want the others to find out just how much damage she can deal.

Sylvia was, after all, a max-level boss monster. If the others saw the damage counter for any of her attacks, they’d think the game broke.

“I’ll take time practicing with her later, but for now, I’d like to do some training by myself.”

That was the best excuse he could come up with, but Rao cocked her head at him as if he was being silly.

“Why? Come on, don’t be shy. Show us what your wolfy can do. I’m curious myself.”

Rao looked at Shuutarou expectantly. He averted his eyes, nervous.

Barbara came to his rescue. “If he wants to practice solo, that’s fine, isn’t it? Summons are only support characters, detecting enemies and assisting in attacks. Their actual behavior in battle changes depending on the setting, and I heard they can be a little unpredictable, too.”

Barbara had witnessed what Sylvia could do, and she understood that nothing but trouble would come out of her exact damage being displayed for everyone to see. Fortunately, she managed to persuade Rao, who was curious, to drop the subject.

“Okay, my turn, then!”

Shuutarou swiftly moved into the battle area.

“Hope he doesn’t get scared with so many monsters around him,” Rao muttered.

But as she and Reilan watched the battle unfold, a series of emotions flashed in their eyes, until they were completely dumbfounded.

“Wh-whuh? Are those numbers right? His damage is as good as Reilan’s?!”

“His Double Strike cooldown is only 0.48 seconds? Just how high is his skill mastery level...?”

Even though Shuutarou lost his weapon bonus stats after changing from swordfighter to summoner, he was still able to deal as much damage as Reilan. Through training with the Sixth Evil Overlord—Bertrand—he maxed out many of his skills. The Fifth Evil Overlord—Theodore—had made him the Fang Sword, which had mind-bogglingly high stats. That was on top of Shuutarou’s natural gift for swordfighting.

It wasn’t only Reilan and Rao who were shocked at how strong Shuutarou was. Barbara’s party had never seen him fight anything but trash mobs before, so they, too, were completely taken by surprise. Shoukichi in particular looked as if he’d seen a ghost.

Shuutarou left the battle area, rejoining the others at the room entrance. He noticed that Reilan was twitching.

“Shuutarou...”

In her faintly shaking hand was her cross greatsword.

“Let’s have a duel.”

* * * *

Since players could actually die in the game, PvP matches were no longer innocent entertainment. Death matches were strictly forbidden by the guilds, since the defeated player would die for real. Only “half matches” were allowed, where victory was achieved by reducing the other player’s LP by 50 percent. The exception was PvP matches at the training grounds, where damage was

simulated, which offered the chance to test oneself against other players without any risk. For this reason, access to training-ground facilities was invaluable.

The PvP training mode was used predominantly by frontline fighters. The next biggest threat after monster invasions was player killers, so it was important to be able to fight off hostile humans.

“Here at the training grounds, we can duel without actually losing LP. Our duel will be completely safe,” Reilan said to Shuutarou with anxious insistence.

Shuutarou was really thrown by her challenge.

“I don’t know if I’ll be any fun for you to fight. I’m not that good...”

“Based on what I saw you do in that PvE battle, you two are a close match,” Rao interjected. “Besides, you’d better get used to fighting other players if you’re to survive in this world, kid. Think of it as self-defense training,” she said, her dark thoughts reflecting in her eyes.

Monsters switched up their behavior depending on their remaining LP, but even so, their scripted routines were predictable. Players, on the other hand, didn’t have to adhere to any such action patterns, making it far more difficult to guess their next move. Seasoned player killers could fool their prey easily, making them a major threat even to people who trained in PvP mode.

It wasn’t uncommon for frontline fighters to squabble over who deserved to get rare boss drops or other valuable items found when exploring new areas. Sometimes, these disputes would escalate into actual fights. The majority of guilds active on the frontier of exploration required their members to have high PvP battle ability to fight off competitors for precious loot.

“In Crest, a member’s rank is based on their contribution to the guild and general battle ability, but in our former guild, Twilight Adventurers—or in Yamata, for example—rank was determined in PvP. Reilan gets triggered when meeting a rival; it’s just force of habit.”

“Don’t make it out like I’m acting on some killer instinct!” Reilan protested, putting her hands on her hips in an angry posture.

Shoukichi broke into a cold sweat, thinking she was acting exactly as if driven

by an instinct to kill.

Barbara's party had never seen a duel between two highly skilled players of similar strength. They waited with bated breath for Shuutarou to accept or turn down Reilan's challenge.

'A mock duel? We Overlords would try to kill one another, too, in our spare time,' Sylvia told Shuutarou approvingly.

The Overlords definitely were driven by a killer instinct, though...

Shuutarou thought for a while before making his decision. He turned to Reilan.

"Okay, then! Let's duel!" he said firmly.

Reilan was very pleased. The party moved to a PvP room.

* * * *

The training-grounds PvP rooms could be customized in many ways. Besides choosing the requirements for winning, players could select the scenery, or mobs to spawn for a "duel among attacking hordes of enemies" kind of scenario.

"Is it okay with you to change the setting? Do you have any preference?" Reilan asked Shuutarou, stopping her hand above the control panel.

Shuutarou thought for a moment. There was, in fact, a location he'd like to see.

"Kiren Graveyard!"

"You're curious about the next place we'll visit? Okay, I'll input that."

Reilan smiled and changed the setting from the default to Kiren Graveyard in the room options. The concrete floor began to undulate and morph. Gravestones big and small rose up as the light dimmed. The room had turned into an ominous graveyard.

Shuutarou and Reilan assumed their starting positions some distance from each other.

"Are you ready?"

Reilan pointed her sword at Shuutarou. The long weapon, shaped like a cross, fitted the setting well.

“Sure!” he shouted back.

Other players who’d been training nearby began gathering to spectate.

“Huh? Isn’t that Reilan the Phantom?” someone asked.

“It’s Reilan...!” someone else exclaimed.

Shuutarou looked at Reilan, impressed. “I didn’t know you were famous!”

She scratched her head, feeling self-conscious. “Uh... I did some crazy things on the front lines. That’s why people remember me...”

A circle of curious onlookers had formed around them.

“Okay! As agreed, you score one point for each hit. Bag ten points to win! You can’t die, and you won’t feel any pain, so just go at it!” said Rao, having appointed herself a referee.

Kettle glanced over at her with narrowed eyes. “Rao thirsts to see violence...”

Reilan slowly pulled her cross greatsword out of its scabbard. Shuutarou unsheathed his sword.

Rao started the countdown. “Begin in five! Four...!”

Shuutarou took a deep breath.

“All right, Reilan...”

Reilan shuddered.

But this time, it wasn’t from excitement for the battle. No, this was different. She looked at Shuutarou. His eyes gleamed strangely, and Reilan felt as if she was gazing into the eyes of a deadly snake. Never in her long history of PvP battles had she felt such visceral fear.

What's this boy hiding...?

"Two! One!"

Rao's voice sounded muffled as if coming from far away. Reilan snapped out of the strange trance she'd been in, grasping her sword more firmly.

"Here I come!" Shuutarou shouted loud and clear just as Rao gave them the signal to begin.

* * * *

The moment the battle started, Shuutarou's duel LP dropped from ten to eight.

"Huh?" Shoukichi gasped.

Reilan had used Charge at the start of battle to instantly close the distance to Shuutarou, knocking him up into the air with a blow from her greatsword and following up with a second hit while he was still in midair. That scored her two points. Even a standard combo like that could be breathtakingly fast and powerful when executed by a player with high skill masteries. Only a handful of spectators were able to follow her movements.

She's super fast...!

Shuutarou winced. He'd landed on his feet and immediately assumed a defensive stance, but Reilan was nowhere to be seen. All of a sudden, there was a *swoosh* and a loud impact, sending a shock wave on the ground toward Shuutarou. He jumped to the side and dodged it. A glint of light above him caught his eye.

"Meteor Sword!"

Reilan's greatsword began to glow silver, and as she moved it, it left a trail behind, like a comet's tail. The skill enabled her to strike with unbelievable acceleration, dishing out powerful blows as fast as a machine gun.

The map suited her, she was a PvP veteran, and her skills had long reach. Reilan had an overwhelming advantage over Shuutarou. Her incessant barrage

of attacks didn't leave him an opening to counter—and yet she was the one who felt under pressure.

No toying around. Let's finish this, fast and clean, she told herself, beads of sweat appearing on her forehead.

She was successfully shaving off more and more of Shuutarou's LP, but when he had only four left, he blocked her sword with his. Their weapons clashed with a reverberating *clang*. They locked their swords and stared at each other from behind their weapons.

Did he just...smile?

Reilan was thrown. A cornered player close to losing the match shouldn't have been smiling.

"It's so easy to lose sight of you in the dark. But I won't let you get away now!" Shuutarou said with a grin.

A cloud of dust flew up into the air amid flashes of light and colorful sparks as skills were activated and weapons clashed loudly. Reilan had used Sweeping Slash, which, at her mastery level, was many times faster than most players could pull off. Shuutarou intercepted it with the middle part of his blade, letting the momentum of Reilan's attack push him back.

Where'd he go?!

Reilan looked around frantically, but all she could see was darkness. He'd just been in front of her, and suddenly, he wasn't. She hadn't realized that he'd used the force of the impact to instantly slide behind her.

When Reilan heard movement, it was too late. Shuutarou had swung back his sword to charge an attack and unleashed an explosively powerful Triple Strike on her. Frontline players who'd leveled that skill as high as their player level could use it with devastating effects. Shuutarou, though, had maxed it out. His Triple Strike was incomparably stronger and quicker.

The duel LP counter above Reilan's head flashed and changed from ten to eight. The spectators gasped.

I sidestepped one of the blows at least, thanks to my reflexes. His movements

were a blur...

Reilan assumed a battle stance again, but this time, an aura rose around her, as if she were steaming.

“!”

Sensing something bad was coming, Shuutarou jumped away from her just as a spectral giant in knight’s armor appeared behind her, roaring. The mighty bellow sent shock waves in the air, shaking the battleground.

The skill Reilan had used was called Knight’s Battle Cry. It was a rare area-of-effect skill in a greatsword user’s arsenal, causing huge damage to enemies within the target area and also inflicting Stun on them for a couple seconds.

At least, that’s what it did when it hit.

No way... He managed to predict the range and get out of it in the split second before it triggered? He’s not leaving me any openings...

Shuutarou dodged her attack without difficulty, but that didn’t frustrate Reilan. A smile appeared on her face—a sign of appreciation for this boy who was unfazed by her most powerful attacks. It’d been a long time since she’d tasted the elation that came from battling a worthy rival.

The next moment, Shuutarou was already right in front of her, his feet planted firmly on the ground, which began to rumble like in an earthquake. That, and the way Shuutarou was holding his sword, told Reilan, already in a defensive stance, that he was about to use Triple Strike. Before his blade moved more than a few millimeters, she activated Steel Soul. She stuck her greatsword into the ground, and her body took on a dark-gray hue.

The effect of Steel Soul lasted only one and a half seconds, but while it was active, it made the user invulnerable to damage. It was the master swordfighter’s trump card. Additionally, weapons parried by Steel Soul would become momentarily uncontrollable.

As Reilan had to maintain utmost concentration while using Steel Soul, even a second seemed like an eternity to her as she waited for Shuutarou to strike. But the blow she’d been expecting wasn’t coming. Still poised as if beginning a Triple Strike, Shuutarou was motionless.

“Skill cancel?!” Rao shouted in astonishment.

Shuutarou had seen that Reilan was about to use her defensive skill, so he stopped his move, waiting for her invulnerability status to time out. When it did, and she was temporarily unable to move during the aftercast delay, he hit her stomach with four regular attacks, bringing her duel LP down to four.

* * * *

“Look at that. The kid’s overwhelming a top fighter.”

“No, he’s not. She’s going easy on him, letting him believe for a moment that he’s doing good.”

“Don’t think so! You can’t fake a skill cancel, that’s for sure.”

The spectators in the gallery were spinning their theories excitedly. Reilan was too focused on the battle to hear them, though.

He can read my moves, and I can’t counter his. But that doesn’t mean it’s over for me yet...

Under mounting pressure, Reilan was quickly going over her abilities in her head, looking for something that might work against her small but overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Something did come to mind.

“Okay. Let’s try this on you...”

Reilan held her sword upright in front of her chest and closed her eyes. When she began to move again, it was as if she was performing a dance.

“Sword Dance.”

This was a skill that had fallen into disuse since death became real in the game. It dramatically increased the speed of sword attacks, at the cost of making the user completely unable to defend themselves.

Glowing blue blurs trailed behind Reilan’s sword. Shuutarou was no longer able to match her attack speed, and Sword Dance didn’t require her to follow

predetermined actions or trajectories—her movements were unpredictable. Shuutarou was on the defensive again.

Then Shuutarou’s duel LP dropped to one. But so did Reilan’s. She’d landed devastating attacks on Shuutarou, but he managed to parry a few, dealing damage to her.

Suddenly, there was a twinkle of eerie light in Reilan’s eyes, and the next moment, she’d vanished. It wasn’t the case of her moving so fast that he couldn’t follow her, nor her managing to steal away while he was looking elsewhere. She’d just disappeared into thin air.

I can’t see her...but she’s still there.

Shuutarou could vaguely sense her presence. A chill ran down his spine, and he dodged by rolling on the ground, avoiding a downward slash from Reilan’s greatsword.

“He dodged...? How?”

Reilan stared in disbelief. Thanks to his keen senses, Shuutarou had avoided the fastest attack she’d pulled off that day. Not wasting any time, he landed a hit on his dazed opponent.

“...”

Rao was speechless. Reilan took a moment to react, finding it hard to get over her last attack failing.

“You beat me,” she said eventually.

The duel LP counters above their heads vanished, and the spectating crowd applauded.

* * * *

Reilan and Shuutarou left the duel zone amid roaring cheers. About eighty players who’d been training in the facility had gathered to watch their elite-level battle. Reilan was quickly surrounded by several fans.

“You’re Reilan from Twilight Adventurers, am I right? You’re the reason I bought this game!”

“Whoa, wow. You’re a real beaut! Can’t believe you’re for real!”

“You nearly got him, Reilan. He lucked out dodging your killer strike.”

Reilan seemed to have quite a few admirers.

“Is Reilan famous?” Barbara asked Rao.

“Yeah. She made a name for herself defeating both Crest’s guild master and sub-master in PvP, and add her good looks on top of that,” Rao said with pride, amusedly watching her friend get flummoxed by this much attention.

“But now she’s lost to Shuutarou. You wouldn’t tell by looking, but he’s a beast...,” said Barbara, unable to hide her shock.

“And it’s not even his sword fighting that’s the shocker...,” Kettle muttered to herself. She was half exasperated by Shuutarou’s feats by now.

“PvP’s pretty fun!” Shuutarou said.

His eyes were sparkling with happiness, while Reilan was trying to conceal the sting of her loss behind a soft smile.

“It was a good fight. Shuutarou completely dominated the second half,” said Reilan.

It was very clear to everyone that she was feeling down. Shuutarou wanted to cheer her up, but before he could say anything, a man’s voice boomed across the training grounds.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on here? What’d we miss?”

It was the leader of Party 6. He and his men wove through the crowd of onlookers, making their way to Shuutarou, who was holding his head up higher than normal, and Reilan, who’d been looking at the ground dejectedly.

The crowd filled in Party 6 on what had happened.

“Reilan lost to that kid!”

“He’s really good!”

“Why don’t you battle him, too, Galbo?! Show us your swordsmanship!”

Galbo measured Shuutarou with his eyes, intrigued. The man’s party

members shifted uncomfortably.

“Ha. Well, boy? You wanna cross swords?”

The crowd roared when Galbo challenged Shuutarou even before the boy had the chance to answer. Reilan stepped closer to Shuutarou and whispered in his ear.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault...”

At this point, Shuutarou couldn’t turn Galbo down—not with the crowd waiting in anticipation to see them battle. But then again, it didn’t even cross his mind to reject the offer.

Shuutarou smiled at Reilan.

“It’s okay! I should be thanking you. This is so much fun!”

He turned back to Galbo and signaled his agreement with a big nod.

* * * *

Shuutarou and Galbo resembled David and Goliath, Shuutarou’s weapon like a toothpick next to Galbo’s enormous sword. An innocent-looking little boy versus an intimidating, burly man.

“You fought on the Kiren Graveyard map last? Want to go with the same?”

“No, you can choose another map if you like!”

“A’ight. Default map, then. You okay with the First Hit rule?”

Galbo was configuring the room in a practiced manner. If it wasn’t for the fact that the spectators had just witnessed Shuutarou defeating Reilan, someone surely would have protested that it wasn’t fair to go with First Hit. But Shuutarou had proven himself as a top player.

“If he can defeat Galbo...,” Reilan whispered under her breath.

Hope was budding in her heart for something she was too anxious to put into words yet. The other players who had gathered at the training grounds were looking at Shuutarou with the same expectation.

“First Hit makes things simple—you need to land just one hit to win! The

default map's simple, too. Simple is how I like it!" Galbo bellowed with laughter.

Shuutarou smiled, thinking Galbo was only pretending to be simpleminded, while in fact, he was a clever fighter to be feared. The big man was confident in his victory, and that was the real reason why he hadn't chosen more forgiving duel settings or a map that might offer him an advantage. He was likely at least as good as Reilan.

The match began, and the two contestants clashed.

"Huh. You're a hard hitter...!"

Having had the first taste of Shuutarou's battle ability, Galbo realized the boy wasn't a one-trick pony.

"Finisher!" Galbo roared, activating a skill.

He unleashed a heavy attack that couldn't be blocked or parried, smashing his sword right into...the ground where Shuutarou had just been standing, having dodged with a move so swift that he looked like a blur.

In the last match, ten hits were required to win. Now only one mistake was enough to lose. This would be a quick battle keeping both contestants on their toes the whole time.

"Where's he gone?!"

Shuutarou reappeared behind Galbo, poised for attack.

"Shuutarou got him!" Rao exclaimed, on the edge of her seat.

But Galbo blocked Shuutarou's sword with his blade. He had noticed Shuutarou's shadow on the ground and spun around with superhuman speed to defend himself.

"Phew! Sure am glad this isn't the dark graveyard map, or I'd be done for!"

"?!"

Something was wrong with Shuutarou's sword—he couldn't pull it away from Galbo's. Their weapons were attached.

"Hraaagh!"

With their swords stuck together, Galbo pulled Shuutarou in and then shoved

him powerfully off the ground.

The skill he'd activated was Magnetic Sword, used mostly by tanks to hold monsters, preventing their escape. It was an effective way of restraining speedy bird types and such.

A split second before Shuutarou hit the ground, he flexed his body to lessen the impact and sprang right back up into the air.

"Skull Crusher!" he called.

With Action Assist on, the skill enabled him to leap up higher than normal so that the attack power of the downward strike would be augmented by the momentum of his fall.

Dropping down on Galbo from the sky, Shuutarou kicked him in the chest.

"Ngh?!"

Galbo staggered, knocked out of his stance. Shuutarou swung at him with his sword, but it wasn't the second part of the Skull Crusher move— No, he'd only used that skill for the leap.

"Steel Soul."

Galbo turned a leaden gray. It was the same defensive skill Reilan had used before.

The red glow vanished from Shuutarou's sword inches from Galbo. Shuutarou spun around, landed on the ground in front of his opponent, and spun once more, his sword glowing again—he'd canceled Skull Crusher and activated Triple Strike, timing it so that it would hit Galbo the moment his invulnerability status ended.

"He's superhuman...!" came a comment from the gallery.

The spectators were watching with their mouths gaping open.

Galbo's body returned to its normal color just as Shuutarou's sword was about to reach him.

"Saw it coming!"

Galbo's sword traced an arc mirroring Shuutarou's, and he easily deflected

the first and then the second hit of the Triple Strike. He appeared so in control even when faced with the mind-boggling speed of Shuutarou's maxed-out skill that the audience erupted in cheers even louder than before. He smiled with satisfaction, parrying the last strike.

"I knew you had to be able to use skill cancel to beat Reilan. I kinda wanted to see it with my own eyes, and you really helped me out!"

Next, Galbo charged at Shuutarou, roaring. The boy braced himself for the unexpectedly unsophisticated attack. Galbo swung down his greatsword in an immensely powerful move, but Shuutarou deflected it with the side of his sword and parried with a hit aimed at Galbo's chest.

"?!"

Shuutarou's eyes widened. His sword had hit nothing. He quickly glanced around, but Galbo had seemingly evaporated.

"You see that? There's two of them!" exclaimed Barbara.

"Shh! Don't spoil it! This is gonna be good!" Shoukichi told her.

The spectators saw Galbo disappear the moment Shuutarou's sword pierced his chest, while another Galbo appeared right behind the boy.

Shuutarou staggered slightly, his balance thrown by the momentum of his attack, which had met with no resistance. He righted himself, kicked off the ground with one foot, and nimbly launched himself diagonally into the air. Then came the *thud* of Galbo's greatsword striking the ground just where Shuutarou had been standing. Galbo frowned.

How'd he know to dodge that?

Galbo remembered what happened next as if it was in slow motion. He saw Shuutarou make a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree twist and activate another skill.

"Roundhouse Slash!"

Swish! Galbo's head was distorted for a moment.

"The boy got him...!" said someone from the crowd.

Then everyone fell silent. Shuutarou had made a clean slice diagonally from Galbo's head through to his torso.

The winner had been decided!

* * * *

"Holy ravioli! That was unreal!"

"The game's broken, man! The kid's overpowered!"

"He's superhuman! Gotta be!"

"He beat the elite party leader Galbo?!"

"I missed it! How did he do it?!"

This time around, everyone was extolling Shuutarou as the champion. It was his second victory against a top player, but defeating the big burly Galbo made more of an impression on the crowd than his win over the beautiful Reilan, even though they were both just as skilled.

"Well, I'll be damned! You won, kiddo. But tell me, before that last attack, how did you know where I was?" Galbo asked, shaking Shuutarou's hand.

Shuutarou smiled. "Reilan attacked me from behind, and I countered it then, so this time, I also moved so that you'd attack me from a similar position."

Galbo was struck dumb, told that Shuutarou had lured him into striking from behind. Very few players were so good that they could manipulate their opponents in such a way, and if the boy could do that to Galbo, the leader of Crest's elite Party 6, then he wasn't just a genius; it was as if he were a psychic.

I practiced that scenario tons with Bertrand, so it wasn't so hard! Phew!

Shuutarou was happy that the duels turned out to be doable. Of course, after having an Evil Overlord for a battle tutor, fighting a regular human, no matter how elite, was easy in comparison.

"You're the first person who didn't fall for my doppelgänger trick. I didn't know what I was signing up for when I asked you for a duel, ha-ha-ha!"

Galbo didn't have any hard feelings toward Shuutarou, despite having been crushed in the match. He was good-natured, and holding grudges and sulking

simply weren't things he ever did.

Galbo's party members came over, staring at him reproachfully.

"Using your unique skill in front of an audience? What a bright idea."

"It blows my mind how immature you can be, Galbo."

"And what if you won against the boy just because of that trick? It'd be embarrassing, dude."

They were upset with him, and for a good reason. Galbo's unique skill gave him the upper hand over anyone without prior knowledge of what it was—except Shuutarou, as it turned out. The skill was called Doppelgänger, and it was fairly self-explanatory: It created a doppelgänger of the user, with only one LP but all the same stats. While the doppelgänger would die to the weakest hit, it had the same attack power as the original, so it could be used to double up the player's damage by attacking together, or it could act as a decoy.

Galbo had created a doppelgänger to fight Shuutarou while Galbo himself sneaked behind the boy to attack him—but Shuutarou had purposely created that opening to get Galbo to take a predictable position.

Using unique skills in PvP wasn't that uncommon, but there was an unspoken rule to make it clear before the match whether unique skills would be used or not, and Galbo hadn't discussed that with Shuutarou. Galbo scratched his forehead, making a guilty face.

"Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, well, I wasn't planning on it, but Shuutarou turned out to be stronger than I expected, and I didn't want to lose, so one thing led to another... Ha-ha-ha! I got carried away. Sorry."

"You used your unique skill without warning, and you lost. If that was me, I'd want to dig a hole and hide."

That comment was aimed at Galbo, but someone else twitched and hung her head in response.

"Uh-oh. Touché for you, too, huh?" Rao smirked at Reilan. "You're not sulking because you lost, but because you feel bad for using your own unique skill against Shuutarou, am I right?"

“...”

Just like Galbo, Reilan had let her competitive spirit carry her away, and she'd used her unique skill during the match. Shuutarou had somehow sensed her and narrowly dodged the attack, and nobody besides Rao realized what Reilan had done.

Kettle and Shoukichi had overheard Rao.

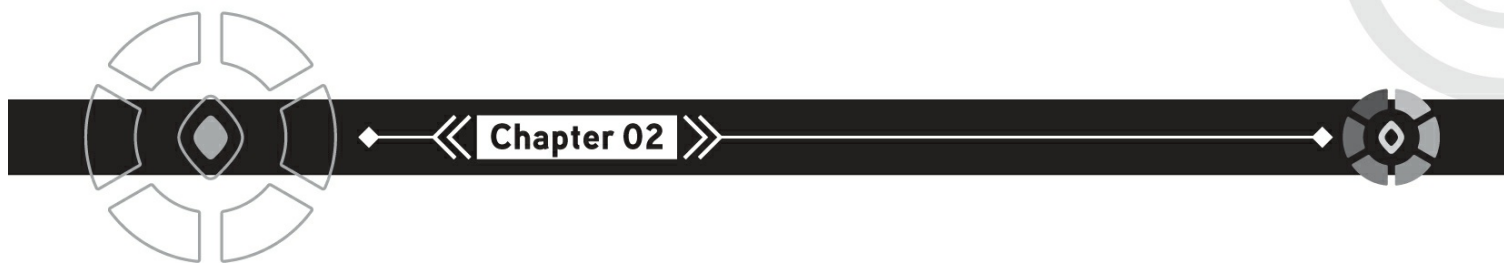
“Wait, Reilan did the same thing as Galbo? Sneakily used her secret-weapon unique skill to try to win, only to lose?”

“That's so childish.”

“Yeah, wow.”

“Cringe.”

The PvP spectacle was over, with one victor and two very regretful losers. They would later sincerely apologize to Shuutarou, who didn't really mind either way.



Party 7 returned to the reception area, where K had been waiting impatiently to speak with the PvP winner.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! You’ve really dropped the bomb on me, Shuutarou! You beat Reilan and Galbo! Which means you’re as strong as our sub-master at least!”

K had screens showing every area of the guild grounds next to his desk, and he liked to spend his free time watching PvP matches, so he’d seen Shuutarou’s duels. Candy, the battle instructor from the Allistras branch of the guild, had given him a heads-up about Shuutarou having sick battle skills, but K wouldn’t have thought the boy capable of beating two elite players in his very first PvP duels.

“Er... Shuutarou, you might’ve heard we’re recruiting new members, and strong players get an especially warm welcome—”

“Sorry, but no thanks.” Shuutarou turned down the offer outright.

K looked devastated. Barbara half smiled at him, moving on to the next thing on her to-do list.

“You’re not getting this one for Crest so easily, K. Now, we’d like to get started with exploring the nearby areas. Could you tell us a little about them?”

The receptionist, who’d slumped over his desk, despairing over his lack of success in recruiting Shuutarou, rolled his head to the side to look up at Barbara insipidly.

“Huh? Ah, yeah, sure...”

“You look like you can hardly be bothered. I’d have hoped for better customer service,” Barbara huffed at him.

Behind her, Kyouko was trying not to giggle.

* * * *

“Whether you’re planning to join the front lines someday or not, just so you know, the minimum requirements set out by our guild are that you have to clear all areas around Calloah three times over,” K explained, back in his relatively professional mode. He looked from one Party 7 member to another before continuing, “We’re a guild, not an army, so you have no obligation to go fight anywhere you don’t like. I’m not trying to pressure you into anything. Just saying that, as someone who’s been on the front lines before, I don’t wanna see anyone trot off to Fort Sandras before they prove they can clear this area without a problem.”

Rao and Reilan, who were frontier veterans like him, nodded in agreement.

“There are three monster-inhabited areas around this town—Kiren Graveyard, Kleeshira Ruins, and Ken-Ron Cavern. In order, they’re located here, here, and here.”

K pointed them out one by one on a map displayed in front of them.

“They serve as the final stages of the tutorial part of the game, testing your abilities before you progress further, which is why I insist that you finish them before moving on. You’ll learn some tricks that will come in handy in the later areas.”

Everyone agreed that sounded sensible.

“On the front lines, you can die oh-so easily. Being at the forefront of exploration means you never know what’s coming next.”

Everything up to Ciola Tower had been thoroughly explored and documented. As long as players memorized the attack patterns and properties of monsters they could expect to encounter, and any special features of the areas, they could plan a safe passage. Owing to the efforts of the frontline players and very

involved support from Crest, the death rates among low-to mid-level players had fallen drastically.

On the frontier, everything was new. The players were exploring areas for the first time, finding out how they worked, what monsters spawned there, and what the boss monsters were like.

“Not that I’m worried about you guys—you’ve got two frontline veterans among you, and a serious-minded leader. You should be able to change to higher-tier jobs while you work on clearing all the areas three times, which will help a lot, too. But I’ve got to warn, or caution, everyone just in case. That’s how things are. Any questions?”

K smiled and looked at each of the party members. Rao and Reilan shook their heads, their expressions neutral. Kyouko, Shoukichi, and Kettle seemed a bit tense, but they didn’t have questions, either. Barbara was watching them with a hint of concern in her eyes. At least the responsible adults outnumbered the anxious kids.

“From Kiren Graveyard on, you need a key to access each new area. That’s a feature you haven’t met with before,” K continued.

Shuutarou had seen a locked area when Elroad took him to the Cerou Underground Labyrinth, which was far beyond Calloah. He’d realized then that some places were inaccessible without some key.

“Area keys can be obtained as a quest reward or as a rare boss drop, or they may be found in special treasure chests in the area before the one you’re trying to unlock. You might not even realize that something you picked up along the way is the key to let you progress to a new place. Whenever you reach a new area, you’ve got to unlock it first.”

“So that’s our next objective? Key-finding?” asked Shoukichi. He clearly thought it was awfully tedious.

“Well, actually!” K smiled smugly. “You don’t need to worry about that! As long as there’s another player in your party, guild, or raid team who has the key, you’re free to pass through! Members of Crest are able to march right up to Ciola Tower without finding their own keys!”

“I see... So there is no real need for us to stay here until we complete each area three times, is there? We could just go?” Kyouko raised an eyebrow at K.

“You could have done that earlier, but hurrying on ahead without due preparation is reckless, to put it nicely. We’ve had many players try that, and it didn’t end well for them, so Crest made that impossible for its members.”

“How?”

“By leaving the keys to the next areas under the supervision of the Calloah branch chief. Since our guild is in possession of these keys already, you won’t be able to get additional ones even if you fulfill the requirements. You need the chief’s permission to use the keys.”

K twirled his index finger in the air, and a ring with keys on it appeared in front of him.

“I’m the chief here, so yeah, I’ve got the keys.”

K smiled. He wasn’t just a receptionist after all.

The party was sitting in the restaurant on Crest’s grounds in Calloah. Shoukichi stabbed a sausage with his fork and slowly rotated it in the air, propping his face with the other hand, elbow on the table.

“Traveling to the front line’s a drag. I wonder if Makoto also had to clear the Calloah areas three times before they let him through.”

Shuutarou and Sylvia were eating their food, chatting telepathically. The little silver wolf was devouring a supersized serving of rice omelet.

‘This rice omelet tastes so good! Amazing. But next time, I’d like mine without peas, please.’

‘Heh-heh-heh! You’re like a little kid, Sylvia, hating peas.’

‘A k-kid?!’



“Wish we didn’t have to do the graveyard,” Kettle muttered, looking at a copy of the local area map they’d gotten from K.

“Huh? Why?” Shoukichi asked her.

“I don’t like the way undead look. They’re too realistically gruesome in this game.”

“Yeah, they are, but K said we’ve gotta do every area three times...”

“Not saying I won’t do it. I just don’t like it.”

Rao was listening in on the kids’ conversation, but she didn’t say anything.

“But, Kettle,” Reilan started, turning to face her. “Undead are weak to the Holy and Fire elements. You have just the right skills to—”

“Don’t waste your breath,” Rao interrupted. “This isn’t how kids learn. Barbara, can I borrow them for a bit?”

“Sure,” Barbara agreed, guessing what Rao had in mind.

Shoukichi and Kettle looked up at Rao, confused.

“Er...?”

Rao walked behind their chairs—

“Gotcha!”

“Eep!”

—and locked their necks in a choke hold, pulling them off their seats and dragging them away, laughing.

“All right then, kids! You had a day out with Reilan; now it’s my turn!”

“That hurts! Don’t manhandle me!”

“I never agreed to go! Help, I’m being kidnapped!”

With Rao and the two kids gone, it was so peaceful—like the calm after the storm.

“Wow, I had no idea about Ur Sluice’s background story. I wonder if the monsters that destroyed the village will appear in some quest,” said Kyouko.

Barbara made a little grunt to show that she agreed.

“When I was still part of the frontier team, we didn’t know yet how to trigger all the area boss events. Some quests in the area we’d passed through may activate at a later point,” Reilan added with a half smile.

Without Rao, Shoukichi, and Kettle, the remaining party members had been enjoying their meal in a more relaxed atmosphere. Shuutarou shared his knowledge of the local lore, impressing everyone. It was all just things he’d read in his beloved blog, *Beta Tester Yoritsura Is In!*

“There’s no NPC giving out quests in Ur Sluice, so if there is a quest about the cause of the village’s destruction, it must start in Allistras or Emaro,” Shuutarou theorized excitedly.

“You have a really good memory for these kinds of things,” Kyouko told him, surprised at how much Shuutarou had to say on the topic.

“Do you know why Kiren Graveyard became overrun with undead? They’re born from strong grudges, which points to the castellan NPC being guilty of really horrible things! Like forcing people into slavery! Experimenting on humans! And on monsters to make them stronger!” Shuutarou continued, on fire.

Reilan cocked her head to the side.

The official story is that it started with Dullahan taking up residence there...

But she kept a smile on her face, deciding to refrain from reminding Shuutarou not to unquestioningly believe everything Yoritsura posted on his blog.

“Can I have your opinion, Shuutarou?” Barbara asked with a hint of mischief in her eyes. “Do you think we could complete the Kiren Graveyard area without trouble with our current lineup?”

“I haven’t been there yet, so I may be wrong, of course,” he started, “but I think we’ll do fine. Undead are hard if you’re lower level, but we’re all within a

good level range, and undead are weak to Fire-attribute attacks, which Kettle has, and the Holy attribute, which you have. We'd just have to watch out to make sure we don't attract too many monsters at once, since Rao's our only tank."

After saying all that, Shuutarou downed a big gulp of his juice. Barbara took a deep breath, looking satisfied with his answer.

"If you think we can do it, then let's go."

She stood up from her chair. Reilan and Kyouko followed. Shuutarou thought that was a bit out of the blue, but he picked up Sylvia and left the restaurant with the women.

* * * *

Barbara, Reilan, Kyouko, and Shuutarou headed in a different direction from Rao and the two kids. They arrived in front of a charmless, dilapidated hut. With an innocent look on her face, Barbara opened the door and led them inside.

Bunches of dried herbs, fish, and newts were hanging from the beams. Shelves were lined with bottles, which appeared to contain eyeballs preserved in liquid. The inside of the hut was even more eerie than the outside.

The only light came from the flickering flame of a lantern in the corner, the decorative paper shade torn in places.

While Kyouko seemed unsettled, Shuutarou was examining the bottles with curiosity. Meanwhile, Barbara and Reilan went to talk with the old woman dressed in tatters who was sitting at the back.

"What brings you here?"

The old woman lifted her head to gaze at the visitors with clouded eyes. Barbara and Reilan exchanged looks.

"The other day, my dead friend came to my house," Reilan said, or at least, that's what Shuutarou thought he heard her say.

The old woman's expression changed.

"Don't be silly, girl..."

“I knew it was him only by his pendant. His head had been severed,” Reilan continued, despite the old lady’s initial reaction.

The NPC opened her eyes wider in a flash of realization. She sighed deeply, and a pop-up appeared on the edge of Shuutarou’s field of view: **Quest Started: The Curse of Kiren Graveyard**

“Your friend fell prey to the Headless Duke,” the old lady said. “My son, the grave keeper, also came knocking at the door one day, changed into something that was no longer alive. As long as the Headless Duke’s body isn’t destroyed, he will continue to hunt the living, tearing off the heads of his victims, who then roam the streets at night, dead but not so.”

Another notification popped up for Shuutarou: **Kiren Graveyard Key acquired**

“This is how you start the quest that gives you access to the graveyard,” Reilan explained to her party. “If you go to the grave keeper’s room, you’ll find a letter there with a hint about the undead’s weaknesses.”

“Got it. Thank you, Reilan,” said Barbara.

Just then, she received a message from Rao.

“Rao’s saying she’ll bring the kids back tomorrow,” she relayed. “She didn’t take you, Shuutarou, because she guessed you’d be fine. Right now, Shoukichi and Kettle are frantically collecting info about the next area we’ll go to.”

“What?”

“They didn’t know anything at all, so Rao’s taking them around to have them find out for themselves about the monsters that spawn near Calloah. Their properties, levels, weaknesses. Also, the routes to take through each area, any traps waiting for unsuspecting players, and how to gain the keys, of course.”

Shuutarou felt a twinge of guilt, since he hadn’t gone to the trouble of doing the groundwork by himself, either, having only read a walkthrough on a blog. But even though he had it easy, at least he was somewhat prepared, and being prepared could save your life. Kettle and Shoukichi wanted to just go to the monster-inhabited zones and play it by ear. This kind of approach was extremely dangerous.

“Rao’s trying to get them into the habit of doing their own research. From now on, gathering as much information as you can in advance without rushing into things will be even more important than before,” Barbara explained.

Shuutarou nodded.

Rao may be doing that also to prevent an accident like before, Reilan thought.

In this world, carelessness quickly led to death. That’s why death rates were so high among children and adolescents.

“Can we go to the weapon shop next? I’d like to buy some Fire-attribute arrows,” said Kyouko.

“Good thinking. Let’s go,” Barbara agreed.

Shuutarou made a mental note that he’d need to speak to NPCs to obtain info needed to progress in the future, when he’d be exploring incognito in his black knight armor.

“Sorry, I have someplace else I wanted to go to...,” he said.

“Ah, don’t worry. You don’t need to tag along. Where should we meet later...?”

They decided on a meeting point, and the women walked off to the weapon store. Shuutarou wasn’t going with them because he wanted to return to his dungeon first.

He and Sylvia chatted telepathically as they hurried past other players to get out of people’s sight.

‘It’s easiest to just ask Dullahan directly about this graveyard, Master!’

‘Yeah, but I may have trouble convincing my friends that what I know is true. I can’t tell them about my unique skill.’

‘Aah, I keep forgetting!’

“Wouldn’t you like to log out?”

For a moment, all other chatter faded into the background.

“What was that?”

The snippet of conversation Shuutarou overheard made him lose his train of thought. He looked around, trying to spot the person who’d spoken about logging out, but they had already disappeared into the crowd. Shuutarou cocked his head and watched for a moment before starting to walk again.

* * * *

In the throne room of Ross Maora Castle, the Evil Overlords sat anxiously in chairs encircling an empty chasm in the middle. Shuutarou had called them to decide who’d act as his next summon, which put them in an agitated state.

Shuutarou was sitting with Punio in his lap, finding comfort in petting his slime monster. Sylvia, who had already been granted the role of the first summon, was wearing a smug smile. It had already been decided that Theodore would be second, in his dragon form, but there would be three more slots to fill later.

“What’s wrong, Number Two? You seem out of sorts,” Gallarus teased Vampy.

“You’re one to talk. A mountain of a man like you, shaking like a newborn deer,” she snapped back.

Bertrand and Elroad, meanwhile, maintained their poise.

“So I think I’ve decided on my third summon...,” Shuutarou began, and the bickering stopped instantly.

He felt Vampy’s and Gallarus’s eyes practically drilling into him. He stroked Punio gently.

“It’ll be Punio.”

Elroad approved at once. “A wise choice indeed.”

Vampy and Gallarus had to agree. Shuutarou would be safer with “summons” that didn’t look human, to minimize the possibility someone would recognize him when he appeared in his dark knight armor. Sylvia could accompany him in

her wolf form, Theodore in his dragon form, and Punio could just be its usual formless self. But that still left two more summon slots to fill later, and both Vampy and Gallarus had high hopes they'd get chosen. Their overt eagerness amused Bertrand.

"We have lots of time to think about the fifth slot, but I'd like to decide on the fourth summon now," Shuutarou said.

Vampy and Gallarus leaned toward him, on the edge of their seats. And then he told them whom he had in mind.

* * * *

The denizens of the Dungeon Core paradise city, Regiuria, paused their work and gathered in the streets to greet a very unusual procession—the dungeon master, Shuutarou, with an entourage of all the Evil Overlords. Shuutarou forced a smile, the obsequious bows of his subjects making him want to cringe.

"I wish they wouldn't do that. It makes me so self-conscious."

"But they must, so as not to disrespect the master of us all," Vampy said poutily.

"...Are you angry with me, maybe?"

"No. How could I be?"

Both Vampy and Gallarus were trudging along, gutted. Shuutarou wasn't completely oblivious as to why they were in a low mood, but he decided it was better not to probe that topic.

They arrived at their destination—the battle arena, which had, in the past, been a place of execution turned into a public spectacle, with slaves fighting as gladiators. In Regiuria, it was a contest ground where confident fighters battled it out to test their own ability. There was only one rule: *Do not kill*. Winning a battle without killing the opponent required more skill, in fact. The battles to be witnessed there weren't gory bloodbaths, but fine displays of power combined with technique.

Shuutarou and the Overlords entered just as the crowd roared in applause.

"After I trained him, he felt obliged to pay you back by putting his new skills to

good use. In the end, he chose to become a gladiator,” Bertrand said with emotion in his voice.

Shuutarou glanced up at the King of the Elves and saw that even though the man wasn’t smiling, his face, illuminated by the light coming from the arena, was radiating happiness.

“Welcome our next challenger, Perion, the young chief of High Lizardmen! He’s an up-and-coming fighter with a string of forty-nine victories under his belt,” came an announcement.

“Wow! This arena’s the real deal!” Shuutarou exclaimed, fascinated by the feverish excitement of the spectators.

A red-scaled lizardman entered the stone-paved arena, and the crowd’s cheering became even louder.

“His opponent will be the unbeatable champion, the legendary gladiator on a 1,330-victory streak! Welcome Iron!”

The atmosphere became absolutely frenzied. The lizardman’s opponent entered the arena, its steps slow and measured. Shuutarou remembered Iron as a battered, rusty pile of armor, but the monster was now polished to a high shine, and its shape was more human.

“I want to have Iron as my fourth summon,” Shuutarou had announced earlier in the throne room.

Iron’s intense battle with the lizardman reinforced Shuutarou’s conviction that he’d made the right choice.

* * * *

The crowd cheered in awe when Shuutarou and the Overlords entered the arena. Some of the spectators were so overcome with emotion that they began to cry. It made Shuutarou uneasy to see that they were idolizing him more and more as time went on, almost treating him like a god by then.

Iron had won the duel. First of all, Shuutarou wanted to congratulate it.

“You’ve become really strong, Iron.”

Iron nodded silently.

It had gotten to level 78. A tank that strong should be put to good use.

Iron's been training here so much. He's strong enough to assist us. I can also use my dungeon master abilities to evolve him...

Shuutarou was about to inform Iron of his plans when Bertrand interrupted:

"He's nowhere near where I'd like him to be..."

The King of the Elves sighed, dropping his head.

"Sorry, Master. With all due respect, I can't approve of making Iron your summon. He's not ready," he said with his eyes on the monster.

When Iron went out of control and killed its summoner, Shuutarou had asked his Overlords to care for Iron, and so Gallarus and Bertrand took it under their wings.

"Iron, I don't deny you've made great improvements since we first saw you, absorbing all that Gallarus and I have taught you. You've been following the rules we've given you without fail, and devoting yourself to self-improvement, as we witnessed today. But..." Bertrand paused briefly for effect. "You're not yet suitable to be our master's party member, even with two Overlords to support you. As the tank, you'd be directly responsible for protecting our master from enemy attacks. An important role like that should go to someone at least as powerful as us Overlords. It wouldn't sit right with me to see anyone weaker take on that responsibility."

Bertrand's judgment seemed harsh, but it was motivated by his concern for Iron—he didn't want the loyal monster to be shattered one day by the realization that it was only in the way. Iron's past had left it scarred, and feeling unwanted again would only bring back its past trauma. After the efforts that Iron, the summon that had ended up killing its summoner, had put into self-improvement, it certainly deserved better.

Bertrand turned to Iron with an earnest look in his eyes.

"Iron is definitely not ready to be Master's companion...but maybe he would like to become his apprentice?"

“What? Don’t be ridiculous!” Gallarus protested.

Iron nodded heavily at Bertrand.

Shuutarou smiled awkwardly. “I think you don’t give Iron enough credit...”

An over-level-70 tank would be the absolute dream for any player. Even on the frontier of exploration, Iron would be totally overpowered.

“Not trying to argue with you, Master,” said Gallarus. “Anyway, it won’t be long until you’ll be able to take along your fourth summon. Theodore’s next, then Punio. Iron may improve by the time his turn comes up.”

“How about we make it a requirement for Iron to become the champion in my world before he’s allowed to accompany Master outside?” Sylvia suggested nonchalantly.

The other Overlords were taken aback.

“Hey, now. He’ll be no use to anyone dead,” Gallarus objected.

Bertrand also balked at the idea. “That would be quite an extreme requirement.”

Vampy and Theodore didn’t say a word. They weren’t as protective of Iron as their fellow Overlords, but they were frowning.

What sort of place is Sylvia’s realm...? Shuutarou wondered. He thought back to Vampy’s empty and desolate world of undead before he’d remade it for her, and to Bertrand’s beautiful but sorrowful forest realm inhabited by the handful of remaining elves.

Iron nodded firmly at Sylvia.

Elroad shot Bertrand and Gallarus a steely look.

“He agrees. It’s not your place to decide what’s best for him.”

“But Vampy’s realm—,” Bertrand started before he was silenced by another frosty look from Elroad.

“Are you going back on your word? It was you who first insisted that Iron would need to prove that his strength equaled ours before you’d approve of him assisting our master. He might win thousands of battles on this arena, be

an invincible gladiator for hundreds of years, but that's merely play compared with the challenges our realms present. If there's one realm where he might stand a chance of emerging victorious, that's Sylvia's."

Bertrand fell silent, bested by Elroad's logic. Eventually, he turned to Iron to speak with it one last time.

"As you can guess, the world where you're to be tested is more unforgiving than anything you'd known. Even those driven by a burning desire for power end up consumed by hopelessness and despair there. Are you sure you want to go?"

Iron responded with another firm nod. Bertrand sighed deeply, overruled.

* * * *

Next, Shuutarou, Iron, and the Overlords—except Elroad and Gallarus, who stayed in the castle to keep watch—headed over to Sylvia's realm.

"I guess Sylvia's world is a huge forest with wolves living in it?" Shuutarou chatted up Vampy, who was walking beside him.

The pale Queen of the Dead gave him a strange look. "There are wolf-inhabited forests in her realm, but where we're going to now is very different. Without going into detail, it's a place far more terrifying and hostile than my realm."

Shuutarou swallowed audibly. A place worse than the realm of death could only be a nightmarish hellscape. Shuutarou's pulse quickened at the thought that Iron would be tested in such a horrific setting.

"Here we are," Sylvia announced, stopping at the head of the procession.

The dark fog they'd been walking through dissipated, revealing a giant, sturdy gate leading into pitch-black darkness. The gate's appearance was similar to the Allistras city gates, but it was more crudely made, and with the darkness waiting beyond, it made a very eerie impression.

"Why is it so dark in there?"

Shuutarou reached for the gate. Unsettlingly, even though his hand didn't sense any resistance, he couldn't put it past the gate. It was as if his mind

subconsciously decided he was forbidden from entering that space and blocked his movement. It wasn't so much frustrating as terrifying, and Shuutarou promptly withdrew his hand.

"Entry is only possible through this gate. It only opens for those who wish for it to open. No one can see past it. Those who live there can't come out," Sylvia recited in an emotionless voice.

The gate was featureless except for a small hole at eye level. When the whole party got near the gate, Sylvia pointed to that cavity.

"To proceed, you need to insert one of your eyeballs into this hollow," she said matter-of-factly.

"?!"

Shuutarou was so shocked by both what she'd said and how she'd said it, his legs buckled, and he fell on his bottom.

"You're joking, right?"

"There's no other way to open the gate."

Sylvia parted her long bangs to show them her other eye. It was the same beautiful blue as the one not normally concealed by her hair, but a scar left by a sharp claw ran from her forehead down to her cheek on that side.

"I've been the victor in that world, so my eye was returned to me. If Iron succeeds, he'll get his eye back, too," she said with a smug smile.

Shuutarou turned toward Iron. "But Iron only has one eye!"

Iron did, in fact, have only one eye to begin with—its iris was no longer yellow, but blue like Sylvia's. It seemed the height of cruelty to demand that the monster give up its only eye and enter the world where it was to be tested with such a major handicap.

Squelch, came a nauseating sound. Before anyone noticed what was happening, an empty socket gaped at them from Iron's face, its blue eye in its hand, sending sparks flying left and right.

Shuutarou reeled. "No, Iron, don't—!"

“Master, he decided this for himself. Let’s respect his choice and allow him to go in,” Bertrand said, putting his hand on Shuutarou’s shoulder.

Iron felt the dark gate with its fingers, searching for the slot. Once it found the slot, Iron pushed its eyeball in. *Byong!* The noise the gate made was very strange, a little like the chime of a bell but with an electronic quality, like some appliance being turned on. Red light slowly welled from the bottom, creeping up until the whole gate was lit. Then it opened with a rumble.

“Don’t worry about Iron. I’ll make sure he doesn’t die. I can come and go freely, since I’ve won the throne there before,” said Sylvia.

“Ah. That’s reassuring,” Shuutarou replied weakly.

Shuutarou peered into the hair-raisingly creepy world behind the gate. Among the black haze, he made out the shape of a partially leveled mountain studded with gravestones. There was a strange gathering of people in black hoods, each holding a sword pointed up at the sky. They were fidgeting restlessly.

“To win the throne, Iron will need to get past all the nameless fighters—their identities have been erased along with their names. When he passes through the gate, he, too, will forget who he was.”

Sylvia, illuminated by the glow from the gate, appeared to be gazing fondly into her realm.

Nameless fighters.

Be they swordmasters, nobles, adventurers, bears, monsters, war axes forged by famous blacksmiths—their identities melted away as they became nameless fighters, united by their thirst for power. All this realm had to offer them was rivalry. Only those with the strongest will would emerge victorious from the countless battles. Those whose wills faltered turned to dust, upon which the stronger treaded on their way toward the throne of champions.

The single red eyes of the black-cloaked nameless fighters were darting this

way and that, glowing menacingly. When they saw Sylvia and Iron, the fighters uttered unearthly growls. They sounded so bloodthirsty, Shuutarou thought they were like vengeful spirits from legends.

“Iron...”

Shuutarou felt so bad for Iron. It was heading into this hell, blinded. He racked his brain for some words of encouragement to offer the monster. He remembered what Bertrand said to him earlier.

“He felt obliged to pay you back by putting his new skills to good use. In the end, he chose to become a gladiator.”

“Master, he decided this for himself. Let’s respect his choice and allow him to go in.”

Shuutarou fixed his eyes on Iron’s back.

“I’ll be waiting for your return.”

He wasn’t sure if Iron had heard him. The gate rumbled shut. Then all was quiet again.

* * * *



The next morning, Shuutarou and Bertrand were sitting on a bench at a fountain plaza in Regiuria. Bertrand slowly puffed out a big cloud of cigarette smoke, watching children playing with a ball.

“Since we’ve left him in Sylvia’s hands, Iron may return quite a lot stronger,” he said.

Bertrand didn’t lack self-awareness. He began training Iron out of necessity. Had Iron, the summoner killer, displayed any aberrant behavior, Bertrand would have slain it at once.

But soon enough, although Bertrand still claimed he was mentoring Iron only for Shuutarou’s sake, he began to care about his charge, wanting the best for it.

Shuutarou stroked Punio. “Iron’s your trainee, so I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Bertrand turned his head toward Shuutarou, who continued, “After you taught me swordfighting and martial arts, I haven’t lost to anyone. And Iron hasn’t lost a single battle on the arena, either.”

Shuutarou stood up from the bench and looked toward the battle arena.

“I’m glad I chose you to be Iron’s mentor.”

“Why?”

“Because you believe in him. I felt really anxious about sending Iron to that scary world, and I know you were also worried about him, but you insisted we let him go.” Shuutarou smiled softly. “Iron knows it, too, so I think he’ll want to come back no matter what to let you know that he tried his best. If strength of will is the most important thing in that world, Iron will be stronger than anyone.”

Surprised and very moved, Bertrand dropped his head to hide his face behind his fists. He managed to suppress the emotions welling up in his chest, and he looked up with a smile.

“Well, I hope so.”

“It’s a given!”

Their conversation ended there. They continued to wait in silence broken only

by the splashing of the fountain and happy voices of the playing children.

* * * *

Later, the Evil Overlords and Shuutarou gathered in the throne room. Sylvia was back among them.

Shuutarou was sitting on the edge of his seat.

“How’s Iron?” he asked Sylvia.

“At first, he was barely surviving each battle, but he’s doing better now. I spent a year teaching him what he needed to become the champion. Now it’s all in his hands.”

Shuutarou was surprised by what Sylvia said, but it was overall reassuring. He glanced over at Bertrand, who also seemed relieved.

It’s been only one night here, but a whole year in Sylvia’s realm, he thought incredulously, still not used to how time could flow at a different pace in *Eternity*.

“Now that Sylvia’s back, I’d like to return to Calloah,” Shuutarou said, turning to Theodore. “Be on standby for my second summon, okay?”

“Aye,” Theodore said with a firm nod.

The King of the Dragons walked over to Bertrand to give him something.

“What’s this?” Bertrand asked.

“A celebratory gift. For Iron. Give it to him in my stead, will you?”

It was a set of silver armor. Exquisitely engraved, it looked fit for a paladin. It came with a red hip-length cape edged in green, and a helmet with a falcon motif.

For a few moments, Bertrand stared wordlessly at the armor, as if unsure whether to accept it. But in the end, his face softened in a smile, and he took the gear.

“I will give it to him upon his return.”

Theodore nodded, satisfied, and walked over to Shuutarou, flanking him on

the side opposite from Sylvia.

“Please look after the castle while we’re away!” Shuutarou said to the other Overlords.

Elroad, Vampy, Gallarus, and Bertrand knelt, bowing deeply.

“Safe travels, Master.”

Shuutarou and his two companions disappeared, fading into the darkness.



Fort Sandras silently towered over the barren landscape. Rivaling Allistras in size, the giant fortress town was surrounded by impregnable mechanical walls, which made it look even more surreal.

It was the farthest outpost inhabited by players. A commotion broke out among those within the fort.

“It’s Crest...!”

A group of ace players had arrived from Emaro Town. They were affiliated with the biggest and most famous guild, Crest. The Sandras residents rejoiced at these unexpected reinforcements.

The new arrivals stopped in a street lined by copper-colored buildings made of metal. Their leader, Wataru, walked out to the front of the group.

“We have made it to Fort Sandras. Please take the rest of the day to recover from the fatigue of our journey. I will arrange accommodations for us.”

At his call, the group dispersed, chatting animatedly. Only Wataru, Alba, Misaki, and Makoto remained, still having something to discuss between themselves.

“We should go and speak with the other guild leaders,” Wataru said after a while.

“I’m coming with you,” said Alba.

The Crest guild master and sub-master walked off.

“As for me, I’m gonna investigate the dining options,” said Makoto. “Wanna

come with?”

He mimed holding a beer mug in one hand and a skewer with grilled meat in another.

Misaki shook her head, looking at him apologetically. “I’d love to, but there’s something else I wanted to check out...”

“Sure. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Get some actual sleep, girl!”

Makoto headed downtown. Misaki smiled, a little embarrassed that her friend knew she was hardly allowing herself to get any rest. She opened the map to carefully check the area.

“He’s not here, either...”

She was searching for a purple dot marking the player who’d helped her so much, but no such dot showed up in Fort Sandras. Misaki had been really hoping to find him here, at the frontier, so this was a huge disappointment for her. She’d been thinking about him whenever she defeated an enemy, cleared a new area, or was commended by someone for her ability.

“Where are you, Shuutarou?” she muttered sadly, tracing the map with her finger.

The player she owed her life to, whom she still felt very inferior to, was hopelessly elusive.

After a while, Misaki pointed her boots toward the training grounds and started walking gingerly.

* * * *

Every town had its own NPC-run Adventurers Guild, and Fort Sandras was no exception. Inside, it was just like any of its counterparts: a lively tavern. At the back, Wataru and Alba were sitting at a large round table, together with five other players. The table was laden with fine foods, but only the two people sitting opposite Wataru and Alba, on the northern side of the table, had started eating.

“Hey. Thanks for coming all the way,” said one of them, a man with red eyes and wavy black hair.

The man brought to mind a snake. There was a coldness in his eyes and voice. His companion, who seemed entirely absorbed by the food, was a handsome youth with chiseled features and a Samoan-style tattoo with a sun motif covering his chest and shoulders. There was an air of readiness for violence around him.

Those two were from Yamata.

Yamata was a battle-oriented guild with seventy members. Originally, they'd been a PvP guild. Their system was unusual in the way that their top eight players shared leadership, but those positions saw high turnover as guild members competed for them in death matches. They continued that guild tradition even after death in the game became real.

Thus, the leaders were always the strongest players that the guild had to offer. It might beggar belief, but even the position of guild master wasn't permanent—it went to the best Yamata player. Currently, that was Hiiiiive, the man with wavy black hair. The tattooed man was Alan, the sub-master.

The two players sitting on the eastern side of the table were the next to acknowledge Wataru and Alba.

"We've heard this morning of your departure from Emaro. You made good time, arriving here on the same day," the one dressed in a white robe said in a relaxed voice.

His hair was as white as his robe, but he looked to be in his midthirties. The way he smiled hinted that he placed a great deal of confidence in himself.

Next to him was a girl in her late teens, wearing a similar white robe. She wasn't looking at the others or saying anything.

They were representing Aegis.

Like Crest, Aegis had its own uniform to promote a sense of belonging among their ranks: white robes, unlike Crest's gray armor.

Aegis was a popular choice for players who were interested in speedrunning quests, areas, and bosses.

The guild master was Shirokado, and the girl next to him was Matsu.

Another woman at the table was avoiding eye contact, too—the one on the western side of the table. She had her head down, covering her face with her arms, so Wataru and Alba couldn't see what she looked like.

"Well, shall we raise a toast to celebrate the new arrivals? Some have already been enjoying the food, I see," said Shirokado.

Hiiiiive stared at him challengingly. "Why are you presiding over the meeting?"

"Someone has to. You're impatient to be done with it so you can leave, no?"

That shut Hiiiiive up. Shirokado raised his glass, still smiling placidly.

"Here's to Crest joining us on the front lines!"

The frontier guild masters' meeting began with a tense atmosphere. It would be no exaggeration to say that the fate of the three hundred and fifty thousand players in the game rested in the hands of this small group of guild leaders.

Alba felt enmity toward the others, who had ignored Crest's calls for help when Allistras was in danger of being invaded by monsters, prioritizing progressing with exploration over saving lives.

Exploration's important, too; I know that...

The guild masters who'd refused to help back then didn't do so without a reason. Through pressing on with exploration, they were contributing toward greater good, too, since the assumption was that clearing the game would set the trapped players free. Every day, the frontier fighters were putting their lives on the line.

But they could've put that on hold for a while to ensure the safety of the three hundred and fifty thousand players first.

As far as Alba was concerned, it was illogical to ignore the plight of the players in the starting city to focus on another task that could have easily been postponed.

The front line was dangerous, but it also offered various advantages, while there was no profit in looking after the well-being of the noncombatants in Allistras. Alba was quite new to video games, but he quickly learned about the importance of levels, equipment, and items—things that grew dramatically more important when the game stopped being just a game.

Strong weapons enabled players to progress further. Strong armor protected them from threats lurking ahead. Good equipment like that could also be sold at a high price, earning the seller an easier life. Money could solve a lot of problems...but shouldn't protecting the lives of others come first?

Alba watched the other guild masters, who were eating their food and acting as if they didn't have a guilty conscience. To him, they were as incomprehensible as if they were aliens. But in contrast to Alba, Wataru wasn't showing the slightest hint that he might be disapproving of the others.

"One of the Twilight leaders couldn't make it?" Wataru asked the woman sitting on the western side of the table.

She was in her early twenties, had blue hair, and seemed nervous. When Wataru spoke to her, her eyes darted left and right anxiously.

"The guild master is...unwell," she said evasively.

Both the guild masters and sub-masters had been invited to the meeting. The woman must have been the Twilight Adventurers' sub-master.

Alan hooted in laughter, prompting a puzzled look from Wataru. Shirokado cleared his throat.

"Wataru," he said, "as far as I know, several of your best people have already arrived here ahead of you?"

"That's correct. Ten players, including our third-in-command."

A small party of Crest's elite fighters led by Flamme had moved to Fort Sandras some time before Wataru brought his crew.

Shirokado gave a little chuckle. “A small dispatch from the biggest of guilds is all it takes to rock the boat here.”

That remark irked Alba, but he just pressed his lips into a line so as not to say anything snappy.

“By the way,” Shirokado continued, “I expect you’d like to know about our progress. We’ve cleared the Cerou Underground Labyrinth up to the third boss.”

That piqued both Wataru’s and Alba’s interest. The Cerou Underground Labyrinth was the next area after Ciola Tower. Then there were the Sorn Mines, which were protected by the elemental spirits’ prayer. Shuutarou and Elroad had found it impossible to enter the labyrinth, since they lacked the key—but that, of course, was not something the Crest leaders knew about.

“The labyrinth is probably bigger than any of the previous areas. We’ve started encountering monsters that are level forty there, although we defeated the first boss with a level-thirty-five party without much difficulty.”

“What are the monsters’ elemental attributes?”

“For some reason, they’re all over the place. Fire is the most common. Actually, you should just get a look for yourselves.”

Shirokado was skimping on information, but Wataru didn’t press him to share more. There was something else he’d come to talk about.

“The noncombatants are now living in safety. Nothing can be guaranteed in this world, of course, but I’d say we can put that matter in the rearview mirror,” Wataru said, instantly garnering attention from the others. “I have no intention to reproach you for not sending reinforcements to stop the monster invasion. But if you do feel even slight regret over not having come to our aid, perhaps I could convince you to agree to this proposal...”

Wataru paused for a single breath.

“I would like to unite our guilds. To put an end to the rivalry that has no place in *Eternity* now that it’s not just a game.”

He reasoned that play had turned into survival. It no longer mattered who got

what first. They should unite their forces and share information to hasten the day they would all be released from *Eternity*.

The other guild leaders considered his suggestion in silence. Hiiiiive was the first to speak.

“We can cooperate, and you can hire us out, but we’re not merging with you.”

He got up from his seat. Alan followed suit, looking bored.

Alba’s armor clanked as he shifted in his chair.

“Why not?” Wataru asked the Yamata leaders, his expression neutral.

“Same goal doesn’t mean same methods,” Hiiiiive told him. “We’ve got our own values that don’t mix with yours.”

After that vague reply, Hiiiiive waved and left.

“Food was good,” Alan said, heading out, too.

Alba stared hatefully at the door after those two left. Wataru wasn’t ruffled—perhaps he’d expected as much.

“And what about Aegis?” he asked Shirokado patiently.

Shirokado didn’t reply immediately, seemingly thinking some more about the proposal. Then his lips stretched into a little smile.

* * * *

Alba shook his head, looking at the four empty seats where the other leaders had been sitting. “Even in these circumstances, they won’t forgo their competitive spirit.”

“You have to see it from their perspective,” Wataru said sensibly. “Joining us is of no benefit to them. We prioritized helping the noncombatants, while other guilds searched for a way out by progressing through the next areas of the game. And it’s fine to have factions with different outlooks; they’re all valid. As Yamata’s guild master said, some of us just don’t mix together.”

Alba sighed, his indignation ebbing away.

To the players too scared to leave the inns, Crest, who protected Allistras, was a beacon of hope. The frontline guilds, on the other hand, were heartless; they spared no thought for those weaker than them. But at the same time, most players also could hardly wait to be freed from the game world, and investing time and resources into so many players who were entirely dependent on others might delay everyone's release.

Neither Yamata nor Aegis was willing to merge with Crest.

"There's no clear path to freedom. We're all groping in the dark. Why is the concept of cooperation so repulsive to them...?" Alba groaned.

The requirements for clearing the game weren't stated anywhere. Neither was there any reassurance that doing so would set the players free. Competing for resources and information was, if anything, detrimental to everybody, or so Alba thought. He sighed again, exasperated that the other leaders hadn't shared any valuable insights, leaving Crest to pretty much find everything out on their own.

"Excuse me... About that offer to merge...," the quiet Twilight sub-master said, raising her hand like a pupil in class.

Alba turned to her, his face fearsome as he was still in a rotten mood, and the young woman gasped, intimidated, quickly dropping her hand.

Alba hurriedly apologized, cursing himself. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"We'd actually...like to merge with your guild," the woman replied timidly.

Alba beamed. "Oh! Really?!"

The woman nodded, her face tense. She gazed down at the table. "Yes... But you see...I told you earlier that our guild master is unwell. This has been going on for quite a long time now, and we're not functional at the moment. So we may not be of much help to you..."

Twilight Adventurers used to be the next-biggest guild after Crest. During the beta, they were most popular with laid-back players. They had a good reputation as a friendly, not-too-hardcore bunch. At one point, they had many

famous people in their ranks. The guild master was one of them.

The young woman had been appointed as their sub-master only recently. Her name was Kagone.

“We’ve heard of what happened in Ciola. Some of the players previously affiliated with you have joined our guild,” Wataru said with sympathy.

Kagone gave him a little nod. She bit her lip. “Our main players left the guild after that incident, and our master became a shut-in, too weighed down by guilt to carry on running the guild, so more and more people have been moving to other progression guilds.”

Twilight Adventurers shrank from a big, lively guild into a minor faction, their activities temporarily suspended.

“We’d like to merge with you, but only after our guild master recovers. Will that be all right?” Kagone asked.

Alba nodded numbly, his hopes of a successful merger fading.

* * * *

Mechanical soldiers strode up and down the stone-paved streets, their armor clinking and clanking. Alba and Wataru made their way through the town, silent for a long time before Alba finally spoke out about what had been on his mind since the meeting with the guild leaders.

“We’d have to re-recruit players who’ve retired from battles.”

It wouldn’t be without precedent, but persuading players who had suffered all kinds of trauma to fight again would be a challenging task.

“I’ve heard of players who can’t bring themselves to even touch a weapon after seeing their beloved die in front of them,” Alba continued, with no shortage of sad examples to recount.

Wataru nodded gravely. “Well, we won’t know until we meet them, although if their guildmates couldn’t get them to stay, they’re unlikely to listen to strangers like us,” he said, stopping in front of an inn bathed in the light of the setting sun.

He opened the door to go inside just as two other players were coming out—it was Hiiiiive and Alan from Yamata.

“Ah!”

“!”

“Hey,” Hiiiiive mumbled.

Alba and Alan scowled at each other, as if ready to jump at the other’s throat.

“You guys come to see the Eyeless, too?” Alan asked with a smirk, tapping the corners of his eyes.

He was mocking them, but Alba didn’t know why. He treated Alan to a hostile stare, not that it made the slightest impression on the man.

“Who do you mean?”

“The clairvoyant who’s lost her sight. Clairvoyance is a real superpower. Pity you can’t drag ’em around where you need them because of that pesky system protection, though.”

“You’d coerce others to serve your own goals?” Alba growled.

Alan stared back defiantly. “We’ll never get outta here by playing it nice. And I want to be outta here. You better not get in my way.”

Hiiiiive scratched his head, irritated. “Drop it. Let’s go,” he said to his guildmate. Then he added to Wataru, “Anyway, you guys will only waste your time here.”

He was honestly trying to spare Wataru and Alba the effort, convinced the clairvoyant was a lost cause.

Hiiiiive happened to make direct eye contact with Wataru for the first time.

“Huh...!”

He’d known people of all sorts and was confident in his ability to read others, and what they thought about him, in their eyes. It was a skill he’d honed through many years of working as a police detective. One look into another’s eyes, and he knew whether they feared, envied, or respected him, if they were trying to hide something from him or were hoping to get something out of him.

In Wataru's eyes, he saw none of these emotions. Or rather, he couldn't interpret what was hiding in their depths.

This boy isn't just a Goody Two-shoes...

Hiiiiive realized he'd been too hasty in his initial assessment of the Crest guild leader.

Wataru smiled obliviously. "Well, we'd like to talk to her and see for ourselves," he said.

"Be my guest," Hiiiiive replied, slinking past Wataru and Alba. "Later." He waved limply.

Alba stood for a while, gazing in the direction where the Yamata leaders had disappeared into the crowd, but Wataru just walked straight into the inn. Alba hurried after him, and soon, they found the clairvoyant's quarters. Wataru knocked on the door. To his surprise, the woman inside immediately replied in a strong voice that the door was unlocked, and they were welcome to come in. Most shut-ins didn't open their door for anyone.

They entered, expecting the room to be cluttered, but it wasn't. Not to say it was tidy—there just wasn't anything in there. There wasn't much light getting in from the windows, but they could see a woman sitting in a chair. Her hair was disheveled, covering her face, but they could see her name tag: BYAKUREN. The guild master of Twilight Adventurers.

She wasn't a particularly strong player like Wataru. Neither did she have an in-depth knowledge of the game's lore and mechanics. She'd started playing *Eternity* driven by curiosity, attracting players to her guild with her personality. Wataru heard she had a strong sense of responsibility and looked after her guildmates well.

Byakuren raised her head, and her long slate-gray hair parted. "Wataru and Alba! What a surprise."

She was grinning. Alba felt a chill run down his spine; the woman's superficially normal behavior hinted at bottomless darkness in her heart.

"When did you arrive?" she asked Wataru.

“Earlier today.”

“I see.”

“We’ve been told that you haven’t been feeling well,” said Wataru.

Byakuren brought her hand to her forehead. “That Kagone’s such a blabbermouth!”

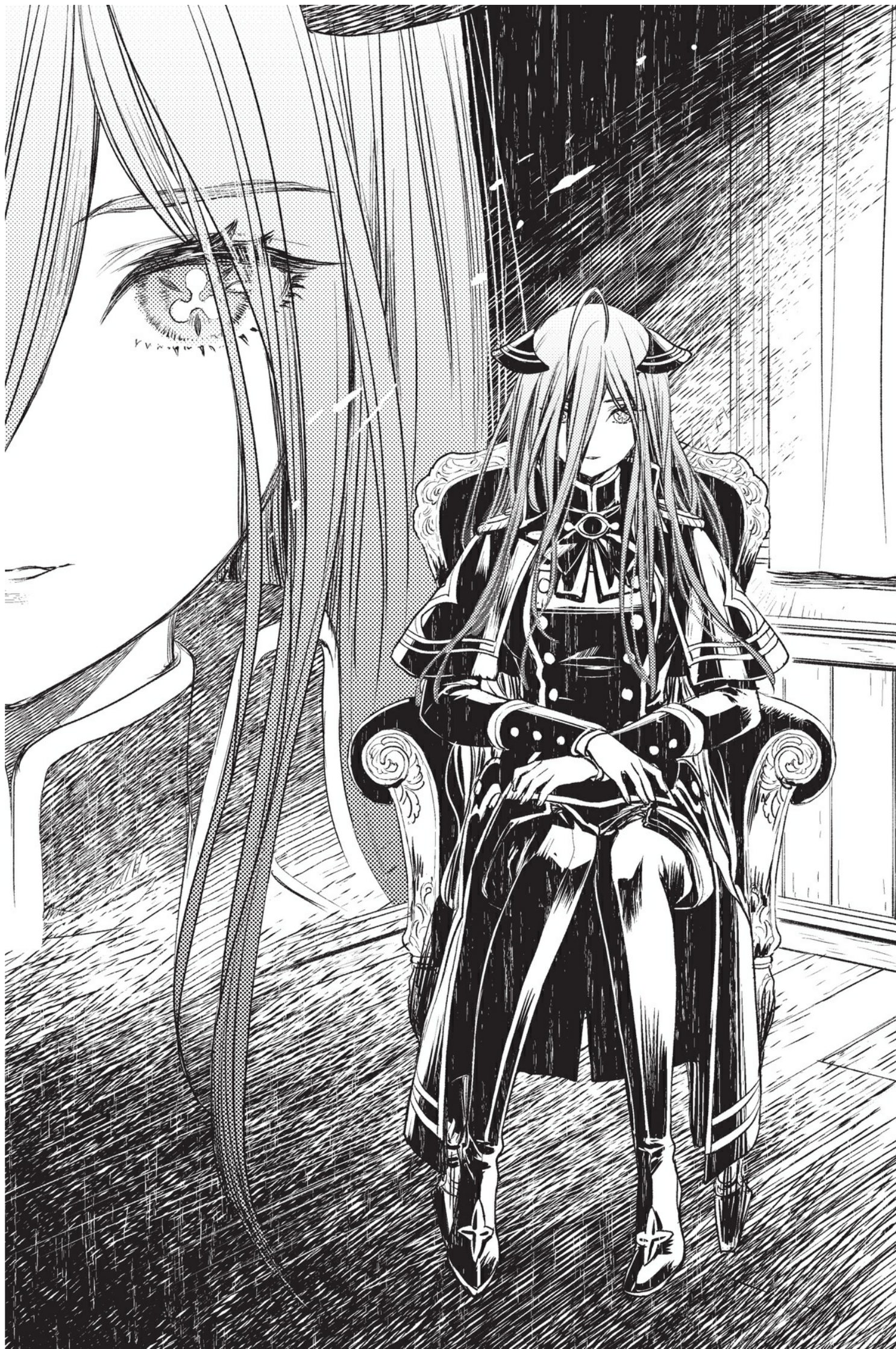
Wataru couldn’t see anything wrong with her.

The three of them reminisced for a while about better times, a smile never leaving the woman’s face. They talked, they joked. Byakuren was just as they’d remembered her from the beta days. But only until Alba changed the topic to a recent event.

“If you’ve been worried about that invasion, please be reassured that we managed to stop it before it really started, with minimal losses,” he said slowly, aware that this was a delicate topic. “Allistras has become the safest place to be in this world.”

Byakuren’s smile vanished. She leaned back against the wall and fixed her gaze on the ceiling, her manner completely changed. She spoke without turning her head to look at them.

“I’m sorry. We wanted to go and help you; we really did. But your request came at a bad time—we were in the middle of exploring an area.”



Wataru nodded understandingly. “Yes, I heard you were the first guild to head into Ciola Tower. Quitting such an expensive expedition wouldn’t have been an option for you, of course.”

Exploring new areas was a costly undertaking. Every participant had to be kitted out with the best possible gear and plenty of recovery items, to maximize safety. That added up to substantial amounts. The costs could be astronomical for guilds heading into uncharted areas with the intention to be the first to clear them, since they had to take every measure to increase the chance of success, bringing along as many items as possible. Even if they could safely retreat, they obviously wouldn’t want to as long as they were going strong.

Byakuren wasn’t saying anything.

“What we wanted to communicate is that we don’t have any hard feelings,” Alba explained, interpreting her silence as a sign of remorse. “From your reply, we could tell that you simply weren’t in a position to come to our rescue,” he continued quietly, finishing in a near whisper.

Byakuren remained motionless, as if all the energy had drained from her.

“There were twelve of them...,” she said softly after a while.

“Sorry?”

“Twelve of our members died because of an error in my judgment. I keep thinking about it, even now...that if I hadn’t been so blind and made a different call back then, they’d still be alive.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Alba, taking a step back.

Byakuren kept on speaking as if she were a broken record.

“But there’s no use thinking about it, is there? Wishing I’d acted differently won’t bring them back. Despite that, the thoughts keep returning. I can’t forget about them. I’m not that strong! I’m not! I’m just a normal—”

She suddenly stopped.

“I’m done with being timid. I want to change.”

“My family life’s over, you know...”

"I want more excitement from life."

"I'd go to the end of the world with you!"

Byakuren laughed dryly, hunching under the weight of her sorrow.

"Twilight Adventurers is no more. Kagone and a few others insist they still need me, but I'm done. I have no strength left. I've failed. You came here because of my skill, didn't you? Sorry. As you can see, I can't help."

That was the last thing she said to them. She ignored their further attempts at conversation.

"..."

Wataru exchanged a look with Alba, and they left the room. Alone, Byakuren sat motionless for a while longer before curling up in her seat with her head buried between her knees. Then she settled into that position.

* * * *

A female player in a black costume entered the tavern. Alba waved.

"Good to see you. So how is it?" he asked.

"How is it? I totally hate this design," the player answered, sitting down next to him.

"I wasn't asking about your outfit."

Flamme impatiently grabbed and pulled down the hood of the costume, revealing her pretty, bespectacled face.

"It was your idea to change your job to scout," said Alba.

"The job suits me, but not the outfits that come with it. There were so many cute ones for my previous job, but this?"

"A trivial thing to be upset about."

"Trivial to *you*," Flamme replied with a pout, ordering beer for both of them.

When the tankards arrived at their table, Flamme and Alba bumped them together before drinking.

The tavern had customers around the clock. The lively chatter of NPCs helped

players forget about the harsh reality they were living. In Allistras, every tavern had its share of players drowning their sorrows in booze.

Flamme and Alba sipped their drinks, half listening to the rowdy background conversations of NPCs.

“So what has your investigation turned up?” Alba began, getting back on topic. “Anything we should watch out for? And how are you in general? Do you find your work stressful?”

“Whoa, who are you, my dad? I’m fine. I don’t work alone. No need to worry about me,” Flamme replied like a cranky teenager, nibbling on the snacks that came with the beer.

Alba was reassured to see her acting like herself.

“Yum,” said Flamme. “So my investigation. I have an almost complete map of the monster spawn points and booby traps. I have info about the bosses and quests leading up to them, and enough consumables to send along with instructions to thirty players.”

“Efficient as always. With that, we’ll be able to head out into the dungeon as planned.”

“Heh-heh! I worked hard to get all that sorted, you know.”

“I believe that. Sounds like a night of drinking is in order for our hard worker.”

They sipped their drinks in a convivial atmosphere.

“Tell me, do you have anything on Twilight Adventurers? Or more specifically, their leader, Byakuren?” Alba asked.

Flamme stopped with her drink halfway to her lips.

“You’ve gone to see her, haven’t you?” she asked back.

There was no doubt she knew something about Byakuren.

“We have. Wataru and I visited her after the meeting with the other leaders.”

“Ah.” Flamme finished her beer. “If you couldn’t get her to come out of that room despite her regrets over refusing us help earlier, the prognosis isn’t good.”

She paused to order another beer.

“From what I heard, she’s—”

* * * *

In her dark room, Byakuren was reminiscing about the past. She felt guilty about turning away Wataru and Alba, but she reasoned that there was nothing she could do for them anyway. At the same time, she was disgusted with herself for shirking any effort, assuming she was too broken to be of use to anyone.

Telia, Rao, Reilan, and Haru Kanata.

Her irreplaceable friends. Friends she’d lost.

“Why can’t I forget them...?” she whispered into the darkness. “I’m so tired of it all.”

She’d said those very same words so many times, sitting alone in her room, merely existing. She’d wonder if Rao and Reilan were all right or if Haru Kanata spent the last of her days still pursuing her passions, but those were idle thoughts that would not lead to action.

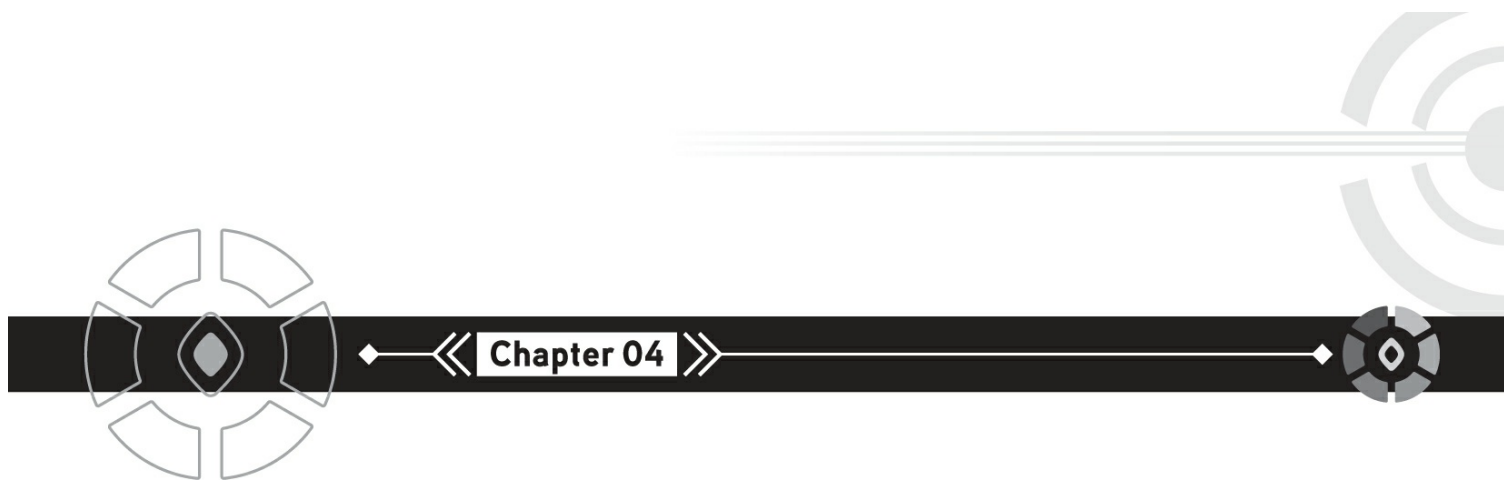
Byakuren unlatched the glass window and pushed the wooden shutters open. It was dark outside. She could see white smoke coming from the castle, hear its moving machinery. The mechanical noises mixed with the usual lively clamor from the shopping district.

Somewhere out there, people were fighting. Going through blood, sweat, and tears to get closer to clearing the game. Meanwhile, Byakuren had resigned from her duties, confining herself to her room, where she was safe.

Looking at the nightscape of the town, she felt the twinges of guilt again, making her hate herself.

“ ... ”

She closed the shutters and the window, blocking out the view and the sounds from the outside world.



The more a player used a skill, the more experienced they became. Seasoned players would switch off Action Assist to use their skills with more control and freedom of movement.

Since there weren't that many attack skills tied to specific jobs, the average player could handle most situations with the default skills as long as they had a good understanding of the game's mechanics. But skilled fighters who played without Action Assist had a wider array of actions at their disposal, such as atypical feints or chaining attacks without assuming the default stance for them. This gave them a huge advantage in PvP. Average players who tried to imitate them and turned off Action Assist would find out with frustration that it wasn't so easy to manually execute the skills.

In a game where a mistake could mean the death of the player, training to play without Action Assist in itself was a high-risk, low-reward undertaking. In the heat of a battle, it was easy to make mistakes. Using Action Assist was safer.

For these reasons, only a handful of players routinely played without it. Their skill command was superior to the motions scripted by the system. They were real virtuosos, geniuses. In PvP, they were the nemeses of players who relied on their knowledge to win.

One such budding genius was at the training grounds. A barrage of arrows flew at a training dummy so fast that they seemed like flashes of light.

"The angle was wrong... Let's try this again."

Misaki took a deep breath and restarted her training. A new dummy spawned

as a target for her arrows. She tried shooting from different stances and positions.

She'd already clocked six hours practicing that day. Even among the frontline fighters, nobody else forced themselves to endure training sessions this long. Misaki hardly had any time left for sleep—but then again, she couldn't sleep anyway.

“I think I'm getting the hang of it.”

She practiced each new skill thoroughly, until it became muscle memory, her second nature. She didn't have a gift for archery, but as the saying went, practice makes perfect. What Misaki excelled at was the ability to focus. That, paired with her extraordinarily strong sense of duty and her desire to become worthy of the silver bow she'd received from Theodore, led her toward mastering her skills through trial and repetition.

“...?”

An unusual movement on her minimap caught her eye—a single blue dot leaving the town. It was moving at a leisurely pace.

Going outside in the middle of the night?

It wasn't necessarily cause for alarm. Scout-class players would go on reconnaissance all the way to boss rooms to find out what sort of enemies awaited along the way and where the traps were. They could do that safely owing to their high agility and trap-disarmament and stealth skills.

Scouting out new areas was a very important job, which scouts would normally do alone, since other players would struggle to keep up with them and attract monsters' attention. If they did have a companion, it was another scout. Misaki had learned from past mistakes when she inadvertently obstructed this or that scout's stealthy mission, as she'd jump the gun and run to the rescue when spotting a solitary player in a dangerous zone.

They're not behaving like a scout, though...

She could see the blue dot stopping to kill encountered monsters. But soloing on the front lines was suicide.

Misaki decided it was an emergency. She opened her menu to call for help, but her fingers froze in the air; it occurred to her how unlikely she was to find any volunteers to go out in the dead of the night and rescue a solo player from a field map populated by the some of the strongest monsters.

The door of a nearby training room creaked open.

“Ah!” Misaki yelped.

“Hmm...?”

It was Makoto, wiping his brow with a towel after training.

* * * *

Two running silhouettes appeared in the nightscape of the badlands surrounding Fort Sandras. One of them was a girl with a beautiful bow on her back. The other one was a man carrying a large shield.

“You told me to sleep, but here you are staying up late training,” Misaki chided him teasingly.

“Giving good advice and following it are two different things,” he replied.

They were bantering, but neither was in the mood to laugh.

“Damn. I can’t reach anyone.” Makoto tutted, exasperated.

Nobody from Wataru’s squad or other Crest frontline players was responding to calls. Everyone must have gone to bed early to rest up before their first attempt at clearing one of the frontier areas the next morning. It was half past three, when most people were asleep anyway.

Makoto gave up and closed his menu window. He looked around to get his bearings and saw an enormous tower looming over them.

“Holy smokes! That’s Ciola Tower, isn’t it?!” he cried.

“I still see them on my map!” said Misaki.

“All right, let’s get to them already!”

The player they were tracking had entered Ciola Tower, which incidentally was where Crest was heading the next day. The recommended level for the

tower was 30, so neither Misaki nor Makoto was underleveled; however, that area was supposed to be explored by parties, not just a pair of players.

“We can’t enter without a key, can we? Wataru said so.”

“It’s in the guild storage, so we’re good. Flamme’s team must’ve gotten it,” Makoto replied, shuddering at the thought that if they didn’t have that key, they’d be locked outside the tower while that solo player got slaughtered.

The areas up to and including Ur Sluice were the tutorial part of the game, and they required no keys to unlock. From Kiren Graveyard onward, access was restricted to players with the corresponding keys obtained through special quests. One of the perks of being in a guild was that keys obtained by the guild were shared between members, allowing them to skip those quests.

Misaki and Makoto approached the tower entrance. The keyhole in the sturdy door flashed, and the door opened. They rushed inside.

A woman was standing in a beam of moonlight coming through a window. She was gazing upward.

“What are you doing here alone at night?!” Misaki shouted at her.

When she saw the woman’s face, her agitation subsided into sadness. The stranger’s eyes spoke of a great loneliness, of drifting in the world with nothing to hold on to.

“I think that’s none of your business,” the woman replied, smiling enchantingly.

Byakuren’s smile in the pale moonlight made Makoto recoil.

Her smile’s straight out of a horror flick, he thought, noticing how her eyes were as cold as the grave, as if despair had made her dead inside.

“Doesn’t matter if it’s my business or not!” Misaki shouted at her again.

If that little blue dot on her map disappeared, she’d know that player was gone forever, and that wasn’t something Misaki could just shrug off. Some deaths might go unnoticed by other players, but Misaki would see a blue marker suddenly vanish, and she’d know what it meant.

“!”

Moving red dots appeared on Misaki's map—four monsters, approaching them terrifyingly fast.

Without saying a word, Misaki aimed her bow upward. When the bird-type monsters came into view, diving at them, she quickly triggered her skill to work with the arrows she'd nocked.

"Rapid Shot!"

She hit the monsters even before Makoto raised his shield. They exploded into polygon shards.

Misaki strapped her bow to her back again and turned to Byakuren as if nothing had happened.

A chill ran down Makoto's spine.

She finished off a group of monsters at her level with one attack...?

Not only was Misaki's attack power startlingly high, but she could also detect enemies on the map before anyone else could see them, then destroy them with efficiency cultivated through who-knew-how-much practice. She was in the same league as the top players in the game, without a doubt.

People say she's something else, and they're not wrong. How do you train to become this strong...?

Witnessing Misaki's battle prowess put Makoto on edge as much as Byakuren's empty eyes did.

"I don't want anyone to pin their hopes on me anymore, only to be disappointed. I've seen enough death already."

"Suicide is no solution," Makoto said sternly, glaring.

Byakuren didn't reply, her face still turned upward as the glass-like remains of the dead monsters slowly drifted down.

Misaki placed her hand on her heart.

"I, too, am terrified of people dying right in front of my eyes. The thought of being responsible for someone's death—that's just unbearable. It's like this for everyone. It may seem to you that others are more resilient, but that's only

appearances.”

That riled up Byakuren, who, for the first time, turned to glare at this girl who was speaking as if she alone had some special insight into human nature. Their eyes met.

Wait...

Misaki's eyes shone with stalwart determination, but under that was something else. An emotion all too familiar to Byakuren, which told her that this girl was also a survivor of a tragic event. She decided to listen to what Misaki had to say.

“I can see what others can't. My unique skill shows me all humans, animals, and monsters on my minimap. That's how I knew you were going to the tower.”

“Your ability lets you sense living things?” Byakuren asked, her interest piqued.

“Yes.”

“I see...”

Byakuren was shocked by the realization that Misaki was carrying a far heavier burden than her own. The ability to sense life was extremely useful, but also excruciatingly stressful for the player.

She probably can't sleep at night. Or enjoy a meal or time with her friends. The sense of responsibility she feels must be crushing. An ability like that can also earn one enemies, Byakuren thought in silence.

“Some time ago, I nearly got killed by monsters,” Misaki continued, her memories demanding they be put into words, unstoppable. “And then I narrowly escaped being murdered by a player killer. I would have died, if a certain person hadn't saved me.”

Misaki stroked her bow without realizing she was doing it. Her chest tightened painfully from emotions she couldn't describe. The things that she'd left unsaid for so long could no longer be relegated to a corner of her mind.

“I owe it to that person to save as many lives as I can. To do what I can to free us from the prison of this world as soon as possible. I have to do this. It's my

destiny.”

When Misaki spotted a player she thought might be in danger, she rushed to help without a second thought.

She was only a high schooler, and fighting monsters when everything looked and felt so real was terrifying for her. Even when she had no strength left, exhausted from her daily training regime, her unique skill remained active. She was plagued by fears about innocent players falling prey to player killers. By the possibility of a monster invasion. She was finding it impossible to sleep—closing her eyes could mean missing an opportunity to save lives, and that would haunt her forever. She’d rather wear herself out, remaining watchful day and night.

Misaki didn’t talk about herself to others. She didn’t want them to point out that what she was doing was unsustainable, which would weaken her resolve.

Trying to talk Byakuren out of suicide, Misaki looked back on herself for the first time. She’d been bottling up her emotions, but that bottle shattered at last. Misaki burst into tears, sobbing loudly.

Feeling awkward, Byakuren looked to Makoto for something to say, but he only stood there silently, unsure what to do himself.

* * * *

Makoto, Misaki, and Byakuren returned to Crest’s inn. By the time they sat down in Makoto’s room, Misaki had recovered from her outburst, although she held her head low in embarrassment.

“It’s nothing special, but here, have some of this,” Makoto said, pouring them tea.

The pleasant aroma of the tea leaves spread through the room.

“Heh-heh. Didn’t take you for a tea drinker,” Byakuren teased him, in a better state of mind than when they’d found her.

“I’d bring out the booze, but it’s not really a drinking occasion, all things considered.”

There were two beds in the room, opposite each other. Misaki sat down on one, Byakuren on the other, and Makoto stood leaning against the wall near the

door.

Misaki drank all her tea in one go, thirsty after crying a river—and she rarely cried. Once rehydrated, she felt better.

Byakuren broke the silence. “I’m sorry. Makoto had told me a little about you on the way here, Misaki. Now I should tell you...about me.”

Hearing about what had happened to Misaki made Byakuren reflect on herself, and she was ready to share her story.

* * * *

A few months earlier, Byakuren, also known as Akira, applied with friends she knew from another game to beta test the hottest upcoming title, *Eternity*. Luckily, she and her friends all got accepted. They formed a party and played together every day.

Byakuren was the party leader, and Rao, Reilan, Telia, and Haru Kanata the members. They became well-known for being a super-rare female-only party. Byakuren in particular might have been the single most famous beta tester, owing to her character’s incredible unique skill.

Her unique skill was Clairvoyance.

This ability conferred a huge advantage—Byakuren needed only to enter a new area to see the locations of treasure chests, hidden passages, and the like, saving a lot of time. It was the best skill for facilitating game progression.

Thanks to Byakuren’s Clairvoyance, her party was leaving other players in the dust. They were the first to reach Kiren Graveyard, which was the farthest area explored during the beta.

Not too long after starting the game, Byakuren and her friends formed a guild. They named it Twilight Adventurers.

Telia came up with that name. She joked that it was fitting for a group of

single women in their thirties, who, in her opinion, were already in their twilight years.

Reilan and Rao used their experience from other games to become strong fighters, overshadowing many from the progression-oriented guilds. Haru Kanata wasn't interested in battles, so she focused on crafting weapons and armor instead. As for Byakuren, she loved exploration, which became her specialty—her unique skill had certainly put her in the ideal position for that. Telia was happy just supporting her friends in their pursuits.

Their fast progress earned them fame. With their personal charm and other attributes, Rao and Reilan increased the guild's popularity, which contributed to Haru Kanata's shop prospering in turn. But by the time Twilight Adventurers grew into a sizable guild, the game had become a death trap.

"We can do this! Trust me. We have amazing tanks, fighters, and healers! And equipment we can share! With my Clairvoyance, we'll breeze through new areas!"

While most players were too scared to leave their inns in Allistras, there were also some who realized that boss battle rewards and stat increases were extremely precious, and they headed for the front lines. Twilight Adventurers was in that latter category.

The guild had dozens of members by then, not counting the founding members—Byakuren, Telia, Reilan, Rao, and Haru Kanata.

They wanted to bring the nightmare of being trapped in *Eternity* to an end. Byakuren firmly believed they could do it.

While other guilds were still struggling to get past Kiren Graveyard, Twilight Adventurers had already made it to Fort Sandras and were amassing funds and leveling up in preparation for the next area.

They funded equipment purchases for their members by selling completed maps to other players at a high price. They ladled out money to their guildmates to make them stronger and, as a result, safer.

More people were joining them, and the guild began holding ranked matches, both for PvP practice and to keep morale up.

However, a rift was forming between the founding members regarding the guild's strategy.

"We shouldn't rush so much. The game's designed so that you're supposed to clear every area a few times before moving on, learning about the enemy spawns and traps and getting EXP. Slowly does it, you know?"

"The way we're doing it is safe! Why waste time on finding out every single monster spawn location? Do you want to keep walking in circles grinding the same maps over and over, or do you want to actually find a way out of this game?!"

Rao and Byakuren were often fighting. Both Rao and Reilan thought it was better to err on the side of caution and practice clearing one area before starting another, while Byakuren and Telia wanted to leave once-cleared maps behind for good.

"We don't have all the time in the world! Think for a moment about Telia's sister! And Haru Kanata's health!"

Telia had a sister two years younger than her, an abusive father, and a mother with early-onset dementia. Haru Kanata suffered from a serious condition. They'd become friends after meeting through a support group.

The longer they remained trapped in the game, the higher the chances of their families or their bodies coming to harm.

The faster they sped through the game, the higher the risk of them dying in a battle.

Neither strategy was the answer that would satisfy everyone.

"As long as we're able to keep going forward, I don't want to stop. I have to be back to protect my sister. Youko has only me," Telia pleaded, and Rao couldn't find the heart to assert her own conflicting view.

Byakuren could plot the most direct route to the area boss using Clairvoyance. So far, her guild had managed to defeat every boss in their way without difficulty, thanks to how carefully they prepared for battles. Because of that, most guild members agreed that progressing as fast as possible should be a priority.

Twilight Adventurers completed the Ciola Tower key quest and gained access to the dungeon. After a few tentative forays inside, they made their first real attempt at clearing it. Wataru's request for reinforcements arrived when they were close to the top of the tower.

"The city's under threat of a monster invasion...?"

The request came by e-mail rather than call, since it was the quickest way to alert many people at once. Byakuren read the message out with surprise.

"The monsters' levels and number are unknown, but they're likely to be various types of goblins, it says."

"Cowardly goblins, hiding out in the tunnels..."

"Let's go back. If Wataru's asking for help, this is serious," Reilan said with concern.

Byakuren looked at her map. The boss room was very close.

"But we've made it this far. Let's at least check what the boss is like before we leave."

"You're so stubborn! Do you not understand that this is an emergency?!" Rao shouted angrily.

"They're going to battle the goblins tomorrow, not today, so we have time for both. If we leave without even seeing the boss, then we've just wasted our time! We only need to go up this spiral staircase; it's that simple!" Byakuren objected.

A scout nodded. "I don't see any traps on the way to the boss."

The path to the boss was simple, without traps to watch out for. Turning back when they were so close to the last area, after using lots of consumable items, would be a waste of both time and money.

"Okay, but promise we'll retreat at the first sign of danger," said Rao.

"Deal," Byakuren agreed. "Once we're done scouting out the boss, we'll go straight to Allistras."

Twilight Adventurers began their ascent to the Ciola Tower boss—and then

misfortune struck.

* * * *

The long spiral stairway leading to the boss room wasn't surrounded by walls. There was only a rudimentary structure of crisscrossing beams, the ceiling open, a calm blue sky above—unbefitting a deadly game.

"What was that?"

Rao, going at the front, suddenly stopped. Her guildmates looked around.

"Did you see something?"

"I heard a...cry? I don't think it was just the wind."

No sooner had she said that than another cry, so loud that everyone could hear it this time, echoed through the tower, and a dark shadow blocked the sunlight. The players looked up—something huge had appeared above, spreading its wings to cover the top of the tower.

According to the Ciola Tower Monster Guide, Thunderbird Fendalr was a giant eagle imbued with the power of lightning. It built its nest atop Ciola Tower after it became deserted following an angel attack. Fendalr looked out for prey from its high perch, swooping down to kill it. Of the many adventurers who had tried to slay the monstrous bird, none had returned.

The Thunderbird was slowly flying lower and lower. A group of smaller birds appeared around it. Having spotted the players on the spiral staircase, it flew toward them and hovered parallel to them, opening its mean-looking eyes to stare at them with menacing interest. Then suddenly, it glanced down.

Rao, Reilan, and Byakuren shuddered.

"Everybody, run down the stairs!"

"I'm your opponent!" Rao cast her Provoke skill.

"Splitting Slash!" Reilan attacked to get aggro on Rao.

“Rune of Aquilia!” Byakuren unleashed her attack as well.

But the Thunderbird flew away, as if it had lost interest in them. It began circling the tower.

“Descend slowly! Don’t panic!” Byakuren shouted. “We’re all scared, but don’t try to push past those in front of you! That’s only going to end in—”

Falling off the stairs to certain death at the bottom of the tower.

The bird uttered a strange call again, and its body began buzzing with white zigzags of electricity. It stopped circling and approached the tower again.

Zap!

It happened in a moment—the players were hit by an attack so powerful, it felt as if their brains were being fried, their weapons getting soldered to their hands. A burning pain ripped through their bodies.

Silence fell over the tower.

A status ailment notification was displayed above every player: STUN

I can’t move!

They were frozen in place.

The Thunderbird was now flying level with the players. It was obvious to everyone that the monster was about to attack them directly.

Rao the tank had better resistance to statuses than others, so she was the first to recover.

“Immovable Shield!”

She activated a defense skill to protect Byakuren and Reilan, who were separated from the rest of the group.

“Stun Healing Aura!” shouted Telia, restoring the rest of the players to a normal status.

As soon as they could move again, the others dashed down the staircase. The battle formation was lost as the guild split into three groups.

Byakuren, Reilan, and Rao were letting those behind them through, more concerned with saving them than their own safety. At the back was Telia with a few others. Most of the guild members were somewhere in the middle.

Thunderbird Fendalr began another attack. It flew inside the tower again, beating its wings with such force that it generated wind as strong as a gale. It was its usual hunting tactic, which it had used in the past against the daredevil adventurers who'd encroached on its territory.

Rao managed to protect Byakuren and Reilan. Those at the back retreated to the floor above, escaping the strong gusts. Those in the middle, though, had nothing to use as a shield. Some came crashing down the stairs; others smashed into the skeletal walls or fell to the bottom of the tower.

"Urgh... Aaaaaaaah!"

"Nooooooooooooo! Aaah! Aaah!"

Shrieks of agony echoed through the tower.

The sky-piercing Ciola Tower was a place cursed by angels. There was no chance of surviving a fall from the top. One body after another landed on the ground with a *thud*. The smaller bird monsters seemed to have been waiting for this moment. They glided down to peck the players who had only one remaining LP, turning them into clouds of pixel shards.

Then it was quiet again for a while, until a few remaining players who had been in the middle of the group recovered from petrifying shock.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

"Th-they're dead...!"

"Move! Outta my way!"

It was chaos on the stairs. Those who'd managed by some miracle to survive bolted down the staircase. A few more people got pushed down to their death.

Falling from a great height didn't instantly kill players, but it reduced their LP to one. There was no hope of restoring LP after a fall, though, with the swift

swarm of bird monsters swooping down to peck the weakened humans to death.

Thunderbird Fendalr spread its wings wide again, eyeing a group of eight players running down the stairs.

“Keep the others safe,” Reilan said, and she stepped over the edge.

She’d jumped from a dizzying height, aiming her greatsword at the Thunderbird. It struck.

SYSTEM BLOCK

The text that popped up above the monster meant that damage was blocked because the action was not permitted, such as when a player attacked another inside a town, an NPC who was necessary for a quest, or a boss that was impossible to kill at that point.

This wasn’t a boss battle. It was a scripted event. A trap they should’ve foreseen. But they’d missed it.

The Thunderbird shook Reilan off, throwing her into the air.

“Reilan!!!” Byakuren screamed.

As Reilan plummeted down, her eyes were fixed on a certain spot. Byakuren followed Reilan’s gaze to a small group of survivors. She broke into a run.

The Thunderbird stirred another gale that attacked the players fleeing down the stairs. Their faces contorted in agony as the wind swept them upward. Byakuren watched in despair.

“Te—”

Telia was among them, hurtling down to the ground. Her lips moved slightly. She said something, but Byakuren couldn’t hear her among the screams of pain.

Misaki and Makoto had been listening in silence as Byakuren told them about her guild's misfortune, her eyes empty.

"That day, Telia and eleven others died. Those who had been cast outside the tower survived. That was probably scripted," she finished quietly.

"But wasn't Telia with you? Why did she die with the middle part the group?" Misaki asked carefully.

"I don't know."

Byakuren smiled sadly. Misaki hung her head.

"I wonder what her last words were. Did she say 'Good-bye, friend'? Or 'I've had enough of this world'? She knew she wasn't going to make it."

The expression on Telia's face as she'd been falling was etched into Byakuren's mind. It was such a gentle smile.

Byakuren took two feathers out of her storage. One shone white, while the other was an iridescent green.

"These are the keys for the tower. A Lightning Feather and a Wind Feather. You can tell what they're hinting at."

It was a simple setup. Head for the boss room unprepared, and the Thunderbird would come and stun you, then push you off the stairs. Scripted instant-death events occurred in other dungeons and areas, too. Finding out in advance what triggered them was even more important than preparing for boss battles. This task fell to the scouts.

"Your scout made a mistake?" Makoto asked Byakuren.

"Overlooked it, yes."

"Ah."

"Rao comes off as tough, but she's actually the sensitive type. The deaths of her friends traumatized her deeply. She blamed me for hurrying everyone on. The day after that accident, she said farewell and left. Others left after her. Not much remains of my guild. I deserved to be abandoned by my friends, of course."

Misaki frowned and shook her head. “Nobody deserves that...”

“Not long after, Haru Kanata killed herself.”

Byakuren had wanted to hurry and clear the game because two of her close friends had to return to the real world as soon as possible. But they died. And without Rao and Reilan, Twilight Adventurers would have been of little use in helping Crest stop the monster invasion. Byakuren had shut herself in her room, her heart festering in thoughts of self-reproach. How she had wished she could make up to the others. But she’d lost her courage in herself as a leader. The expectations the remaining guild members placed on her were too much.

Byakuren smiled gently at Misaki.

“But you, Misaki, made me think I’m holding back everyone who wants to clear the game by not utilizing my unique skill. Even if I’m hated by people, my skill should be used to help others. I didn’t see it that way before, but you opened my eyes.”

Wallowing in regret wouldn’t bring the dead back. The way to make up for her past mistake wasn’t seeking death, but contributing toward setting the players still living in the world of *Eternity* free.

Misaki, who also possessed a skill causing her a lot of anguish, was nevertheless channeling all her strength into surviving. Her earnest words did the trick of rekindling Byakuren’s own will to live.

Misaki made Byakuren an offer.

“Would you like to form a party with me?”

* * * *

“You want me in your party?!” Byakuren exclaimed as if that was the craziest idea she’d heard in a while.

Misaki nodded, completely serious. “We’re not in any parties yet, so we could make a new one with you.”

“Huh? You mean, both of you? But hold on, I’m really not the right person—,” Byakuren protested, agitated.

“Please. It would be inconsiderate of me to just leave you after convincing you to get back to action.”

Even though Misaki had been a member of Crest for quite some time, she hadn't been a permanent member of any party. Far stronger than most, she didn't want other players to feel bad due to having such a power imbalance in the group. Byakuren, however, was at a similar level to hers.

Makoto raised an eyebrow. “I'm invited, too?”

“Oh. Do you not want to party up with me?” Misaki asked, blinking a few times.

Like Misaki, Makoto was without a party. The last one he'd been in was Crest's Party 21. To make a ranked party in Crest, after choosing the leader, the group would have to show off their teamwork at the training grounds before being registered.

“I guess I don't mind.”

“Hooray!”

Misaki threw her hands into the air, and Makoto scratched his cheek, embarrassed by how it flattered him that she wanted him for her party.

Byakuren smiled uncertainly. “But I'm rusty...”

“No problem at all! A little bit of practice at the training grounds, and it'll all come back to you!”

It was a lot to ask of Byakuren, who'd been a depressed shut-in for so long, but Misaki's attitude galvanized her to try her best, too.

“With your and my unique skill put together, we should be able to progress at a fast pace.”

Clairvoyance enabled Byakuren to see the entire map layout as soon as she entered an area. Sense Life let Misaki see the exact locations of all enemies. They'd be able to instantly see the shortest and safest route to the area boss. If Byakuren wanted to hasten clearing the game, cooperating with Misaki was the way to do it.



“What about Twilight Adventurers, though? Should we be poaching their guild master?” Makoto said to Misaki.

“She doesn’t need to leave her guild to fight along us.”

“Fair point.”

Byakuren watched the two of them out of the corner of her eye, battling with her own uncertainties.

Should I be dragging them into my own quest for repentance?

Besides, she had her own guild to attend to. The members who hadn’t quit had been waiting for her to find the strength and will to lead them again. Shouldn’t that take priority?

How can I apologize to them for leaving them hanging for so long? But I can’t hide anymore.

Byakuren smiled to herself, her mind made up.

“Could you give me a little time? I need to apologize to my guild members who stayed even though I was in no condition to be their leader. I don’t know how they might take a belated apology from me, but this is something I must do.”

Misaki and Makoto readily agreed, glad to see Byakuren motivated again.

* * * *

The remaining twenty-four members of Twilight Adventurers assembled in their guild headquarters. They all seemed rather gloomy.

“She’s going to announce we’re disbanding, isn’t she...?”

“Don’t be dumb! I’m sure she has some good news for us.”

“But Rao and Reilan aren’t coming back.”

“Where’s V-Ryuu?”

“In Yamata now. Didn’t you hear?”

There was so much pessimism in the air. Kagone, the sub-master, listened to her guildmates’ conversations with a heavy heart. She sighed, checking the

time.

Two more minutes...

Kagone wanted to believe that Byakuren was going to make a comeback, but it was hard to stay optimistic when even a visit from Crest's leaders seemed to have had no effect on Byakuren. At long last, Kagone had given up.

They had all relied heavily on the guild's founding members. The regular members placed absolute trust in them and their guild master.

Byakuren didn't wield her power to make others accept her as the leader—No, it was her charisma and kindness that attracted others to her guild.

"I still want her to be our leader," Kagone said to herself, a tear running down her cheek.

She'd steeled herself for Byakuren announcing they were disbanding, but now that Byakuren was about to make it final, Kagone was racked with gut-wrenching anxiety.

Kagone didn't think she had the charisma, skill, and courage needed to be a leader. There was a time when she'd tried her best, hoping to one day become as trusted as the founding members, or even... No, there was no use dwelling on the past.

The agreed time arrived. Kagone glanced at the empty podium...but it wasn't empty anymore.

"Huh...?"

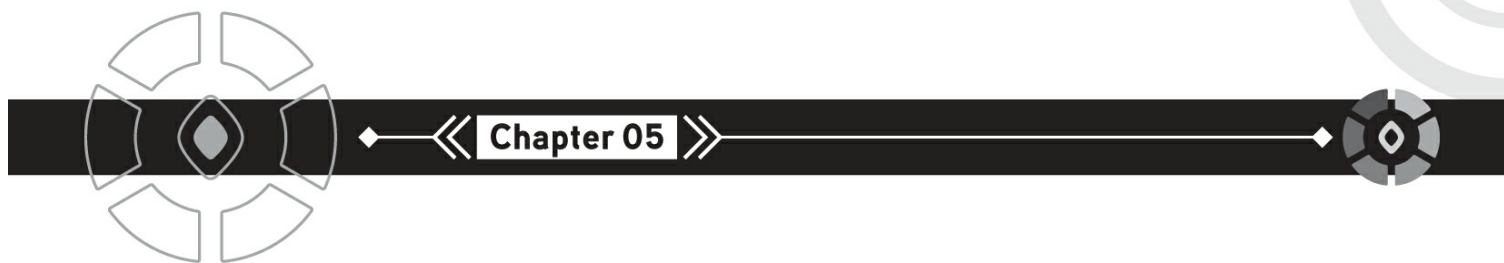
She rubbed her eyes in disbelief. Not because it was a stranger taking to the podium. It was someone she knew well, a woman whose eyes were no longer empty, her hair no longer matted. The woman looked around with lively determination, her beautiful hair hanging loosely over the blue uniform Haru Kanata had made for her—the uniform she had worn to Ciola Tower.

"I'm so sorry for having taken so long," the woman said in that dignified voice that everyone in the room had so longed to hear.

Tears sprang to many people's eyes.

“I’m back.”

Byakuren of Twilight Adventurers had returned.



The Ciola Tower access questline began with an errand at an ordinary farm. Thirty-seven members of Crest had turned up to do it together. Although most of the quest involved fetching items, there would be a battle in the middle of it, and Crest wanted to play it safe.

“Why are we doing this if Flamme already got the tower key?” one player whined.

Another frowned at them. “You’ve made it so far, but you don’t even know the basics? How come?”

“If it’s so basic, why don’t you enlighten me?”

“If you get to the final quest where it asks you to defeat the boss, beating it will get you loads of extra EXP on top of what the boss gives, plus other rewards like gold or gear.”

“Are you serious?!”

Makoto, who was watching them out of the corner of his eye, sighed. “People consider *this* ‘elite’?”

He was turning over soil with a hoe for the second step of the tower access quest—restoring the farm that had been destroyed by a bird monster. A dozen or so players were working the field together.

This kinda stuff’s nice for a change, Makoto thought, getting really into it.

“I wonder how it went for Byakuren,” mumbled Misaki, who was next to him.

Byakuren told them she was going to see her guildmates that morning and

explain herself to them. Misaki was fretting over whether she should've gone with her. After all, Misaki was the one who'd changed the fate of Byakuren's guild.

"I'm sure it went fine," said Makoto.

"I hope so..."

Misaki still seemed worried. Makoto straightened up and hit his back with a fist a few times, as if he'd thrown it out through decades of farmwork.

"Those guys didn't up and leave even when there was no sign of her ever coming out of her room again. Seeing her back on her feet is the moment they've been waiting for, no?"

Misaki thought about it for a moment.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, cheering up.

Makoto smirked and grabbed his hoe with both hands again.

"Stop overthinking," he said, resuming his work with renewed vigor, "and get to work! Gotta finish the questline today!"

Misaki blinked, surprised by how Makoto seemed to be finding himself in this sort of manual labor. Then she smiled.

"Let's get on with it, then!"

She followed his lead and attacked the ground with her hoe.

* * * *

At the Adventurers Guild's busy tavern, Wataru, Alba, and Flamme were sitting at a table. Wataru was writing something.

"How's progress?" he asked Flamme, lifting his gaze from his notes.

"Let me check," she replied. She scratched her head, scrolling through their guild members' quest logs. "The majority have already gotten to the battle part. We should be ready to head into the tower at noon as planned."

"That's great to hear."

Wataru resumed his writing. Alba was mulling something over.

“Looking at the quests from Ken-Ron Cavern to Ciola Tower, it would seem to me the underground maze boss marks the end of this story arc,” he eventually said.

The three of them had been researching the game lore to try to guess what overarching story the Mother AI had prepared for its trapped players. There was a lot of data to go through, from common NPC requests to area-unlock quests. Minor or not, they read everything thoroughly.

“Are you referring to the ‘wind spirit’s servant’?” Flamme asked Alba.

“Yes, that would be it.”

Flamme pulled up some info on her screen and shared it with the two men.

“You can see here that a ‘spirit’ was already mentioned by an Ilyana Tunnel NPC. The term came up frequently in the later quests in this chain, which seem to be pointing in the direction of the next area, the Cerou Underground Labyrinth.”

The other guilds had likely noticed that, too. Flamme scrolled down.

“The Wind Blessing quest, which is presumably part of that questline, turned out not to be related to Ciola Tower after all, but it mentions the wind spirit’s ‘master.’”

She showed them a line from the quest: **Careful not to displease the master of the wind spirit. A once-prosperous kingdom that earned the wrath of the four great elemental spirits now rests at the bottom of the ocean.**

“Four great elemental spirits, and the wind spirit’s master... I think we’re onto something important here,” Wataru said with interest. He tapped his screen. “Maybe I’m reaching, but do you suppose there was some wordplay in ‘Third death is final’ in that message from the Mother AI? The kanji for *death* has the same reading as *four*, so maybe the four spirits?”

Flamme grumbled, deep in thought.

“I may be reading too much into this as well,” she said, “but if you’re right about it referring to the four spirits—which, according to game lore, destroyed a whole country that opposed them—then maybe it means dying three times

because of the great spirits would make it impossible for us to leave the game, ever?”

“Yeah, I think you’re reading too much into this,” said Alba.

Flamme shot him a look. “Well, just sharing my theory!”

They still knew so little. Based on how the difficulty of each area was indicated by its name in the Japanese alphabetic order, most players were barely past the tutorial. There was so much they had yet to discover and explore.

“This wind spirit looks to be the next major boss. And we’ll need to be especially careful with it,” Alba said, standing up.

“Yes, I think so, too,” Flamme agreed, also getting off her chair.

“For now, we should focus on clearing Ciola Tower. We’ll do it at our own pace. Slowly but surely,” said Wataru.

Flamme and Alba were in agreement. After all, Ciola Tower had nearly destroyed the guild that had been famous for its fast progress—Twilight Adventurers. Now it was Crest’s turn to try completing that dungeon.

* * * *

The next morning, Yamata and Aegis headed off in different directions, each guild working on clearing a different area. Flamme watched them go with a disapproving pout on her face.

“Every guild has their own patch to work on today, it seems,” Wataru said, walking up to her from behind with Alba.

Flamme spun around to face them, still looking discontented. “I don’t see us getting along with anyone from those guilds,” she said.

“Let’s not judge them so hastily,” Wataru replied.

Alba just smirked.

Crest members began to assemble. They were going to head to Ciola Tower shortly and begin their exploration of the dungeon. Wataru watched his guildmates file out of the inn for a while, and then he shifted his gaze to the

tower looming in the distance.

“If we make it to the boss room in three, maybe four days, we can consider that a success,” said Alba, standing beside him.

Despite their failure to secure extra manpower by joining forces with the other guilds or even only merging with Twilight Adventurers, Alba was confident that they could hold their own on the front line. He was in for a surprise.

“Hey, look at that...,” one of the guild members said, pointing.

Alba turned, and to his shock, there was a group of more than ten people walking toward them, with a woman at the front.

“Oh, so they did take you up on that offer!” Flamme said happily.

Alba barely heard her, completely thrown for a loop. He turned to Wataru with a question in his eyes, but Wataru shook his head in response.

“No...,” Wataru managed. “They didn’t, as far as I’m aware...”

But then why was Twilight Adventurers apparently coming to join them? Led by none other than Byakuren, who had the same energy about her as they remembered from the beta days.

“Good morning. I’m sorry about yesterday,” Byakuren said, pressing her hands together daintily.

She was so different from the day before that, Alba and Wataru couldn’t help staring wide-eyed.

Byakuren exchanged a look with Kagone.

“Twilight Adventurers wishes to merge with Crest,” Byakuren announced in a clear voice.

Crest members clamored in delight at the news. The rest of Twilight Adventurers nodded to show it was a unanimous decision.

Wataru could see out of the corner of his eye that Alba was still frozen in shock.

“We’ll be very happy to have you, of course,” he said. “But may I ask why the

change of heart?”

Byakuren satisfied his curiosity, relaying the events from last night to gasps of surprise from Crest members other than the two stoic leaders. Twilight Adventurers listened in solemn silence, having heard the story earlier.

Misaki's a superhero, Flamme thought with admiration. Twilight Adventurers had considerably shrunk in numbers compared with their heyday, but with their experience on the front lines, they would greatly increase Crest's potential. Not to mention that Byakuren's unique skill would be a huge asset.

“I understand now,” Wataru said with a warm smile after Byakuren had finished.

He glanced at Misaki and Makoto, who were avoiding his gaze, looking rather uncomfortable. Their initiative the previous night had brought unexpectedly good results, but going to monster-inhabited areas at night without a healer was against the guild rules. Not that anyone would reproach them, given the circumstances.

“I should have been more specific when I proposed the merger,” Wataru said. “I meant using the guild alliance feature so that we could join forces while remaining separate guilds.”

That seemed to reassure Twilight Adventurers.

A guild alliance was similar to a party, but encompassing entire guilds. It had many perks, such as being able to share items in a guild's possession and making it impossible to deal damage to members of allied guilds. Town contribution rewards earned by one guild would be shared with the allies, so larger guilds would normally request something in return from the smaller-scale allies. But Wataru wasn't going to ask for anything. Twilight Adventurers hadn't anticipated such generosity.

“Might I ask for a personal favor...?” Byakuren began uncertainly, her eyes darting this way and that.

Wataru flashed a knowing smile. “If what you wanted to ask is to be partied up with Misaki and Makoto, then of course. I have no objections.”

Misaki and Makoto reacted with a fist pump, and Byakuren placed her hand

on her chest in relief. She was going to remain the guild master of Twilight Adventurers, and she'd also get to join Crest's Party 50. What this meant for her was that she'd go together with Misaki and Makoto when they were exploring fields and dungeons, devoting the rest of her time to running her guild. Nobody from either guild had any objections, and in fact, many kindled a hope of filling one of the remaining three spots in Party 50, with its two beauties.

"With our forces combined, we'll have a much easier time clearing new areas," Flamme said, bursting with gratitude to the point where she was almost in tears. "Thank you so much for your help!"

She paused, glancing briefly at Kagone.

"We wouldn't dream of pressuring you to jump right into action after your long hiatus. Please take the time you need to prepare while we work on clearing Ciola Tower. Let's join forces from the next area. How does that sound?"

Kagone, who had noticed that quick eye signal from Flamme, responded with a subtle nod. She was fighting back tears, thankful for Flamme's consideration. Ciola Tower was an area that Twilight Adventurers hadn't yet succeeded in clearing, but it had left them with traumatic memories. Flamme thought it would be very insensitive to ask them to come along to explore the tower. Everyday life in *Eternity* was rife with danger, causing constant stress. Strong-willed players like Misaki who remained determined to keep going forward in spite of their fear were rare. It was more common for fighters to lose their mental resilience and shut themselves in their inn rooms—as Byakuren had done. It would be unreasonable to expect her to recover from that so quickly.

"..."

Byakuren considered that in silence. Since Crest and Twilight Adventurers had become allies, it would suffice for only one guild to clear the dungeon. Keys were shared between them; so as long as Crest managed to obtain the items allowing entry to the Cerou Underground Labyrinth, Twilight Adventurers could join them there.

There was no need for Byakuren and her guild to head into that dreaded tower. Flamme had made her offer out of kindness, but accepting it would put

Twilight Adventurers in Crest's debt. Kagone didn't seem to realize that; she was simply grateful.

"I would like Twilight Adventurers to join us now and clear the tower together."

The crowd stirred at Wataru's words, but Twilight Adventurers' members didn't dare speak out against him and risk the dissolution of the alliance, without which their own small guild would struggle to get back on track.

"It's heartless to insist they go there with us," Flamme protested. "Why don't we let them practice in Ken-Ron Cavern until they shake off the rust?"

"Practicing in the previous area is definitely a good idea, but I think it's important that Twilight Adventurers clear Ciola Tower," Wataru said firmly.

Kagone looked at him, visibly worried. "I'm afraid we might hold you back there... Exploring the frontier is dangerous as it is without someone getting in your way due to their past..."

Two other guilds had already cleared the tower and moved on, but it was still one of the newest areas for the players of *Eternity*, and completing it required seamless teamwork.

Wataru shook his head. "What future is there for a guild mired in the past?"

"!"

Chatter in the crowd died at once.

"None of us were born soldiers. We'd lived in a peaceful world, enjoying the predictability of every day. Until one day, we became trapped in this ruthless game. Many have died. Without doubt, more will join them," Wataru said in his measured voice. "The battles ahead of us may claim the lives of our friends here, but that cannot stop us. We must move past those deaths, avenge the fallen, and keep on going. Look for an easy way out once, and you will not have the courage to take the difficult path ever again."

Twilight Adventurers gasped in unison. They remembered Allistras being on the verge of a catastrophe, which a single guild managed to avert. Even in the face of spirit-crushing odds, Crest didn't give up. They didn't look for an easy way out—they set the bar as high as possible, choosing to save everyone in the city or die trying.

“Our alliance shall clear Ciola Tower together,” Wataru proclaimed.

For a while, there was silence. Then Byakuren spoke.

“First, I'd like our guilds to practice teamwork.”

A little smile appeared on Wataru's face.

“We'd be an alliance in name only if you couldn't rely on us as your own members,” Byakuren added in a decisive tone.

Her guild members shouted in agreement. Wataru turned to his people to issue new orders.

“A change of plans—our exploration of Ciola Tower is postponed. Our current objective is to train together with Twilight Adventurers to ensure our teamwork is up to standard. Next, we will clear the tower together and the Cerou Underground Labyrinth after that. We must be triumphant; we must be a beacon of hope! Can I count on you?”

Crest members raised their weapons and cheered.

To them, Ciola Tower wasn't just a dungeon to clear. It would be a test of their alliance, of their ability to support each other and overcome difficulties together.

* * * *

The members of the two guilds introduced themselves to one another. Seeing her guildmates cheerful for the first time since the Ciola Tower incident, Byakuren thought wistfully about the friends she'd been missing dearly.

“If only Rao and Reilan were here...,” she mused.

Not a moment later, she shook her head, scolding herself for wanting her friends back on the front line. She'd clambered out of that dark hole of despair,

but her friends might still be too traumatized. She should find the courage to message them and check how they were first.

Wataru smiled. He'd overheard her talking to herself.

"They are in Crest, making their way here at a steady pace."

"I"

Byakuren was visibly surprised. Rao had gotten over the incident and was heading for the frontier. Byakuren was struck with so many emotions at once—astonishment, joy, and guilt, to name but three—but she kept them to herself, only saying, "That's good to hear," with an unreadable smile.

"Rao and Reilan are in Party 7 now; that used to be Party 21," said a Crest member. "Isn't that your old party, Makoto?"

"What?"

Makoto quickly opened his inbox to check his messages, but all he had was an e-mail from Kyouko asking how he was, some silly photos from Shoukichi, and a message from Kettle venting her frustrations.

"That's a massive promotion! Nice job, Barbara...", said Misaki.

She seemed surprised at the news, while Makoto shook his fist in mock anger at his friends for keeping this info a secret.

Rao and Reilan were famous. Having two top players join must have greatly increased that party's battle ability. But something didn't add up.

"Their party ranks seventh now; who'd have thought? But getting bumped up from twenty-one to seven just because two strong players joined? Is that fair?" Makoto asked, thinking that such an abrupt promotion might upset other parties, who then might be unpleasant toward Barbara and company.

Wataru gave him a nonplussed look. "They were upgraded because of their overall ability. All members of the party were close to or above level thirty."

"What?" Makoto opened the guild member list to check. "Damn, you're right..."

That made him even happier than the news of Barbara recruiting Rao and

Reilan. Only players who got a lot of EXP from the Goblin King boss battle or grinded in Ken-Ron Cavern were that high in level. It wasn't so long ago that he'd last seen Barbara, Kyouko, and the kids, and back then, they were nowhere near level 30.

How...how did they do that...?

Noticing that Makoto seemed greatly confused, Wataru briefly described what feat earned Party 21 the promotion.

"They defeated a level-thirty-seven invasion boss?!" Makoto yelled over the surprised gasps of the crowd.

"Yes. That was before Rao and Reilan joined them."

"The more you tell me, the less sense it makes..." Makoto was stunned.

"A level-thirty-seven boss... That's on par with the Goblin King, isn't it?" Misaki asked. "A single party defeating such a monster... It's hard to believe..."

"And yet it happened. They showed us footage of the battle along with their spoils. The fact that their levels suddenly increased by so much proves that they did slay that boss."

Misaki didn't know what to say. The evidence was there, but it seemed impossible that a party ten levels below a boss had any chance of killing it, since damage from players below the boss's level was halved. The stat difference alone should've made it impossible.

"Let me send you the video," Flamme said to Makoto and Misaki.

She shared the footage submitted by Barbara.

"Oh..."

Misaki pointed to a boy in the video.

"This boy... Who is he?"

Flamme was surprised at how shaken Misaki appeared.

“Hmm. Party 21 went to the forest to help a level-one summoner obtain materials for his first summon. They ran into the boss there. I think this boy is the level-one summoner.”

Level 1... It can't be him, Misaki told herself, but her heart wouldn't stop racing. She'd met a player who was no taller than an elementary schooler and yet strong enough to single-handedly defeat an invasion boss.

“What's his name?” Misaki asked, the pounding of her heart deafening now.

“His name... Here, got it. It's 'Shuutarou.'”

Tears rolled down Misaki's cheeks. People around her had no idea why she was crying, and they spoke to her with cautious concern, but she didn't even notice.

“At last... At long last...”

As Flamme watched Misaki in utter bewilderment, Wataru decided to share what he knew about Shuutarou. The boy wasn't a member of Crest, so Wataru was hesitant at first, but he could tell from Misaki's state that Shuutarou mattered a lot to her.

“He ended up leaving that party to make room for Rao and Reilan.”

He wasn't sure if Misaki heard him. She was still crying, lost in her own thoughts.

Makoto spoke uncomfortably. “Poor rookie, running into an invasion boss on the way to get items for his very first summon. Watching the battle up close must've been scary to him. Off to a bad start, after mustering the courage to go out into the field for the first time. Wouldn't blame him if he never set foot outside the city again.”



Shuutarou was the strongest member of that party, but of course, to an outsider, he seemed like a helpless little boy.

You're so wrong about Shuutarou, Misaki thought, but she was too overcome with emotion to speak.

"On the contrary," said Wataru. "He's making his way to the frontier together with Party 7, from what I heard."

"You're kidding!" Makoto exclaimed, deeply impressed. "Now that's a ballsy kid! Gotta watch out for that one."

Flamme inferred from Misaki's reaction that Shuutarou was special in some way. She shot a look at Makoto, irked by how oblivious he was.

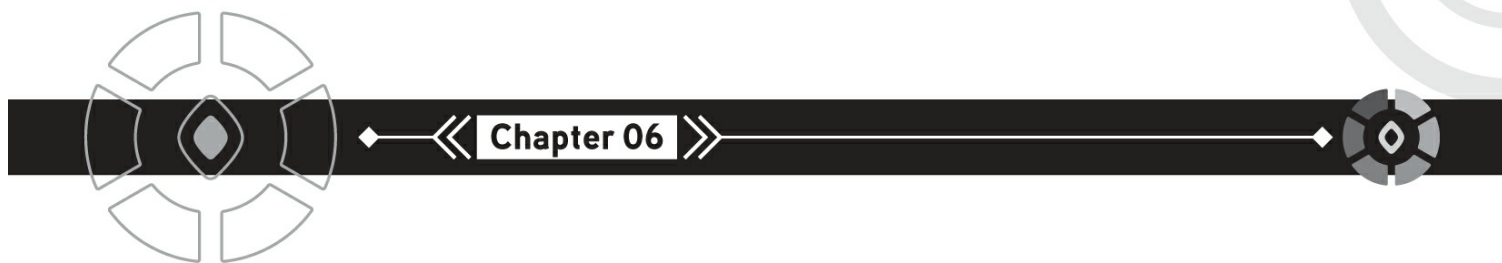
The kids are doing well for themselves, Makoto was thinking. *I just hope the level jump doesn't get to their heads. No, Barbara will see to it they don't try to bite off more than they can chew. I should give her a call... Actually, e-mail is fine...*

Byakuren stared into the distance, happy that Rao, too, had recovered from that awful incident.

Misaki smiled to herself.

We're going to meet again, Shuutarou.

The newly established Party 50 had a very emotional start. Together with Crest and Twilight Adventurers, they began their preparations to clear Ciola Tower.



When Shuutarou went to the meeting point the next morning, everyone else was already there.

“Sorry I’m late again!”

“Nah. We only just got here,” Rao said, patting Shoukichi and Kettle on the shoulders.

Normally, the two kids would grumble at such signs of affection, but that day, they just sat quietly in their chairs without slouching, looking tense.

“Well, I can’t wait to hear your report,” said Barbara.

She glanced at Shoukichi and Kettle with glee, gesturing with her hand to make drinks appear in front of everyone at the table.

“I knew it! You orchestrated the whole thing!” Shoukichi shouted, standing up.

“A baseless accusation,” Barbara replied, playing innocent.

Shoukichi finished his soda in one big gulp before unfolding the map from K. He pointed to Kiren Graveyard.

“So we went around researching each area’s layout, monsters, traps, and quests with juicy rewards. I won’t lie, if we went straight from beating the Ur Sluice boss to clearing the areas here, we’d get hurt bad.”

That was why the kids weren’t as raring to go as usual—as Rao took them around town to learn about the three adjacent areas, they were shocked to find out just how unforgiving they were, the difficulty curve rising steeply now

they'd left the "beginner-friendly" zones.

Before Crest established their branch in Calloah, the Kiren Graveyard field map and the Ken-Ron Cavern dungeon had been claiming more lives than the front lines. As K had told them, there had been many cases of rash players, thinking they'd do just fine after successfully defeating the Ur Sluice boss, who paid the highest price for their impatience and overconfidence.

The game was merciless, but not impossible. The information needed to progress safely was there if you only made an effort to search for it.

"Here's what we found out about Kiren Graveyard...", Shoukichi began.

He relayed pretty much the same information Shuutarou had shared the other day. Reilan and Kyouko nodded approvingly.

Kettle took over. "Okay, I'll talk about the Kleeshira Ruins, then."

Everyone was waiting in silence for her briefing.

"But first," she said more quietly. She pressed her hands together. "First, I wanted to apologize to you. I had no idea just how much work Makoto, Barbara, and Kyouko were putting into researching every detail of the areas we were going through so that we could clear them. I'm sorry I never even tried to find out about everything that was going on in the background."

She bowed her head low. Barbara and Kyouko were wide-eyed. Kettle's self-awareness and sincere apology had taken them by surprise. Kyouko even teared up.

"Oh, Kettle...", she said.

"I, er... I'm also sorry. From now on, I'll do my part by gathering info!" Shoukichi added.

"That's...that's great to hear," Kyouko managed through tears.

The kids' concerned looks as Kyouko cried moved Rao so much, she got sniffly, too. Their area briefing had to be put on hold until everyone calmed down.

Kettle cleared her throat and resumed her report.

“We’ll all have to memorize the Kleeshira Ruins emblems to progress. Touching the wrong emblem changes the layout of the map.”

She showed them seven different variations of the ruins map.

“There are mostly statue-like monsters. Blunt weapons and the Water attribute are effective against them. They move slower than anything else we’ve met before, which makes this area a bit easier on beginners than the graveyard, but they have to be killed quickly. If we take too long, traps will activate, and our path may be blocked.” Kettle then moved on to explaining the third area. “Ken-Ron Cavern is very dark, which makes it hard to see. The monsters that spawn there are bats with status ailment attacks, spiders with Paralysis attacks, and Harutana apes with Ice attacks, which can freeze targets. This is the area where things are most likely to go awry, so it’s best to go there once we’re comfortably overleveled for it.”

The grown-ups were secretly very proud that Kettle had analyzed the dangers so well and arrived at a sensible conclusion all by herself.

Reilan jumped in with a question.

“We’ll leave the cavern for last, then. Which area do you think we’re better suited to start with, the graveyard or the ruins?”

Since the difficulty of the game areas was organized in the Japanese syllabary order, Kiren Graveyard was presumed to be cleared before the Kleeshira Ruins, but the recommended level for the ruins was only two levels higher than for the graveyard. Both were within Party 7’s ability.

Kettle exchanged a look with Shoukichi before giving her well-thought-out answer.

“The graveyard. We have many physical attackers, but no one has any blunt weapons, and none of us have spells or weapons with the Water attribute, which we’d need for the ruins. The graveyard will be easier, since I can use fire magic, and Barbara has Holy-element spells. It’s the best place for us to grind some levels.”

Shuutarou had reached the same conclusion. Everyone agreed with Kettle’s suggestion, the two ex-frontline players included.

“Well, sounds like we have a plan! You’ve done excellent detective work, Kettle and Shoukichi! I’m very impressed! Maybe I should put you in charge of research permanently,” said Barbara.

“Sure, no prob!” Shoukichi replied confidently.

Satisfied, Barbara stood up.

“That concludes our strategy meeting. Let’s ask K for permission to enter the graveyard!”

“Oh yeah! A new area to conquer! Whoo-hoo!”

Everyone from Party 7 got up to go to the reception, fired up to get started. Shuutarou hesitantly raised his hand.

“Sorry... Do you mind if I summon my second monster first?”

* * * *

Shuutarou wanted everyone to be there when he got his second summon to convince them that the new monster who was going to accompany him had been, in fact, summoned in the normal way. He had to take extra care not to draw anyone’s suspicions.

Well, not everyone had to be shown the summoning—only Rao and Reilan, who hadn’t been there when he “summoned” Sylvia, but he couldn’t single them out.

Having Barbara and company present at Sylvia’s “summoning” worked out really well, after all. They’d assumed Shuutarou had gotten lucky acquiring a gamebreakingly strong monster.

Shuutarou made a little spectacle of calling his second summon, surrounded by both Party 7 and a few random bystanders. A black dragon appeared before him, as planned. The crowd stirred.

‘What sort of role do you want to have in my party, Theodore?’

‘I could attack with fireballs.’

‘Fireballs? Sounds good!’

After checking with Theodore, Shuutarou turned to Party 7 to tell them about

his new monster.

“His name is Theodore. He can use fire magic, like Kettle!”

Kyouko smiled. “A magic-attack type! Sylvia’s all physical damage, so it’s good to get a different type!”

Both Shuutarou and Sylvia were physical damage dealers. Theodore was a magic damage dealer. A party with nothing but attackers couldn’t be called well-balanced, but it was common to start out with attackers and get support members later.

After Shuutarou acted out deciding on the name for his new companion, the little dragon perched on his shoulder. Shuutarou petted him. With a mini dragon on his shoulder and a tiny wolf cuddled with one arm, Shuutarou and his monsters looked adorable.

The usually stoic Barbara and Kyouko were thrilled.

“Your summons are sooo cute!”

“I love both the fluffy pup and this scaly boy!”

“Scaly boy...?” said Shuutarou.

Meanwhile, Rao and Reilan peered at the dragon with curiosity.

“He’s small, but still a dragon. You won the lottery with this summon.”

“I’ve seen what dragons can do. His battle abilities should be well above average.”

Dragon-related items were hard to come by, so Shuutarou pretended he’d gotten Theodore through a random summoning.

Kettle came over to pet Sylvia.

“I’m curious why you named him Theodore.”

Shuutarou hadn’t prepared for a question like that. He had to come up with something quickly.

“I called him that because...dragon scales look like armor, see? So I gave him a name fitting for a knight!”

“Yeah, that’s totally the vibe!” agreed Shoukichi.

Kettle made a face, seemingly unconvinced. She looked over at Sylvia.

“And what about *her* name?” Kettle asked.

“I named her Sylvia because...”

Shuutarou looked down at the small wolf in his arms, racking his brain for something convincing to say. Then he had a eureka moment.

“...Because her fur is silver.”

“Really original. Like calling a black dog Blackie.”

“Does everything have to be super original? You like to overcomplicate everything!” Shoukichi snapped at Kettle.

Nobody knew just how much of a shock it was to Sylvia to hear her name was unoriginal.

* * * *

The receptionist and chief of Crest’s Calloah branch, K, took a look at the members of Party 7, his eyes lingering a little longer on Shoukichi and Kettle.

“You seem ready,” he said. “Off to clear one of the maps now?”

“Yes. With your permission,” said Barbara.

A key ring with three keys appeared in K’s hand. He handed it over to her.

“Here, have all the keys. I believe in you guys. Let me know where you’re going first, and I’ll sign you up for some quests.”

“We’d like that, thank you. Our first destination will be Kiren Graveyard.”

“All right. Gimme a moment.”

Shoukichi was puzzled by K’s change of manner toward them. “Why are you suddenly cool with us going to the next areas?”

“Because you did your homework and prepared,” K said without lifting his eyes from his screen. “Got no reason to stop you.”

It hit Shoukichi that the receptionist had been holding them back because he

could tell that he and Kettle had been absolutely clueless when they arrived in Calloah. Shoukichi blushed.

K short-listed a few quests and displayed them to the group.

oooooooo

Request: Farewell Message

From: Laza Kirha

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: My doctor says I don't have long to live. My legs have failed me, and talking has become an impossible task. Please take these flowers to my beloved, along with my farewell message.

Objective: Place a farewell bouquet on the grave of Laza Kirha's beloved

Reward: 4,400G, 25,400 EXP

oooooooo

Request: The Living and the Dead

From: Baltina R. Simone

Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: At night, five of my adventurer friends come calling on me in my inn. As far as I know, they had passed... Am I losing

my mind? Are these hallucinations? Or are they the spirits of the departed? Could you visit their graves? And should they turn out to be ghosts held back by their attachment to the world of the living, could you...set them free?

Objective: Investigate the graves of the fallen warriors (0/5)
Reward: 4,800G, 34,100 EXP

oooooooo

Request: End the Grief
From: Caitlin
Time Limit: 48:00:00

Details: I’ve lived for a long time, but the only years that brought me any joy were the ones I shared with my friends. Now those friends are gone. The monster responsible for their deaths must be slain. May it never again bring grief to the inhabitants of this town.

Objective: Kill Dullahan (0/1)
Reward: 12,700G, 86,000 EXP

oooooooo

“All these quests are on the main route through the graveyard,” Kettle noted.

K nodded, pleased. “Aren’t you a star pupil?! That’s right, you can complete these quests without making any detours. These three quests are not to be missed out on when going to the graveyard!”

Since Shuutarou was in his own party, he had to wait his turn to accept quests. Once that was done, they were all ready to go.

“Well, shall we?” Barbara asked.

Shoukichi and Kettle tensed. Kyouko, Rao, and Reilan looked serious. Everyone nodded.

‘Please remember not to do anything flashy!’ Shuutarou telepathically urged Sylvia and Theodore.

‘You can count on me, Master!’

‘But of course, Master.’

* * * *

Kiren Graveyard was always shrouded in darkness. There were graves as far as the eye could see, the monotony of the landscape broken by dead trees and a dilapidated church. White haze rose from the ground, completing the chilling picture. Some graves lay open, with only a rusty sword in the coffin. Here and there were piles of bones that must have come from some enormous creatures.

Shuutarou had been dreaming of finally setting foot in the area that the beta testers had a nightmarishly difficult time with. His eyes lit up with excitement when he saw the spooky graveyard.

Rao rested her war ax against her shoulder, alert and earnest. “Okay. It’s your first time, so don’t get greedy. Come noon, we call it quits. I’ll walk at the front, and Reilan will walk at the back.”

They wordlessly changed formation as she instructed and began walking through the graveyard.

Kettle seemed very anxious. She turned to the little black dragon flying beside Shuutarou.

“You and I can exploit the enemy’s elemental weakness. Let’s do our best.”

The dragon let out a tiny roar in response. Kettle couldn't help smiling.

"We haven't seen yet how strong that dragon is," Barbara whispered to Kyouko, who was close to her, behind the kids.

"Something tells me that Shuutarou has a knack for getting insanely strong summons," Kyouko replied.

She was right on the money.

"Three hounds at two o'clock!" Rao shouted. "Their master's probably following behind."

Everyone got battle-ready. Shuutarou could see three large dogs with collars running toward them. They were at least twice as long as an adult human. The dogs emanated semitransparent miasma. Their claws were thick and sharp, and they were dribbling drool that melted the things it fell on, like acid.

According to the Kiren Graveyard Monster Guide, they were vicious, corpse-eating Beroah hounds. Half-undead, they were among the deadliest of the graveyard's monsters, oozing miasma and dripping venom from their fangs and claws.

Reilan swore under her breath. "Running into the Dogkeeper right at the start...?"

The ground shook with a rumble followed by the sound of something being dragged. Lo and behold, a five-meter-tall human-type monster appeared before Party 7, following the dogs. His neck was studded with several swords. Blood in a strange color, a mix of purple and green, seeped from the wounds.

According to the Kiren Graveyard Monster Guide, Death Row Convict Mannbaldr had been sentenced for murdering one hundred and six people in Calloah Castle Town. His beheading didn't go as planned—the executioner's swords kept breaking on the serial killer's monstrously muscular neck. He was eventually killed, though, but not long after the burial, he rose from the grave, brought back by the power of Dullahan the Headless Duke. Together with his tamed Beroah hounds, he attacked visitors to Kiren Graveyard.

Many beta testers found Mannbaldr impossible to defeat. Not only was he as strong as a boss monster himself, but he also had three miniboss minions with

him. Since he always appeared with the hounds, players nicknamed him the Dogkeeper. Unlike regular monsters, he wandered around the graveyard and could be encountered anywhere, like an invasion boss, except that his minions were just those three hounds. Only one Dogkeeper spawned at the graveyard, and given the vastness of the map, the probability of coming upon him was quite low. Party 7 had gotten very unlucky.

“I’ll get him to aggro on me, and then we take out the dogs one at a time, from A to C! Don’t attack the Dogkeeper until then!” Rao called, activating her skills.

Barbara cast support skills on Rao just before she used Provoke.

“Over here!”

With the monsters’ attention on Rao, the rest of the party could begin to shower them with attacks. Kettle hit Beroah Hound A with a fireball. It yelped from pain, and its LP decreased by 5 percent. Shoukichi and Shuutarou leaped in to follow up with their melee attacks.

“Triple Strike!”

“Triple Strike!”

Their attacks flowed beautifully, hitting the monster’s front paws, body, and hind paws. Shuutarou dealt a lot of damage, far more than Shoukichi with his new sword. Beroah Hound A was left with 72 percent of its LP. Next, arrows began to rain down from the sky on it, further reducing its LP to 69 percent. Kyouko’s Arrow Rain also hit the other hounds and the Dogkeeper. While she didn’t deal criticals, her damage was still pretty good, as she had used fire arrows. She was readying another volley.

“Over here! *Ax Bash!*”

Rao recast Provoke and whacked Beroah Hound A on the head with the side of her ax, stunning the beast.

Mannbaldr attacked Rao with his giant arms. Beroah Hound B bit her several times. The third hound seemed to be waiting for an opening.

Rao had defense buffs on her, so she still had 77 percent of her LP left.

Barbara kept buffing her to reduce the damage taken and to increase her defense, so despite the strength of the enemies she was tanking, Rao was doing fine.

The Dogkeeper's attacks hurt really bad, though, she thought, inwardly cursing.

Reilan's sword gleamed, and she executed a multihit attack that was so fast, it was a blur, instantly bringing down the hound's LP from 69 to 31 percent, knocking it back.

"Wow! That's some serious damage, Reilan!" shouted Shoukichi.

"Way to go!" added Kyouko.

They still had three other monsters with almost full LP left...or not. The hounds and Mannbaldr burst into pixel shards, revealing a giant silver wolf sitting calmly behind them.

"What the—?!"

"No way..."

Rao and Reilan stared in shock at the wolf; it was as huge as a boss monster. The other party members were similarly flabbergasted, even though they'd seen before what Sylvia was capable of.

The level-up chime sounded a few times.

'Ha! My claws strike faster than light!'

'...'

Sylvia shot a smug look at the little black dragon, who didn't reply. He'd already given up on trying to reason with her.

* * * *

To Shuutarou's surprise, Rao and Reilan didn't think that the existence of a summon that could instantly kill a boss-level monster and its minions was the least bit suspicious. They looked at Sylvia with renewed interest and excitement.

"We've seen something like that on the front lines! Heh, clearing the local

areas three times over is going to be a breeze with your wolfy!” Rao said, stroking Sylvia’s silver fur.

“I don’t want to keep her abilities secret from you,” Shuutarou replied. “But I don’t want her to take part in battles except when we stumble on something unexpected. We won’t become better fighters if we don’t get to fight, letting her wipe out everything for us.”

‘Will that be okay with you, Sylvia?’

‘Yes, yes!’

This time, Sylvia had acted on Shuutarou’s orders. He’d been planning on letting Sylvia handle things when they did run into something far too risky for them to tackle alone. It made more sense to him to let the others know he had a superstrong monster rather than expose them to danger just to hide that.

This way, they had a shared secret. In an emergency, they could rely on Sylvia, so there was no need to feel anxious.

We travel and do quests together, so they’d have found out about Sylvia sooner or later anyway. Best to show her off right at the start and deal with any doubts they have, Shuutarou thought. He wanted Reilan and Rao to trust him, and they seemed to.

“You didn’t say a word about Sylvia to us, Barbara, but I understand why,” said Reilan. “There are too many people who think others have a duty to use their powers for whatever they consider common good, without any regard for their circumstances.”

Reilan had experienced that on the front lines. As an unparalleled damage dealer, she’d been forced many times to take part in battles she didn’t want to, or to settle disputes she wanted to stay out of. It had its mental toll. To her, it made perfect sense for Barbara’s party to be quiet about Shuutarou’s incredible summon.

And so the number of people aware of Sylvia’s exceptional strength increased by two, reducing Shuutarou’s guilt about being so overpowered by a little bit.

Shoukichi checked the party status screen.

“Ahem! We leveled up and can upgrade to the next job! Dual blade, here I come!”

Party A

Barbara (L)

Shoukichi

Kettle

Kyouko

Master Swordfighter Level 39

Party B

Shuutarou (L)

Summoner

Level 28

+AcM Sylvia

+AcM Theodore

Level 30 was a big milestone—players could upgrade to a next-tier job, which would significantly increase their stats and overall strength.

“We’re lucky to get loot from the Dogkeeper on our first day! Gotta say, it’s nice to have good ranged attackers on the team! Okay, folks. Let’s keep going, but don’t rush on ahead,” said Rao.

Party 7 and Shuutarou assumed their initial formation and resumed exploration.

* * * *

The skull of the last skeleton shattered, and the monster collapsed into a pile of bones with a hollow *clatter*. The two parties had cleared the so-called Skeleton Arena, a zone within the graveyard where a throng of skeletons spawned as soon as players appeared, attacking all at once. More rookies had come to misfortune here than in any other part of the graveyard.

“All right. It’s almost noon, so we’ll be going back soon. Let’s go to the brothers, take a break, and return to Calloah,” said Rao.

“Whew... I could use a break.”

“Getting through this area is easier in theory than in practice...”

Shoukichi and Kettle were doubled over, resting their hands on their knees, panting. The consecutive battles had worn them out.

“Let’s get moving! Don’t forget you can upgrade to the next job when we’re back in town!” said Kyouko.

That invigorated Shoukichi immediately. “Aaah! Good you reminded me! Let’s go, go, go!”

Barbara and Reilan opened their maps of the area, checking the way to the “brothers” Rao mentioned.

‘Do you get this weird feeling, too?’ Sylvia asked Theodore suddenly.

‘Is the graveyard giving you the chills?’

‘No. But...there’s this weird smell in the air.’

‘I wouldn’t know. I don’t walk around with my nose to the ground like a dog.’

‘Ah, sorry. I forgot you’re a lizard with inferior sense of smell.’

Is there some unspoken rule between the Evil Overlords saying they can’t get along...? Shuutarou thought, scanning the horizon for any sign of danger. It was very quiet, eerily so, but he couldn’t see anything alarming, and neither could he smell anything strange. He hurried to join Shoukichi and Kettle.

* * * *

The ground shook as giant bones came crashing down. Shoukichi, who’d dealt the final blow to the monster, let a long breath out and sheathed his two swords without any hint of smugness.

They’d defeated the two “brothers”—giant skeletons—which was the last of the objectives they’d set for themselves that morning, and turned around to go back to Calloah.

“By the way, why do you frontier fighters always clear each area one-hundred-percent before moving on? Why isn’t it good enough to just beat the area boss? You’d have gotten farther that way, I think,” Shoukichi said as they walked.

“Gotta do what you gotta do, for the sake of those who come after us.” Rao rested her ax on her shoulder. “If we didn’t hundred-percent the areas we passed through, players who tried to follow in our steps later might die to something we had sidestepped thanks to dumb luck. Clearing the game’s the big goal, but at the same time, we gotta take into account that we might get wiped out on the frontier, so it’s also our responsibility to compile a complete walkthrough for players in the areas we’ve left behind.”

Since being locked in the deadly game, pushing the front line forward by one

area took about a week each time.

Discovering the map layout and the locations and types of traps alone took three days. Learning about the attributes of the monsters spawning there took one whole day, and finding out about the area boss's attributes and attack patterns took two days on top of that. On the seventh day, the group of players, well prepared by then, would finally clear the area.

The frontline fighters' survival was precarious. They had to take care collecting data and pass it on to other players, so that in case of their total failure, someone else would be able to pick up from where they'd left.

Death rates among parties who thoroughly researched the areas they were going to before attempting to clear them were low. With a full walkthrough compiled through the efforts of the frontline teams, it was possible for any party meeting the level requirements to clear an area in just one day.

"The facilities, local NPCs, and message boards I dragged you kids to give you scraps of info you can put together to figure out how to clear the nearby areas. But you've got the frontline fighters to thank for charting their locations to speed things up," said Rao.

Shoukichi's eyes lit up. "Wow, I didn't even think of that! Those fighters are even more awesome than I realized!"

A melancholy smile played on Reilan's lips. Rao gazed up at the sky, grimacing.

"When one of my closest friends died, I no longer saw the point in risking my bacon on the frontier. But I couldn't just do nothing; sitting still's torture to me, so I thought I'd help the next contingent of players or something, then went back to Allistras." She turned to the kids. "And there I met you, Shoukichi, along with Kettle and Shuutarou—all prodigies who give me hope for the future. You made me think that everything I'd done at the frontier wasn't a waste after all."

Rao's gaze moved to Reilan, at the end of the formation. Reilan looked her back in the eyes.

"S'ppose I can give the frontier another go," Rao continued. "The gains we earn will help others who come after us, even if we don't make it. The noncombatants pin their hopes on players like us, and now I get that it's

important, too. Whatever happens, it won't break me again." She paused for a moment. "I'll go see Byakuren. I owe her a lot of apologies. She wasn't wrong about everything. It took me this long to see it."

"You needed this time to process what had happened," said Reilan.

"I guess so. Thanks for being so patient with me."

Rao had been really struggling with the loss of two of her best friends and with doubts over whether their efforts amounted to anything at all. It took a visit to Allistras, where she witnessed the resilience of the players she'd left behind, and the hope-filled Party 7 to rekindle her fighting spirit. The front line beckoned her again.

Reilan looked down on the ground and nodded in quiet acknowledgment.

"So you're going back to the frontier?!" shouted Shoukichi.

"Yeah. Sorry to spring this on you. I'll stay with you for now, as long as we're heading in the direction of the frontier, but eventually, I'll have to drop out, leaving you to your own party projects."

Barbara prodded Rao's back. "What do you mean about our own party projects? You're a member of our party, and you don't even know that the front line is where we've been heading for since we left Allistras?"

Rao looked at everyone in surprise and saw that their eyes glinted with determination. She bit her lip.

"Gosh, I'm slow," she said. Happiness welled up in her chest, along with other emotions she fought back to keep from bursting into tears.

Shoukichi got even more hyped up. "So you're gonna make a comeback! And Reilan, too, right? You're gonna team up with Byakuren again, just like old times!"

"Heh. Byakuren has probably already filled our old positions, but we'll see," Reilan said with a faint smile, secretly hoping she was wrong.

* * * *

They were going to resume exploring the graveyard in the afternoon at two

o'clock, after replenishing their consumable items, changing jobs, and testing out their new skills at the training grounds. A break in town was usually only called if party members became too mentally drained, encountered an enemy they couldn't beat, or came across a trap they didn't know a way around. Rao made an exception this time for Shoukichi and Kettle's sake.

"Shuutarou! Come with me to the job office! Let's go, let's go!"

"Oh, I'm coming, too!"

Shoukichi and Kettle had Shuutarou tag along with them. Their excitement was contagious; Reilan ended up joining them as well.

"Welcome. Would you like to upgrade to a higher-tier job? Or would you like to reclass?" the job-change NPC asked.

"Upgrade!" Shoukichi and Kettle replied simultaneously.

The NPC spoke to Kettle first.

"As a wizard, you can upgrade to one of these four jobs."

A screen appeared in front of Kettle. The NPC turned to Shoukichi next.

"As a swordfighter, you can upgrade to one of these four jobs."

Another screen popped up in front of Shoukichi. He and Kettle exchanged a look and pumped their fists. Each of them already had a dream job to change to. For Shoukichi, it was a dual blade, a fighter who wielded two swords at once. Kettle's dream job was red mage, someone who specialized in fire magic. Both of these jobs were rare, though, with certain conditions that needed to be unlocked. Luckily, Shoukichi and Kettle had already cleared the requirements.

Shoukichi and Kettle glowed briefly.

"Whooo! Got my dual-wielding skills! And boosts for swords held in each hand! This is it! My time has come!"

Shoukichi jumped for joy. The job he'd chosen was among the strongest for close-quarter combat. While it didn't come with any particularly powerful attack skills, it allowed the player to overwhelm the enemy through a flurry of fast attacks. The player's attack power was also greatly enhanced by being able to equip two swords at once, with status increases for both.

Swordfighters had no status boosts for equipment held in their weaker hand, and in fact, sub-weapons held in the weaker hand got a stat reduction. Shoukichi had been using a second sword despite that to prove he was worthy of becoming a dual blade—it was the unlock requirement. Now he'd be able to make use of the full power of both swords at last.

“Huh. My other elemental spells disappeared. Guess that comes with being a Fire-based wizard...,” Kettle mumbled, reading through her skill list.

Wizards were jacks-of-all-trades but masters of none, with a wide array of spells with low attack power and range. They could upgrade to a job specializing in a single element, like a red mage. While that meant losing access to the other elemental spells, the spells they got were vastly more powerful. Cultivating Fire spells as a wizard unlocked the red mage job, said to be the strongest of the second-tier wizard jobs.

Both Kettle and Shoukichi had been craving high attack power, and now they were curious to test how much stronger they'd become.

“Shuutarou...” Shoukichi turned to his friend.

“Sure, I'll duel you,” Shuutarou replied, anticipating the question.

“Awesome!”

Kettle was also keen to head to the training grounds.

“After talking to NPCs, I thought clearing all those Calloah areas would be easy as long as I was over the required level. But it's totally not. Things can go wrong even if we prepare for everything. When that Dogkeeper appeared, I almost chickened out,” Shoukichi said with self-resentment, stroking his swords in their scabbards at his hips. “What I learned from that is, feeling qualified to clear an area isn't good enough. We've got to be *overqualified*. That's why I need to get in more practice battling monsters and people. Single opponents and groups. To cover every scenario.”

Somehow, it made Shuutarou happy to see his friend so determined. He smiled and nodded.

“Sure! I'm happy to practice with you as much as you like!”

He got the impression that Shoukichi wasn't just curious about his new abilities; his friend also wanted to get a handle on how fighting as a dual sword would be different from swordfighter.

Reilan was also pleased with the kids' serious-minded approach to their new jobs.

"Let's do PvP and group PvE until the end of our afternoon break. I'll gladly help you test out your skills."

"Yay!" Shoukichi and Kettle cheered.

They messaged Barbara to let her know of their plans, then headed to the training grounds.

* * * *

Out of ten battles with Shuutarou, Shoukichi won one. Out of ten battles with Reilan, he won zero.

"Oof! It feels like the more I duel Shuutarou, the further apart we get. With Reilan, I knew I stood no chance right from the start, so that was the expected result," Shoukichi said. He was lying down, absolutely beat.

Kettle was spread-eagle on the ground next to him, just as exhausted.

"I'm still the weakest in our group..."

"Close combat doesn't suit casters. Even the top ranged magic users from the front line often get beaten in PvP by close-range attackers," Reilan told her, bringing everyone drinks.

In fact, whether casters stood any chance against close-range attackers depended almost exclusively on the map terrain.

"At least getting hit doesn't break casting in this game, but while I'm standing there casting, a melee player can hit me five or even six times before my spell fires off," Kettle complained, scowling at Shoukichi.

Shoukichi's job gave him a particularly great advantage over Kettle, so she'd only managed to beat him one time out of ten attempts.

"But when you used the terrain to your advantage, Shoukichi couldn't get to

you at all, and you defeated him without taking damage. You might not be able to dish out attacks as fast as melee players, but your spells deal high damage. Think about that,” said Reilan.

“So it all boils down to me needing more practice, huh?” Kettle sighed.

Shoukichi was gazing up at the ceiling, tired but satisfied.

“I didn’t do great, but I can see now what I’ve got to work on to improve!” he said.

“Same here,” Kettle added. “I did the best against groups of monsters, so I should be able to contribute more when clearing the graveyard!”

Despite their defeats, Shoukichi and Kettle learned a lot from the practice battles.

Shuutarou was watching them with a smile when Reilan spoke to him.

“You’re really strong even without your summons. How did you get so good? Have you been training a lot?”

“Yeah! It’s all thanks to special training!”

“I see. And what kind of training was that?”

“Um...”

He thought about his time with Bertrand.

“You must become one with your weapon. Have it with you always; treat it as a part of your body.”

“Master one skill first, and only then should you move on to practicing the next. We’ll start by practicing each move ten thousand times over.”

To some, this sort of endurance training would’ve been grueling, but not to Shuutarou, who simply enjoyed waving a sword around.

“Thinking about my sword all the time, even in my sleep or when taking a bath. For, like, two years.”

“Two years?!”

It was two years in the sped-up reality of a dungeon world, but that wouldn’t

have occurred to a normal player like Reilan.

His way of life is just too different from ours, Reilan thought. It makes sense now that he's so strong.

She assumed he'd been hardcore training to become a swordmaster from way before he started playing the game. Even though it was weird, she figured it explained his remarkable strength and had no further questions.

* * * *

All members of Party 7 arrived at their meeting point.

"You upgraded, too?!" Shoukichi exclaimed when he saw Barbara and Kyouko.

"We did."

Barbara (L)

Shoukichi

Kettle

Kyouko

Hunter Level 30

Everyone was now in their second-tier jobs, greatly boosting their overall battle ability.

Barbara's new job—priest—offered better healing skills than acolyte. It was a versatile type of healer, with a range of powerful defense spells and even a small number of attack spells stronger than anything an acolyte might have.

Kyouko chose the hunter job, because unlike bowmaster, which specialized in bows alone, hunters also got an attack power increase for sub-weapons, such as daggers. This job made her more self-reliant, as she was capable of fighting at any range; she could use a bow for long range, projectile weapons for midrange, and her sub-weapon for close range. Like Barbara, Kyouko chose the most well-rounded second-tier job.

Just like thief-class jobs, hunters had trap-setting and trap-removal skills, which sped up exploration of new areas. Rather than having to find a way around a trap, they could simply disable it.

The two adults had selected jobs that gave them the flexibility to offer support in a variety of scenarios, as well as contribute to attacks. The teens, on the other hand, had advanced to jobs with higher attack power. It suited the party's playstyle perfectly.

"You're in your second jobs, too, I see!" said Kyouko.

"Promoting was the first thing we did after coming back! Feast your eyes on Shoukichi the dual blade!"

He drew his swords and struck a fearsome pose. Reilan and Rao smiled, while Kettle snarked, "You're such a show-off, Shoukichi."

"Well, I imagine everyone is impatient to test out their new jobs in the field," said Barbara. "Shall we make our way back to the graveyard and resume where we left off?"

She didn't need to ask twice.

Shoukichi readied to dish out a speedy attack on a skeleton knight. He brandished his two swords, which gleamed menacingly.

“Multithrust!”

Shoukichi’s swords whizzed through the air as he unleashed a flurry of stab attacks. The skeleton knight was heavily armored, reducing physical damage, and yet its LP dropped to zero in a matter of seconds.

Shoukichi felt euphoric. “The difference in attack power is unreal!”

Rao gave him the stink eye. “Don’t go out in front of the tank!”

“Right... Sorry...,” he said guiltily.

A group of mummies that had been idle not too far away from them switched to attack mode, alerted by the sounds of battle. They were coming toward them.

The Kiren Graveyard Monster Guide entry for mummies described them as dead people who had risen from the grave. They wandered the graveyard, with no clothing but for the bandages they’d been wrapped in for the burial. Although they were similar to zombies, mummies were driven by powerful grudges against the living, which made them more vicious.

Five mummified adventurers stood before the party. Kettle readied her staff.

“Leave groups of enemies to me,” she said. *“Glowing Light!”*

After the briefest casting time, Kettle’s pretty face became illuminated by a glowing orb like a tiny sun. Its light shone on the graveyard, the brightness dealing damage to the mummies, whose LP began to drop. Kettle could control the light orb’s movement, triggering it to deal massive damage with a single word...

“Burst!”

The glowing orb dropped down between the mummies and exploded. The blast destroyed not only the mummies, but also the bat monsters in the vicinity.

Rao had to shield her eyes from the glare as she scanned the area.

“Nice! Your showy new skill packs a punch!” she said with appreciation.

Kettle kept her expression neutral as she hung her staff on her back. Shoukichi sheathed his swords, glancing at Kettle with envy.

* * * *

A little while later, they arrived at the first trigger point. Trigger points denoted the locations of booby traps, a sudden spawn of a group of monsters or a particularly powerful enemy, or a branching of paths. That one was a booby trap—a grave at the crossroads shooting poison needles on approach. The Poison status effect was very annoying; besides healing the initial damage inflicted by it, it had to be removed with Cure Poison, or it would keep dealing damage to the target over time.

“Let me take a closer look at the trap,” Kyouko said.

She took out some sort of tool from her inventory and carefully walked to the other side of the grave. There, she tried disarming the trap. Success depended on her skill level.

Tchink!

“It worked! I see that traps I remove get added to my inventory,” Kyouko told them.

She got lucky. Her level 1 Trap Removal skill had only a 15-percent success rate.

“Cool! But be careful in the future. If you fail, the trap will explode right in your face!” Rao said, chuckling.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?!”

“Well, now you know! I didn’t want to scare you, or you wouldn’t try to disarm the trap, and if you don’t do it, your skill level won’t go up. Barbara’s a priest now, so you’re in good hands even if you do end up getting hurt!”

“I...I don’t like the idea of traps exploding in my face, ever!”

Kyouko was losing heart.

Stumbling on traps in areas that weren’t too high-level wasn’t that much of a

problem—the damage could be healed up. But later on, traps could be really deadly, and players with good trap-removal skills were in high demand on the front line.

As Kyouko found out after removing her very first trap, the disarmed traps were collected by the player. They could then be used to their advantage in PvP or in boss battles. Setting traps was a different skill from removing them, and it had to be leveled for a good chance of success, but that wasn't something Kyouko had to worry about for the time being.

* * * *

Kettle placed flowers on a certain grave, and a spirit appeared. He smiled, satisfied, and vanished again with a flash of light. The players received quest-completion notifications.

Rao placed her hands on her hips and nodded.

“All right, that's our second quest done.”

The three quests K had signed them up for could be completed with minimal effort while exploring the graveyard. They would have to go back to the town to receive their rewards, though.

The third quest involved killing the area boss.

“So we only have Dullahan left now?” asked Barbara.

“Yup. Once we clear the last battle area, it's a straight path to Dullahan's mansion,” Rao replied.

Shoukichi and Kettle sucked in a breath, tensing. Reilan looked at Shuutarou and smiled.

“You don't seem to ever feel anxious,” she said to him.

“Huh? Really?”

“At least to me, you look completely calm. I envy you—I always feel nervous before fighting a boss for the first time.”

“I’m not scared of fighting Dullahan; that’s true. I didn’t get in as a beta tester, so while you guys were trying to kill him, all I could do was watch battle videos and read walkthroughs over and over, waiting for a day when I’d get to fight him myself. That day’s finally come, so I’m more excited than anxious!”

Even though *Eternity* wasn’t simply a game anymore, Shuutarou was just as hyped as before at the thought of facing the famed boss.

“Also, I have Sylvia and Theodore, so I think I don’t get as scared as others that something could happen to me.”

Sylvia had killed a level-37 Negrus boss in one hit, so a level-30 Dullahan wouldn’t be a challenge, either.

Shoukichi sighed, still unable to shake off his anxiety. “You say it’s because of your summons, but if there’s anything I learned from getting repeatedly beaten by you in PvP is that you’re just naturally cool as a cucumber.”

“Hmm, you think so?”

Shuutarou cocked his head at Shoukichi as if that idea had never occurred to him. Reilan pressed her lips into a smile.

“He’s right about that.”

* * * *

“Is everyone ready to go?” asked Barbara.

Everyone answered in the affirmative, and they set on the path to the final battle area when they caught sight of another party.

“Are they fighting the Dogkeeper?”

They heard a loud ruckus—a party of six people was locked in a desperate battle against three hounds.

Rao groaned. “It respawned already?”

“Encountering it twice on the same day is unusual,” Reilan noted.

Normally, minibosses didn’t respawn for quite some time, and given the size of the map, you’d have to be cursed with really bad luck to stumble on the respawn.

“I think those guys are having trouble...”

Shoukichi pointed to the other party. Their teamwork was poor, and it was only thanks to their good equipment that they were still surviving; the hounds were completely overwhelming them. In any case, Shoukichi and his companions couldn't just stand there and watch, not when the situation was growing increasingly urgent.

Rao started running toward the struggling party. Shuutarou followed her.

“We're coming, too!” called Barbara, leading the rest of her crew.

By the time they caught up, Rao was already saving the players from one of the hounds on their tail.

‘Should we handle this?’ asked Theodore.

Shuutarou glanced back at his friends. A little smile appeared on his face.

‘Nah, no need this time.’

Kettle's eyes glowed red.

“Fire Pillar!” she chanted.

It was a new skill she got with her second job. Kettle swiftly pointed her staff at the third hound's paws. They all felt the heat as a blazing pillar arose from the ground, engulfing the unsuspecting monster and pushing it skyward. That took out 20 percent of its LP.

Shoukichi was the next to unleash one of his cool new skills.

“Fivefold Thrust!”

This dual sword skill was an upgrade to the swordfighter's Triple Strike. The five consecutive hits brought down the second hound's LP by an astonishing 25 percent. Kyouko followed up, firing an arrow that spiraled right in between the monster's eyes, reducing its LP by a further 10 percent and knocking it back.

Then, just as Death Row Convict Mannbaldr swung his weapon in a blind rage, the ground shook as Rao roared fiercely. Mannbaldr got pushed back and knocked down. He couldn't stand back up. Rao had used the tank skill Intimidate on him.

The hounds noticed their keeper had been attacked, and they all turned toward Rao.

“Come at me, puppies. Over here!” she yelled, readying her ax.

Thanks to Provoke, the monsters lost interest in the other players, aggroing on her.

Meanwhile, Barbara was healing the injured party. The chaotic battle had been brought under control.

The third hound got knocked up into the air and burst into pixel shards. Reilan landed on the ground gracefully, a long cross-shaped sword in her hand. The pixels fell around her like snowflakes.

“One down,” she said, turning her attention to the remaining monsters.

The other party was hugely relieved to have gotten help. In the past, Party 7 had found the battle with Mannbaldr difficult, too, but after a few level-ups and job changes, they had the upper hand.

* * * *

The Dogkeeper dropped to his knees, burning bright. After the level-up chimes, there was a moment of silence, followed by relieved cheers. The rescued party was so worn out, they slumped onto the floor. Only their leader remained on his feet. He came over to Party 7.

“Thank you so much!”

He had golden-blond hair and mischievous eyes.

“Is everyone okay now?” Barbara asked, setting up a healing circle.

“Yeah, thanks to you!” the man replied.

“Let’s move somewhere without monsters,” Rao proposed. “You guys look like you need a breather.”

Everyone readily agreed. They went to an open area away from the path. Feeling safe at last, the blond man relaxed.

“Who knew the Dogkeeper would spawn on us right after another tiring battle? It’s our unlucky day,” he said with a wry smile.

His party members were full of reproach.

“You’ve been asking for it! Stat boosts from armor don’t cancel out the fact that you’re underleveled!”

“K warned you something like this might happen!”

They told Barbara that their party’s average level was 25, well below what was recommended for the graveyard. They happened to get some valuable items earlier, sold them, and bought really good armor with the money. Their leader insisted the gear was so good, they could clear the graveyard at their level.

“I can’t believe K would give them the key to the graveyard,” Shuutarou whispered to Kettle.

“They’re not in Crest, so he probably has no authority over them,” Kettle whispered back.

She guessed right—K couldn’t forbid these players from going to the graveyard. Even Crest members could put their foot down and refuse to heed his advice, since a guild wasn’t an army, and nobody had an obligation to take orders from higher-ups. The difference was, Crest members usually listened to sensible advice, and that’s why death rates were much lower among them.

“What were the ‘valuable items’ you sold?” asked Reilan.

The blond man beamed from ear to ear. “Gear nobody in my party could equip, probably left behind by some other player. We found them the day before yesterday near Ur Sluice. Can’t use them, sell them, I thought, and we made a fortune! Wish we could find another neat pile of loot like that.”

Reilan was quiet for a moment, thinking.

“Those items were probably mementos.”

“Mementos? What?”

“When a player dies, some of the items in their inventory and pieces of equipment are left behind in that spot. They disappear after a while, but some items stick around longer. I think the pile of items you found was that: drops from a dead player.”

The blond man's party members grimaced, but Reilan smiled at them.

"It's not theft," she said. "As finders, you were in your right to sell the goods. I think that player would have preferred their items served someone else rather than go to waste."

Her words carried weight—as a frontline player, she must have seen many people fall in battle, nothing but piles of items left of them.

The blond man and his party members exchanged looks.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad," Reilan continued. "But no matter how good your equipment, you shouldn't attempt to clear areas above your level. Boss monsters take half the damage from lower-level players. Don't think you can wing it, or you'll pay for it with your lives."

The party would have died if they had made it to the boss. Reilan was clear about it. It was very important to be at least of the recommended level because of the damage reduction to boss monsters. Dealing only half the damage would draw out the battle significantly, and the longer the battle, the more tired and less focused the players. The greater the chance of running out of items and making mistakes. The greater the probability of death.

The blond man hung his head.

"Advice taken to heart. I regret selling that gear now. I feel now like we've taken the baton from that player, and it's on us to carry it to the goal."

The man was quick to reflect on his mistake—perhaps he'd been secretly regretting his foolhardy plan from the moment things started to get out of hand. He seemed so contrite that his party members tried to lessen his guilt by saying, "We just got a little ahead of ourselves. Lesson learned." The blond man teared up.

"Want us to escort you to the exit?" Rao offered.

"Thank you, but we'll be fine on our own," one of the party members replied. "The regular mobs on the way back are no problem; our gear gives us enough of an advantage over them. And the Dogkeeper boss won't respawn for a while."

He and his friends patted their leader on the back and left. Shoukichi watched

them until they were out of sight.

“Dead players leave behind mementos...,” he said quietly to himself.

“What about it?” asked Kettle.

“If we die, our data just gets erased, right? But as long as we leave something behind, even one item, and somebody finds it and takes it with them, it’s like some part of us remains.”

Rao and Reilan sucked in a breath.

“I don’t even want to think of dying in this world,” Kettle said angrily. “So what if you leave behind a memento? It’s only data, like the player who might pick it up. I don’t want to be just a piece of code that gets deleted. I’m going to end this hell, get out of here, marry a man I love, and have lots of kids. I’ll live to a ripe old age and die surrounded by my big family and all my grandchildren. That’s what I decided, and I swear that’s how it’ll be.”

It sounded more like she was talking to herself than replying to Shoukichi.

Rao beamed and gave Kettle a hug, laughing heartily. “Okay then! I can’t die until I see you get happily married!”

Kettle turned bright red and started sulking.

“So who’s this man you love who you’re going to marry? Come on, don’t be shy!” Rao teased.

“Is it Shoukichi? Or maybe Shuutarou?” Reilan added.

Kettle spat out a bunch of expletives. The exchange relieved their tension before the boss battle, and they headed toward Dullahan’s mansion in a much lighter mood.

* * * *

Dullahan, the Headless Duke, slowly rose from its throne. The intimidating monster stood three meters tall, heavily armored, with a frayed cape and an imposing sword at its belt.

According to the Kiren Graveyard Monster Guide, Dullahan was responsible for the undead takeover of the graveyard. Dullahan catalyzed the unfulfilled

ambitions and grudges of the dead to bring them back, then set them on the living in order to harvest more bodies to turn into minions. Once a highly esteemed knight, Dullahan had been executed for a crime he didn't commit. Grief and fury at the injustice had awoken him in his grave, and the decapitated knight returned to haunt the living.

Dullahan's mansion was a Western-style building. The entrance led to a large hall with a red carpet. At the far end was a throne, on which sat the headless knight, awaiting his visitors.

Rao the tank went over the most important points for the battle one last time before the party entered.

"Watch out for the area-of-effect attack when Dullahan switches to its second phase, and the combo that comes after that," she explained. "Remember, from the second phase on, it summons minions, and from the fourth phase, its slash attacks are extended. Don't stand too close to the walls—"

"Or the traps will trigger, dealing fatal damage to us. Got it," Shoukichi said.

Rao nodded, pleased that he remembered. Everyone in the party had to memorize the area layout and characteristics, Dullahan's attributes and moves, and other things to watch out for during the battle.

"In the early stages, I'll be attacking whenever I can, too," said Barbara.

Dullahan was an undead, and undead were weak to Holy-attribute attacks.

"I'll take care of the minions it summons after phase switches!" Kettle announced just as they heard the clinking of Dullahan's rusty armor.

The monster had sensed them, and it was ready to engage. It grabbed the hilt of its heavy sword with both hands and drew it from the scabbard. The tip of the sword dragged on the ground as Dullahan started to approach the party.

The battle began!

Rao moved first. Surrounded by a fierce red aura, she slammed her war ax

against the floor, getting aggro on her.

“Steel Soul! Herculean Strength! Steel Soul! Trine Ax! Brandish! Steel Soul! Punishing Bash!”

Rao deflected Dullahan’s sword with her defensive skill, getting back at it with her heavy hitters. A frontline veteran, she knew how to chain her attacks to prevent being immobilized by their after-use delays. Stunned for a few seconds by Punishing Bash, the monster got showered with magic attacks cast by Barbara and Kettle.

“Dragon Flint!”

“Holy Light!”

A giant fireball and a beam of light flew at Dullahan and knocked the monster into the air. Meanwhile, the close-range attackers—Shoukichi, Shuutarou, and Reilan—ran up right up to Dullahan. Their swords gleamed.

“Fivefold Thrust!”

“Triple Strike!”

“Great Slash!”

The monster’s LP bar was visibly decreasing. The first round of attacks shaved off 17 percent of its LP.

“Dealt nice damage there! Let’s buff up before the second phase!” Rao called out.

Barbara and Kyouko recast their buffs. Rao used her own defense-and crit-increasing skills, activating Knight’s Sacrifice last. That skill allowed her to take damage instead of her party members one time. It was essential for the start of the second phase, when Dullahan used its AoE.

Bosses generally had five different attack patterns for each phase, which would change for every 20 percent their LP decreased. Every phase change was accompanied by the summoning of minions—which Kettle was responsible for wiping out this time—as well as particularly strong or difficult-to-evade moves. The attackers had to make sure everyone in the party was ready for the phase shift before getting the monster’s LP over the next threshold.

Rao looked back at the others and noted that they seemed prepared.

“Okay, ranged team! Fire away!”

At Rao’s call, Kettle and Barbara cast their spells, and Kyouko loosed her arrows.

“Dragon Flint!”

“Radiant Retribution!”

“Strong Shot—Fire Arrow!”

Dullahan had assumed a defensive stance but took 7 percent of damage from those attacks combined nonetheless, bringing its LP below 80 percent and triggering the second phase. Its movements changed.

“It’s readying the second-phase combo!” Rao shouted, but her voice was drowned out by the sound of metal striking metal as Dullahan’s sword hit her war ax, sending sparks flying.

Shuutarou watched with worry. “She needs support...”

“No. Prepare for the shock wave,” Reilan said curtly.

The reverberating clang of metal spread through the room together with a shock wave, which pushed the players over but dealt no damage to them—except Rao, who absorbed it all through Knight’s Sacrifice.

Reilan got back on her feet, looking slightly annoyed. “At least only the first of the second-phase attacks is an AoE.”

“Uh, how can you be so chill?!” Shoukichi shouted, panicking. “All that damage hit Rao!”

But Rao was exchanging blows with the boss as before, her LP not as low as one might expect.

“Blazing Whirlwind!” Kettle called, raising her staff.

A throng of undead summoned by Dullahan was turned to ashes by the AoE. Rao stayed focused on the boss only. The melee attackers were waiting for her signal.

“Did Rao take so little damage because of her level?” asked Shuutarou.

“That helps, but it was mostly thanks to her unique skill, which makes her a super tank. She can tank the second-phase combo attack with ease, too,” Reilan replied calmly. She placed a great deal of trust in Rao.

Rao’s unique skill was Master Armor. It was automatic defense buff triggered by successfully blocking several attacks in succession—a dream skill for any tank.

Unique skills that worked with any job, like Galbo’s Doppelgänger, were greatly valued, but the rare job-specific ones could be even more precious.

“At the frontier, Rao was treasured far beyond me with my glowing PvP battle record.”

Tanks faced the highest risk of death, and consequently, there weren’t many of them. Rao with that tank-specific unique skill was a godsend.

“She cares about others a lot and has a very strong sense of responsibility. Now that she’s found somebody to protect again, she’ll do anything to accomplish just that. This determination gives her strength, more than ever before.”

Rao blocked a series of Dullahan’s moves, parrying its sword at the end to leave it wide-open for an attack. Kettle watched her with admiration.

“Amazing...”

“Attack now! Let’s finish the second phase!” Rao commanded.

The others resumed their assault.

* * * *

When Dullahan had less than 40 percent of its LP left and the battle entered the fourth phase, it summoned a group of armored zombies that survived Kettle’s AoE attack and were running toward her. Meanwhile, three weapons and a shield appeared in the room, one on each side. Dullahan threw away its greatsword, which shattered as it fell. The monster turned this way and that, as if deciding which new weapon to choose.

“Stick to the plan! Shuutarou, you destroy the hammer! Shoukichi, the polearm! Reilan, the mace! After that, all three of you will destroy the shield!

Kettle, kill the minions! Barbara, don't attack, only heal! Kyouko, support anyone who needs help!"

Everyone shouted in the affirmative.

Shuutarou sprinted toward the hammer. *'Theodore, if it looks like someone might not make it to their target weapon, can you destroy it for them?'*

'Of course.'

Shuutarou reached the hammer and used Triple Strike on it. Just one hit reduced the weapon's durability to 46 percent, and the second hit shattered it.

Reilan will make it on time, but Shoukichi and Kettle might have trouble...

Shuutarou was right—Kettle still hadn't managed to wipe out the zombies, which Shoukichi was fighting, too, for some reason, despite his objective. Kyouko shot an arrow at the polearm, but it merely grazed the hilt. From that distance, it was hard to hit a slender weapon like that.

Theodore chanted something, and a black flame appeared on each of Shuutarou's shoulders. The next moment, the flames flew in two directions, one toward the polearm Shoukichi was meant to destroy, and the other toward the group of zombies Kettle couldn't subdue.

"Huh?!"

Shoukichi had been caught by the zombies en route to his objective, getting confused when Kettle's AoE made it difficult to see what was going on for a moment. But suddenly, the three armored zombies that had been upon him burst into flames and exploded. He could see the polearm blowing up at the same time on the other side of the room.

"Whoa..."

Kettle had been having difficulty controlling her AoEs. She knew at once that the flames that wiped out the zombies and destroyed the weapon had come from the little dragon sitting on Shuutarou's shoulder.

"Good job, team!" Rao exclaimed, noting that Reilan also had managed to smash the last spawned weapon in time.

Shoukichi felt bad about missing his objective.

Whose attack was it...? Shuutarou's?

Meanwhile, Kettle was embarrassed that she'd failed to complete her task by herself.

Urgh... Not again...

Thanks to Theodore's subtle intervention, Dullahan didn't go into rampage mode, where it would switch from one weapon to another and thrash around the hall. All it could do now was attack with its bare fists, and it had no way of blocking the player's attacks. Its LP continued steadily decreasing until it dropped onto its knees. The floor shone purple, and an armored horse skeleton spawned.

"It's the last phase, guys! I'll stop the boss when it charges on the horse!"

After refreshing her buffs, Rao spread her arms wide, activating Iron Heart, which prevented knockback and stopped enemies as long as Rao's defense was higher than their attack power.

The party readied for the final stage of the battle.

Dullahan mounted the horse skeleton and charged, but not at Rao, who should've had aggro on her—the monster rode into a wall, crashing into it, then turned its horse around and began galloping in another direction.

"We've got to stop Dullahan before it rides in the shape of a hexagram, or the floor will start dealing Poison damage to us and restore its LP! Remember the traps—stay clear of the walls! Kyouko, you know what to do!"

"Sure!"

Rao moved to intercept Dullahan, predicting the direction of its movements from the pattern it was tracing on the floor. When they clashed, her face contorted from effort, but she endured, stopping the monster in place. The rest of the party unleashed their attacks on it.

"Come ooon! Die alreadyyy!"

"You're going dooown!"

Kettle and Shoukichi's battle cries echoed off the walls. Dullahan's LP plummeted, and both Dullahan and its horse crumpled to the floor in pieces.

There was a moment of perfect silence, and then the level-up chime sounded, loud and clear. A list of generous rewards popped up in front of the party members.

“We killed it...?” Shoukichi asked.

He’d been slashing the monster with his swords frenetically as if in a trance, and he couldn’t yet believe that the battle was over and they won it. But when he saw the drops they got, he cheered and hugged Shuutarou.

And so, Party 7 and Shuutarou cleared Kiren Graveyard. An announcement that Dullahan had been slain followed, and light shone down from the ceiling. Where it fell on the floor, yellow specters—the souls of Dullahan’s victims, presumably—appeared, drifting up toward the heavens.

“One area completed,” Shuutarou said with a relieved smile, patting Shoukichi on the back.

Shoukichi was so happy, he was crying.



Party A

Barbara (L)	Priest	Level 32
Shoukichi	Dual Blade	Level 32
Kettle	Red Mage	Level 31
Kyouko	Hunter	Level 31
Rao	Ax Warrior	Level 38
Reilan	Master Swordfighter	Level 40

Party B

Shuutarou (L) Summoner Level 30

+AcM Sylvia

+AcM Theodore



A week had passed since Crest and Twilight Adventurers formed an alliance.

In the past, towers inspired awe as symbols of authority. Some were erected for military purposes, while others were constructed for religious functions. Ciola Tower belonged to the first category. It was a watchtower, overlooking the country border and an underground labyrinth inhabited by monsters. A foreign invasion or monsters creeping out of the dungeon would be easy to spot from its summit...except that the tower had never been finished due to a sudden angel attack.

“In most settings, demons are evil, and angels are good, but in *Eternity*, angels are referred to as Punishers,” said Kagone, the sub-master of Twilight Adventurers.

“Why?”

“Because they mete out punishment to those who threaten the gods.”

“How do you know so much about the game lore?” asked Misaki.

There was a hint of pride in Kagone’s smile. “Without anything to do, I became an avid reader of all manner of written records strewn around this town.”

The angels dwelled in heaven, descending only to act as punishers. There was a saying among the NPCs: *The angels come for the wrongdoers*. The angels didn’t police the world—they only exacted punishment. They guarded the

heavens, barring access to anyone who tried to reach it without divine permission.

The construction of the tower was deemed a transgression against God, as the tall structure brought people a little closer to the heavens. And so the angels came down and attacked the “arrogant” humans. The lord of Sandras, who’d commissioned the tower, was outraged. He had his castle rebuilt into a fortress and had machines constructed for him that were supposedly capable of killing angels. This information could be gleaned from historical records of Fort Sandras and Ciola Tower.

One might wonder why the angels didn’t come to destroy the fortress and the machines. The answer was simple—they didn’t consider human-made contraptions a threat, and they wanted to send a message to humans that they were foolish to think they could kill angels.

“The upper tenth of the tower only has a spiral staircase and wall frames. The Thunderbird roosting at the top can easily see down into the tower and spot intruders.”

“Wow. You’re a walking encyclopedia,” said Makoto, not liking the sound of the tower already.

Byakuren was walking at the front of the group. She didn’t try to join the conversation.

Kagone lowered her voice, her eyes on Byakuren. “I scoured the town for any piece of information, hoping it would prevent another incident like before.”

A shadow appeared on her face, and she looked down at her feet. An awkward silence fell over them. Makoto cursed himself for his thoughtless comment, meant only to show he had been listening, not to press Kagone to explain herself.

“Glad you did that—we have to move on past the tower eventually,” Byakuren said without turning back.

Twilight Adventurers members who heard her raised their heads.

They’d spent the first two days getting a feel for battles again. The third day was dedicated to memorizing everything about the Ciola Tower monsters and

layout. After that, the guild members devoted four days to training together with Crest.

Byakuren had no words to express her gratitude toward their allies.

Crest has enough fighters to clear both the tower and the underground labyrinth, but they delayed that by a whole week so that we could go together. Thanks to their patience, we're now in a position to succeed, I reckon.

Her guild was ready to attempt to clear the tower again. Everyone was determined to do it this time.

"I will keep guiding us through the shortest route through this game, to freedom," Byakuren said decisively.

Those of her guildmates who'd been worried her comeback might be short-lived were reassured to hear that.

"Four enemies at two o'clock!" Misaki warned them.

Flamme immediately issued orders. "Four together? Must be hornbugs. Whoever's at the front, quickly step around the corner and turn right back! Nobody touch the bugs when they get stuck in the wall!"

Wataru was at the front. He disappeared around the corner for a moment. No sooner had he returned than four bugs whizzed through the air like darts, getting their horns stuck in the wall.

Hornbugs were Ciola Tower monsters with sharp horns, which they used to stab their prey to suck out blood and magical force. In flight, they were faster than even bird monsters and could build up enough momentum to shatter rocks with their tough horns.

The stuck bugs buzzed, quivering. When they stopped moving, attackers made short work of them. The monsters shattered into glittering dust and faded away.

"Your unique skill is amazing, Misaki," said Wataru. "It meshes so well with Byakuren's Clairvoyance. Add Flamme's intel-gathering skills to that, and nothing can catch us off guard."

It normally took so long to clear a new area because learning about the

layout, the placement of monsters and traps, as well as monster types and behavior patterns was very time-consuming. It was also crucial to make sure everybody on the team had memorized this information.

Flamme had arrived at the front lines early to get all that intel, making use of her scout skills. She'd shared the map layout, which had the traps marked with her guild and allies, but getting a map from someone didn't mean you *knew* the area as soon as you stepped in—theory couldn't replace practice. Hands-on experience was necessary.

To have a good chance of success with the boss battle, the players would have to have plenty of recovery items left over after traversing the map, and they ideally should have suffered no mental or physical fatigue. Some parties would get to the boss room many times only to turn back, until they perfected the approach. They had to ensure the perfect conditions for the boss battle—which would be extreme compared with anything they'd had to fight on the way—or they risked death.

The Crest–Twilight Adventurers alliance, though, could skip the boss-approach practice, which filled the guild members with optimism.

“We’re behind the other guilds, but with Clairvoyance, we instantly know the best route through any new area.”

“We should overtake them before long.”

“Our three goddesses will guide us...”

Flamme, Misaki, and Byakuren steered the group away from danger. As long as everyone was on the ball when fighting monsters, everything should go well.

As for battles...

“Holy Guidance!”

“Dragon King Slash!”

...Wataru and Alba saw to it they had all bases covered.

* * * *

At last, the group made it to a wide landing.

“Here we are again,” whispered Byakuren.

She gazed up at the tall unfinished walls and the winding staircase. Then she looked down, and she could see far from that height. There were the badlands, Fort Sandras, and the entrance to the Cerou Underground Labyrinth, which tunneled deep under the surface.

We made it this far before, and then...

It was hardly noticeable, but Byakuren was shivering, the horror of the day her guild had failed to clear the tower vivid in her mind. Her teeth started chattering.

“Byakuren...,” Misaki started, but before she could finish what she was saying, Twilight Adventurers made a tight circle around their leader, taking turns to squeeze her hands encouragingly.

“Let’s triumph over the ghosts of our past,” Kagone said, her voice quavering.

Tears welled up in Byakuren’s eyes, but she quickly wiped them.

“Thank you all,” she said with a warm, sincere smile.

She wasn’t shivering anymore.

* * * *

The two guilds kept going higher and higher. Everyone glowed with a white and green aura. They kept walking up the stairs until they heard wings flapping, then they saw an enormous eagle followed by a flock of small thunderbirds. Byakuren’s staff shook in her hand. She couldn’t take her eyes off the bird, which screeched loudly.

It’s going to use that attack...!

The air thrummed as the monster unleashed its lightning attack, which had doomed Byakuren’s guild the last time. It hit everyone on the staircase, but the glowing auras protected them, and nobody suffered any damage. The wind blast that followed felt like a gentle breeze.

“Yesss! Its attacks aren’t working on us!!!”

“It’s payback time, electric chicken!”

“We’re coming to get ya!”

Fendalr flew upward, as if giving up on attacking the players, who kept shouting mockingly after it. The yelling players weren’t laughing, though—tears were running down their cheeks.

“I can’t believe...,” Byakuren whispered, finishing in her head, *that I let so many of my friends die from this preventable attack.*

Thunderbird fledglings dropped Wind Feathers, which were items the mother bird imbued with a powerful wind blessing to protect their offspring. A single feather shielded its wielder from the mother bird’s wind power.

Lightning Feathers were likewise dropped by thunderbird fledglings and imbued with a powerful lightning blessing from the mother bird. These items shielded their wielder from the mother bird’s lightning power.

These keys were required to clear Ciola Tower. Unfortunately, the first time Twilight Adventurers tried to clear it, they didn’t have them.

How could we have missed something so elementary?

It didn’t make sense to Byakuren. Her guild did progress fast from one area to another, but they weren’t careless. Still, thinking about it now couldn’t change what had happened.

Someone shouted that they had reached the top level of the tower. The call snapped Byakuren back to the present. She slapped her forehead, banishing intrusive thoughts of the past.

* * * *

The winding staircase had led the players to the boss room at the very top of Ciola Tower. There, they saw a giant nest. They heard a sharp screech, and Thunderbird Fendalr landed in front of them.

The members of Twilight Adventurers were stunned that they'd made it to the boss so easily, having consumed very little of their resources.

"Is this really it?"

"I haven't even used a single potion!"

"We'll fight Fendalr just as we practiced," Wataru reminded the team, getting them to focus.

They'd simulated this fight at the training grounds many times, but that didn't stop the players from feeling anxious about the real battle, in which they would be risking their lives. Wataru's presence did have a calming effect on them, though.

Wataru continued, his voice measured and composed, "Raid Team B and C tanks, wait for the boss to aggro on me before taking positions!"

The group, composed of Crest's and Twilight Adventurers' members, numbered fifty-four people. They were divided into three raid teams, each comprising three parties with tanks as leaders. A good raid tank—and you really needed those for raids—required fortitude, endurance, and also strong leadership skills. Due to their pivotal role, they were designated as the party leaders.

"Alba and Makoto, I'll be counting on you," said Wataru.

Alba was the main tank of Raid Team B. The renowned sub-master of Crest had the skill to back up his reputation. When fighting as a small group, Wataru would normally be the main tank, and Alba—who also boasted a range of powerful attack skills—the secondary tank and attacker in one. That was how they'd done it in the Goblin King battle.

Raid Team A was composed of elite Crest players. So was Raid Team B. As for Raid Team C...

"Eh, I'm just an extra. Wataru and Alba could do this on their own. Anyhow, I'm squishier than them, so sorry in advance to the healers," Makoto said jokingly.

The players standing around him were members of Twilight Adventurers.

They were encouraging one another, mustering their fighting spirit.

Makoto sidled up to Misaki and whispered, “What did they make me a leader for?”

“I think it’s because you’re the third best tank?”

“Seriously? The gap between me and them is as big as the Mariana Trench!”

Makoto reluctantly stood in front of Raid Team C. He cleared his throat.

“*Ahem...* One week wasn’t much to prepare for this, but owing to everyone’s concerted efforts, I’d say we’ve got this.”

His team listened, focused on his words. Makoto wasn’t as famously powerful as Wataru or Alba, nor did he have Byakuren’s spellbinding charisma, but he was broad-minded and dependable, making everyone on his team feel supported—and that qualified him to be a leader in his own right. It was clear at a glance to everyone but himself.

“Past trauma hasn’t broken you. The difficulty of the whole enterprise hasn’t put you off. Twilight Adventurers, you’re already victors, even without killing that thing...buuut we’re gonna do it anyway.”

Makoto pointed to the Thunderbird.

“Let’s win this battle to seal your comeback and earn ourselves a chicken feast tonight to celebrate our alliance and whatnot!”

Makoto raised his fist to the sky. His team stood in silence for a few moments, and then a few people giggled. Only a handful clapped weakly.

Makoto blinked. “Er... Not feeling particularly fired up, I take it?”

Byakuren stifled a laugh. “Heh... Compared with the other teams, your speech was a little...anticlimactic. Tee-hee... But I think I actually prefer your style!”

“You’re poking fun at me now, aren’t you?! I can’t believe you guys! I’m trying really hard here to sound like a leader, honest. At this rate, Alba will chew me out for doing a half-baked job...”

Makoto felt rather deflated, but Byakuren noted that his speech had calmed his team’s nerves. Now at ease, they could be expected to do better in battle.

I see now why Barbara had absolute faith in him, thought Misaki. She looked over at Raid Team A and noticed Wataru nodding to himself with a pleased smile.

The Crest guild master drew his magnificent sword and pointed it at the Thunderbird.

“Begin!”

* * * *

As soon as a semitransparent dome separated Wataru from Thunderbird Fendalr, his team began their attack. That was the cue for the remaining teams to flood into the room and circle around to take position on the northeastern and northwestern side.

“Everyone, attack together with Team A until we get its LP down by eighteen percent! If lesser mobs appear, prioritize them instead! At this stage, it’s all about dealing damage!”

Raid Team C acknowledged their leader’s commands and began attacking all at once.

The gemstone on its head is a weak point, but I don’t know if I can hit it from here, Misaki thought.

There were only three Crest members in Raid Team C. Makoto, the leader and the tank. Misaki, who was in the same party. And lastly...

“You will hit it. Trust me.”

“Sorry?”

Misaki hadn’t even noticed when another player stood next to her. He nocked an arrow on his greatbow, pulled the drawstring back, and released, looking perfectly nonchalant. The arrow struck the back of the bird’s head, but the CRITICAL notification appeared in the air, so it must have hit the monster’s

weak point.

“Wow...!” Misaki exclaimed.

“You need piercing arrows or pierce-type skills, and then you don’t have to worry about which side you’re facing,” the male player said in a detached tone.

This bow user with narrow eyes was called Amakusa. He was also in Crest but, for some reason, got put in Raid Team C.

“!”

Two red dots appeared on the area minimap. Misaki was the first to notice them.

“More birds already!”

Misaki spun around and shot at the thunderbird minions, killing them almost the same instant they spawned.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho! Wow! That was an acrobatic shot!” commented Amakusa.

“...”

It irked Misaki that the man hadn’t done anything, watching her take out the monsters as if it was a show. Everyone else was giving this battle their all, while this guy seemed to just be there for the ride.

Oblivious to Misaki’s poor opinion of him, Amakusa turned to her with what he thought was a winning smile.

“Hey, by the way, I’d like to join your party.”

“Ask later. We’re in the middle of a boss battle.”

“It’s already won. That’s no fun for me,” he said with a smirk.

A vein on Misaki’s forehead visibly throbbed. “Don’t you have your own party?”

“Yeah, with nobody in it. Everyone else quit.”

“That should have made you think that maybe you’re the problem. No matter how good you might be, we don’t need problematic members in our party!”

“So much anger,” Amakusa commented indifferently, but at least he moved

away from Misaki.

What was this man thinking? Misaki fumed. Amakusa's critical shot from behind impressed her, though. She nocked an arrow, activating Strong Shot.

I've gotta hit that gemstone from behind...!

Her arrow flew, spiraling beautifully, right at the back of the monster's skull. But it didn't result in a critical hit.

It has to be really precise, or it doesn't work.

Having tried it for herself, she could tell that Amakusa was an exquisite archer. She shot a quick glance at him before becoming totally absorbed in the battle.

* * * *

"Switching in!" Makoto bellowed when Fendalr's LP dropped to 62 percent.

Support members cast buffs on him. Makoto activated his own defensive skills, raised his greatshield, and walked over to face the Thunderbird.

"Prey Beacon!"

Fendalr stopped attacking Alba, switching its target to Makoto. It scratched at him with its sharp talons, which Makoto blocked with his shield. He stacked another skill on top of the others.

"Eyes on me!"

With two aggro-focusing skills in effect, Fendalr was reliably locked onto Makoto. Just before the bird's LP decreased to 60 percent, more buffs came Makoto's way.

Fendalr 60% LP remaining

The boss used a new skill—Tremendous Thunderbolt. A white lightning bolt struck Makoto, who didn't even flinch.

“Perfect!” a healer from Raid Team C exclaimed happily.

Every 20-percent-LP milestone was followed by a fierce counterattack from the monster. The tanks had to withstand their force and keep the aggro on them no matter what. Whenever they got hit, healers recovered their LP right away. Makoto had to endure the onslaught until Fendalr’s LP dropped to 42 percent, and then Raid Team A would take over again.

“You’re overhealing me! Tone it down a notch!” Makoto shouted.

The healer in charge realized with a start that Makoto was right. Healing more than necessary was a waste of MP, and it risked the tank losing aggro.

Despite his bungling address to his team, Makoto was a top-class tank, and having an excellent tank greatly decreased the risk of anyone in the team coming to harm.

“He’d deny it, but he’s an ace,” Byakuren muttered, admiring him.

* * * *

The boss had only 12 percent of its LP left.

“One big push, and victory’s ours!” Alba shouted, and everyone cheered.

Their plan was to charge up and unleash their strongest attacks all at once to finish the boss off before it had the chance to use its devastating special that was triggered at 10-percent-remaining LP. It was a great strategy, as long as the attackers were able to deal that much damage fast.

“It’s time to move on,” Byakuren whispered, delicately running her fingers along her staff.

A tear rolled down her cheek, dropping on the staff, which bore an engraving, the name of its maker—Haru Kanata.

Byakuren raised her staff, looking at the boss fearlessly. She was a star magician, wielding the power of the stars. She began to gracefully trace lines on the ground with her staff. Her magic was activated by drawing the shapes of constellations.

Byakuren moved as if in a dance, tracing an original sign freely, without any

support from the game system.

“Three percent left!” someone shouted just as she stopped.

The elaborate symbol Byakuren drew, similar to a magic circle, began to glow.

“Rune of Hercules!”

A giant sword appeared above the symbol. When Byakuren raised her staff, the sword rose high into the air. In one quick movement, Byakuren swept downward with her staff, and the sword cut Fendalr in twain, its LP going from 3 percent to 0 in an instant. Its body shone briefly before bursting into particles.

The room fell silent.

“Looks like we won?” someone said hesitantly, and only then, it sank in that they had, in fact, won. Everyone cheered just as the level-up tune sounded, and screens showing battle drops appeared in front of all players.

Byakuren hadn’t moved, her staff still pointed toward the last of the shiny pixels drifting in the air before they slowly disappeared. Besides a sense of accomplishment, she felt a lightness in her chest. She thought she heard voices of the friends she’d lost.

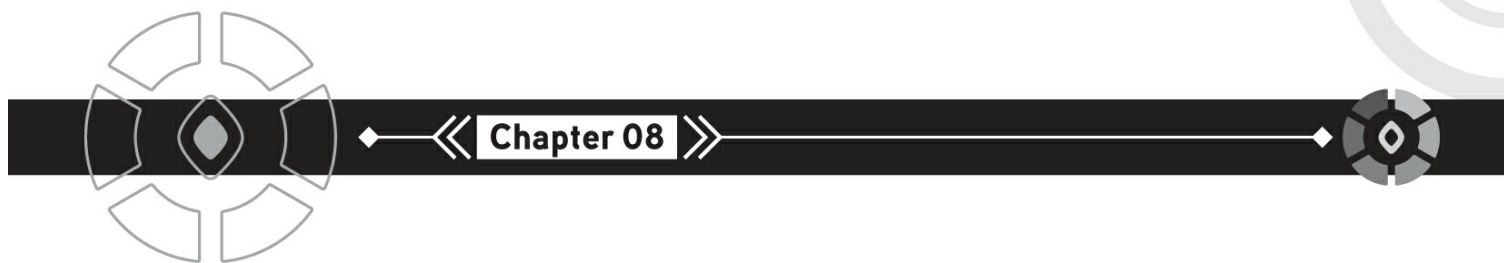
“Well done, Akira.”

“The staff I made you served you well.”

She looked around, but of course, her friends weren’t there.

“I— No, we did it. Were you watching?” she asked, even though no reply would come.

Byakuren had been freed from the stifling sense of obligation she’d been weighed down by. It was the same for her guildmates. They’d faced the nemesis from their past, triumphed over it, and put it behind them.



Shuutarou temporarily left Party 7 and went to the job office. He'd reached level 30 and wanted to upgrade to the next job.

The others are probably already going at it in PvP. Can't wait to join them, but first, a new job!

He was excited to hear what the job NPC would offer him, but to his surprise, he didn't get the standard line.

"You have fulfilled special requirements, unlocking the test for an EX job promotion. Would you like to attempt it? The details of the EX job will only be revealed after the promotion."

Shuutarou froze. Similar to Shoukichi's and Kettle's jobs or Wataru's holy knight job, which was unlocked by mastering both knight and acolyte, EX jobs were only offered to players who met certain special conditions. But EX jobs were in their own category of elusive. Nobody knew the unlock conditions. Even the walkthrough blog Shuutarou had been reading religiously had no mention of them.

"What's the test like?"

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you what it involves, but there are three things to note," the NPC said mechanically. "Firstly, EX quests may be undertaken solo or with a party, but party members will not unlock the EX job for themselves just by helping the player undergoing the test."

Shuutarou had known about some cases where a specific job promotion involved passing a test, but those had to be completed solo. He guessed that if

he was allowed to bring along other players to help him, this test must be extremely difficult.

It sounds dangerous. I can't ask Barbara's party for help with this.

"Secondly," the NPC continued, "the quest monsters do not yield any EXP or drops. Once started, the quest must be completed in one attempt. Should you find the quest too difficult, you can leave the quest area by retracing your steps, but it will mean abandoning the quest, which may not be retaken."

It sounded like a risky and grueling undertaking. Even though doing it as a party was allowed, finding players willing to help a summoner with this job promotion would be near impossible, unless the summoner was a huge asset to them.

"And lastly, you will not feel any bodily needs within the quest area. Lack of sleep will not affect your performance. However, you will experience fatigue from exertion and pain from suffering damage. You can expect a long battle. Prepare well."

A super-difficult quest unlocking a mysterious job would be a cool feature in a normal game, but in a game where death was for real, it sounded almost suicidal.

Shuutarou typed out a message to Barbara: **The promotion will take a while. I'll rejoin you later.**

Then he looked back at the NPC and asked, "Where does the quest start?"

"Go through the Door of Trials over there to begin."

Shuutarou hadn't noticed it before, but there was a strangely thick, black door next to the job NPC's desk. It had a sinister aura, which made Shuutarou shudder. He sensed that what awaited him beyond that door would be nothing like the battles he'd fought so far.

'We'll assist you,' said Sylvia.

'Thanks. I have a nasty feeling about this quest, though...' Shuutarou smiled. *'Let's all go together.'*

Behind the Door of Trials were ruins built by what must have been a once-great civilization. A strange phenomenon could be observed outside the crumbling structure.

“It’s night one moment, then day the next. What a strange place,” said Shuutarou.

On the bottom left of his field of view, he could see **Job Promotion Test in Progress**. Below that was a list of his party members.

Shuutarou (L) Summoner Level 30

+AcM Elroad

+AcM Vampy

+AcM Gallarus

+AcM Theodore

+AcM Bertrand

Elroad, the Evil Overlord with blue hair, red eyes, and an outfit like a butler’s, looked around with curiosity.

“This is not the part of Calloah Castle Town that Master entered,” he noted. “The entrance must be a warp portal, perhaps to another world entirely. You can tell by the concentration of magic in the air—it’s closer to the conditions at Ross Maora.”

“Which means we’re in for some entertainment!” said Gallarus, the bearded giant in magnificent armor. “Master, if you could honor me with the task of annihilating your enemies!”

Gallarus was barely containing his joy at having been finally taken outside Ross Maora Castle. Like Elroad, he could sense the magic in the air, which made him hopeful for worthy opponents.

Vampy, the pallid maiden with a crown of horns, sighed petulantly. “Master’s time is precious. I can kill instantly with my ability. The last thing we want is for you, Gallarus, to cause a dimensional rift with your rampaging.”

Her eyes darted to one side and then the other. She spotted Shuutarou, and the next moment, she was already standing beside him as if she’d always been there. The unflinching black-haired knight Theodore, with a beautifully engraved longsword strapped to his back, appeared on his other side.

“Master, you must feel anxious without Punio. Allow me to be your protector on this occasion.”

“Ludicrous! I outrank you,” Vampy hissed at Theodore.

“Hmm? Sorry, but I’ve already decided to be Master’s guardian, and that’s exactly what I will do. Would you mind getting out of my way?”

“You get to travel with Master all the time! Stop hogging him!”

Neither was willing to stand down.

The last of the Evil Overlords in the party, the golden-haired elf Bertrand, rested his spear on his shoulders, with his arms dangling over it.

“For all you know, there might be nobody to fight. Is that why you’re fighting between yourselves?”

As for Shuutarou, the banter of his minions made him feel at ease. His thoughts drifted to Iron.

“Sylvia went to check in on Iron in her world... Over there, it’s been decades since the last time she looked in on him, hasn’t it...?”

Bertrand nodded. “Uh-huh. But if anything happened to him, she’d know, even without needing to travel back to her realm. The trial takes a lot of time, but you don’t need to worry so much.”

Shuutarou was relieved to hear that.

A minute had passed since they’d entered the EX job quest area. Suddenly, there was a change in the air.

“Attention! A powerful monster has appeared in the ruins. The recommended level for the battle is one hundred twenty. Players below this level should exercise utmost care. Attention! A powerful monster...”

The sudden announcement made a chill run down Shuutarou’s spine. The Evil Overlords didn’t seem to have heard it.

“The recommended level is one hundred twenty...”

It slowly sank in just how insane it was that the recommended level was the max level in the game. The Evil Overlords were level 120, but Shuutarou was very, very far from it. The highest level any player had reached in the game thus far was 52. Everyone would run for the exit after seeing an announcement telling them their job promotion test involved a battle with a max-level monster—everyone except Shuutarou.

If this is meant for level-one-hundred-twenty players, then it’s like doing four promotions at once. This EX job must be something off-the-wall rare.

Of all players, only Shuutarou was in a position to choose whether to attempt this test or not. He had the power to make that choice.

Shuutarou thought about what to do, looking at his Evil Overlords. Elroad noticed his gaze and knelt on one knee.

“We are at your command, Master.”

The other Overlords followed suit. Shuutarou made his decision.

“The job promotion test has begun. Find and defeat the phantom of the mystic summoner. Your reward will depend on the outcome of the battle. When Semui’s power is dominant, a curtain falls over the world. When it is Kamui who triumphs, the world is bathed in light. Balance the powers of shadow and light, and he shall appear at the altar.”

After the mysterious announcement, the strange shifting of tension in the air stopped as a very ominous atmosphere settled over the ruins. Vampy was on high alert.

“There are ten thousand of them...”

Her keen sense for any signs of life told her exactly how many monsters had

spawned in the ruins.

Shuutarou relayed the announcements to the Evil Overlords. Gallarus stroked his beard, thinking.

“Hmm...? I feel like I’ve heard the names *Semui* and *Kamui* somewhere before...”

He was interrupted by the metallic sound of Theodore drawing his sword. The King of the Dragons had his eyes fixed on a spot in the darkness some distance away from them.

“Here they come,” he said.

An opening appeared in the ceiling, letting in light from the blue sky above. The light shone on a group of giant arthropods.

Per the Ru B Desert Monster Guide, these were gray harvas, carnivorous arthropods attracted by the slightest noise. These aggressive creatures injected prey with a mixture of venoms that could not be cured with low-tier recovery magic. The venom could swiftly melt armor and then the body of the prey. But venom was not the only weapon in their arsenal—harvas also possessed brutishly strong pincers. Their appearance in the Ru B Desert effected dramatic changes on the ecosystem.

Put simply, they were creepy scorpion monsters the color of concrete, armed with shiny giant pincers and tails with stingers delivering deadly venom. Resistant against both magic and physical attacks, they possessed high strength and agility and were level 117.

Compared with these scorpions, the invasion-event boss monsters Shuutarou had encountered before seemed like weak little puppies. And there were eight of them. In this situation, a regular player would likely lose their mind from fear and hopelessness.

But from the point of view of the Evil Overlords, level-117 gray harvas were just bugs they wouldn’t even notice treading over.

“I see a few paths we could take. Which way shall we go, Master?” asked Vampy.

The scorpions had already turned into shiny pixel shards. Vampy’s instant-death skill had destroyed them before they’d had a chance to approach Shuutarou’s party. Even if they had been, say, level 119, they’d be unable to get within reach of Shuutarou. To have any chance of attacking the party, the enemy would need to be max level.

“Let’s go to where those monsters spawned,” Shuutarou replied. “That’s probably the intended direction.”

The Evil Overlords nodded.

Having instantly wiped out the scorpions, which could have crushed a raid group composed of all other players in the game, Shuutarou and his Overlords strolled leisurely as they headed deeper into the ruins as if exploring a nice little town.

* * * *

Thanks to Vampy’s skill instantly killing any monsters lower level than her, the party didn’t have to engage in battle with any monsters spawning along the way. Suddenly, Shuutarou took his eyes off the map of the area, which was filling in quickly as they progressed, and opened his quest menu. The job promotion test was, after all, handled by the system as a quest. Shuutarou found it in the list of quests in progress.

oooooooo

Quest: EX Job Promotion Test

From: Job Change Office

Time Limit: 47:57:36

Step 1: Retrieve the gemstone from the mystic summoner’s altar. (0/1)

Step 2: ??? (Complete Step 1 to reveal)

Step 3: ??? (Complete Step 2 to reveal)

oooooooo

Only the first step was clear at that point, with new instructions to appear after finishing the previous step. Shuutarou told the Evil Overlords about this and asked for their advice.

“With this much magic permeating the entire area, it’s not possible to determine which way to go,” Elroad grumbled, frowning.

Vampy lifted her head, struck by an idea. “May I suggest splitting up? Three Overlords will each check one path, and two others with Master will take the last remaining path together. Master, what do you think?”

The path branched in four directions. Shuutarou’s map of the area was still mostly blank. He’d heard that completing a new map took the frontier parties at least three whole days, but he was going to be exploring together with Party 7 the next day. That was why he readily agreed to Vampy’s time-saving strategy.

“Yeah, let’s do this. So how are we gonna split up?” said Shuutarou.

Vampy was quick to assert herself.

“I will go with you, Master.”

She stood next to him, a rosy tinge to her pale cheeks.

Gallarus frowned, staring at her dubiously. “You come up with that idea for Master’s sake or for yours? You should go a separate way. We’re all equally good at detecting enemies—except Sylvia, that is, but she’s not here.”

“The strongest of us should be with Master. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Oh, is that how it is? Then come on, let’s see who’s stronger!”

A red aura appeared around Gallarus, and a white one around Vampy. The ground began to shake. Elroad sighed, deciding he had to intervene.

“You two will stop it with your posturing. All you’re doing is wasting Master’s time. Both of you and I will search for the altar independently. If that’s not acceptable to you, you will be returned to the castle for obstructing Master’s quest.”

The top three Evil Overlords exuded such powerful, menacing vibes that thousands of monsters waiting in the ruins to attack the invaders died without anyone noticing. The auras around Gallarus and Vampy faded and disappeared as they cooled off.

“Theodore and I will gladly be Master’s escort, then,” Bertrand said with a big grin.

Theodore, who’d been quiet the whole time, nodded.

Shuutarou turned to the three Overlords who’d be temporarily leaving his side.

“Please don’t push yourselves too hard,” he said gently. “Let me know at once if you’re in danger, and we’ll head over to help right away.”

Vampy and Gallarus swooned.

Aah, Master! How magnanimous you are! Perhaps it is for the best that I go on my own. Being close to you is a rare gift that I must treasure, not reach for greedily! thought Vampy.

Hnnngh! To be shown such kindness... Master honors me with his concern for my safety! thought Gallarus.

For a moment, the two looked intoxicated, but their expressions quickly returned to normal, and each of them turned toward one of the unexplored paths.

Will Master praise me if I find the altar for him? Vampy wondered. *I long to feel his hand on my head again. For that pleasure alone, I would fight ceaselessly for half a millennium.*

I wonder how Master will commend me for finding the altar for him. Whatever he says, it’ll be a moment of bliss for me, that’s for sure, mused Gallarus.

The two uttered war cries and disappeared down the paths.

Elroad bowed deeply.

“I shall be on my way,” he said and proceeded down the third path.

* * * *

Vampy walked until she reached an area with a dome ceiling. It was as chock-full of monsters as if it was a battle arena. Vampy gazed down at them.



A Hyvn ogre stronghold?

According to the Rauga Settlement Monster Guide, Hyvn ogres were a top-tier class of ogres distinguished by their high intelligence. Rather than destroy the towns and villages they ransacked, they studied them to benefit from the achievements of other humanoid-monster civilizations. Cruelty and ruthlessness lay in their nature, though. When they discovered an advanced tribe, they would slaughter the men outright and rape the women until they, too, died. Once they garnered everything of value from the tribe's settlement, they set fire to it to prevent any other tribes from learning anything from it.

Here among the ruins thrived an unusually advanced ogre civilization.

I thought the altar might be here... Got my hopes up for nothing, Vampy thought with exasperation.

"I will ask you a question," she began.

Hearing her voice, Hyvn ogres started to come out of their stronghold. White patterns were painted on their black bodies. They were armed with high-quality weapons.

"Where is the mystic summoner's altar?"

Vampy's dignified voice carried far. The eldest of the Hyvn ogres stepped out in front of the others. He seemed fearful.

"I beg your forgiveness. We do not know what lies past our settlement. I cannot give you the answer you seek."

"Ah. I did not mean to intimidate you. Sorry."

Vampy was about to simply walk off, suppressing her instant-death skill, but then the ogre elder said something that sealed his fate.

"By the way, Queen of the Dead...a delicious smell is wafting from the way you came. It's the smell of a human, if I'm not mistaken... Did you not notice?"

"A delicious smell of a human? You're not talking about my master, are you?"

The ogres became anxious, seeing a ferocious aura appear around Vampy, even though her face seemed calm. She picked up the hem of her dress and

gave it a sniff. Then she smiled.

“Could it be this magnificent scent you refer to in such crude terms? And they call you an intelligent race. What a joke.”

“Wh-what are you—?”

But the next moment, all the Hyvn ogres burst into pixel shards and faded away. Five hundred of these level-110 monsters died just like that.

“I shouldn’t have bothered asking.”

Vampy started walking again, feeling refreshed after getting rid of the ogres. She only cared about Shuutarou. In her eyes, the world didn’t need anybody else.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Gallarus was walking through a sprawling forest deep in the ruins. The highly condensed magic in the air filled him with expectation. He spotted something in the distance and smiled smugly.

Did I hit the jackpot?

He hurried his steps, taking delight in imagining the sour faces of Vampy and Elroad when they heard it was him, Gallarus, the Third Evil Overlord, who found the altar. But what motivated him even more than schadenfreude was thirst for Shuutarou’s praise, which would be even more fulfilling than vanquishing a powerful foe, laying an entire country to waste, or drinking the finest liquor.

Shuutarou was the first person ever whom Gallarus—an overlord used to giving orders, not taking them—wanted to serve, of his own free will. To him, the smallest praise from Master Shuutarou was monumentally rewarding.

Gallarus heard a voice directly in his head.

“Stop, O powerful one!”

He kept walking at the same pace as before.

“This is your final warning. Mighty or weak, nobody is allowed to pass through the dark elves’ forest.”

A strange creaking sound came from the forest. Gallarus paused and looked

around, intrigued.

The Tsulgur Primeval Forest Monster Guide entry for dark elves said these forest guardians were not, in fact, a race of elves—they were very different beings, born from the hatred and grudges of the downtrodden elves. Like elves, they loyally protected their beloved forest but had a murderous nature. Trespassers would be slain with magic or poison arrows, or they would simply have their necks broken. The bodies were then dragged outside the forest and left on display to deter others. Dark elves possessed greater physical strength than regular elves, and they favored the darkness of the night. Although there were, of course, individual differences in strength between them, the most accomplished dark elves would surpass level 110. Armed with bows, they patrolled the forest for intruders.

Gallarus gazed up. The moon shone in the night sky.

Dark elves, eh? Strange world, this one. It was daytime only a minute ago...

The forest was dark and still. Gallarus looked around for anything of interest, but having found nothing, he resumed walking. There was a rustling in the treetops, and thousands of arrows and magical missiles rained down on the giant. They hit their target...and vanished. Gallarus caught the confused whispers of the aggressors.

“What in the world just happened?!”

“We hit him, we certainly did. But then everything disappeared!”

“Where are the arrows? What happened to the magic?!”

Gallarus looked slightly to the side. “You’d better go back home while you still can,” he said and started walking again.

“Damn this insolent intruder! Another all-out attack!”

“Use all your magic!”

“Giants are weak to dragon blood! Lace your arrows with it!”

Gallarus sighed in annoyance.

“Spare yourselves the effort. Next time, you’ll get hurt. I’m giving you a fair warning—go back to your homeplace and reflect on your stupidity.”

The dark elves noticed something was wrong. There was a village in the direction Gallarus had been staring, but suddenly, they could no longer sense the presence of their kin. Gallarus hadn't been throwing empty threats around.

The village was gone. The dark elf women and children had all disappeared, along with everything else within the fenced-off area of the forest. Where there used to be houses was a huge, gaping crater.

"You bastard! My wife... My children...!"

"Destroy him!!!"

The dark elves showered Gallarus with even more arrows and throwing spears than the first time. A whirlwind of magic engulfed him. He didn't flinch.

"Boring."

In the blink of an eye, the forest around Gallarus was gone. He hadn't even made any motion indicating an attack, yet not only the dark elves but all the trees and even the terrain had also been destroyed by some force.

Only the dark elves' homeplace at the heart of the forest remained. Gallarus saw a structure that could be an altar.

Eh, that's not it.

He sensed no magic from it, so this couldn't have been the altar his master was seeking. Gallarus continued on the path leading farther into the ruins.

* * * *

Elroad felt the shock waves of the powerful attacks unleashed by the other two Overlords. He stopped and raised his hands, making a square with his fingers.

Attempting to communicate with the other races... Their goodwill is incomprehensible. Our master is waiting. Every second is precious.

Having calibrated the size of the rectangle, Elroad released a wave of attack magic in the exact shape he'd formed with his hands, destroying rubble, plants, animals, and monsters in its path. Just buildings were left behind. There were no more enemies in front of Elroad. He hadn't even seen them, but he had no

interest in finding out who they were or how they lived. What mattered to Elroad was carrying out his master's wishes, and nothing else.

The most efficient way to look for the shrine is to remove life-forms and other obstructions, leaving behind only structures to examine.

Elroad walked down the path, his footsteps the sole sound.

* * * *

A few minutes after the Overlords split up, Bertrand said with amusement, "Well, well. No subtlety from those three."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

"Almost all the monsters have been annihilated. Those guys aren't holding anything back."

Shuutarou smiled awkwardly. He could easily imagine Elroad, Vampy, and Gallarus destroying everything in their path.

Theodore, who was walking at the front, stopped suddenly.

"Our overeager 'friends' would be devastated to hear this, but it appears we're the lucky ones," he said.

Shuutarou followed his gaze to a majestic shrine with a tall stone staircase and some engraving above the entrance.

"Looks like the home of some supercool monster," Shuutarou joked.

Theodore turned to him, surprised. "You have keen senses of observation, Master. I, too, can sense a powerful presence inside. It's guarding the altar, I presume."

"Wait, there really is a supercool monster in there?!"

They cautiously walked up the stairs and entered the shrine. Inside, the architecture was simple. It was just one big room with an altar at the center, flanked by two dragon statues. A large crystal with the sun and moon symbols rested upon the altar—this must have been the sacred object used in ceremonies.

"That's gotta be the gemstone!"

Shuutarou wanted to go and get the gemstone he needed to complete the first step of his job, but he stopped when Theodore drew his sword.

The two dragon statues crumbled into glittering dust with a rumble and screeches of agony.

The Monster Guide entry for Ancient Enchanted Golems from the archaic city of Muskia informed that these monsters looked deceptively like stone statues until the moment somebody tried to lay their hands on the belongings of their master. Then they attacked without mercy, with the full power of the monsters their master had used as materials to make them with magical techniques lost to time.

“Aw, Theodore! How could you?” Bertrand asked with a grimace, sympathizing with the golems, which hadn’t even gotten the chance to move.

Theodore sheathed his sword, expressionless as usual.

“Enemies must be slain,” he said.

Shuutarou heard an announcement that no one else could hear:

“Congratulations! You have completed the second step of your job promotion test, ranking up your reward. See the quest screen for details.”

He cocked his head, wondering why he got that announcement when he hadn’t even reached for the gemstone.

“Second step”? What did I complete...?

He navigated to the quest screen to check.

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Quest: EX Job Promotion Test

From: Job Change Office

Time Limit: 47:44:07

Step 1: Retrieve the gemstone from the mystic summoner’s altar. (0/1)

Step 2: Kill all monsters in the ruins. (30,709/30,709)

Step 3: Defeat the mystic summoner and the Moon and Sun Dragons. (Pending)



Next, Shuutarou went over to the altar to pick up the mystic summoner’s gemstone. His two Evil Overlords watched closely, expecting this action to trigger a special battle, but nothing happened, besides the first step of the promotion test getting marked as complete. That left only one step.

Bertrand gazed toward the entrance. “Look who’s here. Elroad plus two have returned.”

Vampy and Gallarus appeared crestfallen, while Elroad was as calm as always. “I’m so sorry, Mast—”

“I was worried about you guys!” Shuutarou cried. “I’m so glad you’re back! You completed the second step of the test for me. Thank you!”

Vampy froze. The words *thank you* replayed in her head again and again like an echo. Gallarus covered his eyes with his hand, lifting his face to the ceiling.

“You didn’t need our help after all, Master,” Elroad said with a delicate smile. Shuutarou smiled back at him. “I did! It went so smoothly thanks to you!”

After praising his Overlords, Shuutarou told them about the third objective he had to complete before asking for their advice.

“What are these Moon and Sun Dragons? Anyone know?”

Gallarus clapped his hands in an exaggerated “aha!” moment. “I do! I knew the names *Semui* and *Kamui* rang a bell. They’re gods from an Eastern fable.”

Vampy frowned. “Gods?”

“That’s right. Twins who get along like cats and dogs. One is in charge of the moon, the other, the sun. Kamui’s the sun god, and Semui the moon god. They keep fighting, and when Kamui wins, the sun rises. When Semui wins, the sun sets. So you see, they’re not to be found inside the ruins”—he pointed up—“but in the sky.”

They all looked up just as the moon replaced the sun, and morning turned into night.

Shuutarou repeated the announcement from the beginning of the quest. ““When Semui’s power is dominant, a curtain falls over the world. When it is Kamui who triumphs, the world is bathed in light. Balance the powers of shadow and light, and he shall appear at the altar.””

Elroad nodded. “For their powers to be balanced, neither must be winning. Or they must stop fighting.”

“Or defeating them both might work, too?” Shuutarou suggested.

Elroad smiled at that. “Your solution is the simplest, Master. Let’s do as you say. Hopefully, we’ll see some change at the altar after killing those gods.”

* * * *

Two dragons were warring in the sky. One of them had red scales and yellow eyes. The other, blue scales and black eyes. No sooner had the first dragon sent a burning beam of light at the ground below than the other followed it with an absolute zero beam of its own. The dragons fought incessantly high in the firmament, the sky changing color when one or the other managed to land a hit on its opponent.

The God Realm Mordeantbarre Monster Guide entry for the brothers Kamui and Semui described them as rulers of the firmament who’d originally been deities of day and night. In the distant past, the divine brothers’ quarreling had caused abrupt changes between day and night. Life could not exist in such an unstable environment. Voroderia, the God of Darkness, had to intervene, stripping Kamui and Semui of their god rank. He turned them into dragons bound by a pact to serve a summoner. Thus, Kamui and Semui’s fighting finally ceased.

The warring dragons detected a great power rising from the ground toward them.

“Something’s coming...”

“A sinister power...”

They flew to different corners of the world, where they waited to see what was happening. Night fell over half of the world, while it was daytime in the other.

A beautiful all-white maiden appeared before Semui, the Moon God.

“Greetings, selfish god.”

In this girl in her pure-white dress and a crown of horns, the dragon recognized the personification of death.

Meanwhile, Kamui, the Sun God, had another visitor.

“Who are you?!”

This visitor was a man with blue hair and red eyes, dressed like a butler. Around him were countless magic circles. A faint smile briefly appeared on his lips.

* * * *

Half of the world was dark, the other bright. The rapid day-and-night changes had stopped, indicating that the dragon brothers were no longer fighting each other.

Gallarus crossed his arms. *“It’s started.”*

Shuutarou was waiting by the altar for the phantom of the mystic summoner to appear.

I guess he only comes out when the dragons are killed.

Shuutarou felt a subtle change in the air, and a white and black mist appeared in front of the altar, its wisps weaving together. Theodore and Bertrand readied their weapons.

An old man in tattered clothes emerged from the mist.

“Entry to the summons’ paradise, the resting place of my master, is forbidden to all. With the power granted to me by my master, I shall purge you from this holy land you are desecrating with your presence!”

Using his staff as a walking stick, the phantom of the decrepit mystic summoner, his back hunched, began to creep toward Shuutarou. He dropped a round gem he was holding onto the floor. It cracked, and light shone through the fissure. The gem began to transform into three monsters.

Ah, should’ve seen it coming! The dragons were two of his summons. Of course he has three more!

One of the monsters was a giant bipedal unicorn. The second one was a red-eyed wolf emanating a dark glow. The last one was a beautiful green-skinned woman.

Gallarus stepped forward. “Lemme handle this.”

He turned to stare down at the summons with a flutter of his majestic cape.

“Hmm. I see you are not to be trifled with,” the mystic summoner commented, recognizing Gallarus as a mighty opponent.

The summoner chanted something, and his three summons shone purple. When the light faded, they seemed vastly more threatening, somehow.

Shuutarou looked worriedly at Gallarus, but the giant just stood there with his arms crossed, unimpressed.

The mystic summoner’s monsters had been upgraded to max level, but that didn’t mean they could rival Gallarus. Besides level, a monster’s strength depended on its attributes, stats, skill levels, and—most of all—its class tier. For example, a level-120 slime would be no match for a level-120 Abyss Slime like Punio. The attributes and stats of higher-tier monsters were superior to their lower-tier counterparts. In the real world, a five-year-old might undergo the same training as an eighteen-year-old, but nobody would expect the child to stand a chance against the adult in battle. Even if they had been taught the same moves, the adult would have an advantage simply due to being bigger and stronger. In *Eternity*, it was the same with low-tier and high-tier monsters. A slime was a tier-one monster; an Abyss Slime was tier four. Each tier was a

tremendous improvement over the last. Lower-tier monsters had nothing on a level-120 tier-five monster.

“What’s wrong? What do you think you’re doing?!” The mystic summoner seethed, unable to comprehend why his summons, as powerful as Semui and Kamui, were unable to land a single hit on their opponent.

The summons were attacking Gallarus with great ferocity, but his only reaction was a big yawn.

“Trying to bore me to death?” he asked.

The next moment, his unique skill, Adamantine Body, was triggered. A red shock wave struck the three summons with a loud *boom*. Both them and the shrine windows cracked and shattered.

Adamantine Body negated damage from opponents whose attack power was lower than Gallarus’s defense. It could also counter it, increasing the power of the counterattack by Gallarus’s attack power.

“No... The summons my master gave me... The strongest monsters in the world...have been defeated?”

The mystic summoner reeled from shock after the instant death of his minions. Gallarus cocked his head, looking at him in disbelief.

“You know nothing about the world, old man. Like a caged bird. Thinking your half-baked tier-five monsters were so powerful—how naive. The strongest monsters in the world are far, far above them.”

Gallarus was quite disappointed that he’d won the battle he’d been looking forward to without even lifting a finger. Shuutarou was shocked, too.

“Gallarus is so OP...”

Bertrand lit a cigarette and puffed out a cloud of smoke. “Nice try boosting your tier-five summons, old man, but they had no hope of winning against a tier-seven opponent. We’re called Overlords for a reason.”

The highest tier was supposed to be five. All monsters had the potential to evolve to it. But as the Evil Overlords knew, there were two more hidden tiers.

Even at the same level as Gallarus, those monsters were doomed...

Shuutarou hadn't known that his Overlords were this powerful.

Theodore had been standing to the side this whole time, not even bothering to spectate.

"Seems it's over now," he said.

The sky had turned white. It was neither daytime nor nighttime. The whiteness of the sky was the result of all color having drained from it.

* * * *

A little earlier, Semui, the god of the moon, was petrified with fear as a monstrosity too powerful for him to understand drew near. This monstrosity in the form of an all-white girl looked at him with a charming smile.

I can neither fight nor run from this girl; logic will not work on her.

Semui, a dragon who used to be a god, had been fighting with his brother, Kamui, since time immemorial. The two battled with the intention to kill. Anyone who tried to interfere would be annihilated by the shock waves from the dragons' attacks, which were aimed at each other. The dragons saw only the other as worthwhile rivals, with everyone else being mere trash monsters not to be spared a thought.

The white maiden, though, was coming to take Semui's life, and he realized that she would accomplish her goal. For the first time in his existence, he was the trash monster. His defeat was certain. Fear of death seized him.

"Are you scared?" Vampy asked him.

The dragon was trembling. The girl touched him. Her hand was so tiny compared with his large body. It was cold as ice.

"You're smart. I like that. Some think dying in battle brings glory, but I never saw it that way."

A deathly cold white aura appeared around the girl. She was Death.

Semui had been bound to the mystic summoner well over a hundred years earlier. Exactly a hundred years had passed since he and his brother had resolved not to serve the phantom of their master, who was buried in the shrine.

Semui thought about his brother, his opposing counterpart, for one last time. Then he looked into Vampy's eyes, ready.

* * * *

Kamui, the god of the sun, realized at a glance that the man before him was of much higher rank. The man was observing him, a multitude of magic circles floating in the air around him.

If it's magic he's going to attack me with, I will survive.

Kamui's and Semui's scales had been formed from the garments they'd worn when they were gods. They protected them from all sorts of magic.

So why was Kamui terrified of this man? Why was his first thought about how to protect himself? He used to be a god. Even as a dragon, he was still the ruler of the world, not to be overpowered by anyone.

Don't insult me acting like you can win, he thought angrily.

"Prominence Nova!"

The dragon sent a roaring, giant ball of fire flying toward Elroad. The Evil Overlord's face remained perfectly impassive. He gestured with his fingers, and a golden pocket watch appeared in front of him. *Tick-tock, tick-tock*, it ticked, slower and slower. As the hands of the watch slowed down, so did the fireball. With one final *tick*, the watch went silent, and the fireball stopped in the air. Elroad took a closer look at it before flicking his fingers. The fireball dissolved into light particles and disappeared.

Elroad sighed. "I give you one point for realizing that I outrank you. Another for your fighting spirit. But trying to attack me with something so pathetic—that really killed the mood for me."

He picked one magic circle from the dozens floating around him, then set it on his palm. He showed it to Kamui with a smug smile.

“If your intention is to kill in one hit, this is the kind of magic you should be using.”

An obsidian-black ray of light fired from the magic circle. The casting time was a mere fifth of a second, but it was a tremendously powerful spell. It hit Kamui’s shoulder.

“Gwaaaaaargh!”

In a delayed reaction, the dragon writhed in pain. He thought the spell had missed, since it hadn’t hit a critical point, but he was wrong. The spell had a certain horrific effect.

“Debug: Abyss Maggots,” Elroad chanted coldly.

The wound on the dragon’s shoulder began to turn black, rotting. Or rather, the flesh was being eaten by something.

“This spell takes the form of maggots that are attracted to magical power. They devour their host until nothing is left. The infected wound is impossible to heal.”

The difference in the power of the attacks in Elroad’s and Kamui’s arsenal couldn’t have been made clearer.

The spell had easily pierced the scales that Kamui believed to be his ultimate defense. It couldn’t be countered.

He showed me that spell as a glimpse into his power...

Kamui sensed so much magical power from Elroad, it might as well have been bottomless. The spell with which he’d attacked Kamui used only a microscopic proportion of it.

Kamui resigned himself to defeat. A former god, he was too proud to beg to be spared.

Forgive me, Brother. It’s not your hand I will die by...

He lowered his head, exposing his neck.

“Do it,” he said.

“That was my intention from the beginning,” Elroad replied.

He chose another of his magic circles. It expanded over his hand, and a dark flame appeared above it.

* * * *

The phantom of the mystic summoner gazed up at the sky.

“Come forth, Kamui and Semui, Dragons of the Firmament! Fallen gods, display your power!”

The old summoner looked back at the invaders with a smirk, certain of his victory, but nobody seemed the least bit concerned.

Two silhouettes appeared in the sky, floating down. They landed silently, facing away from the mystic summoner, and bowed before Shuutarou.

“My apologies for keeping you waiting, Master.”

“I’m terribly sorry it took so long.”

They straightened their clothing—a butler’s jacket and a white dress.

Shuutarou smiled with relief. “Welcome back!”

He saw that Vampy had brought something back with her—a red dragon and a blue dragon sat on her shoulders. They were as tiny as Theodore in the mini form he used when posing as a summon.

The mystic summoner recognized them.

“Kamui! Semui! Why do you appear in this ridiculous form?! And why are you sitting on that filthy intruder’s shoulders?! Have you forgotten your pledge to serve me?! Don’t tell me you’ve yielded to this wench!”

“We have pledged our loyalty to our noble and mercilessly powerful mistress,” replied Semui, the blue dragon. *“We have no pact with you, a phantom of our dead former master.”*

“Now we serve Vampy, the Queen of the Dead, and her master, Shuutarou,” Kamui, the red dragon, continued. *“We have been powerless to oppose them.”*

Kamui glanced at his shoulder where his arm was missing.

Vampy glared at Elroad. “You’ve injured my cute little minion!”

“Be glad I didn’t kill it.”

When Semui surrendered to Vampy, pledging his allegiance, she’d sent a telepathic message to Elroad. He canceled his spells immediately, but the annihilated limb of the dragon couldn’t be restored.

Shuutarou looked at the dragons.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Shuutarou.”

The dragons bowed humbly.

“It is an honor to meet you, Master Shuutarou. Thank you for allowing me to serve Mistress Vampy.”

“I vow to serve you with my life. I shall do my utmost to be of service to you, Master, and to Mistress Vampy.”

Vampy also bowed to Shuutarou.

Kamui had been narrowly saved from extermination. Disliking Elroad, he’d asked to become Vampy’s minion, which Vampy communicated to Shuutarou, getting his permission. In the end, it wasn’t death that ended the dragon brothers’ fighting.

Shuutarou was pleased.

It’s good to have more friends!

“You made a new pledge of loyalty? How much is that worth, if you switch allegiance at the slightest sight of trouble?!” said the phantom.

“Silence, ghost! We had been forced into servitude to that despicable summoner by Voroderia, who diminished our powers. The curse that bound us to the summoner was lifted with his death, yet we have been unable to leave this prison. Can you not comprehend the torment of immortality in confinement?!”

A glow began to emanate from the dragons’ mouths. White from Kamui’s, and black from Semui’s.

“N-no, stop! You wouldn’t dare attack me, your master—!”

But they had already fired beams of light at him. The temperature rose in the

shrine as the phantom burned.

“Urrrghhhraaagh!”

Defenseless, the phantom disappeared with a scream.

Shuutarou looked around. “This should be the end of the test, I think.”

Congratulations. You have completed the third step of the job promotion test. All objectives have been cleared. You have qualified for the maximum reward—the EX job promotion including two promotions.

Shuutarou’s body glowed.

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Quest: EX Job Promotion Test

From: Job Change Office

Time Limit: 47:39:11

Step 1: Retrieve the gemstone from the mystic summoner’s altar. (Complete)

Step 2: Kill all monsters in the ruins. (Complete)

Step 3: Defeat the mystic summoner and the Moon and Sun Dragons. (Complete)

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The light that bathed Shuutarou gave him new powers. He heard an

announcement directly in his head.

“EX job promotion requirements have been met. Your job has been changed to legendary summoner. Second-rank reward granted: You have been promoted to mystic summoner. Third-rank reward granted: You have been promoted to master of monsters.”

I got a new job and two promotions for it right away!

Shuutarou threw his fists up to the sky in joy. The description of his new job appeared in front of him.

Master of Monsters

An extraordinary summoner who can command all types of monsters, making excellent use of their abilities and bringing out their true potential. Perhaps one day, they will lead their army of monsters to conquer the entire world.

Promotion Requirements: Reach 10,000 max-loyalty minions and defeat the mystic summoner and all his summons

Skills Learned: Additional Summon Slots, Master of Monsters' Rally Call, Life Share, Peak Growth, Max Summon, Magical Contract

Skill Info

Additional Summon Slots: Maximum summon slots +2

Master of Monsters' Rally Call: Minion's stats +150% (Effect range: 15m)

Life Share: Share LP pool with up to two chosen minions

Peak Growth: Minions' EXP gain +500%

Max Summon: Overcome a summon's limitations, increasing their maximum level and evolution tier. (Only usable on maxed-out minions.)

Magical Contract: Gain access to your minions' physical, magical, and unique skills. Effectiveness increases with loyalty.

Shuutarou stared at the skill descriptions, wide-eyed. They sounded incredibly overpowered compared with his previous skills, and the stat increases he got from the promotions were incomparable with what he had as a swordfighter or summoner.

The legendary summoner job-unlock requirements would have been difficult to meet even for a level-120 player. The master of monsters job was two tiers above legendary summoner. Unexpectedly, a boy who was merely level 30 had managed to acquire that job in the briefest amount of time, owing to a miraculous string of lucky coincidences.

Normally, a job that started at level 1 could be upgraded at levels 30, 60, 90, and 120, so a max-level player would have a tier-five job. But legendary summoner was a tier-five job. Which made mystic summoner a tier-six job, and master of monsters a tier-seven job. Shuutarou had risen to the same tier as the Evil Overlords.

These skills can be leveled just like Double Strike. If they're this powerful now,

what are they going to be like at mastery level 100...?

Shuutarou shuddered, overwhelmed by the scale of power he found himself wielding.

“The EX job promotion test is finished. In ten seconds, you will be teleported out of the quest area. The EX job promotion test is finished. In ten seconds, you will be teleported...”

Shuutarou clenched his hands into fists.

“I earned this reward only thanks to help from the Overlords. I owe everything to them.”

He disappeared in a flash of light the same moment the shrine crumbled into ruin. The mysterious job promotion quest was over, its result surpassing Shuutarou’s wildest dreams.



Names didn't exist there. Neither did laws. Everyone was equal, united by a single-minded desire for power. That place existed solely to give power to those who came for it.

There was no light. It was a world of endless night. One-eyed nameless fighters who'd forgotten who they used to be roamed that world, armed with their conviction.

On a bone-dry patch of wasteland, three individuals were fighting. Their faces were hidden by the hoods of their cloaks. Each of them was holding a silver sword. Same in attire, with the exact same weapons, they differed in the strength of their conviction.

"You're too slow, Eyeless No. 9!" hollered the biggest of the fighters.

The one called Eyeless No. 9 was being targeted by both of the others at once.

"It's a fluke you're still alive. But your fluke ends here—I'm going to take the throne!" yelled the other attacker.

The two swung their swords at Eyeless No. 9 simultaneously, but he twisted and leaped away. The blades missed him by a hair's breadth. He struck one of his opponents with his sword, kicking the other.

"Uwah! No chance even with two against one, huh...?"

The one who got kicked hobbled away, holding his hand over where his mouth probably was.

"Aaargh... Aaaaaarrgh!"

The opponent who had been struck with the sword turned into black speckles that rose into the air like soot lifted by the heat of a flame. The black specks dissolved into nothingness. That was what death looked like in that world.

“ ... ”

Eyeless No. 9 stood still in silence for a while before walking off.

* * * *

Eyeless No. 9 rested by a small campfire. He was facing it as if watching the flames, but of course, he couldn't see anything. He had propped his exquisite silver sword against his shoulder and was stroking its hilt.

“What's up? Good to see you're still alive.”

The voice prompted Eyeless No. 9 to instantly swing his sword at the person who'd crept up on him. She didn't try to dodge. The blade hit her shoulder but didn't hurt her. Eyeless No. 9 gasped and put his sword away.

The person who'd come to see him sighed and sat down on the other side of the bonfire.

“Admirably sharp reflexes, but you should try to learn to recognize my presence.”

She was Sylvia, the silver-haired Fourth Evil Overlord. She looked at Iron closely, and for a moment, she thought she'd glimpsed a robot-like face under the hood of the monster's threadbare cloak.

“You've made it to the top ten, so not many challengers remain for you,” she said. “But the ones who you've yet to encounter are incomparably stronger than the others. They haven't managed to seize the throne, but they've been surviving in this world for hundreds of years.”

She peered at Iron, looking for any sign of emotion. It displayed none. She nodded, pleased.

“As long as your fighting spirit is strong, it doesn't matter if you lose a battle or if you retreat. But lose that spirit, and this world will erase you,” she added, standing up.

Iron remained motionless in front of the fire.

“I came to check on you just in case, but I see I needn’t have worried. We’ll meet again when you claim the throne.”

She smiled at him. Iron slowly raised its head and nodded slightly at her.

“Good luck, Iron.”

Sylvia faded into the darkness. Everything was silent once again, save for the creaking of the fire. Iron was still “looking” toward where Sylvia had been standing, but after a while, it turned back to the fire.

* * * *

Having successfully completed his job promotion test, Shuutarou returned with his Overlords to Ross Maora Castle. Kamui and Semui were greatly excited to be brought there.

“So this is Master’s castle!”

“I sense many strong presences here.”

They were sitting on Vampy’s shoulders. With a tiny red dragon on one side and a tiny blue dragon on the other, the white maiden looked like a fairy-tale character.

“Master, could they stay in Regiuria when you have no tasks for them?”

Shuutarou was happy to agree to Vampy’s request.

“Sure, they can live there. But please visit them every now and again, so they won’t feel abandoned like last time.”

“I shall do as you say,” Vampy replied, bowing.

Shuutarou looked from one dragon to the other.

“Living in Regiuria comes with two conditions. One, you will not fight among yourselves ever again. And two, Kamui is only allowed to fly in the sky in the morning and afternoon, and Semui in the afternoon and at night. Can you agree to that?”

“Er... But why do it like that...?”

The dragons seemed puzzled by the second condition. They cocked their heads this way and that, looking quite adorable.

Impatient with the little dragons, Theodore cut in with an explanation.

“Regiuria has a permanent source of light. Your role is to create a daytime and nighttime cycle and boost productivity by enhancing the performance of nocturnal races such as undead, allowing diurnal races to have designated time for resting.”

“And we can both fly in the afternoon?”

“Yes. Keep to opposite sides of the sky, as you did in the ruins.”

The dragons finally understood the purpose of this arrangement.

Gallarus smirked at Theodore. “You got new friends of your kind.”

“New subjects, not friends,” Theodore corrected him coldly.

Shuutarou turned to Sylvia. “Sylvia...how’s Iron doing?”

“Hmm? Oh, he’s fine.”

“That’s great,” Shuutarou replied, relieved.

Sylvia frowned a little. “Master...are you regretting sending Iron to my world?”

“I”

Shuutarou couldn’t hold her gaze. She was right; he did have regrets.

Elroad shot Sylvia a stern look but didn’t scold her. As for Sylvia, she ignored him, smiling at her master.

“That’s understandable. You’re worried about Iron; I can see that. But let’s have our faith in him and await his victorious return. Looking forward to your words of praise is what drives him.”

A smile returned on Shuutarou’s face. He nodded.

Bertrand looked up at the sky, idly watching the smoke from his cigarette diffuse in the air and disappear.



The howling of wolves carried far in the deep woods where people no longer lived, although some of their stone houses still stood here and there. The woods were now the territory of a proud pack of gray wolves.

A giant wild boar ran out into a clearing, panting. It darted left and right, trying to shake off its pursuers, but wolves were calling from all directions. Two male wolves attacked the fleeing boar, which was a muscular, enormous adult, much larger than the wolves.

“We’ve got you now!”

“Damn, he’s tough!”

The wolves buried their teeth and claws in the boar’s thick skin, holding on as it kept running frantically. The boar saw a big rock and charged toward it with the intent of slamming into it sideways to crush the wolves.

“!”

But then another wolf slunk into view, blocking its path. This wolf was at least five meters long, with enormous fangs and the eyes of a veteran of many hunts.

The charging boar stopped in its tracks and shuddered violently. The next moment, its head was flung into the air.

“Got him!” shouted a little wolf, landing on a high tree branch.

This little wolf was the youngest of a litter of six. Her name was Sylvia.

* * * *

The wolf family was enjoying their meal. The biggest of the wolves—Sylvia’s father, Auron—spoke in praise of his daughter.

“You’re a little rascal, Sylvia, but your hunting strategy is the best among your siblings. That skill you have must be a gift from the Forest God.”

“Tee-hee!”

Sylvia swelled with pride. Her siblings didn’t look up from the meat they were chewing, envious.

Ninety-nine percent of skills seen among beasts were physical boosts. They

differed in which part was boosted; for example, Sylvia's oldest brother had an enhanced sense of smell, while the third-oldest brother was especially swift-footed. Those abilities were by no means rare.

Humans mostly had skills enabling them to understand foreign languages or be more dexterous with their hands. Like the skills common among beasts, these, too, helped them in their daily life, but not to any great extent.

But Sylvia, the runt of the litter, had an exceptional ability—Flash Swords—with which she could instantly summon swords made of light. This wasn't a type of skill usually seen among her kind.

Thanks to this ability, Sylvia was the best huntress among her siblings. Her father was proud to have such a daughter and called her the Forest God's helper.

"Mother! Mother! Praise me, too!"

"You're so spoiled, dear."

Despite her strange power, Sylvia was just a pup whose brief life had been very peaceful so far. She was the most gluttonous, mischievous, and attention-seeking of the litter. Her siblings and parents spoiled her. There was nothing she lacked, and every day brought her lots of fun. She wanted it to always be like that.

Then one day...

...Sylvia and her siblings were chasing one another around and playing. Suddenly, her oldest brother's nose twitched. With his extraordinary sense of smell, he was always the first to detect targets for them. He started walking down an unfamiliar path.

"There's something this way."

The others followed, and soon, the six young wolves arrived in some crumbling ruins they'd never seen before.

“Cool place!”

“Meh. Just some human ruins.”

“It’s in better shape than the others, though.”

While her siblings chatted away, Sylvia stood transfixed by something in the distance.

“What’s that over there?” she wondered aloud.

It was an arch of some sort, overgrown with vines and mosses but well-preserved. Strangely, the other side of it was dark, even though it was early afternoon.

The curious young wolves walked over to investigate, thinking it might be a secret base of some sort.

“Stay away from there!”

Their father’s angry voice boomed through the forest. His posture and his eyes were so furious, the siblings cowered in fear. They’d never seen him this upset before.

The father wolf shot one last hateful look at the arch, then herded his pups back toward their home.

* * * *

It was the early hours, when even the owls had gone to sleep. The wolf family was resting in their den, which was dug up under a tree, but Sylvia kept twisting and turning until she gave up on trying to fall asleep and sat up on her haunches. Her mother was also awake, which was unusual.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked in a kind voice.

Sylvia nestled next to her and told her about the strange place they’d found in the forest the previous day. Her mother listened quietly until Sylvia finished.

“Only death awaits beyond that arch,” the mother wolf told Sylvia.

“You mean we’d really die if we went through it?”

“Yes.”

Sylvia looked at her mother anxiously. Her mother curled around her.

“Nobody who has gone there has ever come back. Not your uncle, not my friends. You must stay away from there.”

Her mother waited for Sylvia to promise she’d never go to the arch, but to her concern, Sylvia was quiet.

“Sylvia, I don’t blame you for being curious. You’re the bravest wolf I’ve known. But please don’t do anything that would make me and your father sad. Can you promise me that?”

“Yes, Mother,” Sylvia agreed with resignation.

* * * *

Simon Harold, an archaeologist, and his large team of adventurers arrived at their destination.

“It’s here, no question about it!”

Simon dropped to his knees, overcome with emotion, taking in the view of the same ruins Sylvia and her siblings had discovered some time earlier.

“You’ve found what you’d been looking for, so we’re done here,” one of the adventurers said nervously. “Exploring the ruins wasn’t in the contract.”

“Oh, don’t bother me with the contract now! Do you not understand that we’ve just made a groundbreaking discovery?! It’s time to get to work, not turn back!” Simon yelled back, gesticulating wildly.

The adventurers were looking around, clearly uneasy.

“Sir, we’re in gray wolf territory,” one adventurer warned. “Even pups are at least level seventy. We won’t escape unscathed if they attack us in a pack...”

His voice trailed off as he spotted something. He drew his weapon, and his friends immediately drew theirs.

Two wolves emerged from the forest, baring their fangs at the humans. They were Sylvia's two oldest brothers, who'd come to the ruins again despite warnings from their parents.

"Humans! They're messing with our territory!"

"We must drive away these plunderers before they grab anything!"

The wolf brothers crept toward the adventurers, who tightened into a battle formation. The wolves attacked. The fight didn't last very long.

"Ha! Foolish beasts, attacking A-rank adventurers!" one of the humans boasted, even though his party was still out of breath, exhausted.

The two wolves lay on the ground, their fur bloodied. One of the men approached them with a hunting knife in his hand.

"Gray wolf pelts are A-grade materials. Good to have this in addition to that loony's stingy reward for escorting him here."

The wolves were still breathing but had no strength to move. The man stabbed the older wolf with the knife...and something changed in the air. The adventurer stopped, suddenly fearful.

"Something's there!"

A pack of wolves appeared. One of them was monstrously large.

"We found you, humans," growled Sylvia's father.

Sylvia's mother eyed the humans murderously. Sylvia was following her parents, coming closer and closer to the adventurers.

"K-kill them! Now!" Simon's voice broke. He was scared out of his wits.

All the adventurers but one backed away at the sight of the big wolf, realizing they stood no chance against it in battle. The one who showed no fear, clad in fine armor, stepped forward. He laughed, reaching for the longsword at his belt.

"Well, it's not a boring forest hike after all. Let's have some fun!"

Sylvia sensed that unlike the others, he was strong. And she was right. While the others were A-rank, he was an S-rank fighter. His name was Roya, and he was famous among the humans for having slain a dragon.

Roya's longsword slid out of the scabbard with a metallic *hiss*. He assumed a battle stance.

"Come, wolves. Let's dance."

* * * *

Not only Sylvia, but even her mother had never seen Sylvia's father in such a perilous state. The man called Roya was fearsomely strong.

Sylvia's father was barely holding up, dripping blood from all over. Meanwhile, Roya didn't have any serious injuries.

"Heh-heh-heh... You're a true monster, wolfy."

Sylvia couldn't just stand back and watch as her father was on his last legs. She summoned a light sword and, holding it between her teeth, parried Roya's blow before it could hit her father.

"What in the world...?"

She'd caught the man off guard with her skill, which a beast shouldn't have had. His sword got knocked out of his hand.

I may not be strong enough to kill him...but there's another way!

Sylvia slammed into him with the full momentum of her charge, toppling him over backward into the darkness that lay beyond the eerie arch. She fell in as well. The anguished howls of her parents as the darkness swallowed her up rang in her ears.

* * * *

Sylvia opened her eyes and saw nothing but darkness at first.

Father...Mother...my brothers and sisters...I hope you're safe...

On second thought, they had to be. She'd pushed the man into the arch, and the other humans were so weak, even her gravely injured father could easily defeat them.

She stood up and looked around, but all she saw was featureless darkness. It made no difference whether she had her eyes open or closed.

She began walking, and after some time, a large gate emerged from the darkness.

Could this be the exit?

The door was smooth but for one small round indentation. It had no ornamental features. Sylvia tried pushing it as hard as she could, but it wouldn't budge.

Mother warned me I'd die if I entered the arch...

Imagining a slow death in that empty, dark world drained Sylvia of energy. She was still trying to push the door open, but with less and less strength.

Suddenly, she heard a voice say, *"Make an offering of one of your eyeballs to qualify."*

"What?!" she growled back. "Qualify for what?!"

There was no response. The voice had gone silent, and she couldn't see anyone around.

Make an offering of one of my eyes? Don't tell me...I'm supposed to put my eyeball into the hollow in this door?

The thought of gouging her own eye out was terrifying. There was no way she could do that.

Sylvia walked away from the gate and curled up on the ground. Sleep came before long. She thought hunger might wake her up, or morning light, but when she opened her eyes again, everything was exactly the same. She understood that something had happened to her body.

I don't get sleepy or hungry.

She didn't seem to have any physical needs. Her body clock told her that a day had passed, so it was very odd she felt exactly the same as when she first set paw in this dark world. After three more days, she gained certainty that she was somehow suspended in the same state.

On the fourth day, a voice came from the gate again.

“Make an offering of one of your eyeballs to qualify.”

Sylvia stood up and walked over to the gate. She thought of her family.

If they’ll let me out of here for one eye, I’ll give it to them.

She stuck a claw into her left eye socket and dug out the eye. The burning pain made her scream. Dripping with blood, she pushed the eyeball into the hollow in the door.

Byong!

* * *

The gate made a strange noise, electronic but chime-like. Bright-red lines appeared on the door, resembling blood vessels, and it rumbled open.

On the other side was an ominous landscape of a bare mountainside dotted with gravestones. A group of people in black hooded robes milled around in the omnipresent dark haze. They were armed with swords, which they held pointing upward.

What is this place...?

Shuddering, Sylvia felt her body transform into a tattered robe and a sword. She walked through the gate, pulled in by some invisible force. A single word was repeating itself over and over in her head.

“Fight.”

On the other side, she was no longer Sylvia. She had become just another fighter, just another sword, just another part of the dark world.

The gate closed behind her and again loomed silently in the darkness.

* * * *

In that world, everyone was but a nameless fighter. The fighters didn’t have names, and they’d lost their individuality, except for differences in their thirst

for battle and the strength of their conviction.

Those who didn't fight weren't fighters.

Those who didn't have conviction weren't fighters.

Those who weren't fighters were absorbed by the forces of chaos.

After many battles, No. 3,550 regained fragments of her conscience, although she didn't know if No. 3,550 was her name or if it was just a number.

"Where am I...?"

Around her, a graveyard stretched endlessly. She'd been there for a long time, but her conscience had been dormant. All she had were her tattered clothes and a sword, but she was once again cognizant.

How many have I killed? How long have I been here?

She couldn't remember.

When the body of No. 1,998, stretched out on the ground in front of her, began to dissolve, something she'd lost found its way back to her.

"Your sword is not of this world," No. 1,998 said to her as he lay dying. "It might be what this world needs."

No. 1,998 momentarily transformed into a young, tearful man before crumbling like a sand statue until nothing was left of him.

No. 3,550, the victor of the battle, became No. 1,998.

"My...sword?" she repeated.

She looked at her sword, which glowed as if it was made of light, but she couldn't remember anything about it. Yet. What she did remember was her

“conviction.” Shakily, she began to walk again in search of another opponent.

“I must return home...”

But why? She didn’t know. Where was her home? She didn’t know that, either. The fighters she met on her way, she slew. Before disappearing, they would very briefly change back to their original form.

One fighter she killed changed into a sword. Another, into a giant tree. Another, into an old human.

Every battle she won restored a small part of her. After more than a hundred years of fighting, when she became No. 94, she remembered her true name and who she used to be.

* * * *

“You know it, don’t you? To get out, you have to defeat No. 0. There’s no other way. But I’ve given up,” said No. 23.

He and Sylvia were sitting by a campfire. Sylvia fell into deep thought.

By then, she’d become No. 8 and knew the mechanics of the dark world perfectly. The fighters were assigned numbers reflecting their rank, and they had to climb up the ranks to regain their original form. If they didn’t do so quickly enough, they’d forget not only their names, but also their “conviction” forever.

Those who didn’t have conviction weren’t fighters.

Those who lost their conviction would be erased.

No. 23 looked up at her. The face of a human boy peeked out from under the tattered hood.

“Are you going, then?”

Sylvia had stood up. She was no longer a wolf, but a beautiful human woman. She'd taken on a human form, as it was best suited to fighting with a sword. All the top one hundred fighters were in human form.

“I am. Was nice talking to you,” she said in her strong, confident voice.

No. 23 hung his head, looking like he might burst into tears. “No. 2 to No. 7 are all allies of No. 1. You don't have to do this, you know? You've recovered so much of yourself. One defeat, and you'll crumble like sand, to be consumed by this world!”

Sylvia was already walking away from the campfire. No. 23 jumped to his feet and ran after her, shouting as he stumbled, “It's all over if you fail to win just once!”

But Sylvia didn't turn back. She gripped one light sword firmly in her hand as several more appeared behind her back, spinning in a circle. The opponents who appeared before her to block her way died in one hit each. There were very few fighters left whom she had to reckon with. At last, she became No. 1, and she found the throne. A human was sitting on it.

“Well, I'll be! If it isn't that wolf pup from the ruins. Your papa was strong, I'll admit that.”

He was the adventurer she'd pushed through the arch.

“Why haven't you left this world?” asked Sylvia.

No. 0 chuckled. “Because I'm at home in this world, where strength is everything! This is exactly where I want to be,” he said, slowly standing up from the throne. “So don't entertain the thought that you can deprive me of it.”

He drew a longsword from his scabbard, just like when Sylvia first saw him in the forest.

“And if you're going to try, at least make it entertaining for me!”

He swung his sword at her with enough force to slay a god, but she parried it with her light sword. Her other swords pierced his body simultaneously.

Roya saw his body beginning to dissolve, and only then did he realize that

he'd been hit.

“What...? How could I lose so easily...?”

Sylvia's archenemy was fading into nothingness. She'd been leveling up her Flash Swords through countless battles in the dark world until she could attack at the speed of light, and no physical barrier could block her swords made of light. No other sword skill could match hers.

“Simple. Your conviction was weaker than mine,” she told Roya.

Having defeated him, she became the champion of the dark world. When she sat on the throne, the same voice she'd heard at the gate spoke to her again.

“Wish for anything, and it shall be granted.”

Her gouged-out eyeball, which she'd offered the gate to allow her passage, floated back to her. She took it in her hand and made a wish.

* * * *

Birdsong woke her up. Sylvia sat up and saw she was in the ruins.

“I have to go home...”

With her heart thumping in her chest, she got up from the ground and ran toward her family home on two feet...

* * * *

“What was I expecting...?”

Sylvia laughed to herself sorrowfully. She was standing at the foot of an enormous tree with a hollow at its roots where there used to be a tunnel leading to her family den. Judging from the girth of the tree, hundreds of years had passed since the last time she'd been there. Time flowed at the same speed in the world beyond the arch and in her forest world.

Sylvia remembered her parents, and her siblings playing in front of that tree. Not finding them here was a devastating blow to her.

“It was all for nothing...”

She’d survived in that cruel world driven by a single wish: to return to her family.

Reeling from shock and disappointment, she sat down on the ground. Her eyes fell on the hollow at the bottom of the tree again, and she noticed something. Deep inside, she could make out the shape of two wolves among the tree roots. She recognized her parents.

“Father! Mother!”

She rushed over to the hollow, but she stopped abruptly, noticing what state her parents were in. Her father saw her and raised his head, a smile in his eyes.

“You’ve returned.”

Her mother smiled at her tenderly.

“Welcome back, Sylvia.”

Sylvia had thought she’d never hear their voices again. She reached toward her parents with shaking hands, but when she touched them, they crumbled like sand statues, and the hollow turned back into the den from hundreds of years earlier.

Sylvia’s mother and father had never given up waiting for their daughter’s return. Even after their bodies died and rotted away, their spirits stayed at their den, waiting.

“I’m home,” Sylvia said with a sad smile.

She’d returned at last from her odyssey.

* * * *

During Sylvia’s hundreds-year-long absence, the forest had greatly shrunk, cut down by the humans. With less and less space to live in, the beasts concentrated in the small, remaining part of the once-vast forest.

Sylvia scanned the horizon, sitting on top of the arch, feeling purposeless. She’d exterminated humans from the area near her old den and the ruins, and news of her overwhelming power quickly spread through the forest. The elders

of various beast clans came to plead with her.

“Please, could you protect our forest?”

“Please lead us! Be our queen!”

The other beasts treated her as their mistress or even goddess, but she felt no obligation toward them.

A very small wolf stepped forward.

“Please...don’t turn your back on us.”

“...”

Sylvia decided to protect the forest, which her family had loved so much. It was very easy for her—all she had to do was kill any humans who ventured into it. She’d been guarding the area near her den. Expanding the area she watched over wasn’t much trouble.

A year passed. Then two more. Sylvia had slaughtered so many humans that they’d given up on going into the forest, designating it a no-go area.

Thus, Sylvia had become the Queen of the Beasts after all.

* * * *



One day, Sylvia encountered an opponent she felt she might not be able to defeat. This was a first since she left the world beyond the arch. He'd nonchalantly emerged from the arch and stopped to look at Sylvia.

"Sorry, but I'm going to sequester this world."

The smirking man introduced himself as the God of Darkness. Sylvia ignored him, gazing toward her home from the top of the arch, where she was sitting with her arms around one knee. Voroderia momentarily glanced in the direction of her home, and suddenly, there were several swords around him, pointed at his neck.

"Lay a finger on my home, and I'll kill you," Sylvia warned him impassively.

Voroderia scratched his head. He seemed quite delighted by Sylvia's hostile attitude.

Sylvia's world was then removed from the Mother AI's supervision and preserved in another location.

Just like the other Evil Overlords, Sylvia found herself in Ross Maora Castle. When she met the others, they would fight at first, but after measuring their strength against one another, they eventually settled into a hierarchy and resolved not to interfere with the other's business.

Then one day, Shuutarou appeared in their castle.

Becoming some human boy's underling is an insult, Sylvia fumed every time she passed him by in a castle hallway, her hatred toward him intensifying. She didn't try to rebel against that arrangement since witnessing the boy fuse other monsters to power up his pet slime, but she couldn't be forced to feel devotion toward him.

Strength alone wasn't sufficient to rule over others. The only instance when Sylvia would spontaneously prioritize others over herself was when those others were her family. She didn't feel loyalty or obligation toward the other

Overlords, much less Shuutarou.

I have no reason to care about him, but...

She saw how Vampy came to absolutely adore Shuutarou. Bertrand would chat with the boy, laughing with sincerity he'd never displayed before.

Shuutarou was winning the other Overlords over, and the way they gravitated toward him reminded Sylvia of the atmosphere in her family, held together by the central figures of her parents.

Father... Mother...

Whenever Shuutarou spoke to her kindly, whenever he showed genuine concern for her, whenever he showed weakness in front of her, she felt moved. The total love she'd felt for her family was beginning to be replaced by something else.

“Ah... Dear Father...dear Mother...”

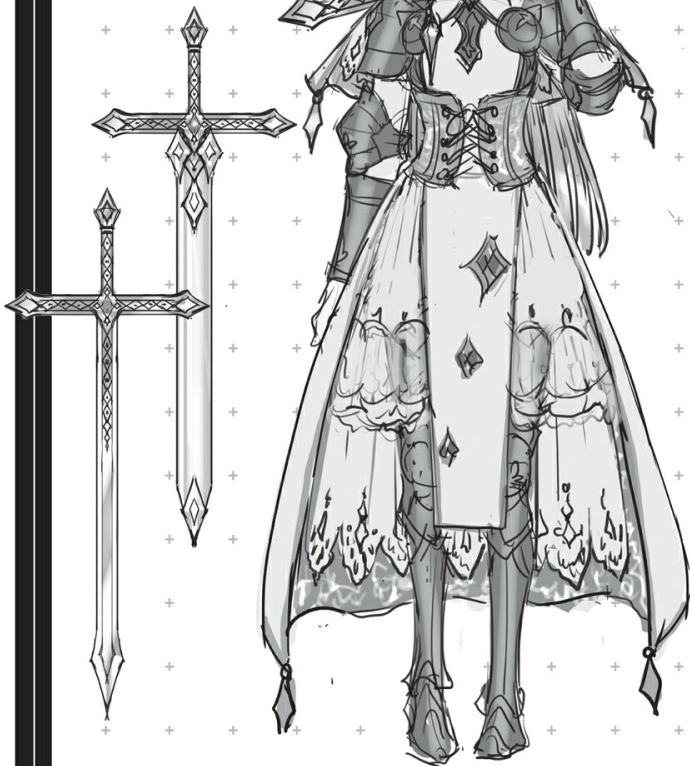
Sylvia was desperately longing for someone she could devote herself to as much as she did to her family.



Player:

REILAN

An ex-member of Twilight Adventurers who used to fight on the front lines. Gives off an icy, aloof impression that tends to intimidate children, although she's actually quite affectionate and fond of kids. During beta testing, when she was still active on the front lines, she was among the top three attackers and used to be known as Reilan the Phantom.



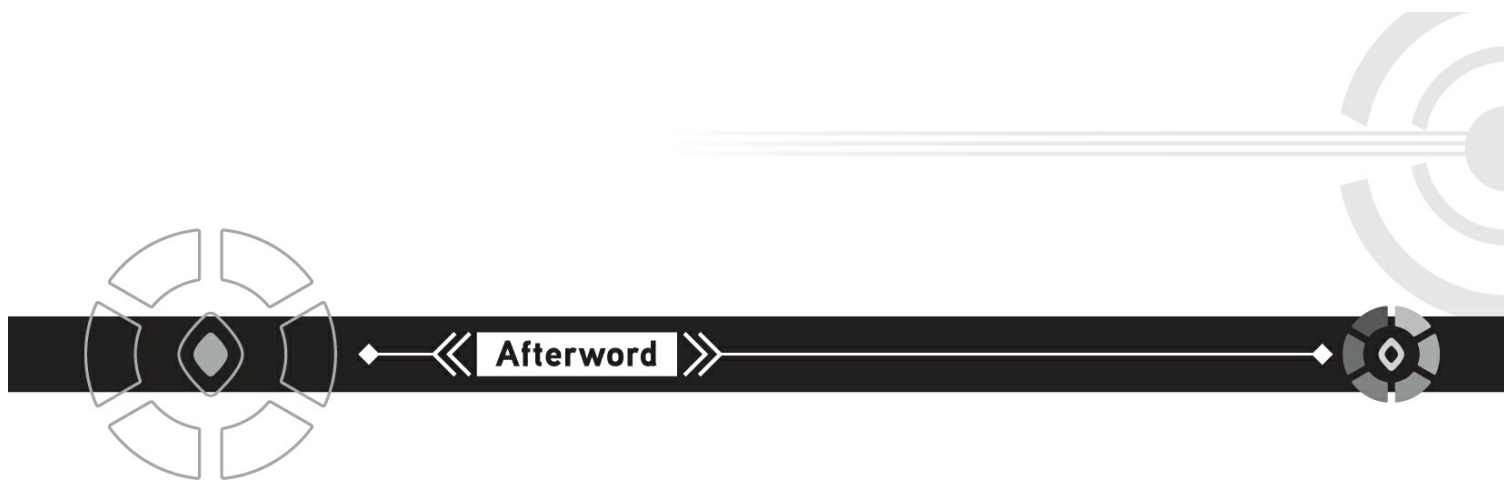
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Player:

RAO

An ex-member of Twilight Adventurers who used to fight on the front lines. Cheerful, strong-willed, and righteous, she naturally becomes the center of any group she finds herself in. Her emotional intelligence and caring nature quickly earn her peers' trust.



Thank you for buying *The Unimplemented Overlords Have Joined the Party!*, Vol. 3!

In this volume, I allowed myself to dig deep into the background of Twilight Adventurers. I originally wanted to put the Evil Overlords on center stage, but my writer's instincts led me another way. With the new characters—Byakuren, Rao, and Reilan—decently fleshed out, and Misaki given some more attention, too, I'm expecting the ladies to keep playing an important role in the story.

Personally, I love the trope of friends reuniting to fight together again. And of a mentor finding out after some time that their charges had made incredible progress. And of getting one step closer to becoming like someone you idolize. So well, I packed all of them into this volume.

The frontline guilds don't seem like very nice people, but don't forget that's because we see them mostly through Alba's eyes. For Wataru to be a mysterious kind of leader, his right-hand man, Alba, had to be an opinionated, intense man with a strong sense of right and wrong. I love how, in the manga, he's drawn in a way that immediately gives you the vibe of a stubborn old man with a heart in the right place.

In my first draft of the scene where Byakuren goes to the tower alone, Misaki notified Wataru and Alba, and they rushed to help. I wanted to show off Wataru's coolness. Alba's horse was very convenient, as it could carry them both to the tower fast. In the end, I rewrote it so that Misaki went to the tower with Makoto. After all, Wataru and Alba had quite a few pages to themselves already. I wanted Makoto to have some space to shine, too. Comparing the two

versions, I'm sure I made the right call there.

The easygoing Makoto is a compassionate, open, and likable leader. I'm really happy with how the closing part of the Ciola Tower story turned out with him in the focus.

I'm also really pleased with how members of Party 7 have been developing as characters. Not only Rao and Reilan, but Shoukichi and Kettle, too. Watching the younger members grow as players and people brings the whole group closer together, making the dynamics more interesting.

As for Shuutarou's chapters, I've shone the spotlight on Iron. I didn't want Iron to exit the story as a sad summon driven to kill its summoner, so I brought it back into the plot when publishing online. I think it'll be an interesting character to keep around.

Shuutarou's job promotion instantly made him overpowered, which makes it tricky for me as a writer. I can't have him just resolve everything with his newfound powers and end the main story arc too soon.

As I promised you in the afterword at the end of Volume 2, I included Sylvia's backstory in this volume. Besides telling you more about Sylvia, it also describes in more detail the World of Swords, which Iron got sent to.

Which leaves three Overlords who haven't had their backstories yet: Elroad, Gallarus, and Theodore. My plan is to keep including one extra story with each volume and get at least six volumes published in total!

I'd like to write more about Punio, too, at some point.

In other news, the manga adaptation is finally out! As the author of the original series, I get to see Hirokawa's adorable illustrations before anyone else! It makes me feel terribly smug.

The story and character portrayal in the manga aren't quite the same as in my novels, so do check them out! You won't be bored!

Let's meet again in the next volume!



THIS IS WHAT I IMAGINED
WHEN I READ FLAMME'S
CRANKY COMMENT ABOUT
HER NEW JOB OUTFIT.

Kawaku

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